

An Introduction to The Examen

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PSALM 139 (GNT)

Lord, you have examined me and you know me.

² *You know everything I do;
from far away you understand all my thoughts.*

³ *You see me, whether I am working or resting;
you know all my actions.*

⁴ *Even before I speak,
you already know what I will say.*

⁵ *You are all around me on every side;
you protect me with your power.*

⁶ *Your knowledge of me is too deep;
it is beyond my understanding.*

⁷ *Where could I go to escape from you?*

Where could I get away from your presence?

⁸ *If I went up to heaven, you would be there;
if I lay down in the world of the dead, you would be there.*

⁹ *If I flew away beyond the east
or lived in the farthest place in the west,*

¹⁰ *you would be there to lead me,
you would be there to help me.*

¹¹ *I could ask the darkness to hide me
or the light around me to turn into night,*

¹² *but even darkness is not dark for you,
and the night is as bright as the day.*

Darkness and light are the same to you.

¹⁷ *O God, how difficult I find your thoughts;
how many of them there are!*

¹⁸ *If I counted them, they would be more than the grains of sand.
When I awake, I am still with you.*

²³ *Examine me, O God, and know my mind;
test me, and discover my thoughts.*

²⁴ *Find out if there is any evil in me
and guide me in the everlasting way.*

The ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates, once said that “*The unexamined life is not worth living.*” He thought when someone doesn’t question his thoughts and actions or closes her eyes to motivations that prompt her thoughts and actions, then, it’s a waste of a good life. For Socrates, an unexamined life was superficial, stale and a shadow of what it could be. For him, the unexamined life is one whose purpose is never questioned; a life that’s never analyzed, inquired into, or inspected.

The unexamined life is very different from what the psalmist imagines when he extends this invitation to God in Psalm 139

Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart!
Try me [test me] and know my anxious thoughts!
And see if there is any wicked or hurtful way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting (v’s 23-24)

Or, as Eugene Peterson translates it in *The Message*:

Investigate my life, O God,
find out everything about me;
Cross-examine and test me,
get a clear picture of what I'm about;
See for yourself whether I've done anything wrong—
then guide me on the road to eternal life.

The question we each must ask ourselves is: *Would I be willing to pray like that ...* to ask God to *thoroughly* search me—my hearts, my soul, my mind and will, my attitudes and actions, my hesitations, impulses, words and thoughts?

Would I be willing to pray like that? If so—Why? If not—why not?



In Mark 10, when a young man comes to Jesus with a question, the One we know as Teacher and Lord responds with a call to self-examination. Here’s the story:

¹⁷ As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

¹⁸ “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall

not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.”

²⁰ “Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.”

²¹ Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

²² At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.

²³ Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

²⁴ The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

²⁶ The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?”

²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, “With human beings this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

~ Mark 10:17-27

This narrative is a great example of the Psalmist’s call to *an examined life*.

The man asks Jesus to tell him what must he do to earn, merit or achieve eternal life? ... to which the Lord replies, in effect, *examine your life*.

“You know the commandments,” Jesus said: “Don't murder, don't commit adultery, don't steal, don't lie, don't cheat, honor your father and mother.” Look at your life in the mirror of God’s will as expressed in the Law.

“Teacher,” he replied, “from my youth I’ve kept them all!” – not exactly a thoughtful, prayer-filled self-examination. So, Jesus moved on to the scrutiny the psalmist invites when he says “Search me [thoroughly], O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts!”

I love how Mark says, “Jesus looked him hard in the eye—and loved him!” I imagine Jesus looking him right in the eye with a look that penetrated right to his soul. You know—the kind of look about which we say, “He saw right through me.”

Then, Jesus said, "There's one thing left: Go sell whatever you own and give the proceeds to the poor. All your wealth will then be heavenly wealth. And, after that, come follow me."

Hearing those words, the man froze as the eye of God looked into his soul and forced him to look at it, too. I don't know how long was the pause but it must've felt like a lifetime.

Then, "the man's face clouded over," says Mark. "His face fell." This was the last thing he expected to hear. In the end, he walked away sad and heavy-hearted because he held tight to a whole lot of things he wasn't about to let go of."



What David points us to in Psalm 139 when he prays

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts*

... is a style of classical prayer called "**The Examen**" that shows up particularly in the early 16th century spiritual writings of St. Ignatius of Loyola in Spain. Unlike Socrates' self-examination, the Examen invites *God the Holy Spirit* to look us over in love, much as Mark described Jesus examining the rich man's heart.

More precisely, the Examen invites Jesus to show us *two* mysteries that might otherwise remain hidden:

1. First, we invite Jesus to show us where, when and how He's been present to us throughout the day, and to put on view how we've responded to Him.

This is called the *Examen of Consciousness* which opens our eyes to the Spirit's movement in our lives. The intention is to wake us up to the presence of God with, within and around us.

2. Then, second, we invite Jesus to reveal where in our lives where we need cleansing, purifying and healing.

This is called the *Examen of Conscience* by which we courageously ask the Lord to bring to our attention attitudes, actions and moments in which we fall short of exhibiting Christ's character or the Spirit's fruit in our lives.

First—the *Examen of Consciousness*; second—the *Examen of Conscience*.



1) The goal of the *Examen of Consciousness* is to make us more aware of God's presence and activity in our lives, and so change how we view our life and the world around us. It's to enable us to recognize God's unconditional love and presence as *the* ultimate, unchanging reality of our lives.

The psalmist is clearly aware of God's presence everywhere and anywhere, at any and all times—(Psalm 139:8-12)

⁸ If I ascend to heaven, You're there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You're there.

⁹ If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,

¹⁰ Even there Your hand will lead me,
And Your right hand will lay hold of me.

¹¹ If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night,"

¹² Even the darkness isn't dark to You,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike *to You*.

Or, again, as it's rendered by Peterson:

If I climb to the sky, you're there!

If I go underground, you're there!

If I flew on morning's wings to the far western horizon,
You'd find me in a minute—you're already there waiting!

Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the dark!

At night I'm immersed in the light!"

It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;
night and day, darkness and light, they're all the same to you.

David is conscious of *God's constant presence*, which results from a prayer of Examen that asks God to ... *search me and know my heart*.

Praying the *Examen of Consciousness* usually involves taking a few moments at the end of each day to go back over the day's events and inviting God to show us where He was present with us and how we responded to His presence. As Ruth Haley Barton says in her book *Sacred Rhythms*, "we might ask ourselves, *How was God present with me today? What promptings did I notice? How did I respond or not respond?*" (p. 95).

I'd suggest, as we do this, by writing in a journal or a notebook to record our reflections, turning into written prayers our noticing of when and how God seemed to present during the day, ... when He felt absent, ... and when it felt like He might've been present but it wasn't obvious.

Then, finally, an *Examen of Consciousness* can be concluded with prayers of thanksgiving for those times when we sensed God's presence.

Barton indicates that,

“As we review our days in this manner, we will notice times and places where we got a glimpse of God-with-us but failed to respond. Perhaps we were moving too fast to really notice, or we were stubborn or lazy or felt it would require too much of us. Observing such a missed opportunity might fill us with regret, but this honing of our awareness opens up the opportunity for us to make a different choice next time. Through the *examen of consciousness*, we become aware of God’s presence with us even in moments that are tinged with regret, and we begin to believe, little by little, that nothing can take us out of God’s presence” (p. 96).

Practice: Examen of Consciousness

1. Get quiet and *become aware of God's loving presence with you*.
 - Maybe you can place your hand on your heart—a reminder of God’s presence within you. Breathe deeply – as you inhale, imagine you are breathing in God's unconditional love; and as you exhale – imagine that you are breathing out the distracting anxieties and worries.
2. In the silence, take about 5 minutes to ask yourself **2 questions***—
 - a. *For what moment today am I most grateful?*
 - If you could relive one moment, what would it be? What made it so special? Remember it. Relive it. Be grateful for it.
 - b. *For what moment today am I least grateful?*
 - What made it difficult? Don't judge it or try to fix it or wish it away. Let God accept you as you are.
3. Finally, *give thanks* for what you experienced.



* You can also use some other variants of the two questions like:

- a. *When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?*
- b. *When did I feel the most alive today? When did I feel life draining out of me?*
- c. *When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, and God? When did I have the least sense of belonging?*
- d. *When was I happiest today? When was I saddest?*
- e. *What was today's high point? What was today's low point?*
- f. *Where was I cooperating with God's work in my life? Where was I resisting God's work in my life?*

g. For what do I need to thank God? For what do I need to confess to God or to another?

Or, you could simply ask yourself: *How was God present with me today? What promptings did I notice? How did I respond ... or not respond?*



2) When we move from seeing God more clearly in the *Examen of Consciousness*, we come, second, to the *Examen of Conscience* which enables us *to see ourselves more clearly* in the light of God's presence with, within and around us.

Like the *Examen of Consciousness*, the *Examen of Conscience* involves reviewing our day or week ... only this time we ask God to plainly show us ... *us*. It's to say, "Lord, show me the unvarnished reality of my attitudes and actions; reveal to me the good, the bad and ugly of what I thought, what I said and what I did."

This is to pray with David in Psalm 17, **probe my heart ... examine me ... and test me ...**."

It's to pray with Job, "If I've walked with falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit— **let God weigh me in honest scales** and he will know that I am blameless [or not!]**—**if my steps have turned from the path, if my heart's been led [astray] by my eyes, or if my hands have been defiled (fr. Job 31:5-7).

Furthermore, it's to ask with the willingness to listen and learn without defending or defensiveness, and without rationalizing and giving excuses for our behavior, attitudes and thoughts.

Again, Ruth Haley Barton reminds us that in the *Examen of Conscience* we don't depend on our own morbid introspections or keen insights. Instead, we surrender ourselves to the Spirit of God, who reveals truth to us as we are able to bear it. As God brings different things in our lives to mind, we willingly reflect on what we contributed to the situation and how we might respond differently going forward. It's our being willing to allow **God** to guide the process differentiates an *Examen of Conscience* from a self-help project and makes it a genuine spiritual prayer practice. (See: p. 101)

There are at least three elements that make up an *Examen of Conscience*.

- a. The first is simply *seeing* what went wrong in our actions or even our inaction. It's to recognize something in our behavior was un-Christlike. Our awareness may be clear-cut – as when we see that what we've done clearly violates God's revealed will in the Scriptures, or the awareness may even

come as a vague sense of dis-ease within us that something wasn't quite right—as when there's a subtle resistance within us toward doing something loving for another person, something that would bless them and reflect Christ to them.

- b. The second element in an *Examen of Conscience* is being *willing and able to name the failure* for what it is and also to name what's going on inside of us. This is where we really need the Lord to guide us, for, as David says in 1 Chronicles 28, it is only He who ... “*searches every heart and understands every desire and every thought*” (v. 9). Without His guidance we can be blinded by our penchant to avoid seeing what we don't like in ourselves, or by closing our eyes to soul-wounds that have become calloused over, or we're tricked by our own sinful nature that tries to camouflage habitual patterns of sin that trip us up.
- c. The final move is *confession* – in which say aloud to ourselves, to God and to others what we've done; ... remember God's *forgiveness* of your sin grace through Christ; ... follow with *repentance* – where we take steps to move away from it, for Christ's sake.

This is why Mark's comment about Jesus' posture toward the rich man is so significant—that Jesus looked at him *and loved him*.

In the *Examen of Conscience*, God's not out to hammer us, to dump on us, put us down or write us off. He loves us! And, notice, that Jesus' love does not depend on anything the man has yet done for Christ. He loved him ... He just loved him. All Jesus wanted for the man was for him to experience God's very best and become the person God made him to be. That's all

One of my all time favorite verses in the Bible is Proverbs 17:3 – *The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but the LORD tries, tests or proves the heart*. The refiner's fire doesn't come to destroy the silver and gold but to make it more valuable, pure and precious by burning off the waste and impurities so that it can become all it was made to be.



Practice: Examen of Conscience

“How do things stand between me and God? Where am I coming from, and how is my life in Christ growing?” Here is a way of examining the deep and dynamic personal relationship we have with God.

- 1. Recall that you are in the presence of God – The Examen of Consciousness.**

We start by recognizing that God is intimately involved in our lives, wherever we are and whatever we are doing at the moment. Take time to recognize His presence. God is concerned *for you* and *about you*.

2. Give thanks to God for the favors you have received from Him.

Use our imaginations and senses. Be concrete in looking at the day's gifts ... just notice. Look at God's permanent gifts that allow us to live today. *How has God blessed you, and what do you contribute to others and to God?* Give thanks for the many blessings of your life.

3. Ask for an awareness of the Holy Spirit's aid.

Now, we might pray David's prayer from Psalm 139:23-24: *Search me thoroughly, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my anxious thoughts! See if there is any wicked or hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting*

We ask the Holy Spirit to explore the mysteries of the human heart – *our* own human hearts. We ask for freedom to look at our interior life without condemnation or complacency. *Trust in the Spirit* — He will lead you through pain and darkness, and into gratitude and joy.

4. Now, examine how you are living this day.

Now, we review our day. Look at the *internal* events and our *soul's* life during the day. Where was our heart divided? Do we notice the Holy Spirit or evil spirits? Notice where you acted freely and when you were un-free. In the company of the Holy Spirit, explore the mystery of what's going on (or gone on) inside of you.

5. Pray words of confession.

Sometimes we need to express regret and sorrow for our failings throughout the day. None of us is perfect, and we often do and say things that we regret later on. How could we have responded better? Where do we need reconciliation in our lives? We are sinners, but sinners loved by Christ. God, in His great mercy, continues to beckon to us over and over and over again--God never gives up on us.

6. Pray words of reconciliation and resolve.

After reviewing our day, we can look more compassionately upon ourselves and recognize our need for God. Having expressed sorrow for our sins, we now *praise God* for the times we responded with charity, and *ask for a desire to see God* more clearly.

Now, it's also the time to *pray towards the future*. Having reviewed the day, we're more disposed to re-enter the world with thankful hearts. We consider all that has happened in the examen period, seeking God's help to be made anew. Hopefully, our examens change us for the better, seeking to continue doing those good things that we have been doing already and to improve in those areas in need of improvement.

End your prayer respectfully and completely. Say your goodbyes in a way that is comfortable for you.

A few final thoughts:

Growth in friendship and intimacy takes time and constant attention. Try to give 10 minutes each day to this examination. Cover all six points each day but allow yourself to linger more at one point than another. Let the Spirit guide you. Find a prayer spot and make it sacred to you.

