



The Lost Art of Reflection

A 9-week Bible study on
self-examination before God

A free resource from RFLCT.

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A 9-week Bible study on self-examination before God

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RFLCT. is a daily reflection app for Christians. One honest question a day. A Scripture anchor. No feed, no streaks, no shame.

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Contents

Why this study exists

How to use this study

The 9-week arc

Week 1. The Lost Art

Week 2. Christ Withdrew

Week 3. The God Who Already Sees

Week 4. Search Me, Know Me

Week 5. Sin Named, Not Managed

Week 6. The Heart Beneath the Heart

Week 7. At the Table

Week 8. Test Yourselves

Week 9. A Rule of Reflection

Closing word

Bibliography

Stay in the practice

Why this study exists

Most Christians have never been taught to examine themselves. Not properly. We've been taught to read the Bible, pray, attend, serve, give. All good. But the older practice of sitting before God and asking honest questions about our own hearts has quietly disappeared from most modern Christian lives.

This study is an attempt to recover it.

For nine weeks, we'll walk through what Scripture actually says about reflection and self-examination. We'll sit with the Puritans and the Reformers, who took this practice seriously and built whole rhythms of life around it. And we'll do the harder work of letting these texts read us, not just the other way around.

A warning up front. This is not a self-improvement plan. We are not examining ourselves to feel better about ourselves, or to climb a ladder of holiness, or to earn anything from God. We are examining ourselves because we already belong to Christ, and people who belong to Christ tell the truth about themselves.

Conviction leads to the cross. Not to despair. Not to performance. To the cross.

That's the whole point.

How to use this study

Each week has two layers.

The weekly teaching. A longer session you can read in one sitting (about 15 to 20 minutes). It includes the core Scripture passage, theological teaching from the Reformed tradition, a voice from church history, reflection questions, and a practice for the week. Read it on a Sunday or whatever day starts your week.

Five daily devotions. Short readings (about 5 minutes each) that take the week's idea and turn it slowly. Monday through Friday. Saturday is open. Sunday is for the next teaching.

A family/kids version. Tucked inside each weekly teaching. Simpler language, age-appropriate questions, and a short object lesson or activity. Designed for mixed ages, so a 6-year-old and a 12-year-old can sit in on the same conversation.

You can do this study alone. You can do it with your spouse. You can do it as a family. You can do it with a small group. It will work in any of those settings. The deepest version is probably the one where you do the personal study yourself and then bring the family version to the table during the week.

If you miss days, just pick it back up. There are no streaks here.

The 9-week arc

Week	Theme	Anchor	Voice from history
1	The Lost Art	Lamentations 3:40	John Calvin
2	Christ Withdrew	Luke 5:16, Mark 1:35, Matthew 26:36-46	Dietrich Bonhoeffer
3	The God Who Already Sees	Psalm 139:1-12	Charles Spurgeon
4	Search Me, Know Me	Psalm 139:23-24	John Owen
5	Sin Named, Not Managed	Psalm 51, 2 Corinthians 7:9-11	Thomas Watson
6	The Heart Beneath the Heart	Proverbs 4:23, Matthew 15:18-19	Jonathan Edwards
7	At the Table	1 Corinthians 11:27-29	John Calvin
8	Test Yourselves	2 Corinthians 13:5, 1 John 5:13	Richard Sibbes
9	A Rule of Reflection	Psalm 4:4, Lamentations 3:22-23	Richard Baxter

Where each week goes

Week 1. The Lost Art. Why self-examination has disappeared from modern Christianity, and what we lost when it left. We start with diagnosis, not technique.

Week 2. Christ Withdrew. Before we sit with the Psalms or the Puritans, we sit with Christ. Jesus practiced what he commands. He withdrew to desolate places. He prayed all night. He examined his own will in Gethsemane. And he told his disciples to take the log out of their own eye before they touched anyone else's speck. The practice we are recovering is the practice he kept.

Week 3. The God Who Already Sees. Before we look at ourselves, we have to remember who is already looking at us. Examination begins with God's gaze, not ours. This is the foundation that keeps reflection from turning into morbid self-focus.

Week 4. Search Me, Know Me. The prayer that opens the practice. We don't audit ourselves. We invite God to do it. Owen's work on indwelling sin sharpens the question of what we're actually asking God to expose.

Week 5. Sin Named, Not Managed. What Paul calls godly grief, and how it differs from worldly sorrow. Watson on repentance. The gospel turn at the center of the study. Conviction without Christ is just shame. Conviction with Christ is freedom. This is the hinge of the whole study.

Week 6. The Heart Beneath the Heart. Now that the cross is planted, we can go deeper. Reflection that stays on the surface of behavior is shallow reflection. Edwards helps us look at the affections, at what we actually love and want. We can do this work without despair because Week 5 already settled who holds us.

Week 7. At the Table. Paul tells the Corinthians to examine themselves before they eat the Lord's Supper. Why? What does the Table have to do with reflection? Calvin's view of the Supper as a means of grace reframes the practice.

Week 8. Test Yourself. Paul also says to examine whether you are in the faith. This is hard ground. Done wrong, it produces anxiety and spiritual paralysis. Done right, it produces deep assurance. Sibbes on the bruised reed steadies us here.

Week 9. A Rule of Reflection. Practical. How do you build self-examination into a real life with a real job and real kids and a real attention span? Baxter wrote a whole section of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* on this. We close the study with a sustainable rhythm, not a heroic one.

Week 1

The Lost Art

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!

Lamentations 3:40 (ESV)

The question we stopped asking

Stop and think about the last time you sat in silence and asked yourself, before God, "How am I actually doing?" Not how the project is going. Not how the kids are. Not how your prayer life looks on the outside. How is your soul.

For most of us, the answer is some version of "I don't remember."

This is new. It would have been strange to a Christian living in 1650, or 1750, or even 1900. Self-examination was assumed. Pastors preached on it. Households practiced it. Believers kept journals tracking their own hearts week by week, year by year. The Puritans wrote entire books on how to do it. Calvin built it into the rhythm of the Lord's Supper. Edwards weighed his own affections with the seriousness most of us reserve for tax returns.

Then, somewhere, it slipped away.

We didn't decide to stop. There was no vote. Sermons got shorter, lives got busier, phones got smarter, and the inner life got crowded out. We replaced self-examination with self-expression. We replaced sitting before God with scrolling. We replaced reflection with reaction. And we did it slowly enough that we hardly noticed.

This week, we name what we lost.

What Scripture says

Lamentations 3 is one of the darkest chapters in the Bible. Jerusalem is in ruins. The covenant people are exiled. The prophet's grief is enormous and unfiltered. And then, in the middle of all that wreckage, comes verse 40.

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!

The Hebrew verbs are strong. *Test. Examine.* They are the words you would use for assaying metal, for inspecting something carefully to find out what it actually is. The prophet is not asking the people to feel

bad. He is asking them to look.

And notice the order. *Examine our ways*, then *return to the Lord*. The looking is not the destination. The looking is what makes the return possible. Without examination, you cannot return, because you don't know what you are returning from.

This is the basic logic of reflection in Scripture. We look at ourselves so we can come home.

A few other places to sit with later this week:

- Psalm 4:4. *Ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.*
- Psalm 139:23-24. *Search me, O God, and know my heart.*
- 1 Corinthians 11:28. *Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*
- 2 Corinthians 13:5. *Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.*
- Haggai 1:5. *Consider your ways.*

Notice how often the verb is in the imperative. Reflection is not a personality type. It is a command.

A Reformed lens

John Calvin opens the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a sentence that has shaped Reformed theology for nearly five centuries.

"Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

Read that again. Wisdom has two halves. One is knowing God. The other is knowing yourself. And Calvin spends the next paragraphs arguing that these two halves are inseparable. You cannot truly know God without coming to know yourself, because the closer you draw to

God the more honest light falls on your own heart. And you cannot truly know yourself without God, because apart from him you will either flatter yourself or despise yourself, but you will not see yourself clearly.

This is why self-examination matters. It is not a side hobby of the spiritual life. It is one half of wisdom.

But notice what Calvin is not saying. He is not saying that you find God by digging into yourself. The modern world says that. Look within, find your truth. Calvin says the opposite. You see yourself rightly only when you stand in God's light. Reflection is not introspection turned up to eleven. It is standing in the presence of God and letting him do the seeing.

This is what protects honest self-examination from becoming morbid self-focus. The Christian does not stare at the mirror until it consumes them. The Christian looks at God, and in God's face sees their own.

A voice from history

The Puritan pastor Thomas Watson wrote in *The Mischief of Sin*:

"The reason we come away so cold from reading the Word is, because we do not warm ourselves at the fire of meditation."

Watson is talking about Scripture. But the principle is the same. The reason most of us come away from our spiritual lives feeling vaguely unchanged is not that we lack information. We have plenty of information. We have sermons on demand, podcasts, study Bibles, apps. What we lack is the heat of reflection. The fire that turns truth from a thing we know into a thing that has actually formed us.

Watson and the Puritans believed that meditation and self-examination were the bridge between knowing and being changed. Without the bridge, the truth stays on the page.

This study is a small attempt to rebuild the bridge.

Personal reflection questions

1. When did you last set aside time, even ten minutes, specifically to examine your own heart before God? What kept you from it more recently?
2. Where in your life have you replaced reflection with reaction? With consumption? With busyness?
3. Calvin says you cannot know yourself rightly apart from knowing God. Does your self-talk reflect that? Or do you tend to assess yourself by other standards (productivity, the opinions of others, comparison)?
4. Lamentations 3:40 ends with *return to the Lord*. Is there any small thing you already sense you need to return from? Name it.
5. What would change in your week if you assumed self-examination was a command, not a personality trait?

Practice for the week

One practice. Small. Repeatable.

At the end of each day this week, spend two minutes in silence before bed and ask one question: What was the truest moment of my day, and what was the most hidden one?

Don't journal unless you want to. Don't try to fix anything. Just look. Then pray a single sentence. Something like, "Lord, you see all of it. Thank you." Or, "Lord, I want to return."

Two minutes. That's it.

If you miss a night, start again the next night. The practice is the rhythm, not the streak.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: a real mirror

Bring a small mirror to the table. Pass it around. Let everyone look at themselves for a few seconds.

Ask:

- What can a mirror help you see?
- What can a mirror not help you see? (You can't see your own heart in a mirror. You can't see if you're being kind. You can't see if you're hiding something.)

Then read Lamentations 3:40 together, in whatever translation you use.

Explain: The Bible says God wants us to look at ourselves on the inside. Not in a mean way. In a true way. He already loves us. He already chose us. But because he loves us, he wants us to be honest about what's really going on inside.

This isn't punishment. It's the same way a parent who loves you asks, "What's wrong?" when something is wrong. They ask because they love you, not because they are mad.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- What does it mean to be honest with God?
- Is there anything in your day today that you would not want God to see? (Be gentle here. Don't push for an answer in front of others. Plant the question.)
- God already knows everything about you. Does that scare you, or does that help you?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- What is the difference between feeling bad about something and being honest about it?
- Why do you think a lot of people would rather scroll their phones than sit and think?
- The verse says we examine ourselves so we can *return to the Lord*. What does it mean to return? What does that picture look like in your own life?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, you already see us. You already love us. Help us be brave enough this week to look at ourselves the way you look at us. Help us tell the truth. Help us come home. Amen.

The verb is a command.

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!

Lamentations 3:40

The prophet is not making a suggestion. The verb is in the imperative. *Test. Examine. Return.* We are used to thinking of reflection as a personality trait. Some people are reflective. Some people aren't. The Bible doesn't talk about it that way. In Scripture, reflection is something we do because we have been told to do it. Not because we are wired for it. This is a kind of relief. You don't have to be a contemplative by nature. You just have to obey.

Sit with this. Where in your life have you assumed something was optional because it didn't come naturally to you?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you have asked me to look. Help me look today.*

For further reading. Haggai 1:5-7. Psalm 119:59.

JOURNAL

The order matters.

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord!

Notice the order. *Examine*, then *return*. Not the other way around. We are tempted to skip the first half. We feel vaguely off, so we run straight to a verse, or a worship song, or a quick prayer that skips past what was never honestly named. We try to return without having looked. But you can only return from a place you've identified. The examination is what makes the return real.

Sit with this. Is there anything you've been trying to "return" from without ever clearly naming?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, help me name what I keep avoiding.*

For further reading. Hosea 6:1-3. Joel 2:12-13.

JOURNAL

Two halves of wisdom.

"Nearly all the wisdom we possess consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves."

John Calvin

Calvin's claim is enormous. There is no wisdom that is only about God and skips the self. There is no wisdom that is only about the self and skips God. They are two halves of the same coin. This is why pure introspection fails. You can know yourself perfectly and still miss everything that matters, because you have not put yourself before God's face. And this is why a head full of theology without self-examination produces a particular kind of cold believer who knows a lot and is changed by little.

Sit with this. Which half do you tend to neglect? The God-knowledge half, or the self-knowledge half?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, give me both halves of wisdom this week.*

For further reading. Job 42:1-6. Proverbs 1:7. Isaiah 6:1-7.

JOURNAL

Reaction is not reflection.

We replaced reflection with reaction. We see a headline and we react. We get a text and we react. A thought lands and we Google it instead of sitting with it. The whole architecture of modern life makes reaction fast and reflection slow. But the soul does not grow at the speed of reaction. The soul grows at the speed of attention. The Puritan habit of sitting with a single verse for thirty minutes is not nostalgia. It is technique. It is how a person actually changes.

Sit with this. Where in your day today did you react when you could have reflected? What would five minutes of silence have done to that moment?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, slow me down enough to be changed.*

For further reading. Psalm 46:10. James 1:19-21. Ecclesiastes 5:1-3.

JOURNAL

The mirror and the face.

For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.

1 Corinthians 13:12

One day we will see God face to face. Until then, we see ourselves and God only dimly, in a mirror. But notice the verse. Even now, in the dim version, we are *seeing*. We are not blind. The mirror is foggy, but it is not dark. By God's grace, we can look at our own lives and see real things, and we can look toward God and see something real about him. This is the basic confidence of self-examination. It is not perfect. But it is real. And when the mirror finally clears, what we will see is a face that has loved us the entire time.

Sit with this. What might the patient face of Christ already be seeing in you that you cannot yet see in yourself?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, the mirror is dim, but I trust the face that's on the other side.*

For further reading. 1 Corinthians 13:8-13. James 1:22-25. 2 Corinthians 3:18.

Looking ahead to Week 2

Before we go further with self-examination, we sit with the One who already practiced it. Jesus withdrew. Jesus prayed in desolate places. Jesus examined his own will in Gethsemane and surrendered it to the Father. And Jesus told his disciples to take the log out of their own eye first.

Next week we let Christ set the pattern. The practice we are recovering is not a Puritan invention. It is the rhythm of our Lord.

Week 2

Christ Withdrew

But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.

Luke 5:16 (ESV)

The practice he kept

Before we recover a discipline, we look at the one who already kept it. We are not inventing self-examination. We are following a Lord who did it first.

Read the Gospels with this question in mind. Where does Jesus go when no one is watching? You will find a pattern. He withdraws. He goes early. He goes alone. He prays through the night. Mark, the fastest-paced of the four Gospels, slows down for these moments. The man who calmed storms, healed the blind, and raised the dead also slipped away into desolate places and prayed.

This is the same Lord who told us to examine ourselves. He did not call us to anything he had not first lived.

This week we sit with that.

What Scripture says

Start with Luke 5:16. The grammar is worth noticing. The English Standard Version reads, *But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray.* That word *would* is doing work. It signals habit. Repeated action. Pattern. Luke isn't describing one quiet morning. He is describing a way of life.

Now hold that next to Mark 1:35. *And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.* And Luke 6:12. *In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.*

Three different evangelists. Same pattern. Jesus withdrew. Jesus prayed. Jesus made the inner life a non-negotiable.

Then there is Gethsemane. Matthew 26:36-46. This is the deepest scene of self-examination in the New Testament, and Christ is the one doing it. He looks at his own will. *My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.* He

examines his own desire. He names what he wants. He sets it before the Father. And he surrenders it.

That is examen. That is exactly examen. The Lord of the universe, kneeling in a garden, doing the work we have been told to do.

And then there is Matthew 7:3-5. The speck and the log. Jesus does not just practice self-examination. He commands it as a precondition for relating to anyone else. *First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye.* This is one of the sharpest verses in the Sermon on the Mount. Look at yourself first. Always.

The practice we are recovering is the practice he kept and the practice he commanded.

A Reformed lens

Reformed theology has always insisted on two truths held together. Christ is our Savior, and Christ is our Pattern. We do not collapse one into the other. He does for us what we could never do for ourselves (the gospel). And he also shows us how to live (the example).

In the matter of self-examination, both apply.

As Savior, Christ already passed the examination we could not pass. The Father searched him to the bottom, and Christ was found pure. *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.* Because he passed, we are not crushed when we look at ourselves. The verdict over our lives was decided at Calvary, not in our morning quiet time. This is the basic Reformed instinct. Assurance comes from Christ's work, not ours.

As Pattern, Christ shows us what a life lived before the Father actually looks like. He withdrew. He prayed. He examined his own will. He surrendered. If our Lord lived this way, we cannot pretend it is optional for us.

The danger of collapsing pattern into Savior is moralism. We end up imitating Christ to earn what he has already given. The danger of collapsing Savior into pattern is cheap grace. We claim what he has given without ever letting it actually shape us. Reformed self-examination walks between both ditches. We look at ourselves because we are already loved, and we follow Christ into the desolate place because we already belong to him.

A voice from history

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote in *The Cost of Discipleship*:

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."

The line is famous. The line a few pages later is less famous and just as important.

"Discipleship is not an offer that man makes to Christ. It is only the call which creates the situation."

Bonhoeffer is writing against a Christianity that was being sold to a comfortable middle class as a vague affirmation. He is writing for one that takes the actual life of Jesus seriously. The actual life of Jesus included the desolate place, and the night of prayer, and the cup in the garden.

Bonhoeffer pastored a small underground seminary at Finkenwalde in the late 1930s. He built daily silence and personal confession into their rhythm. He took heat for it from other Protestants who thought it sounded Catholic. His answer was simple. Christ did this. The early church did this. The Reformers did this. We have been the strange ones to stop.

Self-examination, in Bonhoeffer's view, is not a luxury for the contemplative. It is a basic posture of someone who has actually been called by Christ.

Personal reflection questions

1. Where is your desolate place? If you don't have one, where could it be? A chair. A morning walk. The car at lunch. A specific time.
2. The Gospels describe Jesus' withdrawal as a habit, not a special occasion. What habit of withdrawal could you build into your real week?
3. Read Matthew 26:36-46 slowly. What does Jesus do in Gethsemane that you tend to skip when you pray? Naming what you want? Surrendering it? Both?
4. Matthew 7:3-5 says to take the log out of your own eye first. Where in your relationships are you tempted to inspect specks before logs?
5. If Christ practiced self-examination, what does it say about us that we have largely stopped?

Practice for the week

Find one 10-minute desolate place each day this week. Not 30. Not 60. Ten.

Put your phone in another room. Sit. Read the day's short Scripture. Then ask one question. *What would Jesus pray for me right now if he were in this room?* Sit with whatever comes up. End with a single sentence of prayer.

Do this five days. If you miss one, start again the next day. The point is the rhythm of withdrawal, not the count.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: the quiet place

Set the scene at the dinner table or in the living room. Ask: when Jesus needed to talk to his Father, where did he go?

Read Luke 5:16 together.

Explain: Jesus could pray anywhere. He's God. But he made a habit of going to quiet places where no one would interrupt him. He didn't do it once. He did it a lot. The Bible uses a word that means he kept doing it.

Then ask each person to point to one spot in the house, or one place outside, that could be their own "quiet place" this week. Write the spots down on a piece of paper. Tape it to the fridge.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- Why do you think Jesus liked quiet places?
- If you went to your quiet place every day for a week, what would you talk to God about?
- What is something inside you that nobody can see but God?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- Jesus is God. He didn't need to pray to know what God wanted. Why do you think he prayed anyway?
- In Gethsemane Jesus said, "Not my will, but yours." Have you ever wanted something you knew God didn't want for you? What happened?
- Matthew 7 says to take the log out of your own eye before the speck out of your friend's. Where in your life do you spot specks faster than logs?

A short prayer to close together

Jesus, you went to quiet places. You prayed. You examined yourself before the Father. Help us follow you there this week. Help us tell the truth about our own hearts before we tell anyone else what's wrong with theirs. Amen.

Rising early.

And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.

Mark 1:35

The day before, in Mark 1, Jesus had healed a town's worth of people. Crowds. Demands. Real work. He was popular and exhausted. So he got up early, before anyone else, and went to a desolate place. There is something here about how to survive being useful. Even Christ in his perfection did not let public ministry replace private prayer. The first thing he protected was the unwatched hour.

Sit with this. What is your unwatched hour? Or are you giving every hour away?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, protect a hour for me that belongs only to you.*

For further reading. Mark 1:32-39. Isaiah 50:4-5.

JOURNAL

All night long.

In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God.

Luke 6:12

Read what comes next. Luke 6:13. *And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles.* Jesus prayed all night before choosing the twelve. The biggest decision of his earthly ministry, the team he would build the church on, was preceded by hours and hours of prayer in the dark. Most of us make our biggest decisions in the noise of our busiest days. We text. We google. We poll friends. We rarely sit alone with God before deciding. We are usually deciding first and praying afterward, asking him to bless what we already chose.

Sit with this. Is there a decision in front of you right now that deserves a long night, not a quick text?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, before I decide, let me wait with you.*

For further reading. Luke 6:12-16. Proverbs 3:5-6.

JOURNAL

The cup in the garden.

And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will."

Matthew 26:39

Look at the verbs. *Fell on his face. Prayed. Said. Nevertheless.* That word *nevertheless* is the whole Christian life in one word. *I want this; nevertheless, your will, not mine.* It is the prayer of someone who has stopped pretending. Christ does not bury his desire. He names it. He puts it on the table. And then he surrenders it. This is the deepest model of self-examination in Scripture. It is not Jesus listing his sins. He had none. It is Jesus naming his own desires before the Father and yielding them. Examen at its purest is not about cataloging failures. It is about putting what we want before God and saying, *nevertheless.*

Sit with this. What do you want right now that you have never actually named to God? Try naming it. Then try saying *nevertheless.*

One sentence prayer. *Lord, I want it. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours.*

For further reading. Matthew 26:36-46. Hebrews 5:7-9.

JOURNAL

The log in your own eye.

Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?

Matthew 7:3

Jesus says this in the Sermon on the Mount, surrounded by some of the highest ethical teaching in the Bible. And then he plants this verse like a spike right in the middle of it. Take the log out first. Always. This is uncomfortable because we live in a culture of pointing. Online, in conversations, in our own heads. We notice specks at lightspeed. We notice logs almost never. The discipline Jesus is calling for is a re-routing of attention. Look at yourself first. Then, only then, will you see clearly enough to help anyone else.

Sit with this. Who is the person you are most tempted to inspect right now? What might be the log in your own eye in that relationship?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, before I inspect anyone, inspect me.*

For further reading. Matthew 7:1-5. Romans 2:1-4.

JOURNAL

The Master who serves.

For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

Luke 22:27

Self-examination follows the pattern of the Master. So does servanthood. The same Christ who withdrew to desolate places also knelt to wash feet. The inner life and the outer life are not two different Christianities. They feed each other. The person who has sat alone with God in honesty has different hands when they touch other people. The withdrawal makes the service possible. And the service keeps the withdrawal from becoming self-absorption. This week's practice is private. But it is for the sake of a public life that looks more like his.

Sit with this. Where is the quiet of this week showing up in how you treat one specific person?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, let what you do in me show up in how I love.*

For further reading. Luke 22:24-30. John 13:1-17.

Looking ahead to Week 3

We have looked at the lost art and at the Lord who kept it. Now we deal with something bigger than our looking. We are already being looked at. God's gaze came first. Long before we ever turned our attention to ourselves, his attention was on us. We will sit with Psalm 139 and let Spurgeon walk us through what it means to be searched, known, hemmed in, and held.

If self-examination has felt heavy so far, this is where it gets lighter. The weight has never been on us.

Week 3

The God Who Already Sees

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

Psalm 139:1 (ESV)

Before you look, remember who looks

There is a question we have to answer before we go any further. Who is doing the seeing?

If the answer is "I am," then self-examination quickly becomes self-obsession. I become both the inspector and the inspected. I become my own god. I look at myself with my own eyes and trust my own verdict. This is exhausting and false. It is also the way most modern people think about reflection. Look within. Find your truth. Be your own judge.

If the answer is "God is," then everything changes. Self-examination becomes a response, not an initiative. I am not making myself visible. I was already visible. I am simply turning toward the face that has been turned toward me the whole time.

This is the foundation. Before we ask the next question of ourselves, we sit with the One who already sees.

What Scripture says

Psalm 139 is the bedrock text for this. Read verses 1 through 12 slowly.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

David is not informing God. He is acknowledging what is already true. The verbs are stacked. *Searched. Known. Discern. Search out.*

Acquainted. Know. Hem in. Lay hand. God's awareness of David is total. Behavior. Posture. Thought. Speech. Path. Past. Present. Direction.

And notice the tone. David is not panicked. He is amazed. *Such knowledge is too wonderful for me.* He is not running. He is leaning in. Some translations render *wonderful* as *too wonderful, beyond me, unsearchable*. It is the response of someone who has discovered that being fully known has not destroyed him. It has held him.

That is the basic posture of biblical self-examination. We do not invite a gaze that wasn't there. We open ourselves to a gaze that has been there the whole time.

A Reformed lens

Reformed theology calls this the doctrine of God's omniscience and immanence held together. God knows all things (omniscience). And God is near (immanence). Stack those two and you get the God of Psalm 139. He knows the secret thought, and he is closer than the breath. He is not a distant judge with a file. He is a present love with a hand.

Why does this matter for self-examination?

Because the danger in any spiritual discipline is that it becomes performance. We start examining ourselves for someone. For our church. For our small group. For our own self-image. For the imagined audience of our better selves. When that happens, examination turns into theater. We look at ourselves for the camera.

Psalm 139 collapses the camera. There is no one else watching. There is no impression to manage. There is only the One who already knows the script better than we do. We are not performing self-examination. We are standing in the open.

The Reformed tradition has always emphasized that we live *coram Deo*, "before the face of God." This is not a special posture for monks

and pastors. It is the ordinary truth of every Christian's every moment. Self-examination is not the act that makes God's face turn toward us. It is the act of remembering that his face has never turned away.

A voice from history

Charles Spurgeon, the great London Baptist preacher, devoted hundreds of pages to Psalm 139 in his commentary *The Treasury of David*. On verse 1 he wrote:

"The Psalmist's mind is full of holy delight in the realisation of the Lord's omniscience... The Psalmist as good as says, 'O Lord, I have neither power nor wisdom to search my own heart, but Thou art infinitely able to do it.'"

That last line is the gold. *I have neither power nor wisdom to search my own heart, but Thou art infinitely able to do it.*

We are not good at self-examination. We were not built to be. Even our most honest moments are partial. We forget. We rationalize. We see one layer and miss three. Spurgeon is telling us the response to our own incompetence at this is not to try harder. It is to lean into the One who can.

This is what protects the discipline from despair. We do not have to do this alone, because we cannot do this alone, and we were never asked to.

Personal reflection questions

1. When you imagine God looking at you right now, what is the expression on his face? Where did you get that picture?
2. David says God's complete knowledge of him is *too wonderful*. Most of us would say it sounds threatening. Where is the gap between his response and yours?
3. Where in your life have you been performing self-examination for an audience that isn't God? Who is the imagined viewer?
4. Spurgeon says we have neither the power nor the wisdom to search our own hearts. Does that feel like good news or bad news? Why?
5. If you actually believed God's gaze on you was already gentle, what specifically would you stop hiding from him?

Practice for the week

Each morning this week, before you do anything else, pray these words slowly out loud. "Lord, you already see me. Thank you that your face is kind."

That's it. Don't add to it. Don't explain it to God. Don't journal it.

The point is to start the day from the right place. Most of us start the day already performing, already managing how we look to ourselves and to others. This practice resets the audience. Before email, before scrolling, before anything, you remind your own soul of the gaze that came first.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: a flashlight in a closet

Find a small dark closet or a corner with the lights off. Bring a flashlight. Let each kid stand in the dark space for a few seconds. Ask: what does it feel like when you can't see anything?

Then turn the flashlight on. Move it slowly around the space. Ask: what changed?

Read Psalm 139:11-12 together. *Even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.*

Explain: For God, there is no closet. There is no dark room. There is no hidden place. He sees us when we're at school. He sees us when we're alone in our room. He sees us when we're being kind, and he sees us when we're being unkind. Not to catch us. Because he loves us so much that he is never not looking.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- If God sees you all the time, does that make you feel safe, or scared, or something else?
- What's something good God has seen you do today that nobody else noticed?
- Why do you think God wants to know everything about you?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- A lot of people online try to control how others see them. They post the best pictures. They edit. They filter. How is being seen by God different from being seen on a screen?
- The Psalm says God's knowledge of David was *too wonderful*. Why do you think David said "wonderful" instead of "scary"?

- Is there a part of you that you've been hiding from God? What would it look like to stop?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, you see us. You see us in the bright light and in the dark closet. You see what we hide. You see what we don't even know about ourselves. Thank you that your eyes are kind. Help us stop running. Help us stand still in your light. Amen.

Searched and known.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me!

Psalm 139:1

The verb tense matters. *Have searched*. Past tense. Before you ever opened this devotion, before you ever decided to take faith seriously, before you ever sinned, God had already searched and known you. This means your self-examination is always second. His searching came first. You are not making yourself transparent to a God who hadn't noticed. You are joining a conversation he started.

Sit with this. What changes when you remember that God's seeing of you came first?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you already searched. Now I look up.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:1-6. Hebrews 4:13.

JOURNAL

Hemmed in.

You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

Psalm 139:5

Hem in. In other contexts that phrase could feel claustrophobic. Here it doesn't. David means it as comfort. God's awareness surrounds him on all sides, behind him and in front of him, like a hand on the shoulder. We tend to talk about God's presence as if it is forward-looking. He's with us in what comes. David says he is also with us in what already happened. Behind us, too. The God who sees you in this room also saw you in the worst chapter of your life and was not surprised by you then. He has been on every side of every day.

Sit with this. Is there a chapter of your past you've been carrying as if God wasn't there for it? He was.

One sentence prayer. *Lord, your hand was on me when I didn't know it.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:5-10. Romans 8:38-39.

JOURNAL

No escape.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?

Psalm 139:7

The question is rhetorical, but it lands. There is no version of us that runs faster than God. There is no version of us that hides better than God can find. This is bad news for the part of us that wants to escape him. And it is gospel for the part of us that has tried. Jonah ran. The prodigal ran. We run. And God meets every runner in the place they were running to. Not always with rescue we expected. Always with himself.

Sit with this. Where have you been running from God? What might it look like to stop?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, I'm tired of running.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:7-12. Jonah 1:1-3, 4:1-4.

JOURNAL

Knit together.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb.

Psalm 139:13

This is the verse most people know from Psalm 139. It is usually invoked in conversations about the unborn. That is right. But notice how David uses it in context. He has just spent twelve verses on God's total awareness of him. Then he says *and the same God who knows every thought I will ever have also made me from scratch*. The God who knows you also made you. The seeing did not start when you were born. It started before. You are not being inspected by a stranger. You are being seen by your Maker.

Sit with this. Does it change anything to remember that the One examining you also designed you?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you made me. You see me. Both are good news.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:13-16. Jeremiah 1:4-5.

JOURNAL

Lead me.

And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalm 139:24

The Psalm doesn't end with seeing. It ends with leading. David doesn't say *expose me*. He says *expose me and lead me*. The point of God's gaze is not to leave us standing in the spotlight. It is to take us by the hand and walk us somewhere. This is the difference between examination and shame. Examination ends in being led. Shame ends in being stuck. The first is God's work. The second is not.

Sit with this. Where do you need to be led this week? Not just exposed. Led.

One sentence prayer. *Lord, see me, then lead me.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:23-24. Psalm 23:1-6.

Looking ahead to Week 4

Now that we have remembered who sees first, we can pray the prayer that opens the practice. *Search me, O God, and know my heart*. Next week we sit with David's invitation and let John Owen help us think about what we are actually asking God to expose when we pray those words. Owen wrote a small book on indwelling sin that changed how Christians understood the inner life. He is going to make this week's prayer a lot more honest.

Week 4

Search Me, Know Me

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalm 139:23-24 (ESV)

The prayer that opens the practice

Most self-examination fails because it starts in the wrong place. We sit down to inspect ourselves and we begin with ourselves. We catalog our day, weigh our actions, judge our motives. We are both judge and jury, witness and defendant, accuser and defended. It is exhausting, and the verdict is unreliable.

David shows us a different opening move. Don't audit yourself. Invite.

Search me, O God.

That single sentence reorients everything. Examination is not a self-administered test. It is a prayer. We ask the One who already sees to do the seeing for us, and we pay attention to what he shows.

This is the heart of biblical self-examination. We are not the inspector. We are the inspected, and the inspection is in safe hands.

What Scripture says

Psalm 139:23-24 is the prayer most often quoted on this subject, and for good reason. Look closely.

Four verbs. *Search. Know. Try. Lead.* And one direction. *The way everlasting.*

Search (Hebrew *chaqar*) means to investigate, to explore, to dig down into. It is the word used for examining a problem from every angle.

Know (*yada*) is the deep relational word. It is the same word the Bible uses for Adam knowing Eve. Not surface awareness. Inside knowledge.

Try (*bachan*) means to test, to assay, to refine like metal. It is the word the prophets use when God's people are put under heat to see what they are actually made of.

Lead (nachah) is a shepherd's word. To guide. To accompany the path.

Notice the arc. *Search. Know. Try. Lead.* David is not asking God to expose him for exposure's sake. He is asking God to expose him in order to lead him somewhere. The prayer ends in motion, not in paralysis.

A few other passages to sit with this week:

- Jeremiah 17:9-10. *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind.*
- 1 Chronicles 28:9. *Serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches all hearts.*
- 1 Kings 8:39. *Forgive and act and render to each whose heart you know, according to all his ways, for you, you only, know the hearts of all the children of mankind.*
- Hebrews 4:12-13. *The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword... and no creature is hidden from his sight.*

Scripture is consistent. God is the searcher. We are the searched. The shift from auditor to invited is the basic move.

A Reformed lens

There is a reason the Reformed tradition has always been wary of self-examination unmoored from prayer. Look at the disasters of unaided introspection in the history of the church. The medieval penitential system that buried sinners under endless tallies. Modern therapeutic Christianity that turns God into a coach for our better selves. Hyper-Calvinism that drives anxious souls to dig and dig for signs of election they can never quite produce.

In every case, the failure point is the same. The believer is doing the examining alone.

David's prayer corrects this. He hands the work to God. *You search. You know. You try. You lead.* The believer's role is to ask, to open, to receive.

This is what John Calvin meant when he insisted that our knowledge of ourselves can only proceed from our knowledge of God. We are too compromised to be our own judges. The deceitful heart cannot fairly judge the deceitful heart. The only safe place to be examined is in the presence of the One who is not deceived.

This is also why Reformed self-examination has always been done with the Scriptures open. We do not sit with our thoughts. We sit with God's word. The word does the searching. The Spirit applies it. We listen.

A voice from history

John Owen, the 17th-century English Puritan, wrote a small book in 1656 called *On the Mortification of Sin in Believers*. It is one of the most important books on the inner life in the Reformed tradition. Owen's most famous line from it is also his sharpest.

"Be killing sin or it will be killing you."

The line is bracing. But the chapter that earned it is more careful than the line suggests. Owen is not handing believers a hammer and pointing at a list. He is teaching them how to bring sin into the light of the Spirit so that the Spirit can do the killing.

Owen's basic claim is that indwelling sin (the residue of corruption that remains in every Christian) cannot be defeated by willpower or by self-examination alone. It can only be killed by the Spirit, working through the Word, applied to a specific named sin in a specific named life.

This makes Psalm 139:23-24 the right doorway. We are not killing sin by inspecting ourselves harder. We are inviting the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do. *Search me. Try me. Lead me.* The mortification

follows.

Owen would tell us. Do not pray this prayer abstractly. Bring a real sin. Bring a real pattern. Bring a real corner of your life. Be specific. Then ask the Spirit to search it.

Personal reflection questions

1. Have you been auditing yourself rather than praying David's prayer? What does it look like when you do the first instead of the second?
2. Read the four verbs of Psalm 139:23-24 slowly. *Search. Know. Try. Lead.* Which one are you most resistant to? Which one do you most need this week?
3. Jeremiah 17:9 says the heart is deceitful above all things. How do you actually account for that when you reflect on your own motives?
4. Owen says sin will not be killed in the abstract. Bring one real, named area of your life into focus. What would it look like to invite the Spirit specifically into that one corner?
5. The prayer ends *lead me in the way everlasting*. Where do you need to be led, not just inspected, this week?

Practice for the week

Pray Psalm 139:23-24 out loud, slowly, once a day. Then sit in silence for 60 seconds.

Don't hurry the silence. Don't fill it with more words. Don't journal yet. Just sit. The minute is for the Spirit to do what only the Spirit can do.

If something specific surfaces, write one sentence about it later. If nothing surfaces, that is fine too. Some days the Spirit shows you something. Some days the prayer is the work. Either way, you have invited.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: the doctor's flashlight

Bring a small flashlight. Have one kid sit in a chair and pretend to be the patient. Tell them: when the doctor sees a splinter or a cut, what does she do? She gets a flashlight. She looks closely. She might press on it a little to see how deep it is. It might pinch. But she is not trying to hurt you. She is trying to help you heal.

Read Psalm 139:23-24 together.

Explain: David is praying like a patient saying, "Doctor, look at me. Find anything that's wrong. I trust you." Most of us don't pray like that. We try to hide our splinters from God. We try to handle them ourselves. David says, "No. You look. You find. You lead me."

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- If you had a splinter, would you want mom or dad to find it and take it out, or would you want to leave it in? Why?
- Have you ever tried to hide something bad you did because you were scared? What happened?
- God is not a scary doctor. He's a gentle one. What's one little thing you could ask him to look at this week?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- David asks God to find anything *grievous* in him. What do you think that word means? Why is it brave to pray that?
- A lot of people are afraid of being known. Why? What are they afraid of?
- The Psalm doesn't end with God just finding the bad stuff. It ends with God leading. Why is that important?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, search us. We don't always like being looked at. But we trust you. Take the flashlight. Find the splinters. Lead us to the right way. Amen.

Search.

Search me, O God.

Psalm 139:23

Notice he does not say *I will search myself*. He says *you search me*. This is the first move and most of us skip it. We sit down to examine ourselves, pull up our own dashboard, and start scrolling through the day. We are the inspector. God is barely in the room. David begins differently. He hands the inspection to God. The same God who hemmed him in behind and before, who knit him together in the womb, is the one he asks to do the looking. It is the safest possible setup. The most loving eyes in the universe are the eyes on the case.

Sit with this. Whose eyes have you been doing your self-examination under? Yours? Someone else's? Whose should it be?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you search. I'll listen.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:1-6. 1 Chronicles 28:9.

JOURNAL

Know.

Search me, O God, and know my heart!

Psalm 139:23

Know. Yada. The deep word. David is not asking God to be informed about his heart. He is asking to be deeply known by God. There is a difference between being audited and being known. An auditor checks your numbers. A loved one knows your story. David wants the second. When we pray *know my heart*, we are asking God to be near enough to see what surface inspection cannot. We are not handing in a report. We are opening a life.

Sit with this. Are you praying as if you want to be audited, or as if you want to be known? They are not the same.

One sentence prayer. *Lord, know me. Not just my actions. Me.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:23-24. John 10:14-15.

JOURNAL

Try.

Try me and know my thoughts!

Psalm 139:23

Try. Bachan. The metalworker's word. When silver is refined, it is put under heat. The dross rises to the surface and is scraped off. The metal that comes out is more itself than when it went in. David is asking God to do that to him. This is not a comfortable prayer. We do not naturally pray for heat. We pray for ease, for relief, for peace. David prays for refinement, even when the refinement comes through hard things. The Reformed tradition has always understood trials this way. Not as punishment. As refining. God lets the heat come because he is making us more ourselves, not less.

Sit with this. Where is the heat in your life right now? What might God be refining out of you through it?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, refine, not just inspect.*

For further reading. Malachi 3:2-3. 1 Peter 1:6-7.

JOURNAL

Lead.

And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

Psalm 139:24

The Psalm ends in motion. David is not asking to be left in the exposure. He is asking to be led out of it. *Lead me in the way everlasting*. This is the difference between conviction and condemnation. Conviction names the wrong way and points to the right one. Condemnation names the wrong way and leaves you stuck in it. The Spirit always leads. He never abandons. If your self-examination ever leaves you standing still, paralyzed, ashamed, you have not finished praying. You have stopped at *try me*. You have not gotten to *lead me*.

Sit with this. Where in your life have you stopped at being exposed and not asked to be led? What is the next step you cannot see yet?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, don't leave me here. Lead me.*

For further reading. Psalm 23:1-6. Isaiah 30:21.

JOURNAL

The everlasting way.

Lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:24

David ends his prayer in the long view. Not the way that gets him through the week. Not the way that fixes his current problem. *The way everlasting*. The way that runs into eternity. This is the perspective that keeps self-examination from becoming small. We are not just trying to be slightly better versions of ourselves. We are being walked toward a country we have not seen yet. Every honest moment of examination this week is a step on that road, not just a tally for a journal.

Sit with this. If your self-examination this week was a small step on a forever road, would you take it more seriously? Or less?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, walk me home.*

For further reading. Hebrews 11:13-16. Revelation 21:1-5.

Looking ahead to Week 5

Now we come to the hinge. We have looked at the lost art, the Lord who kept it, the God who sees, and the prayer of invitation. Next week we deal with what God's searching actually surfaces. Sin. Real sin. Named sin. Not the vague mood of feeling bad about ourselves, but the specific, particular, named things we have done and left undone. And we deal with what to do with what we find. The gospel.

This is the center of the study. If we get this week right, everything before and after holds.

Week 5

Sin Named, Not Managed

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Psalm 51:4 (ESV)

The center of the study

This is the hinge. Everything in the four weeks before this one has been clearing the ground. This week we put a flag in the soil.

We have remembered that self-examination is a lost art (Week 1), that Christ kept it (Week 2), that God already sees us (Week 3), and that the right opening is a prayer of invitation (Week 4). Now we deal with what the inviting prayer actually surfaces. Sin. Real, specific, named sin. And we deal with the only place to take it. The cross.

There is no way to make this week comfortable. We are looking at the part of self-examination most modern Christianity has tried hardest to avoid. But there is also no way to make this week heavy, because we are also looking at what makes self-examination light. The cross.

The gospel is not that we are sinless. The gospel is that our sin has been taken by Christ. Self-examination only works when we believe both halves.

What Scripture says

Psalm 51 is the bedrock here. David has been confronted by the prophet Nathan after his sin with Bathsheba and his orchestration of Uriah's death. He responds with the most honest prayer of repentance in the Bible. Read it slowly this week.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin! For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight... Behold, you delight in truth in the inward being.

Notice what David does not do. He does not minimize. He does not explain. He does not blame Bathsheba or his army or his loneliness. He names the thing. *My transgressions. My iniquity. My sin.* Repeated possessive pronouns. He owns it.

Then he names the address. *Against you, you only, have I sinned.* This is jarring at first. He sinned against Bathsheba. He sinned against Uriah, whom he had killed. He sinned against his family and his kingdom. But David sees clearly that every sin against another person is also, and finally, a sin against God. The other relationships are real. But the ultimate offense is against the One whose image was violated.

And then comes the second key passage. 2 Corinthians 7:9-11.

I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

Paul makes a distinction we badly need. There is a kind of grief that leads to life. And there is a kind that leads to death. Both feel terrible. They are not the same.

Godly grief is grief that leads you toward God. It says, *I have sinned against my Lord. I run to the cross.* Worldly grief is grief that turns you in on yourself. It says, *I have failed. I am awful. I hate me.* The first ends in repentance and freedom. The second ends in self-loathing and paralysis.

Most of what passes for Christian "feeling bad about ourselves" is worldly grief in a religious accent. This week we learn the difference.

A Reformed lens

The Reformers were obsessed with this distinction because they had inherited a church that had blurred it. Medieval Catholicism had developed an elaborate penitential system. You sinned. You confessed to a priest. You did acts of penance. You received absolution. The system was meant to bring relief but often produced anxiety, because there was always one more sin to confess and one more act of penance to do.

Martin Luther's breakthrough was the rediscovery that the cross had already done what the penitential system was trying to do. Justification by faith alone meant that the verdict over the sinner had already been spoken. *Not guilty. Mine. Forgiven.* The believer's job was not to keep paying. It was to keep believing.

This freed self-examination from being a tally toward forgiveness. It became, instead, the honest looking of someone who is already forgiven. We do not examine ourselves to earn the cross. We examine ourselves because the cross has already covered us.

This is everything for this week.

Conviction without the cross is despair. To look at yourself honestly without looking simultaneously at Christ is to look at yourself in a hall of mirrors. There is no relief, only repetition.

But the cross changes the geometry of the room. Now you can look at yourself, see what is actually there, and then look up. Conviction becomes a doorway, not a dungeon.

A voice from history

Thomas Watson, the English Puritan pastor, wrote a small book in 1668 called *The Doctrine of Repentance*. It is still in print. Watson lists six ingredients of true repentance. Sight of sin, sorrow for sin, confession of sin, shame for sin, hatred of sin, and turning from sin. The sixth ingredient is the one most of us skip.

Watson writes:

"Reformation is left last to bring up the rear of repentance. It is one thing to be a sinner; it is another to be a true penitent. The true penitent labors to crucify those sins which have crucified Christ."

Notice the verb. *Labors to crucify*. Not manages. Not handles. Not regulates. Crucifies. Watson is not interested in helping us tolerate our

pet sins better. He wants them dead.

But notice the basis. *The sins which have crucified Christ*. The motive for killing sin is not self-improvement. It is gratitude. We crucify what crucified him. The whole effort is downstream of the cross, not upstream of it.

This is the difference between Watson's repentance and the modern self-help version. Modern self-help says *manage your sin so you can become a better you*. Watson says *kill your sin because Christ already died for it, and you cannot keep coddling what killed your Lord*.

The first is a project. The second is a response.

Personal reflection questions

1. Is there a specific sin you have been managing rather than naming? What does "managing" look like in your case? Distraction? Justification? Minimizing?
2. David says *against you, you only, have I sinned*. When you reflect on your sin, does it land that way, or does it stay at the horizontal level of "I let people down"?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-11. Have you been experiencing godly grief or worldly grief? Be specific.
4. Watson talks about labor to crucify sin, motivated by what crucified Christ. Where in your life are you tolerating a sin that Christ died to kill?
5. Imagine standing at the cross with one specific named sin in your hand. What does it look like to actually leave it there? Not pretend to. Actually.

Practice for the week

Name one sin in writing this week. Just one. Specific. Real.

Write it on a piece of paper. One sentence. Don't pad it. Don't add caveats. Don't soften it.

Then, before God, do three things with it.

First, confess it. Say it out loud. Use the words you wrote.

Second, look at the cross. Read Romans 5:8 or Isaiah 53:5 or 1 Peter 2:24 out loud. Picture the moment. This specific sin was on him.

Third, tear the paper in half. Throw it away. Walk away.

This is not magic. The piece of paper does not carry your sin. The cross does. But the physical act of writing, naming, and tearing is a way of saying to your own soul. *This is named, not managed. This is at the cross, not in my hand.*

Family / kids version

Object lesson: the band-aid and the cleaning

You will need a band-aid and a small bowl of warm water. Pretend one of the kids has a tiny scrape on their hand. Two options for how to take care of it.

Option one. Put a band-aid over it right away. The scrape is hidden, but if there is dirt or a small piece of gravel in it, the band-aid traps the dirt in. The scrape gets infected. It looks fine on the outside but it gets worse underneath.

Option two. Clean the scrape first. With warm water. Maybe with a little soap. This part stings a little. But once it's clean, the band-aid goes on and the healing begins.

Read 1 John 1:9 together. *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

Explain: Sin is like a scrape with dirt in it. We can put a band-aid over it (hide it, ignore it, pretend it's fine) or we can let Jesus clean it (tell the truth about it and ask him to forgive us). Both options have a band-aid at the end. But only one heals.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- Have you ever tried to hide something you did wrong? How did you feel inside?
- What does it feel like when you finally tell the truth?
- The cross is where Jesus took the dirty stuff for us. What does it mean that he did that?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- What is the difference between feeling sorry because you got caught and feeling sorry because you did something wrong

against God?

- Why do you think it is easier to manage a sin than to actually let it go?
- The cross is real. Jesus really died. What does it change for you to know your specific stuff was on him?

A short prayer to close together

Lord Jesus, you went to the cross with our real sin. Help us not hide it. Help us tell the truth. Help us bring our stuff to you, not to a band-aid. Thank you that the cross is enough. Amen.

The right address.

Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight.

Psalm 51:4

David has sinned against people. Real people. He knows that. But he names the right ultimate address. *You*. Most of our regret stays horizontal. We feel bad about how things look. We feel bad about how people see us. We feel bad about consequences. We rarely take the elevator up to the actual offense, which is against God himself. Every sin is finally a sin against him because every sin is a refusal of his right to rule. This is not crushing news. It is freeing news. The God we sinned against is also the God who sent his Son to take it.

Sit with this. When you regret something, where does the regret usually stop? At consequences? At reputation? Does it ever get up to God?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, my sin is finally against you. And you are the one who forgives.*

For further reading. Psalm 51:1-6. Luke 15:18-21.

JOURNAL

The two griefs.

Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

2 Corinthians 7:10

Two griefs. They feel similar from the inside. They go opposite directions from the outside. Godly grief. I have sinned against God. I run to the cross. I am sad about my sin and grateful for the Savior. I get up. Worldly grief. I am terrible. I am the problem. I deserve nothing. I sit in the corner. Worldly grief looks holier than it is. It looks like real humility. It is not. Real humility runs to Christ. Worldly grief stays curled around itself.

Sit with this. Which grief have you been carrying? Are you running to Christ, or curling around yourself?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, lift me out of self-loathing into your love.*

For further reading. 2 Corinthians 7:8-11. Hebrews 12:1-2.

JOURNAL

The blood.

But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed.

Isaiah 53:5

Read it slowly. Pause at each verb. *Pierced. Crushed. Chastised. Healed.* The chapter Isaiah 53 was written more than 700 years before Christ. The man at the cross was the man in the prophecy. The transgressions named here are yours. The crushing was real. The healing is offered. This is the verse to read when you have looked honestly at yourself and seen what is there. Not to bury what you saw. To take it where it was paid for.

Sit with this. What did you see this week that you have not yet brought to Isaiah 53:5?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, by your stripes I am healed. Help me believe it.*

For further reading. Isaiah 53:1-12. 1 Peter 2:24.

JOURNAL

The joy on the other side.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

Psalm 51:12

David doesn't end his repentance prayer in mourning. He ends it asking for joy. *The joy of your salvation*. This is the right ending. Sin named, brought to God, met with forgiveness, the soul lighter than it was at the start. If your self-examination never lands in joy, you are not finished. You have stopped at the wound and not waited for the healing. The Spirit does not leave you in conviction. He leads you through it into joy. Not the fake joy that pretends sin wasn't there. The real joy that comes after sin has been honestly handled.

Sit with this. Where in your spiritual life have you been settling for relief and not asking for joy?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, restore the joy of your salvation in me.*

For further reading. Psalm 51:7-12. Romans 5:1-5.

JOURNAL

A clean heart.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Psalm 51:10

That verb *create* is the same Hebrew word used in Genesis 1:1. *Bara*. The word for divine creation out of nothing. David is not asking God to polish what is already there. He is asking God to make something new from scratch. He is saying, *my heart is too far gone to be cleaned by improvement. I need creation*. This is what the cross does. It does not improve the old self. It puts the old self to death and raises a new one. *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17)*. The same God who said *let there be light* says *let there be a new heart in this child of mine*. And there is.

Sit with this. Are you asking God to polish, or to create? Have you settled for the smaller request?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, create in me a clean heart. I will not settle for less.*

For further reading. Psalm 51:10-13. 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.

Looking ahead to Week 6

The cross is planted. Now we can go deeper. Next week we follow Jonathan Edwards down a layer, beneath behavior to the affections, beneath what we do to what we love. This work would be too dangerous to do before Week 5. After Week 5 it is freeing. We can look at our disordered loves without despair because Christ already holds us.

Week 6

The Heart Beneath the Heart

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 4:23 (ESV)

Beneath behavior

Self-examination that stops at behavior is shallow.

Most of us live on the surface of our own lives. We notice what we did. We notice what we said. We notice whether we were patient with the kids or whether we yelled. Those things matter. But under each action is a love. Under each reaction is a want. Under each behavior is a heart.

Jesus said this directly. *Out of the heart come evil thoughts.* He was not denying that behavior matters. He was insisting that behavior is the fruit, not the root. To examine yourself only by what you did is to examine the apple and never the tree.

This week we go down a layer. We have to. Otherwise self-examination becomes behavior management, and behavior management never changes a person.

What Scripture says

Start with Proverbs 4:23. *Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.* The Hebrew word for *keep* (*natsar*) is the word used for guarding a city wall. Vigilance. Watching. Protection. The proverb assumes that the heart is the source. Watch the source, and the streams will follow.

Now hold that next to what Jesus said in Matthew 15:18-19.

But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander.

Jesus' point is sharp. The behaviors people consider scandalous (murder, adultery, theft) are not the actual problem. They are symptoms. The actual problem is the heart that produced them. Clean the mouth and the heart stays dirty. Clean the heart and the mouth

follows.

Then there is Jeremiah 17:9-10, which we sat with in Week 4. *The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind.*

The heart is the source. The heart is also deceitful. We cannot trust our own report on it. We need God to do the searching, and we need to learn to look not at what we did, but at what we loved when we did it.

A few other passages for this week:

- Matthew 6:21. *For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*
- Romans 1:25. *They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.*
- 1 John 2:15-16. *Do not love the world or the things in the world... For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life, is not from the Father.*

Scripture's vocabulary for the heart-level work includes treasure, worship, desire, love. These are the categories under behavior.

A Reformed lens

The Reformed tradition has long argued that the basic spiritual condition of a human being is not behavioral but worshipful. We were made to worship God. The fall did not make us stop worshiping. It re-aimed our worship. Every human is always worshiping something. The only question is what.

This is what Augustine meant by *disordered loves*. Sin is not the presence of bad loves. It is the presence of good loves in the wrong order. We love comfort more than God. We love approval more than God. We love family more than God. The objects are not always wrong. The order is.

Jonathan Edwards built much of his theology on this insight. In *Religious Affections* (1746), Edwards argued that true religion is fundamentally a matter of the affections (what we love and want and fear and delight in), not of the will alone or the intellect alone. A person can have orthodox doctrine and clean behavior and still have a heart that is loving the wrong things in the wrong order. And a person can be in inward turmoil while their affections are slowly being re-aimed toward God.

For Edwards, this is why self-examination has to go deeper than behavior. The real diagnostic question is not *what did you do?* It is *what did you love when you did it?*

This is also why the heart-level work has to come after the gospel. Before the cross, examining your loves only proves how disordered you are. After the cross, examining your loves is part of how the Spirit re-aims them. Pre-gospel introspection leads to despair. Post-gospel introspection leads to formation.

We are in the safe place now. We can go down a layer.

A voice from history

Jonathan Edwards wrote in *The Religious Affections*:

"True religion, in great part, consists in holy affections."

That sentence ran against the grain of his time and ours. The Enlightenment was trying to reduce religion to reason. Edwards' own Puritan tradition was sometimes tempted to reduce it to duty. Edwards insisted that the heart was the seat of true Christianity. Not in a sentimental way. In an ordered, biblical way.

Edwards spent the second half of *Religious Affections* laying out twelve signs of truly gracious affections. They are searching. He was trying to help his congregation tell the difference between religious feelings that come from the Spirit and religious feelings that come from elsewhere. Reading him is like having a careful pastor walk

through your inner life with a flashlight.

The takeaway for self-examination is this. Edwards did not say feelings are spiritual maturity. He said feelings, properly examined, reveal what is actually being loved underneath. A person can produce all the right behaviors with all the wrong loves. Self-examination at this depth is the work of checking the loves.

Personal reflection questions

1. Pick one negative reaction you had this week. Frustration, anger, jealousy, anxiety. Now ask: what was I loving in that moment that I was afraid I might lose? What was I wanting more than God?
2. Matthew 6:21 says where your treasure is, your heart is. If we tracked your time, money, and attention this past month, what would they say your treasure is?
3. Augustine talked about disordered loves. Name one love in your life that is not wrong in itself but might be in the wrong order. Comfort? Approval? Family? Work?
4. Edwards distinguished between religious feelings that come from the Spirit and religious feelings that come from elsewhere. Can you tell the difference in yourself? How?
5. If the cross is the safe place from which to do this work, are you doing it from there? Or are you doing it from a posture of trying to earn?

Practice for the week

This week, when you have a strong negative reaction, stop and ask one question. What was I loving in that moment that I was afraid I might lose?

Don't fix it. Don't shame yourself. Just notice. Write it down at the end of the day if you want.

By Friday, look back at the week's list. Are there any patterns? Is there one love that keeps showing up in disordered position? If you find one, bring it to God in a sentence. *Lord, I have been loving this more than I have been loving you. Forgive me. Re-aim me.*

That sentence is the whole point of this week.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: the tree, the fruit, the root

Draw a tree on a big piece of paper or a whiteboard. Trunk. Branches. A few apples on the branches. And then, underneath, draw deep roots in the dirt.

Ask: where does the fruit come from? Not the branches. Not the trunk. It comes from the roots. The roots draw up water and food from the dirt and send it up to make fruit.

Read Luke 6:43-45 together. *For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit... The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good.*

Explain: When we are mean, that is fruit. When we are kind, that is fruit. But fruit doesn't come from nowhere. Underneath, in our heart, there are roots. Sometimes the roots are loving God most. Sometimes the roots are loving ourselves most. Or wanting people to like us most. Or wanting to be in control most. The roots make the fruit. So when we see bad fruit, we have to ask what kind of roots are underneath.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- Can you think of a time this week when bad fruit came out of you? A mean word. A mad face. A grumpy moment. What were you really wanting underneath?
- What is something you love a lot? Is there anything you might love even more than God right now?
- God wants to be the deepest root in our heart. How could you ask him to be that today?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- Have you ever noticed yourself doing the right thing for the wrong reason? What was that like?
- What is something good that could become a problem if you loved it more than God? Sports. Grades. Friends. Phone. Looking a certain way.
- Jesus said the heart is where it starts. How do you go deeper than just fixing your behavior?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, you see the fruit, but you also see the roots. Change us at the root. Make you the deepest love. Help us notice when something else is climbing into your spot. Amen.

The spring.

Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life.

Proverbs 4:23

A spring is where water rises from underground. You cannot fix a polluted river by treating the water downstream. You have to find the spring. Clean the spring, and the river clears. Proverbs is telling us the heart is the spring. Most of our spiritual life is downstream maintenance. We try to fix the river without going to the source. Vigilance over the heart is upstream work.

Sit with this. Where in your life have you been treating the river instead of the spring?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, take me to the spring.*

For further reading. Proverbs 4:20-27. James 3:9-12.

JOURNAL

Where your treasure is.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Matthew 6:21

Jesus does not say *put your heart on the right things and your treasure will follow*. He says the opposite. *Where your treasure is, your heart will be*. Action precedes feeling. Your heart goes where your investment goes. This is why examining how you spend your time and money is a heart exercise. They reveal what your heart is actually attached to, regardless of what your heart claims. If you want to know what you treasure, look at your calendar and your statements.

Sit with this. Where have your time, money, and attention gone this past month? What does that say about your heart?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, let my heart and my treasure both be with you.*

For further reading. Matthew 6:19-24. Luke 12:32-34.

JOURNAL

Disordered loves.

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

1 John 2:15

John is not telling us to love nothing. He is telling us not to love the world in the place God is supposed to be. The problem with loving the world is not love. It is order. Augustine called this *disordered loves*. The objects of our love can be good (family, work, beauty, food, rest). The disorder is what happens when one of those climbs into the seat that belongs to God. When it does, even the good thing becomes destructive, because it cannot bear the weight of being ultimate.

Sit with this. What good thing in your life is in the wrong seat? What would it look like to put it back in its rightful place?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, take your seat back. Demote everything that has climbed into it.*

For further reading. 1 John 2:15-17. Romans 1:21-25.

JOURNAL

The affections.

Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Psalm 37:4

This is one of the most misquoted verses in the Bible. People use it to mean *God will give you what you want*. That is not what it means. It means God will give you new wants. He will re-aim your desires until what you desire is him. This is the heart-level work. The Spirit does not just stop us from sinning. He changes what we want. Slowly. Over years. He gives us the desires of our heart by giving us a new heart with different desires.

Sit with this. Is your prayer life mostly *give me what I want*, or is it ever *change what I want*?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, re-aim my wants until what I want most is you.*

For further reading. Psalm 37:3-7. Ezekiel 36:25-27.

JOURNAL

From the inside out.

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.

Matthew 15:19-20

The Pharisees were obsessed with the outside. Hand-washing. Food rules. Behavioral marks of holiness. Jesus said it was all backwards. Defilement comes from the inside out, not the outside in. This is good news for the recovering rule-keeper. You will not become holy by polishing the outside. You will become holy by letting Christ work on the inside. The outside follows the inside, never the other way around.

Sit with this. Where have you been trying to polish the outside this week? What would it look like to let the Spirit work on the inside instead?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, work in me from the inside out.*

For further reading. Matthew 15:1-20. Ezekiel 36:26-27.

Looking ahead to Week 7

We have gone down to the heart. Next week we go to the Table. Paul tells the Corinthians to examine themselves before eating the Lord's Supper, and a whole tradition of sacramental examen flows from that command. We will sit with 1 Corinthians 11 and let Calvin help us think about what reflection at the Table is actually for.

Week 7

At the Table

Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

1 Corinthians 11:28 (ESV)

Reflection that has a place

Self-examination has a place where it most naturally lives. The Table.

The Lord's Supper has always been the historic Christian setting for examen. Paul wrote it that way. The Reformers preserved it. Calvin wove self-examination into the rhythm of communion. For centuries, the practice of looking honestly at yourself was tied not to a journal or a quiet morning but to the bread and the cup.

Modern Christians often miss this. We may take communion regularly but rush past the preparation. We may examine ourselves privately but never connect it to the sacrament. We have separated what Scripture put together.

This week we put it back.

What Scripture says

The key passage is 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning 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.

Three verbs to notice. *Examine. Discern. Eat.*

Paul is writing to a chaotic church in Corinth. They were celebrating communion in a way that exposed factionalism and abuse. The rich were eating before the poor arrived. Some were getting drunk on the cup. The Table that was supposed to display the unity of Christ's body was instead displaying its dysfunction.

Paul's response is not to cancel the Table. It is to call the church to examination. Look at yourself before you eat. Discern the body before

you partake.

The word *unworthy* in verse 27 has been badly misunderstood. Paul is not saying you have to make yourself worthy to come to the Table. None of us are. The Table is for the unworthy made worthy by Christ. *Unworthy manner* refers to the way of eating, not the moral status of the eater. The Corinthians were eating in a way that ignored the body of Christ (both the body broken on the cross and the body of believers in the room). The call is to come consciously, reverently, honestly. Not to come perfectly.

A few other passages for this week:

- Matthew 5:23-24. *So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.*
- 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?*
- John 6:53-56. *Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.*

The Table is not a transaction. It is a participation. Examination at the Table is the way we ready ourselves to receive what is being given.

A Reformed lens

The Reformers fought hard over the meaning of the Lord's Supper. Calvin's view, sometimes called the doctrine of spiritual presence, has shaped Reformed practice ever since.

For Calvin, the Supper was not a re-sacrifice of Christ (the medieval Catholic view he rejected) and it was not merely a memorial (the view he found too thin). It was a means of grace. Christ is really present at the Table by the Spirit, and the believer really receives him there, by faith, through the bread and the cup. The Supper does something. It feeds the soul. It strengthens faith. It binds the believer more deeply

to Christ.

This changes what self-examination at the Table is for.

If the Supper is just a memorial, examination is mostly a tally before participation. *Have I sinned this week? Have I confessed?* It functions like a moral checkpoint.

But if the Supper is a means of grace, examination is preparation to receive. *Where do I need Christ this week? Where am I weak? Where am I sinful? Where am I hungry?* It functions like the empty hands of a child being handed bread.

Calvin's view is the more pastoral one. We come to the Table not because we have made ourselves worthy. We come because Christ is there with grace. Examination is how we open our hands to receive it.

The Reformed tradition has also been careful that examination at the Table not become a barrier that keeps weak believers away. Yes, we examine. But we examine in order to come, not in order to stay home. Paul does not say *examine yourselves, and if you find sin, abstain*. He says *examine yourselves, and so eat*. The eating is the point.

A voice from history

John Calvin wrote in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (IV.17.42):

"Let us not be discouraged because we do not yet feel ourselves to be such. For, even though we feel our sins, yet that very humility is no small means by which we are made fit for partaking. Indeed, this Sacrament is provided for the weak. Let those who can take no consolation from any holiness of their own come; let them perceive that they have all in Christ."

Read that again. *This Sacrament is provided for the weak. Let those who can take no consolation from any holiness of their own come.*

Calvin is making a pastoral move the modern church often misses. The Table is for the weak. Not the strong. Not the ones who have

arrived. The ones who know they have not. Self-examination, in Calvin's framing, is not about screening yourself out. It is about coming to the Table empty-handed and full-hearted.

This is the right shape. Examen at the Table is the act of a hungry person remembering they are hungry. The Bread is given.

Personal reflection questions

1. When you take communion, what is your inner posture? Routine? Distracted? Fearful? Hungry? Prepared?
2. Paul says we examine ourselves *and so eat*. Have you tended to examine and then eat, or examine and then stay back? What is driving the difference?
3. Calvin says the Sacrament is provided for the weak. Where in your life are you weak right now? Could you bring that specifically to the Table this week or next?
4. Matthew 5:23-24 calls us to reconcile before bringing our gift. Is there a relationship that needs attention before your next communion?
5. If you began thinking of self-examination as preparation for the Table, not just a private discipline, how would it change?

Practice for the week

Before your next communion service, set aside 20 minutes of preparation.

Ten minutes the night before, or the morning of. Sit with these questions.

- Is there a specific sin I need to bring to God before the Table?
- Is there a relationship I need to address? A word of reconciliation, an apology, a forgiveness?
- Where am I weak right now? Where do I need Christ?
- What am I most grateful to him for this week?

The questions are not a barrier. They are a doorway. You come more honest. You come more hungry. You come more ready to receive what is given.

If your church does not currently take communion every week, schedule the preparation around when you do take it. The discipline is the rhythm of preparing for the meal.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: setting the table for someone special

Set the dinner table together this week as if someone very special is coming. A grandparent. A pastor. A friend the family loves. Talk through it as you go.

Ask: what do we do to get ready when someone we love is coming? We clean up the kitchen a little. We pick up our toys. We change out of our soccer clothes. We don't do these things because the person won't love us if we don't. We do them because we love them. We are excited. We want to receive them well.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28 together.

Explain: When we take communion at church, we are coming to a Table where Jesus is the one we are receiving. The Bible says we should "examine ourselves" first. That doesn't mean we have to be perfect before we eat. It means we get ready in our hearts. We tell God anything we're sorry for. We thank him. We come hungry. It's how we love him back when we come to his Table.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- When we go to church and grown-ups take communion, what do you think is happening?
- If Jesus was at our dinner table tonight, what would you want to tell him before dinner?
- Why do you think it is good to say sorry before we eat with him?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- What does it mean to "discern the body" at the Table? Two layers. The body of Jesus on the cross, and the body of Christ in the room with you.

- Have you ever taken communion and felt like you were just going through the motions? What would change if you actually prepared?
- The Bible says the Table is for the weak, not the strong. Why is that?

A short prayer to close together

Jesus, your Table is for us. Help us come ready. Help us come hungry. Help us tell the truth about ourselves before we receive your bread and cup. We come because you are here. Amen.

So eat.

Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.

1 Corinthians 11:28

Notice what Paul does and does not say. He says *examine, and so eat*. He does not say *examine, and so abstain if you don't measure up*. The examining is preparation to eat. The eating is the point. Many Christians have absorbed a version of this verse that turns the Table into a hurdle. Examine yourself, and if you find anything, stay back. Paul says the opposite. Examine, then come. Always come. The Table is for the examined, not the perfect.

Sit with this. Have you ever held back from communion when you should have come hungrier?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, prepare me to come, not to stay back.*

For further reading. 1 Corinthians 11:23-29. John 6:35-40.

JOURNAL

Reconcile first.

So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.

Matthew 5:23-24

Jesus puts horizontal reconciliation before vertical worship. Not because the horizontal earns the vertical. Because the vertical is mocked when the horizontal is ignored. This is the part of self-examination at the Table we most often skip. We examine our hearts before God but not our relationships. Then we come to the Table and pretend everything is fine. Jesus says to leave the gift, go, repair, then come back. It is the order of integrity.

Sit with this. Is there a relationship you have left unrepaired? Could you take a step toward it this week?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, where I need to reconcile, give me the courage. Then bring me to the Table.*

For further reading. Matthew 5:21-26. Ephesians 4:31-32.

JOURNAL

Discerning the body.

For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.

1 Corinthians 11:29

Discerning the body has two layers. The body of Christ broken on the cross. And the body of Christ gathered in the room. The Corinthians were failing on the second. They were eating in a way that ignored the poorer members of their own congregation. Paul says this is a failure to discern. You cannot honor the broken body of Christ at the Table while ignoring the body of Christ sitting next to you. This makes the Table a deeply communal act. Self-examination at the Table is not just *am I right with God?* It is also *am I right with the body God has put me in?*

Sit with this. When you take communion, are you aware of the people in the room with you? Or is it private and individual?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, help me discern both bodies. The one on the cross and the one in the room.*

For further reading. 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, 11:29-34. 1 Corinthians 12:12-26.

JOURNAL

The cup of blessing.

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

1 Corinthians 10:16

Participation. That word changes everything. The Table is not a symbol we remember. It is a participation we enter. Calvin held this without becoming Catholic. Christ is really there. The bread is really bread. But by the Spirit, the believer really receives the real Christ. It is a means of grace. Communion is not a museum. It is a meeting. This is why preparation matters. We are not getting ready for a ritual. We are getting ready for him.

Sit with this. Have you been treating communion like a memorial or a meeting? How would the second change your approach?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, meet me at your Table.*

For further reading. 1 Corinthians 10:14-22. John 6:53-58.

JOURNAL

The Bread of Life.

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.

John 6:35

Behind every communion service is this claim. Christ is the bread. Christ is the wine. Christ is what is being received. Self-examination at the Table makes sense when we remember what we are receiving. We are not receiving a wafer. We are receiving Christ himself. The examination is the work of coming hungry for him, not full of ourselves.

Sit with this. When you imagine receiving communion this week, what are you actually hungry for? Is it him?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you are the Bread. Make me hungry for you.*

For further reading. John 6:32-58. Revelation 19:6-9.

Looking ahead to Week 8

We have practiced examination at the Table. Next week we deal with the hardest examination of all. Examining whether you are in the faith. Paul commands this in 2 Corinthians 13:5, and a whole strain of pastoral wisdom in the Reformed tradition has developed around it. Done badly, this examination produces anxiety. Done well, it produces deep assurance. Richard Sibbes and his book *The Bruised Reed* will be our companion.

Week 8

Test Yourself

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.

2 Corinthians 13:5 (ESV)

The hardest question

This is the deepest water in the study. Paul tells the Corinthians to ask the question most Christians spend their lives quietly avoiding. *Are you actually in the faith?*

It is a sharp command. It can cut two directions. Done one way it produces real assurance. Done the other way it produces anxiety, paralysis, and a kind of spiritual exhaustion that drives believers in circles.

We have to do this carefully. The question is in the Bible. We cannot skip it. But it has to be handled in a way that ends in confidence in Christ, not in confidence in our own performance.

This week we walk slowly.

What Scripture says

The key text is 2 Corinthians 13:5.

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?, unless indeed you fail to meet the test!

Paul is writing to a Corinthian church that has been doubting his apostolic credentials. He flips the question on them. Don't test me. Test yourselves. If you find that Christ is in you, my ministry to you is vindicated. If you don't, you have bigger problems than my credentials.

The verbs are strong. *Examine*. *Test*. The same words used elsewhere for assaying metal or scrutinizing a witness. Paul is not asking for a casual self-check. He is asking for a serious one.

But notice the assumption embedded in the command. *Do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?* Paul expects them to find Christ. The examination is not a fishing expedition with low odds. It is an investigation that should land in recognition. The

default expectation is yes.

Now put 2 Corinthians 13:5 next to 1 John 5:13.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

John tells us the whole point of his first epistle is that we *may know*. Not guess. Not hope. Know. The Bible expects believers to have assurance, not perpetual doubt.

And then put both next to Philippians 1:6.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul's confidence is not in the believer. It is in the One who began the work. He finishes what he starts.

The biblical pattern is this. We examine to confirm what is already true, not to question it into the ground. The examination is for assurance, not for paralysis.

A Reformed lens

The Reformed tradition has thought about this question with unusual care. The historical context matters. Calvin and the Reformers preached justification by faith alone, which freed believers from a Catholic system of works-based assurance. But almost immediately, a new problem appeared. If I am saved by faith alone, how do I know I have real faith? Faith can be counterfeited. Faith can be assumed. How do I tell the difference between true faith and false?

The Puritans developed an entire pastoral theology around this. They called it the *marks of grace*. Not works that earn salvation, but evidences that real faith is present.

The Westminster Confession (1646) put it this way (chapter 18):

"This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God."

Three pillars of assurance. The promises of God. The inward evidence of grace. The witness of the Spirit. All three feed each other. When one is faint, the other two can carry.

This is healthier than what most modern believers operate with. We tend to ground our assurance in one of these alone, usually our feelings, which fluctuate. The Reformed pattern is to triangulate. Look to the promises. Look for marks of grace. Listen for the Spirit's witness. Together they steady the soul.

Marks of grace include things like love for Christ, love for other believers, hatred of sin, hunger for the Word, gratitude for the gospel, perseverance in faith over time. Not perfection in these. Direction. Are these present in you? Are they growing, even slowly? If yes, the Spirit is at work.

The right way to do this examination is to ask honestly. *Do I see any of these in me?* Not flawlessly. At all. If there is any real evidence, the verdict is yes.

A voice from history

Richard Sibbes, an English Puritan, wrote *The Bruised Reed* in 1630. The title comes from Isaiah 42:3 and Matthew 12:20, where it says the Messiah will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick. Sibbes wrote the book for believers who were tempted to despair about their own faith.

His core line is one of the most pastorally important sentences in Puritan literature.

"There is more mercy in Christ than sin in us."

He continues:

"Christ will not quench the smoking flax. Where there is any beginning of grace, He will preserve it. He will not despise it because it is small."

This is the safety net for honest self-examination. We are looking for evidence of grace. We are not demanding flawless evidence. A bruised reed is still a reed. Smoking flax is still flax. Christ does not need our faith to be impressive. He needs it to be real. And real faith, by his definition, can be very small.

Sibbes was writing to people who feared their faith was not enough. He kept telling them. More is required of you in growth, less is required of you to begin. The faith that lays hold of Christ is enough, even when it lays hold weakly.

For self-examination, this is the safety rail. If you find any real evidence of grace, even smoking flax, the Spirit is at work. The examination ends in confidence, not anxiety.

Personal reflection questions

1. Be honest. Has examining your faith historically tended to produce assurance or anxiety? Why?
2. The Westminster Confession lists three pillars of assurance. The promises of God, the inward evidence of grace, and the Spirit's witness. Which one are you most likely to lean on? Which do you most ignore?
3. Look at the historic marks of grace. Love for Christ, love for other believers, hatred of sin, hunger for the Word, perseverance. Do you see any of these in your life, even in small measure?
4. Sibbes says Christ will not quench smoking flax. Where is your faith small right now? Will you believe he is preserving it?
5. If your assurance is currently weak, where might that be coming from? An unconfessed sin? A wrong belief about God? Just tiredness? Name it.

Practice for the week

Write down one mark of grace you can name in your own life.

Just one. Pick from the historic list. Love for Christ, love for other believers, hatred of sin, hunger for the Word, gratitude for the gospel, perseverance through hard seasons. Where do you see one, even imperfectly?

Then write one sentence under it. *I see this in my life because...* Be specific.

Keep the paper. Put it somewhere you will see it this week. When doubt rises, read it. This is not the foundation of your assurance. Christ is. But it is the evidence the Spirit has left you, and the Spirit means for evidence to steady you.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: how you know you belong

Sit on the couch as a family. Ask: how do you know you belong in this family?

Let the kids answer. They will say various things. *Because mom and dad love us. Because we live here. Because they take care of us. Because we look like them.*

Ask: do you know you belong because you are perfect? Because you do everything right? Because you never make mistakes?

They will say no.

Read 1 John 5:13 together. *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.*

Explain: God wants us to know we are his. Not guess. Know. We know because Jesus made us his at the cross. We know because we love him, even imperfectly. We know because the Holy Spirit lives in us. Just like you know you belong in this family without having to earn it every day, you can know you belong to God.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- How do you know you belong in this family? How do you think you know you belong to God?
- Do you have to be perfect for God to love you?
- What does it feel like to know you belong somewhere?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- Have you ever doubted whether you are really a Christian? What was that like?

- The Bible says we can *know* we have eternal life. What do you think that knowledge is built on?
- Richard Sibbes said Christ won't put out a fire even if it's just barely smoking. What does that say about how God treats a weak faith?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, we are yours. You said so at the cross. Help us know it. Help us not need to be perfect to feel like we belong. We are your children. Thank you. Amen.

The right question.

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith.

2 Corinthians 13:5

Paul commands the question. He does not soften it. He does not say it might be helpful sometime. He says do it. But notice what he does and does not assume. He does not assume the answer is no. *Do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?* He expects the examination to confirm Christ's presence. The test is meant to produce assurance, not to undermine it. This is the right starting place. We ask the question because Paul says to. We expect the answer to be yes, by God's grace.

Sit with this. Have you been treating this question as if the expected answer is no? Why?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, by your grace I am in the faith. Confirm it in me.*

For further reading. 2 Corinthians 13:5-10. 1 John 3:18-24.

JOURNAL

The smoking flax.

A bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.

Isaiah 42:3

Faith does not have to be impressive to be real. A reed can be bruised and still be a reed. A wick can be barely burning and still be on fire. Christ does not need your faith to be strong. He needs it to be his. If your faith feels faint this week, this verse is for you. The Lord is not assessing the size of the flame. He is preserving it.

Sit with this. Where is your faith faint right now? Will you believe Christ is preserving it?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, you do not break the bruised. Hold me.*

For further reading. Isaiah 42:1-4. Matthew 12:15-21.

JOURNAL

Three pillars.

Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:12-13

John was a pastor. He knew his readers needed to *know*. Not guess. The Reformed tradition has held three pillars of assurance. The promises of God in his Word, the evidences of grace in our lives, and the witness of the Spirit in our hearts. When one is faint, the other two carry. When all three speak the same word, the soul is settled. Most of us lean on only one and wonder why we wobble. Triangulate.

Sit with this. Which pillar of assurance do you most need to lean on this week?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, settle me on your promises, your evidences, and your Spirit.*

For further reading. 1 John 5:9-13. Romans 8:14-17.

JOURNAL

Perseverance.

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Philippians 1:6

Paul's confidence is not in the Philippians' grit. It is in the One who started the work. He finishes what he starts. This is one of the deepest marks of grace. Perseverance. Not the absence of struggle. The presence of return. The believer falls and gets up. The believer doubts and comes back. The believer wanders and is brought home. Over time, the pattern is direction. Even when the direction is slow, even when it is hard, it is toward Christ.

Sit with this. Look back five years. Are you closer to Christ than you were then, even with all the wandering? That direction is evidence.

One sentence prayer. *Lord, finish what you started in me.*

For further reading. Philippians 1:3-11. Jude 24-25.

JOURNAL

The Spirit's witness.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

Romans 8:16

The Spirit witnesses. Not your feelings. Not your performance. The Spirit himself. There is something quiet and steady about real Spirit-witness. It is not loud emotion. It is the deep settled sense that God is your Father and you are his child. It rises in unexpected moments. It steadies you when life shakes you. It is not the same as confidence in yourself. It is confidence in him. If you cannot hear it right now, that does not mean it is absent. It often grows clearer in the quiet practices of this study. Reflection. Word. Prayer. Patience.

Sit with this. Where have you felt the Spirit's quiet witness recently, even faintly?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, by your Spirit, tell me again I am yours.*

For further reading. Romans 8:14-17. Galatians 4:4-7.

Looking ahead to Week 9

We have one week left. Next week we make this practice livable. We do not want self-examination to be a study you finish and forget. We want it to become a rhythm that lasts the rest of your life. Richard Baxter wrote a section of *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* on exactly this. We close the study with a sustainable rule of reflection.

Week 9

A Rule of Reflection

Be angry, and do not sin; ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.

Psalm 4:4 (ESV)

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23 (ESV)

A practice you can keep

We end where most spiritual studies fall apart. The practical part. The part where it has to keep going after the study is over.

This is not a study about a season of self-examination. It is a study about recovering a discipline for the rest of your life. So we close with a rule. Not a heroic rule. A sustainable one. The kind of rhythm a real adult with a real job and real kids and a real attention span can actually keep.

The historic word for this is *rule of life*. Christians have used some version of it for centuries. A simple, written agreement with yourself about how you will practice the disciplines of the faith. Not a law to earn anything. A scaffold to make the practices reachable.

This week, we build yours.

What Scripture says

Psalm 4:4 gives the pattern in one verse. *Ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent*. The Hebrew literally suggests reflection in the quiet hours of evening. Ponder. Be silent. Let the day settle. Let the Lord speak.

Lamentations 3:22-23 gives the rhythm. *His mercies are new every morning*. The day begins under mercy. We do not start each morning from a deficit. We start in fresh grace.

Hold those together and you have the basic shape of a daily rule. Morning under mercy. Evening in reflection.

Then there are the larger rhythms. Hebrews 10:24-25 calls us to keep gathering with the saints. Acts 2:42 describes the early church devoting themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer. These are the weekly and corporate rhythms.

And then there is the longer view. Psalm 90:12. *Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom*. The lifetime view.

Reflection at the scale of a year, a decade, a life.

A rule of reflection lives at four scales. Daily. Weekly. Monthly. Yearly. Each scale asks slightly different questions. Together they make a life of examen possible.

A Reformed lens

The Reformers did not invent rules of life. The monastic tradition had used them for centuries. But the Reformers reclaimed them for ordinary believers. You did not have to be a monk to live a structured spiritual life. You could be a baker, a mother, a farmer, a magistrate. The rule simply had to fit your actual life.

This is important. The Reformed tradition has always insisted that holiness is not produced by withdrawal from ordinary callings. It is produced in them. Your rule of reflection is not a way out of your life. It is a way to be more present to God within it.

The danger in any rule is twofold. It can become legalistic (a tally toward God's favor) or it can collapse (you set the bar too high and stop within three weeks). Both errors come from the same root. The rule has become about you instead of about being with God.

A healthy rule is small enough to keep, specific enough to mean something, and grounded enough in grace that you can begin again every time you miss a day. It is a scaffold for friendship with God, not a fence keeping you in line.

A voice from history

Richard Baxter, the 17th-century English Puritan pastor, wrote *The Saints' Everlasting Rest* in 1650. It is one of the great Puritan works on the inner life. Baxter devoted an entire section to what he called *heavenly meditation*, the discipline of daily reflection on God and one's own soul.

Baxter wrote:

"Be acquainted with thy own heart. Though it be deceitful, look into it more often than into thy purse. Look into it as into thy garden, that is overgrown and choked with weeds. Look into it as into a soul that must shortly stand before God."

Notice the comparisons. Your heart is like a wallet you should check often. Your heart is like a garden that needs tending. Your heart is like a soul that has an appointment with God. These are not metaphors of obligation. They are metaphors of stewardship and preparation.

Baxter's basic argument was that no Christian could expect to grow without setting time aside, regularly, to look at their own soul before God. He recommended an hour a day for serious heavenly meditation. He was writing in a slower century. Most of us cannot manage that. But the principle is still ours. Some amount, regularly, for the rest of our lives.

A rule is how you make that real.

Personal reflection questions

1. What has changed in you over these nine weeks? Be specific. Name one thing you are taking with you.
2. What is the smallest daily practice you can actually keep? Two minutes? Five? Ten? Be realistic.
3. What weekly rhythm could anchor this in your week? A Saturday morning hour? A Sunday evening prayer? A specific time you already have.
4. What does Baxter mean by being acquainted with your own heart? What would it look like to check your heart more often than your phone?
5. If you imagined yourself five years from now, having kept some version of this rule, who would that person be?

Practice for the week

Write your rule. One page. Hand-written or typed.

Use this template. Fill in what is yours.

Daily. Each day I will spend ___ minutes reflecting before God. My time of day will be ___. My anchor practice will be ___ (one verse, one question, one prayer; some combination).

Weekly. Each ___ (day of week) I will spend ___ minutes on a longer reflection. I will use ___ (a Psalm, a question from this study, a season of life I want to examine).

Monthly. On the first ___ of each month I will spend ___ minutes reflecting on the previous month. I will ask. Where did I see God's mercy? Where did I drift? What needs attention next month?

Yearly. At the end of each year I will spend a half day reflecting on the year. I will ask. What has the Lord done? Where am I now? What will I ask him for next year?

Sign it. Date it. Put it where you will see it.

If you miss a day, start again the next day. If you miss a month, start again. The rule is the rhythm, not the streak. Mercies are new every morning.

Family / kids version

Object lesson: bedtime check-in

Build it into your family bedtime routine starting this week. The tradition is sometimes called *the daily examen*, and it works for kids beautifully.

Three questions at the end of the day, before lights out.

1. What was the best part of today?
2. What was the hardest part of today?
3. Is there anything you want to talk to God about before you sleep?

That is the rule. Three questions. Five minutes. Every night.

Read Psalm 4:8 together. *In peace I will both lie down and sleep; for you alone, O LORD, make me dwell in safety.*

Explain: When we end the day with God, we let him have the day. We give him the good parts. We give him the hard parts. We give him what we are worried about. Then we sleep. This is how you grow up knowing how to reflect.

Questions for younger kids (about 5 to 9)

- Would you be willing to try this every night for a week with mom or dad?
- What is something you want to thank God for tonight?
- What is something you want help with tomorrow?

Questions for older kids (about 10 to 14)

- What do you think happens to your heart over a year if you talk to God about every day as it ends?

- Is there a specific time of day that would be your best time to reflect? Morning, after school, before bed?
- What is one small habit you could keep for the rest of the year?

A short prayer to close together

Lord, every day belongs to you. The good ones and the hard ones. Help us make a rhythm of reflection that lasts. Help us not need to be perfect. Just faithful. Amen.

New every morning.

The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Lamentations 3:22-23

This is the verse that makes a rule of life sustainable. *New every morning*. Yesterday's failure is not the soil for today's practice. Yesterday's mercy was for yesterday. Today's mercy is fresh. This is the cure for the perfectionism that kills most spiritual disciplines. We try, we fail, we feel hopeless, we quit. The verse breaks the cycle. There is no streak to lose. Every morning is its own grace.

Sit with this. What old failure are you still letting set the tone for today?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, your mercies are new this morning. Help me start fresh.*

For further reading. Lamentations 3:19-26. Psalm 30:4-5.

JOURNAL

Ponder.

Ponder in your own hearts on your beds, and be silent.

Psalm 4:4

The Psalmist gives us the basic daily move. Ponder. Be silent. He places it at bedtime, which is when most of us are too tired to do anything spiritual. That is the point. The discipline is fitted to the ordinary day. You do not have to be at your best to reflect. You have to be honest. Bedtime is honest because it is when the masks come off. Practice it there.

Sit with this. Could you take two minutes tonight to ponder and be silent before sleep?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, before I sleep, let me sit still before you.*

For further reading. Psalm 4:1-8. Psalm 119:148.

JOURNAL

Number your days.

Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.

Psalm 90:12

Wisdom is connected to time. Foolishness pretends time is unlimited. Wisdom counts. This is the case for the longer-scale reflections in a rule of life. Monthly and yearly examen. Not because God expects them. Because you need them. You cannot tell where you have drifted without occasionally stepping back and looking at the larger map. Numbering your days is honest. It is also the doorway to wisdom.

Sit with this. When was the last time you stepped back and looked at a whole month or year of your life before God? What would it take to schedule one?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, teach me to number my days.*

For further reading. Psalm 90:1-17. Ephesians 5:15-17.

JOURNAL

Don't go alone.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.

Hebrews 10:24-25

A rule of reflection is personal. It is not solitary. The author of Hebrews warned the early church not to drift into solo Christianity. He had seen what happens. People isolate. People drift. People dry up. The cure is gathering. Stirring. Encouraging. If you can, find one person who will walk this rhythm with you. A spouse, a friend, a small group. The questions are private. The accountability is shared.

Sit with this. Who in your life could walk this with you? Have you asked them?

One sentence prayer. *Lord, give me at least one companion for this road.*

For further reading. Hebrews 10:23-25. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.

JOURNAL

The everlasting way, again.

Lead me in the way everlasting.

Psalm 139:24

We end where we began. The Psalm of search and lead. The prayer that opens the practice. The point of the rule was never the rule. It was the way. The everlasting way. The road that leads to the country we have not seen yet. Self-examination is one of the practices that keeps us walking and not drifting. So pray the prayer again. Search me. Know me. Try me. Lead me. And then walk the next mile. There are many more.

Sit with this. Are you still walking? Then the rule is working. Keep going.

One sentence prayer. *Lord, lead me in the way everlasting. I will follow as long as you give me breath.*

For further reading. Psalm 139:23-24. Hebrews 12:1-3.

Closing word

You have walked nine weeks of looking honestly at yourself before God. That is more than most Christians ever do in a year. More than many do in a lifetime.

The work is not finished. It will not be finished until the day you see Christ face to face and the mirror finally clears. But you have started. You have practiced. You have built a rhythm.

Reflection is one of the great lost arts of the Christian life. You are part of recovering it. Quietly. Honestly. In your real life, with real ten-minute desolate places, with real names for real sins, with a real cross to carry them to, and with a real Lord on the other side of the mirror.

Keep going.

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