

The Doctrine and the duty of Self-Examination

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“Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?”—2 Corinthians 13:5

The apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Corinth, exhorts the Gentile converts, “Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves: know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates?” Although he had confidence in the Corinthians, that they were in general sincere in their belief, and members of the true church of Christ, yet he felt that it was possible that they might be destitute of the faith of the gospel—that they might have been imposing upon themselves, and were the objects of divine displeasure instead of their “life being hid with Christ in God.”

It is a serious thing for the professor of Christianity to reflect on this possibility, but it is on this account the duty of self-examination is urged on him by the highest sanctions.

In endeavoring to explain and enforce this duty, I shall

I. Make some general observations on the subject.

II. Consider the end which we ought to have in view in self-examination.

III. Suggest some topics to which our inquiries should be directed in attending to this divine precept.

1st. Consider, the commandment to examine ourselves does not imply that we may not be immediately sensible that we believe the gospel, and consequently have joy and peace in believing. The mind perceives, and is acquainted with all its own thoughts, judgments, and

emotions. When we believe any thing to be true, we feel that we do so; and we may know when we believe the gospel of God, as well as when we believe any report upon the authority of a fellow creature. But let it be remembered, that even in the things of this life, we are apt to impose upon ourselves. The deceitfulness of the heart is especially manifest in regard to things unseen and eternal; and hence so many cry peace, peace, to themselves when there is no peace. One fruitful cause of self-deception in every country called Christian, is that most men have been accustomed from their earliest years to hear what is called the gospel, and to acknowledge its truth, without understanding its meaning, attending to its evidence, or feeling its importance. We may be conscious that we believe what we deem to be the gospel, and yet be in the gall of bitterness and the bond of iniquity. It is necessary, therefore, for all to examine, not only whether they believe something to which they attach the name of gospel, but whether it be indeed the gospel which they believe.

2nd. From the very nature of the gospel, as well as from the express declarations of God, we are certain that the faith of Christ must produce sentiments, experience, and practice peculiar to itself. The connection between faith and practice is uniformly declared to be so inseparable that the latter must always exactly correspond with the former.

3rd. Great pains have in consequence been taken to distinguish with accuracy between common and saving faith. And persons have been directed to judge favorably or unfavorably of their state, according as they have exerted the saving and not merely the natural acts of faith. The certain consequence of this must be to lead men to endeavor to perform such saving acts, and to trust in these, when they suppose that they have performed them. The mind is thus diverted from Jesus Christ, from the glory of His atonement, and the mercy of God revealed in Him, which is the only foundation of hope, to a delusive search after something else which may quiet the conscience. Thus a system of self-righteousness is established, under the name of salvation by faith.

Besides, nothing can lay us more open to self-deception. When instead of being engaged in contemplating the truth, our minds are occupied in considering the manner of our believing, we are laid under very strong temptations to persuade ourselves that our faith possesses all the qualities of saving faith, and hence to draw our consolation. The Scriptures show us a more excellent way. They address the common sense of mankind, teach us what we are to believe, and describe the effects which the belief of the truth must

necessarily produce. Thus, our minds are constantly directed towards the testimony of God, and a far more unequivocal test is given us by which we may prove whether we believe the gospel.

4th. We ought ever to bear in mind that we are extremely prone to take refuge in the opinion of others, especially of those who rank high in our esteem for judgment and piety. The opinions of others may indeed be very useful to the Christian. It is, however, often more important for us to regard the sentiments of those who are prejudiced against us than those of our friends.

Caution is the more necessary, as there is a strong tendency in those who are weak in the faith—and especially in persons under recent impressions—to be very solicitous about the opinions of those around them. And it is to be feared that many, by imagining that others entertain a favorable opinion of them, are buoyed up by delusive hopes, and hardened to their own destruction.

5th. The doctrine of Jesus is addressed to the heart, and never fails to affect it when understood and believed. It does not merely produce outward reformation, while the mind remains under the dominion of sin. “It is mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds, casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought and affection to the obedience of Christ.”

In self-examination, therefore, we ought to attend to our inward feelings, as well as to the general tenor of our conduct. In this respect many have erred. While some have considered true religion as consisting almost exclusively in certain emotions of mind, without paying due attention to the conduct; others, observing how little the practice of some professors corresponds with what they profess to feel, discard the consideration of inward emotions entirely, and look only to the outward behavior. Both are in error. By attending to the workings of our minds, as well as to our practice, we are in less danger of being deceived. The one is a check upon the other. Our conduct may in many respects appear good, while it proceeds from a corrupt principle. And in judging of our feelings, without bringing them to the test of practice, we are ever apt to impose upon ourselves, and to cherish, those feelings which give us pleasure, without considering whence they spring. It is only when our feelings and practice correspond that we can have well-grounded satisfaction.

6th. We ought to beware of forming a judgment of ourselves by partial and detached views of our conduct. To this we are extremely

prone. Ever ready to depart from universal regard to the ways of God, we are disposed to rest on some one action, or series of actions, as an evidence that all is well with us, and thus to flatter ourselves that we are in truth the servants of Christ.

7th. The evidence of our being in the faith is always capable of increase. We are not then to be satisfied with the presumption that upon the whole the balance is in our favor, but to seek after the most decisive evidence. We are not to lull ourselves asleep by saying we are right in the main, although imperfect in very many respects, and certainly weak in the faith. According to the evidence of this imperfection, or of our weakness in the faith, we are in danger of making shipwreck of faith altogether.

In short, the greater progress we make, we shall be the less disposed to admire or depend upon our attainments, for our standard of holiness will always be proportionately raised.

8th. The revelation of God—that His love is unchangeable, that believers shall finally and certainly persevere, and that the gifts and calling of God are without repentance—is often abused to the neglecting or setting aside the necessity of self-examination. When lukewarm in our love, and backsliding from God, we are prone to quiet our consciences with such considerations. The saints shall indeed persevere, but we can have no evidence that we are of the number unless we are abiding in the truth.

The Scriptures uniformly distinguish the saving operations of God on the soul by their permanence. The children of God are not of those who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul; while those who receive the Word with joy, but have no root, are manifested by their stumbling and falling away, being unable to endure temptation. Hence it follows, that whatever we have done or suffered for the gospel, unless we abide in the faith, we cannot be saved. We can only be saved by the gospel if we keep in memory the truth. None, therefore, can lawfully take comfort from the promises of God—that believers shall persevere—unless they are actually persevering, and under the influence of these promises, working out their own salvation with fear and trembling. Hence, in self-examination, the question is not, whether we did actually believe at any former period, but whether we are now in the faith of Christ.

II. Let us next consider what purposes and ends we ought to present to our mind in self-examination.

1st. Self-examination, then, is not calculated to quiet the conscience, to banish slavish fear, or to remove doubts and apprehensions of our being unbelievers.

When the mind is apprehensive of divine displeasure and its consequences, we have for our relief, the testimony of God, that the blood of Christ cleanseth from all sin. We are invited to draw near to the throne of grace for mercy, and are assured that Christ will in no wise cast out the most vile who come to Him. If this does not relieve us, God has provided no other ground of comfort and we ought to beware of seeking such, either for ourselves or others. If this does not give us peace, it must be because we believe not the record of God, because we are not willing to be indebted to free and sovereign mercy alone. And in such a state of mind we need to be excited to fear and jealousy of ourselves, and to be called to repentance, not to be quieted in our unbelief and rebellion.

2nd. The object of self-examination, according to the Scriptures, is to prove the genuineness of the peace and comfort which we enjoy.

Peace and comfort are the necessary effects of the gospel, when its meaning is properly understood and its certainty deemed by us unquestionable. But there is a false peace which may be mistaken for true. True peace arises from the knowledge of the atonement of Christ, and is always connected with deep and lively views of eternal things. False peace arises from indifference about eternal things; and of this we see enough in the world lying in the wicked one.

Thus we see that while self-examination is not calculated to restore peace to the troubled mind, it is highly important in order to ascertain whether the hope we enjoy be scriptural. Without much self-examination, we shall not long continue in the possession of solid peace.

3rd. The object of self-examination, according to the Scriptures, is to detect “the hidden evils of the heart.”

Many fleshly lusts war against our souls. We are surrounded with snares, and are ever apt to be led aside; not only to fall into open sin, but to impose upon ourselves, and while outwardly walking religiously, not to be living to God—going on in cold formality, not mortifying our members, but in some secret, and perhaps unperceived manner, serving the flesh. By frequently bringing our hearts to the test of Scripture, and comparing our spirit and conduct with the precepts

of the Word of God, we shall more easily avoid the snares of Satan and maintain more habitually a suitable and becoming conversation.

4th. One great object for which self-examination is enjoined in Scripture, is to increase our joy in the Lord.

Joy is a fruit of the Spirit, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith” (Gal 5:22), and of the very greatest importance and much insisted on in the Word of God. “The joy of the LORD is your strength” (Neh 8:10). It animates us in duty and supports us under trials. It prevents the innocent enjoyments of this life from engrossing an immoderate share of our affections. It renders insipid the pleasures in which the men of the world chiefly delight, and encourages us to devote our all to the Lord, in whose service we enjoy the greatest happiness. Many do not seem to be aware of this, nor of the vast importance of having the soul filled with joy in God. They even look upon it with a suspicious eye, as if it proceeded from presumption, and were inconsistent with that humility which ought to distinguish the disciple of the lowly Jesus. Nothing can be more false and unfounded. The idea can only arise from inexperience of the joy which flows from the gospel.

That there is a presumptuous confidence among some professors, who speak great swelling words of vanity about their joy, is alas! too manifest. But we are not on this account to contradict the whole revelation of God, which represents joy as an eminent characteristic of believers. Paul tells us that the kingdom of God is righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost, and exhorts his brethren to rejoice always in the Lord (Phil 3:1; 4:4).

Nothing recommends the gospel of Christ to the world more than His followers being filled with joy and peace. Ungodly men are ever prone to mistake and misrepresent religion as productive of gloom and melancholy, and they have had too much reason for this from the conduct of many professors. We have every reason to believe that the uncomfortable views of religion which so many entertain arise from their not discerning the glory and fullness of the gospel, together with the carnality of their minds, which leads them to endeavor to keep their consciences at ease, while not living near to God. Hence they flatter themselves, that their want of comfort is the fruit of their humility, and that the joys of others are the offspring of pride, if not a mere pretense. It is no uncommon thing for Satan to be transformed into an angel of light, and to represent the genuine fruits of the Holy Spirit as proceeding from the heart not being right with God.

Upon the whole, it appears that, while our peace and joy must, in the first instance, arise entirely from believing the testimony of God, and can only be preserved by abiding in His doctrine, it is most highly important and necessary—as we would guard against self-deception, as we would correct what is amiss in us, as we would increase our joy, and consequently our activity in the Lord’s service—that we closely and constantly examine ourselves whether we be in the faith.

III. Let us now suggest some topics, to which our inquiries should be directed, while engaged in the duty of self-examination.

1st. Let us inquire how the gospel has affected us. Does it give us hope, while we regard ourselves as justly deserving of the wrath of God on account of sin? Do we see in it a reply to the accusations of conscience? Are these answered by the considerations of its truth? This is the first and necessary effect of the gospel, if we know what it means, and have received it not in word only but by the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance. It is an effect, without which no other can exist, and upon the existence and degree of which every fruit of the Spirit depends. But though this is first in order, it is never solitary. What other effects then has the gospel produced in our minds? I do not mean that we should inquire whether these have been suddenly produced by it; but whether it has, either more gradually or immediately, wrought effectually in us, changing the objects of our pursuit, and the tempers and dispositions of our hearts. Many things, and these highly interesting, may be believed, which leave the heart as they found it. Not so the gospel of Christ; this opens a new scene to the eyes of all who receive it; it brings them, as it were, into a new creation. The things which formerly engrossed their minds now appear mean and contemptible, compared with those revealed in the gospel; and those things which were once considered as unworthy of their regard, now appear to be all-important. Being risen with Christ, by the faith of the operation of God who raised Him from the dead, the Christian seeks “those things which are above, where Christ sitteth at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1). Begotten again to the lively hope of an inheritance incorruptible, undefiled, and unfading, he accounts himself a stranger and pilgrim on earth, and plainly declares that he seeks a heavenly country. Is this the case with us? Have the vast and momentous concerns of eternity made all that is in the world appear vain in our eyes? “This is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). If therefore the world is not crucified to us and we unto the world by the doctrine of the cross, we have never beheld the glory of that doctrine, and are consequently rejecting the testimony of Jesus.

2nd. We should examine the general principles on which we act.

Faith works by love to God. Believers are constrained “for the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead” (2 Cor 5:14); i.e., all endured death in Him, the substituted sacrifice, for their sins. “And that He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again” (2 Cor 5:15). They consider themselves not to be debtors to the flesh to live after the flesh; they account themselves not their own, but bought with a price. They are the willing servants of their Redeemer, desiring to glorify Him with their bodies and spirits, which are His. Does this description correspond with our character? What views have we of the character of God? Do we tremble like slaves in His presence, esteeming Him a hard and austere master, or are we destitute of reverence and holy awe of His majesty? The faith of the gospel produces the most profound awe and veneration of God. The believer views Him as a consuming fire, while, at the same time, he has boldness in His presence, and is taught to cry, “Abba Father!” The comforts of the Holy Spirit are ever found united with the fear of God.

What views do we entertain of sin? Does it appear to us a light matter, or does the sense of it drive us to despondency or despair? In either case, we may be assured, on the authority of God, that we are not believing the gospel. The gospel produces self-abhorrence on account of sin, and that in the greatest degree. It gives a view of sin, so dreadful, as may well confirm every fear which the loudest alarms of conscience can excite. But it also stills these alarms, and produces peace, and joy, and lively hope in believers, without diminishing in any degree their sense of the malignity and awful consequences of sin. We remember and are confounded, and never open our mouths any more, because of our shame, when we know that God is pacified towards us for all that we have done (Eze 16:63).

Again, we should inquire what things chiefly occupy our thoughts, whether the things of the flesh or of the Spirit. “They that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit” (Rom 8:5). In which channel do our minds run? Thus, ought we not only to keep, but to examine our hearts with all diligence. But, as we are apt to impose on ourselves, when we judge merely by our feelings, and to imagine our minds to be spiritual, while our conversation is carnal, we ought to inquire:

3rdly. How far we actually sacrifice everything to the will of God? Does our practice decidedly prove that we are seeking first the

kingdom of God and His righteousness? Does our conduct plainly show that we sit loose with regard to the world? Do our lives make it manifest that neither the wealth, the honors, nor the pleasures of the world are the chief object of our regard; that we are not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds? This is the certain consequence of holding fast the truth.

4thly. How do we employ the talents God has committed to us? Do we seriously consider what talents we possess? Do we act as those who must give account—not endeavoring, on the one hand, ostentatiously to display them, and thus to acquire honor for ourselves; nor, on the other, from sloth or false humility, neglecting to occupy them because they are small and inconsiderable, or because they are of such a nature as not to excite the admiration of men? Do we conscientiously employ them with an eye to the glory of God? This opens a wide field for self-examination.

5thly. How do we bear the trials which God appoints for us? Are we like the bullock unaccustomed to the yoke? Do we faint in the day of adversity or fret under our afflictions? Or do we despise the chastening of the Lord; with a sullen and stoical firmness braving distress, and steeling our minds to disappointment? It is the characteristic of the believer to “glory in tribulations” (Rom 5:3), to account them light and temporary, not worthy to be compared with the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory for which these afflictions are preparing him (2 Cor 4:17-18). The language of faith, therefore, will always be, “The cup which my Father giveth me to drink, shall I not drink it?” The believer, knowing that all things shall work together for good to those who love God, in every thing gives thanks. He has learned, in whatever state he is, therewith to be content. His soul is as a weaned child. While he may keenly feel the rod of his heavenly Father; while he is, it may be, in heaviness through manifold temptations, yet he greatly rejoices, adding fortitude and patience to faith.

6thly. How do we act towards our brethren? “If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar; for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?” (1 John 4:20). Do we consider Christ as our great pattern, whom we are bound to imitate in doing good to all men as we have opportunity, and especially to those of the household of faith? Do we really love the disciples of Jesus: do we esteem them the excellent of the earth; do we associate with them, and testify our love to them by every act of kindness in our power? Nothing ascertains character more than the company with whom we delight to associate. We must needs go out of

the world, were we altogether to avoid the ungodly. But their society is not to a Christian a matter of choice and satisfaction. He is aware of the danger to which it exposes him, and is ever fearful and watchful of its effects.

If self-examination be properly conducted, the result will always be a deep sense of our sinfulness and a growing conviction of our constant need of pardoning mercy. This must be the case with the most zealous, circumspect, and conscientious. The more we are convinced of the reasonableness, and struck with the wisdom and excellence of the commandments of Christ, and the more we know of the happiness of those who obey them, the more severely shall we condemn ourselves, and lament that we have not hitherto regarded them as we ought.

If, on self-examination, we have reason to conclude, or if we suspect, that we are not in the faith, it is our present duty to believe in Jesus who died for the ungodly, and confidently to trust in Him for salvation. Nothing we can do or suffer can prepare us better for receiving the testimony of God. Salvation is proclaimed to men as sinners. The gospel is addressed to all, in the circumstances in which it finds them. We cannot indeed enjoy the blessings it conveys without faith, yet we need no other qualification for divine mercy but guilt and wretchedness; and if we dream that we do, or that we shall ever possess any other, we deceive ourselves. It is only pride and the love of sin, with the blindness and error inseparable from them, which prevent all men from gladly receiving the gospel. They desire to have something whereof to glory; they wish to feel something which shall warrant them to believe. But in so doing they err, not knowing their own character, nor the grace of God.

Do some object, "We cannot believe; faith is the gift of God; no man can come to Christ except the Father draw him"? This is true and, properly understood, what every Christian must feel and believe. But many, it is to be feared, misapprehend and wrest these Scriptures to their own destruction. They lament their own inability as if it were their misfortune, and not their crime, and then they quiet their consciences, considering the uneasiness they feel, as an evidence that there is some good thing in them towards God, and that in due time all will be well.

But in what does this inability consist? We can receive the testimony of men; we conduct ourselves every hour by faith in human veracity; and why can we not receive the testimony of God? Is it less weighty or more questionable? Are we laid under an invincible necessity to

account the God of truth a liar? No; but His gospel pours contempt on all to which we are attached. It shocks the pride of the human heart. It describes our righteousness as filthy rags, and proclaims salvation to the most sober and decent, on the same terms as to the murderer and the sensualist; it acknowledges no difference among men as a recommendation to divine mercy. Thus it levels all human glory, and cuts off all occasion of boasting. Hence Christ is a stumbling block and rock of offense, and Satan, in the form of an angel of light, suggests to those who are blinded by him, that as this doctrine confounds all moral distinctions and depreciates human virtue, it cannot be of God.

Add to this, the gospel makes no provision for the lusts of the flesh or of the mind. It spares not a right eye nor a right hand, but proclaims complete deliverance from all sin. This salvation is not future, but present. Now, to suppose an ungodly man truly desirous of being made holy, is to suppose that he loves holiness, which the Scriptures uniformly deny. If then a sinner's inability to believe consists in pride and the love of iniquity, it is plain that so far from being an alleviation, it is the greatest aggravation of unbelief. "The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God" (Rom 8:7). Yet this God, to whom men are enemies, pitying their ruined condition, has given His Son to die for sinners, and beseeches them to turn to Him and live. But they cannot think of it; they cannot find in their hearts to be reconciled to God; and they quiet their consciences by alleging, "I am tempted of God; He but tantalizes me; I am unable to believe."

When men object that they cannot believe and that faith is the gift of God, their ideas are altogether different from what is meant in the Scriptures by these declarations. We naturally consider faith as something which is to recommend us to the favor of God. However blinded the human mind may be, few are able to persuade themselves that they can fully keep His holy law. They think they can do something, but not quite enough, and they go about to establish their own righteousness under the name of faith, which, though imperfect, they consider to be an acceptable obedience. If their consciences, however, still continue uneasy, they take shelter in the delusion that they must wait till God gives them faith. Such have yet to learn that they are utterly lost and ruined; and till they see this to be the case, the preaching of the cross must appear to them foolishness. In the meantime, they dream of doing what they can that they may obtain faith, and thus attempt to purchase the blessings of salvation. But unbelievers are never required in the Scriptures to use means to believe. This would in fact be a contradiction to the whole gospel. It

would be a commandment to men to go about to establish their own righteousness to endeavor to reconcile God to them; as if He were their enemy, while they were desirous of His friendship.

We are taught in the gospel that we can do nothing, more or less, to procure the favor of God; that we are destitute of every good disposition; that our hearts are filled with enmity against Him; and that the only bar to our being reconciled is our aversion to reconciliation. He commands every creature to place confidence in the finished work of Christ, which He has declared to be all-sufficient for the remission of sins of the deepest dye. And so long as men disobey this commandment, they plainly show, whatever their profession may be, that they love the darkness more than the light, that they hate both Christ and His Father. Eternal life is preached to all, as a free gift through Jesus Christ; and those who reject it, plainly show that they prefer the gratification of their pride and evil passions to the enjoyment of the blessings of the salvation of Christ.

Through the deceitfulness of the human heart, many who do not believe, imagine that they desire to be delivered from sin. But if the power of sin in the heart be such as the Scriptures uniformly assert; if men are completely under its dominion—ungodly, and without strength, till Christ sets them free; and if he only that believeth is thus delivered by Christ, then it is absurd to suppose that any unbeliever truly desires salvation. He may wish to be freed from some particular sin which exposes him to inconvenience, but the dominion of iniquity is so firmly established in his heart that he cannot possibly desire to be delivered from his bondage, which consists entirely in his depraved inclinations.

Some suppose that to call in question their own state is a rejection of the testimony of God, and thus set aside all self-examination. To doubt their eternal salvation, is according to them, to make God a liar. But God has not testified to any individual that he shall be saved. His testimony is true, whether men believe it or not, that he who believeth in Jesus Christ shall never perish, but shall have eternal life. Hence the necessity of inquiring, *Am I in the faith?*

Others, who do not go so far, too easily admit that any suspicions concerning their state are temptations, of which they endeavor to get rid of as soon as possible. But let such remember that their apprehensions may be perfectly well-founded. As far as their conduct and conversation do not correspond with what the Scriptures declare to be inseparable from the belief of the truth, they have reason to doubt, to search and try their ways. All doubts of our personal interest

in Christ, it is true, have their origin in unbelief. If we were fully persuaded of the truth of the gospel, if our eyes were always fixed upon it, if we always clearly perceived the glorious fullness and freeness of the salvation of Christ, we should constantly rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory; and we should also be proportionately sanctified by the truth, be fruitful in every good work, and thus possess the full assurance of the hope which God hath published in the gospel. It is owing to our not discerning the glory of this doctrine, that we at any time stand in doubt of our obtaining eternal blessedness. But we shall not improve our situation by imposing on ourselves, and concluding, without reason and evidence, that notwithstanding our uneasiness, all is well with us. We should consider these doubts as the symptoms of some internal disorder; and that we have at all times an almighty Physician to whom we may with confidence apply, whose skill is equal to the most desperate case; believing in whom, no sinner of the human race shall ever perish, but shall undoubtedly obtain eternal life. Amen.