

The Examined Life

A few weeks ago I was in a doctor's waiting room, and was going to be there for two or three hours. In my hurry I had forgotten to bring anything to read, but there on the table beside me was this book, *"Philosophy for Dummies"*. It looked brand new and was clean—no germs—something I always wonder about in doctors' offices. I picked it up and started reading.

Daily Routine

It began with a statement by the philosopher Socrates who said that the unexamined life is not worth living. Really? Author Tom Morris explains:

"Unfortunately, it's one that far too many people live: getting up, dressing, eating, going to work, breaking for lunch, working some more, going home, eating again, watching TV, leafing through magazines, exchanging a few words with family members in the house or with friends on the phone, changing for bed, and falling to sleep—just to repeat the same thing over and over and over without ever thinking what it all means or how life should be really lived.

"We wake up already in motion in this life. Rarely, if ever, do we stop to reflect on what we truly want in life, or who we are and want to become, on what difference we want to make in the world, and thus on what's really right for us. And that is the unexamined life—almost as a sleepwalker, on automatic pilot—a life based on values and beliefs that we've never really looked at, never really tested, never examined for ourselves."

Self-Examination

When we correctly examine ourselves, we become wise. But don't confuse wisdom with 'education'—book learning; wisdom is insight on life and how to live it. Natural man struggles to find the good and sometimes he will, but what was it Paul told the Jews at Rome about natural law? He said to the Jews, you've got the law and you can't keep it. Look at the Gentiles around you: they don't have the law but they do by nature the things required by the law; they are a law unto themselves for its requirements are written on their hearts:

Who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them (Romans 2:15).

Paul's conclusion was shattering to Jews who were so proud of their circumcised state:

He is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God (Romans 2:29).

Know Thyself

Cervantes, creator of Don Quixote, urged us to make it our business to 'know thyself'. He called it the most difficult lesson in the world. Turn to the Bible itself, and look at the lives and teaching of the people it describes. King David for example, is often found seeking to know himself, with God's help:

Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have walked in my integrity. I have also trusted in the Lord; I shall not slip. Examine me, O Lord, and prove me; try my mind and my heart. For Your lovingkindness is before my eyes, and I have walked in Your truth (Psalm 26:1–3).

But on another occasion, after he has lost his integrity:

Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin ... The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise (Psalm 51:1–2, 17).

Examine Yourself

When our lives do have meaning in the eyes of God, the implication for us is that we should live an examined life. An examination implies a test. You are being compared to a standard. We can't examine ourselves against the standard of wisdom; success requires a substantive, defined focus against which to be measured. The apostle Paul suggests this:

Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified (2 Corinthians 13:5).

How do we examine ourselves? A good test for Paul's counsel may be to look to yourself to see if you are pure in heart – the essence of wisdom. Why? Because we're told that it is the pure in heart who will see God. Is your heart impure? What makes it so?

But we need to acknowledge that this is an examination of ourselves and not others. If you spend all your time talking about how bad everybody is, you are not looking at the real enemy. All we're doing then is making ourselves look good by comparison, like the Pharisee, depicted in the parable Christ told (Luke 18:9–14). His (unanswered) prayer included the words "God, I thank You that I am not like other men – extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector..." (18:11). By saying this he demonstrated a problem we all share: he was self-absorbed. What we don't want is to be gold-plated, our religion being a veneer over a base metal, like the Pharisee in the parable.

Make Time

You know, you can't spend your life in self-examination. That will result in paralysis by analysis. But you can set a time – daily, weekly, monthly – mark it on the calendar – when you commit or recommit your life to obey God in your thoughts, words, and actions. All of them need to be tested regularly.

One way to set the stage for our self-examination is to bring to mind the need for baptism – the way that God has appointed by which we make a commitment to follow Jesus and find salvation. Here's a prayer that might help us at that time:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23–24).

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