

## **Teaching sermon for SNC, Dec 2019**

'Self-examination'

2 Cor 13:5-9; 1 Cor 11: 27-29; 1 John 1:8-10

\*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Tonight is the last of our sermons in this series of the spiritual disciplines, so I thought I might begin by just recapping the series as briefly as I can, especially because if you're interested the audio of all these sermons are up online on the Bethlehem website.

Began by introducing the topic looking at Christian spirituality as receptive spirituality, always coming before God as spiritual beggars to receive what he has for us.

Then we looked at the discipline of Christian meditation, we talked about the method not being the focus for Christians but the object: Christ and his word.

Then it was prayer, especially how Jesus teaches us to pray by giving us his own prayer, by sending unexpected people and situations into our lives and by sending us the Holy Spirit.

After prayer we went to fasting, which goes very closely with prayer, in fact can almost be thought of as a bodily form of prayer, and is something Jesus assumes his disciples will do.

After those we did something a little different and Pastor Fraser considered Christian Spirituality in relation to the gift of marriage.

Then it was spiritual warfare, so looking at the spiritual life and the various disciplines through the lens of how the devil wants to wreck all this and what resources God gives us in that battle.

Next we moved into a few more spiritual practices which are to do with living in community: so there was conflict, forgiveness and peacemaking, then worship and spirituality, and how God brings his good order in the chaos of life, especially into our relationship and communities.

And that's been the series so far this year, again that's just to recap where we've been, but tonight then is our last one in this series and it's one more spiritual discipline you could say, which is that of self-examination. And tonight we'll have a very simple structure: the what, the why and the how. The what, the why and the how.

\*

### **WHAT? SELF-EXAMINATION**

So first is the what, what are we talking about tonight?

I'd like to begin by looking at two passages in Paul's letters to the Corinthians. So let's turn, to begin with, to 2 Corinthians 13:5-9 (p 143).

*Examine yourselves to see whether you are living in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless, indeed, you fail to pass the test! <sup>6</sup>I hope you will find out that we have not failed. <sup>7</sup>But we pray to God that you may not do anything wrong—not that we may appear to have passed the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. <sup>8</sup>For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. <sup>9</sup>For we rejoice when we are weak and you are strong. This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect.*

So notice that first word, ‘examine yourselves’, and then at the end of that sentence is another word which points to the same idea: ‘test yourselves’. It’s from this sort of verse and many others that a whole tradition arose in the Christian Church through the centuries, taking time out to examine one’s life before God and in relation to other people.

It’s worth knowing the context here by the way of this book of 2 Corinthians. One of the basic problem behind 2 Corinthians is that there were some in the Corinthians congregation who didn’t think much of Paul. You have to sort of piece together their criticisms from various things Paul says in the letter, but the basic idea is that they thought he was weak in various ways, and that a real Spirit-filled Apostle of Jesus Christ just couldn’t be as weak as he often seemed to be. And so they had been criticizing and challenging him and the letter is largely, you could say, an examination of his apostleship, whether he’s a true apostle of Jesus or not. And of course Paul turns everything upside down and says that it’s precisely in his weakness that you can see the power of Christ most manifest.

But now right towards the end of the letter after his great examination and defense of himself as Jesus’ apostle, now the shoe’s on the other foot and St Paul says to them, ‘*examine yourselves*’. Stop spending all your time getting stuck into me and other people, and do it a bit of spiritual self-diagnosis, ‘*see whether you are living in the faith*’. Take stock of things, he says, test yourselves, examine your lives.

But notice something important and amazing, which is what Paul assumes here and what his goal is. After he that has happened between Paul and them he still assumed that are true Christians, he says don’t you realize that Jesus Christ is in you! That’s assumed, they are Christian people, in the faith, now examine yourself to see whether the way you’re living in step with that. And notice what his goal is at the end of verse 9 ‘*This is what we pray for, that you may become perfect.*’

So the point of examining yourself is not to dig up dirt and make you feel bad. The goal is good. The goal is to be reminded that Christ is in you and to grow in how his perfect character is being manifested in your life.

Now, just flick back into first Corinthians and we’ll see one other place St Paul uses the same word. 1 Corinthians 11:27-29 (p 133):

*‘Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person **examine** himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.’*

So here the call for self-examination of some sort of comes up again, and here especially in connection with receiving the Lord’s Supper.

Now the context here is a little tricky, but basically there are various abuses going on with how the Corinthians are approaching their worship and a sort of communal meal they seemed to have together in connection with worship, maybe a bit like we have supper after service tonight.

Here's how one commentator explains the context:

*'The conduct of some of the Corinthians at the meal was making a farce of the whole celebration. The wealthier members of the church who provided most of the food, did not have the patience and courtesy to wait for the day laborer's and slaves who would arrive later in the evening. Rather, they went ahead with their own meals. What could have been a marvelous opportunity for them to share with their less fortunate brothers and sisters was lost as they freely indulged, in some cases to the point of drunkenness. By the time the poorer members arrived there was little or nothing left. The poor may have even have missed out on Holy Communion itself.'*

Now Paul says this is no good, it's huge problem, and he goes on to remind them of what's actually going on in Holy Communion, that it's the body and blood of Jesus given for the forgiveness of their sins.

And so Paul says, in light of what's been going on and what Holy Communion actually is, examine yourself.

So, that's just a little about the what of self-examination in some specific circumstances, which also begins to answer the question of why.

\*

### **WHY? DANGER OF SELF-DECEPTION**

But now let's think about that why question more generally, and to do that let's turn to 1 John 1:8-10 (p 187).

*'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us, but if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.'*

So one of the reasons it's helpful to engage in the discipline of self-examination, is that we human beings are very good at self-deception: deceiving ourselves, at tricking ourselves. And John says here one of the big ways we deceive ourselves is by letting ourselves off the hook, by giving ourselves a free pass, by saying we have no sin.

Now sometimes it's willful deception. So to trick ourselves into thinking we have no sin we make excuses – I was tired, he was being annoying, I didn't mean it, I'd had too much to drink, or, 'okay maybe it wasn't a great thing to do, but at least I'm not as bad as that guy'.

But at other times it's not necessarily deliberate deception, but we have real blind spots in our lives that we just can't see clearly what's going on. Remember what Jesus says when we're trying to evaluate other people's sins, he says it's impossible to do until you've examined yourselves and confessed your own sins because it's like your trying to see clearly with a big log sticking out of your eye.

But the funny thing is that even though we may say we have no sin, we still feel that underlying guilt because of the reality before God and the law written on our heart. Most people, perhaps all people, have some sense of guilt or shame in their life. But one of the problems is that we often just feel generally and vaguely guilty or ashamed, but it's not always obvious why. And this is no good. Because what tends to happen then is that we either deceive ourselves as John says into saying we have no sin and there must be some other explanation, usually that's it someone else's fault, or the problem at the other end of the pendulum is that we blame ourselves for everything, and we get into self-loathing, which is never a good place either.

Now this is where self-examination is so helpful, and let me give you an illustration to help make this point.

A number of times I've had an experience with people that's a bit surprising – maybe you've experienced something similar. The sort of situation I'm talking about is when a person receives some diagnosis from a doctor of a condition of some sort that they didn't know they had, and the surprise is that they react positively rather than negatively. It might be discovering low iron, anemia, or an intolerance to some food or even having a child diagnosed as being on the autism spectrum. Obviously these sorts of things bring many challenges for people to work through, but often the diagnosis actually comes with a significant amount of relief, especially if there is a course of treatment available.

This is because it's hard dealing with things when you can't pin them down. So if a person just feels exhausted all the time and doesn't know why, it's horrible. But to find out you've got low iron means something can be done about it. If a person feels sick after eating all the time and doesn't know why it's incredibly frustrating, but if they find out it's just one particular food that's easily avoided, then they can address it. And if a child is out of control and not doing well at school but it's hard to work out exactly what's going on, to group the behaviors and symptoms and find out they're consistent with other children who have autism, can be a strange relief of sorts. Now we know, now we can make a plan to deal with it.

Something similar happens in our spiritual life when it comes to how we live, and how we experience guilt and shame. Remember what Jesus says, *'those who are well have need of a physician but only the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'* Luke 5:32. In a similar way that visit to the doctor and the diagnosis can bring relief, an examination of our lives and hearts before God's law can bring some clarity that is relieving and even freeing, especially when you know what can be done about it.

Notice the second part of the verse from 1 John, *'if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness'* 1 John 1:8-10. We know where the healing is. It's in Jesus Christ. His death on the cross and his resurrection from the grave have brought forgiveness for every sin that has ever been and ever sin that could ever be, and whoever comes to him he will never drive away. Our Father is always ready to forgive and cleanse when we confess our sins to him. But which sins? How do we get clarity about this? This is where self-examination comes in.

So that's a little about the why.

\*

## HOW? TEN COMMANDMENTS

Now finally then is the **how**, and for this I'd like to speak about the ten commandments.

We won't look them up in the Scripture tonight. If you're interested in going back later and reading the context it's in Exodus 20. But here are the ten commandments in summary:

*You shall have no other gods*

*You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain*

*Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy*

*Honour your father and your mother*

*You shall not murder*

*You shall not commit adultery*

*You shall not steal*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour*

*You shall not covet your neighbor's house*

*And You shall not cover your neighbor's husband or wife, servants, animals or possessions*

Now in the Lutheran tradition, this has been our go-to place when it comes to the discipline of self-examination. And it's been strongly connected to confession and absolution, both publicly and private, and through that then self-examination has been connected to the Lord's Supper, as we noted earlier in 1 Corinthians.

Now, let me tell you a little story about how I first learnt some of this practically. I did my confirmation in the United States, my family lived there for several years. And this was also the first time most of us received Holy Communion. And as part of that instruction we were basically required to go to private confession, this is in a Lutheran Church, and they just did it as a normal thing.

It's interesting at one point Luther said no one should be compelled to go to confession, but let me tell you, I was compelled to go, and I will be eternally grateful for it.

So I go in and the pastor is there and we pray and so on, and then he asks me what sins I have to confess. And I had no idea what to say. Now I knew God's word said that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God and I believed that, and I had a sense of guilt for sure, but it was interesting when the rubber hit the road I was lost for words.

So the pastor, very gently, very graciously, basically starts going through the ten commandments with me. Have you prayed as you should? 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> commandments.

Have you honored your parents in how you've acted to them and spoken with them?

Have you been a good brother?

And he didn't need to go much further, I knew we had plenty to work with by that stage.

This pastor was doing exactly what Martin Luther instructs in the small catechism.

This is really important that as Christians examine themselves, we don't make up our own criteria, we don't sit around trying to gauge how we feel about God and our spirituality, but in a sense self-examination is simply allowing God's word, and especially God's law, to examine and test us.

But again remember the point and the goal is not to wallow in our sins, but the point is to get clarity about those sins so we can be led to Christ and receive the abundant grace and blessing he has for us.

Now let me just give you one more example of the sorts of questions that can be helpful here. This is from a little document that you can pick up on your way out tonight that goes through each commandment and gives a number of questions to flesh it out.

And I've used this personally before to examine myself before going to private confession with a pastor, and before holy Communion. I'm just going to read you the part on the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment tonight, 'You shall not steal'.

We should fear and love God that we may not take our neighbor's money or property, nor get them in any dishonest way, but help him to improve and protect his property and business.

*Have I been lazy at work, doing poor work in school or at the job, or working hard only when the teacher or boss is around?*

*Have I been stingy in paying my workers?*

*Have I been greedy, demanding best pay for poor work?*

*Have I worked for myself rather than for Christ and for the benefit of my neighbour?*

*Have I cared for the property in the neighborhood, school, or church, so that it was improved?*

*Have I stolen from the office, school, or the church, or stood silently by while others took what was not theirs? Have I stolen information from another's work?*

*Have I wasted time and food and money or caused others to waste time, food and money by my neglect?*

*Have I been stingy when it comes to giving the Lord a generous portion as thank-offering for what he has given me?*

*Have I stolen from my neighbor by not helping him in time of need?*

So how do we examine our self? Well here's a practical suggestion to get started, if you'll be going to a service with Holy Communion this Sunday, set aside some time Saturday evening or early Sunday morning to read through this and reflect on it for yourself, or if you prefer just read through the ten commandments and spend some time in silence, and let the Holy Spirit bring to mind the problem areas for you. Don't torture yourself and don't think you have to dig up dirt for the sake of it, but do it knowing Christ will bring the healing for whatever is there.

Then when you come to church, maybe as part of the general confession and absolution, name them things quietly to God and receive his forgiveness and mercy. Then come to the Lord's supper, and receive the holy body and the precious blood of your savior who gave himself up on the cross for you, and be cleansed and made holy.

It's a healthy discipline which can find a place in our Christian life and I commend it to you.

\*

**CONCLUSION**

So there we are, the spiritual discipline of self-examination.

We looked at the 'what' with those passages from 1 and 2 Corinthians, examine yourself, test yourself.

We looked at the 'why', our tendency either to self-deception thinking we have no sin, or self-loathing thinking we are all sin – neither of which are true and so we need that sharp diagnosis by God's law.

And finally then we looked the 'how' – there are different ways of doing this, but Luther especially encouraged meditation on your place in life according to the ten commandments.

Self-examination is not spiritual navel gazing, Christians are people who are always to keep their eyes fixed on Jesus. But you will see the wonder of Jesus and what he's done for you more clearly, when you also take the time to examine yourself.

Let's pray.