

Self-Examination: READINGS

A sermon by Rev. Matthew Genzlinger

2 Samuel 12:1-9: Then the Lord sent Nathan to David. And he came to him, and said to him: “There were two men in one city, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had exceedingly many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing, except one little ewe lamb which he had bought and nourished; and it grew up together with him and with his children. It ate of his own food and drank from his own cup and lay in his bosom; and it was like a daughter to him. And a traveler came to the rich man, who refused to take from his own flock and from his own herd to prepare one for the wayfaring man who had come to him; but he took the poor man’s lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.” So David’s anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die! And he shall restore fourfold for the lamb, because he did this thing and because he had no pity.” Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man! Thus says the Lord God of Israel: ‘I anointed you king over Israel, and I delivered you from the hand of Saul. I gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your keeping, and gave you the house of Israel and Judah. And if that had been too little, I also would have given you much more! Why have you despised the commandment of the Lord, to do evil in His sight?’”

John 8:3-11: Then the scribes and Pharisees brought to Him a woman caught in adultery. And when they had set her in the midst, they said to Him, “Teacher, this woman was caught in adultery, in the very act. Now Moses, in the law, commanded us that such should be stoned. But what do You say?” This they said, testing Him, that they might have something of which to accuse Him. But Jesus stooped down and wrote on the ground with His finger, as though He did not hear. So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” And again He stooped down and wrote on the ground. Then those who heard it, being convicted by their conscience, went out one by one, beginning with the oldest even to the last. And Jesus was left alone, and the woman standing in the midst. When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, “Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?” She said, “No one, Lord.” And Jesus said to her, “Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more.”

Apocalypse Revealed 937: “The Lord loves everyone, and wills to be conjoined to him, but He cannot be conjoined as long as the person is in the delight of evil, as in the delight of hating and revenging, in the delight of committing adultery and whoredom, in the delight of robbing or stealing under any form, in the delight of blaspheming and lying, and in the lusts of the love of self and the world; for everyone who is in these is in companionship with the devils who are in hell. The Lord indeed loves them even there; but He cannot be conjoined with them, unless the delights of those evils are removed; and these cannot be removed by the Lord, unless the person examines himself that he may know his evils, acknowledges and confesses them before the Lord, and wills to desist from them, and thus perform repentance....As far as evils with their delights are thus removed, so far the Lord's love enters, which, as was said, is universal towards all; and the person is then led away from hell, and is led into heaven.”

True Christian Religion 535: “It is strange that anyone can find fault with another for his evil intentions, and say, "Do not do that because it is a sin," and yet find it difficult to say this to himself; but this is because the latter touches the will, but the former only the thought nearest to hearing. Inquiry was made in the spiritual world as to who were capable of this actual repentance, and they were found to be as few as doves in a vast desert. Some said that they could repent in the easier way; but were not able to examine themselves and confess their sins before God. All who do good from religion, avoid actual evils, but they very rarely reflect upon the interiors pertaining to the will, for they believe that they are not in evil because they are in good, and even that the good covers the evil. But, my friend, the first thing of charity is to shun evils. This is taught in the Word, the Decalogue, baptism, the holy supper and even by the reason; for how can anyone flee away from evils and banish them without some self-inspection? And how can good become good until it has been interiorly purified? I know that all pious people, and also all people of sound reason, will assent to this when they read it, and will see it as genuine truth; but still, that few will act accordingly.”

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“So David’s anger was greatly aroused against the man, and he said to Nathan, ‘As the Lord lives, the man who has done this shall surely die!’...Then Nathan said to David, ‘You are the man!’” (2 Samuel 12:6-7)

Last week we talked about the spiritual discipline of meditating on the Word of God. This week we are going to explore a second spiritual discipline that follows nicely: The spiritual discipline of self-examination.

When we make the effort to regularly mediate on the Lord’s Word, the Lord is able to enlighten and teach us about what is good and what is evil; what is true and what is false. Allowing the Lord to help us decipher the difference between what is of heaven and what is of hell, is one of the main uses of mediating on the Lord’s Word.

As we learn the genuine difference between what is right and wrong, we begin by applying our new understanding to the world around us. As spiritual adolescents, we become very good at taking what we now know to be good and evil, and applying it to other people and other situations. We see something going on in the world around us that we can now judge to be wrong or even evil, and we take up the cause of trying to right that injustice. We see another person doing something that we now perceive to be immoral based on what we have learned from the Lord’s Word, and we make judgments on their behavior.

Early on in our spiritual development, these more outward focused judgments are to be expected. In fact, for a spiritual adolescent these kinds of judgments are an important part of their development. And on some level, making judgements about people around us is always an important and necessary part of life. However, according to the Heavenly Doctrines, a true milestone is reached in our lives when we begin using our knowledge of what is good and true, to reflect on the evils and false ideas that exist within our own hearts and minds. We enter a new stage of spiritual life when instead of focusing on what is wrong with everybody else, we begin to examine ourselves. We read in the book Divine Providence: “A person comes into the second state of reformation when he begins to think that there is such a thing as sin...and when he examines it somewhat in himself.” (DP 83:5)

The ability to take the teachings the Lord provides us with, and use them to reflect on our own internal evils, is actually an amazing gift the Lord gives us. Because without this ability to practice self-reflection, we could never choose to moderate our lives; and so we could never be regenerated and saved. And indeed this is why we see the Lord encouraging this kind of self-reflection throughout His Word. By telling David that, “He was the man,” the prophet Nathan was prompting him to reflect on his own internal evils and not so much on the evils of another (2 Samuel 12). In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord encourages us to look at the plank in our own eye, before focusing on the small piece of straw in our brother’s eye (Matthew 7:3-5). And in the story of the woman caught in adultery, the Lord so powerfully turns our accusing fingers inward by saying, “He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first.” (John 8:7)

But now even though the Lord gives us the gift of self-reflection and encourages us to use it, the Heavenly Doctrines admit that genuine self-reflection can be a hard discipline to achieve. As we all know from experience, reflecting on the state of other people’s lives and

judging them, is much easier than reflecting on our own internal evils and making changes ourselves. And why is this? True Christian Religion explains this difficulty well: "It is strange that anyone can find fault with another for his evil intentions, and say, "Do not do that because it is a sin," and yet find it difficult to say this to himself; but this is because the latter touches the will, but the former only the thought nearest to hearing." (TCR 535) So when we simply think intellectually about what is evil and false and see it in another, we end up keeping what is evil and false at arm's length. Evil is something we hear and think about, but it's over there. Self-reflection on the other hand touches our will. It requires a commitment to see evil, not just as an intellectual idea, but as something real that is actually affecting my heart and life. Because facing the evils that touch our will is a lot harder and more uncomfortable than dealing with evils that merely touch our thoughts, this same passage goes on to say that those who actually do this kind of self-reflection are as few as the number of doves in a vast desert.

There are many more teachings we could explore about self-reflection, our need to do it and why genuine self-reflection is so rare in the world today. I would like to move on to three relatively simple teachings or Divine tips that can help us practice this spiritual discipline more effectively. The first Divine tip is to approach the spiritual discipline of self-reflection with a real understanding of the Lord's love for you and why He wants you to do this.

Unfortunately, in today's world a lot of people have an image of God as being a rather angry and unforgiving person. When we make a mistake, when we sin, God is to be feared because of the punishments He will now rain down upon us. The kind of Old Testament image of a very demanding God that you don't want to disobey lest His wrath fall upon you, is an image that still taints many people's understanding of who God is, and so their relationship with Him. If you're idea of God is one of anger and vengeance and punishment for sin, then the idea of reflecting on your own evils and confessing them isn't going to be very attractive.

And so, in the Heavenly Doctrines, the Lord spends a lot of time explaining to us why He actually wants us to do this kind of self-reflection; why He actually wants us to see the evils that exist within our own hearts and minds. And it's not because He is angry or wants to punish us for those sins. It's simply because He loves us. And because He loves us, He wants to help us get rid of these evil things that are standing in the way of Him being able to bless us and make us happy. There is a wonderful passage from the Apocalypse Revealed that explains this so beautifully: "The Lord loves everyone, and wills to be conjoined to him, but He cannot be conjoined as long as the person is in the delight of evil, as in the delight of hating and revenging, in the delight of committing adultery and whoredom, in the delight of robbing or stealing under any form, in the delight of blaspheming and lying, and in the lusts of the love of self and the world; for everyone who is in these is in companionship with the devils who are in hell. The Lord indeed loves them even there; but He cannot be conjoined with them, unless the delights of those evils are removed; and these cannot be removed by the Lord, unless the person examines himself that he may know his evils, acknowledges and confesses them before the Lord, and wills to desist from them, and thus perform repentance....As far as evils with their delights are thus removed, so far the Lord's love enters, which, as was said, is universal towards all; and the person is then led away from hell, and is led into heaven." (AR 937) So this may seem like a simple idea, but just knowing that the Lord wants us to do this kind of self-reflection because He loves us is huge. Because of this, we don't need to be nervous about honestly reflecting on our sins before the Lord. We can do this kind of spiritual self-reflection, knowing that the Lord is

here to help, not to condemn. One story that beautifully illustrates this is the story of the woman caught in adultery. Here this woman was surrounded by her accusers, caught red handed committing a very heinous evil. And yet the Lord Himself showed so much patience with her. Even though everybody else was ready to condemn her, the Lord was not. He didn't approve of her evil, and He didn't say, "Oh don't worry about it, it's fine." But He wasn't there to condemn her; He was there to help. And so He said, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:11)

A second Divine tip the Lord gives us when it comes to the spiritual discipline of self-reflection is to be specific. Throughout the Heavenly Doctrines the Lord points out a big mistake that we in the Christian world often make when it comes to reflecting on our evils. We tend to be far too general. For various reasons that we won't go into today, we often fall into the trap of thinking that it's good enough to simply recognize in a general way that we are indeed sinners and filled with all kinds of selfish motives and thoughts. If I confess to the Lord that, yes Lord I incline towards evils of every kind; and yes Lord I am generally a corrupt person from head to toe, than that is enough to be made clean and saved.

On various levels this sounds good, but the Lord teaches us that a person who makes a general confession of all evils, in reality confesses no evils. When it comes to self-reflection our job is not to simply generally see and confess that we are sinners. Our job is to be specific! To find one specific selfish love or behavior that we can see we have a problem with; that is preventing us from receiving the Lord and His love into our life, into our marriage, into our relationships with other people. And then work to shun that specific evil. It's only if we practice the spiritual discipline of reflecting on specific evils within us, that the Lord can help us get rid of those evils, and eventually move forward in our spiritual lives. Swedenborg reports having once seen a man in the spiritual world who was perfectly willing to confess to the world that he was a sinner and impure from head to foot. But because he had never come to know a single evil in himself, because he had never examined himself, he was still inwardly a completely selfish person. Internally it says he was a, "Willful adulterer, a thief, a wily detractor, and intensely revengeful." (TCR 518) And so, he ultimately found his home in hell.

The third and final Divine tip we'll mention today is kind of obvious, but it's one that the Lord does take the time to encourage. In the book True Christian Religion there is an entire section that talks about how the spiritual discipline of self-reflection is easy for those who have now and then practiced it. We all know that all things tend to get easier with practice. Self-reflection is no exception to this general rule. One of the reasons that genuine self-reflection can become difficult is because we don't do it enough. The more we find excuses to not do this kind of spiritual self-reflection and put it off, the harder and scarier it becomes. This is a little bit of a long reading, but I'd like to read for you a portion of this passage from True Christian Religion that really helps us see the importance of simply getting into the regular habit of self-examination: "Actual repentance is to examine oneself, to recognize one's sins, to confess them before God, and thus to begin a new life....To the Reformed Christian world...this repentance is a very difficult task. This is because some are unwilling and some are afraid to practice it; and continued neglect establishes a habit, induces unwillingness, and at length gains the endorsement of the reasoning intellect, and this with some produces sadness, dread, and terror at the thought of repentance....Some said, that whenever they undertake to examine themselves, dread and terror fill their minds as if they saw a monster near their bed in the morning twilight....Others

said that they were utterly unable to examine themselves, to trace out and set forth their actual evils and the secrets of their thoughts; and that they felt this to be as repugnant and terrifying as an attempt to cross a ditch to a rampart where an armed soldier stands and cries, "Keep back." From all this it is now clear that actual repentance is easy to those who at times practice it, but is extremely difficult to those who have not practiced it. . . . It is known that habit is a second nature, and that therefore what is easy for one is difficult for another; and this is true of self-examination and a confession of what is thereby discovered. What is easier for a hired laborer, a porter, or a farmer, than to work with his hands from morning till evening, while a gentleman or a delicate person could not do the same work for half an hour without fatigue and sweating? It is easy for a footman with a staff and easy boots to pursue his way for miles, while one accustomed to ride can hardly run slowly from one street to another. Every mechanic who is attentive to his task goes through it easily and willingly, and when he leaves it, longs to return; while another, who understands the same trade, but is indolent, can scarcely be driven to work. The same is true of everyone, whatever may be his office or pursuit. To one diligent in piety, what is easier than to pray to God? while to one who is a slave to impiety, what is more difficult, and vice versa? . . . Everyone becomes imbued with the end he has in view and the habit arising therefrom." (TCR 563) So just do it! Get into the regular habit of practicing self-examination and after a while it won't be that difficult to do.

This week, I would like to really encourage all of us to make the spiritual discipline of self-reflection a more regular and significant part of our lives. According to the Lord genuine self-reflection is something that not a lot of people do. Those who do it are as few as the number of doves in a vast desert. We read in True Christian Religion that all pious people and people of sound reason will assent to the idea that self-reflection is clearly taught by the Lord and vital to our very salvation, and yet, still few will act accordingly. Let us take up this challenge and act accordingly. Because genuine self-reflection is what allows us to ultimately make room for the Lord in our lives and so to find lasting happiness. As we make this effort, we can remember these three Divine tips. 1. Remember that the Lord wants us to make this effort because He loves us and He is always here to help. We don't have to somehow be scared about the Lord discovering our deep dark secrets. 2. Be specific. As you sit down and practice the discipline of self-reflection look for specific evils; look for specific ways that you may be preventing the Lord's love from filling your life; and then work on shunning those specific evils. 3. Get into a good regular habit of doing this. The Lord does not want us to spend every waking minute reflecting on our internal states and evils. But he does want us to get into the regular habit of being willing to look within and to courageously confront our inner demons. Let's encourage each other to use these Divine tips to practice well the spiritual discipline of self-examination. Real self-examination can be hard, but with the Lord's help and guidance in the long run it is well worth the effort. Amen.