



Prayer of Examen

LUTHER'S FREEDOM FROM FEAR

Examen prayer is the Holy Spirit's application to our lives of scriptural teachings or descriptions of holiness in order to determine where we lack and/or succeed in living a holy life.

Odd though this may sound, freedom is the reason we allow the dark spaces in our souls to be exposed to the light of God's examination. Instinct argues that while the darkness is terrifying, exposure to the light is painful, risky, and ultimately futile. Martin Luther, however, discovered that when he allowed *God* to shine the light, it was fear that fled from Luther instead of Luther failing in his attempts to flee from the darkness (John 3:17–21).

Martin Luther (1483–1546) was a typical Catholic of the sixteenth century, except for his acute and debilitating fear of judgment. His anxiety was compounded when, one night as he walked home, a bolt of lightning either struck him or struck close enough to knock him over. He cried out to St. Anne in terror, pledging to become a monk, if only he were saved from the hellfire.

To keep his vow, he joined a strict order of Augustinians, and in spite of his dislike for monastic life, carried out the oath—if for no other reason than to ease his fear. Not only did he submit to his superiors, studying for a doctorate in theology and becoming a priest, he also practiced monastic disciplines excessively. Yet he could find no peace, no sense of assurance concerning his position before the holy Judge.

Then, sometime between 1513 and 1517, as he prepared and taught classes in Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, Paul's phrase, "the just shall live by faith" (Rom 1:17 KJV; see also Hab 2:4) set him free. He finally understood that God received him because of Christ's trustworthy work on the cross, and not because of Luther's own works, worthy or unworthy. His discovery became a foundation for the Reformation.

Luther's new perspective on God established a new manner of coping with his sin. Instead of the self-flagellation he had rigorously practiced in order to avoid the deceit of self-justification, he trusted the Lord to reveal and reclaim what was not right in his life. As he studied Scripture, he waited on the Spirit to apply the word specifically to him, nudging him in the direction he should turn.

Commenting on this approach to conviction and confession, called "examen," Luther writes, "There is no better mirror in which to see your need than simply the Ten Commandments, in which you will find what you lack and what you should seek. If, therefore, you find in yourself a weak faith, small hope, and little love toward God, . . . these you shall earnestly lay before God, lament and ask for help, and with all confidence expect help, and believe that you are heard and shall obtain help and mercy."¹

Considering the big picture Jesus painted regarding the possibilities for sin, Luther probably saw the Ten Commandments as more than a simple check-list of ethical dos and don'ts. Matthew

¹ Martin Luther, *A Treatise on Good Works Together with the Letter of Dedication* (1520), n.p. [cited 19 June 2008]. Online: www.theologywebsite.com/etext/luther_goodworks.shtml.

5:21–24 suggests that the command against murder was broken when someone was at fault in a dispute and failed to attempt reconciliation. According to Jesus, a lustful look alone ranked with committing adultery (Matt 5:27–28). The rich young ruler vouched that he had obeyed all ten laws religiously, but Jesus directed the man to care for the poor and to follow the Master if he wanted to practice them as God desired (Matt 19:17–21). Jesus himself “broke” traditional concepts of Sabbath because he understood that true Sabbath-keeping also had to do with healing (Mark 3:1–5; John 5:2–16).

From his days of fear, Luther knew that there was more to obedience than legalistic observance. He had already tried legalism to no avail. He came to believe that God already knew every hidden corner of his life. His new freedom was found by inviting God into those corners to sweep them clean (Ps 139:1, 23–24), instead of trying to tidy them up himself.

Like Luther, we may question whether we have done enough. The inner critic plagues us with our imperfect work. The shoulder devil prods incessantly at our personal failings. Believing in God’s mercy is not the problem; believing in his mercy for *me* is the difficulty. Practicing the prayer of examen trains believers to hear the Spirit’s gently convicting voice rather than inner PA systems that blare self-condemnation. Granting God the right to root out sin frees us from the struggle to master that which is too big for us to do in the first place (John 8:32).

For other believers, “live free!” may already be our motto. We struggle to focus on the inner darkness and how it leaks out onto other people. Acknowledging complicated consequences of sin and “fallenness” seems to steal our opportunities to play in the light. Even “making amends,” the ninth step in twelve-step recovery programs, smacks of making a big deal. We would rather make people laugh. The prayer of examen grants us a way to follow Jesus into a light that fills our empty places (Job 33:29–30), and it opens the path to a mercy that is sweeter than honey from the rock (Ps 81:16).

Practice

1. Invite God to search the depths of your heart as you meditate on the Ten Commandments found in Exodus 20:1–20. Ask him for insight into how the truth in Scripture and your own experience have intersected.
2. You may wish to hold up other Scriptures as a mirror for your soul. Some suggestions include the wisdom literature of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, the Psalms, the Beatitudes (Matt 5:1–12), Paul’s New Life in Christ (Col 3), or the Well-Pleasing Service (Heb 13).
3. Read slowly, pausing at each sentence or verse to listen for anything that stands out. Perhaps there is an area of your life that you would like God to examine—your use of time, your relationship with your coworkers, the books you read, etc. Perhaps you will invite him to look through a particular period, your day or your week. Think through your thoughts, feelings, and actions in the context of the passage. How did they draw you to God? To self? How were they like or unlike the picture of God that the reading paints? How has God been at work? What seemingly ordinary things might God have been using for his own purposes? How did you respond?

4. If you find your mind wandering or trying to dredge up remorse without conviction (Matt 6:7–8), perhaps it is time to move on to the next sentence or verse. (Suggestions for dealing with distractions can be found under *Lectio Divina/Practice/4*.)

5. When something not quite right comes to light, avoid the urge to defend yourself. Instead take responsibility for what is wrong and ask God to purify you. On the other hand, avoid the urge to punish yourself. Trust that you will receive God’s mercy (Eph 2:4–5).

6. God’s Spirit encourages as much as he convicts. As you practice the prayer of examen, do not forget to sit still for his smile. When something is shown to you that falls in line with the commands, do not diminish it. Thank God for this evidence of his work through you and for allowing you to participate in his plan (Jer 9:23–24).

7. If it is difficult to hear his voice pointing out matters for celebration or confession in your life because your own inner voice drowns him out, begin by listening for *his* characteristics or actions instead of your own. What does God reveal about himself as you read through the Commandments?

8. Write down your confession to God, both the truth about yourself and the truth about him. Make sure to note the whole truth: his holiness, which cannot be trespassed against, as well as his love that redeems you with mercy. If you have felt a nudge concerning an action you might take, a word you might offer, or a new perspective you might adopt, write that down, too. When you are done meditating through the passage, read what you have written. Thank him for his work. Offer all that you have discovered about yourself to all that you know to be true of God. The goal is not to journey into yourself and stay there, but to journey through yourself to the heart of God.² Yield to his righteousness and mercy and wait.

9. Finally, do not forget that when you leave the mirror, you can leave with confidence and peace that he has shown you all you need concern yourself with today (1 Cor 2:10; Phil 3:13–14).

Sample the Prayer

If you only have a few minutes to spend with God today, contemplate one commandment (or one verse), instead of all ten. Trust God to coordinate the days and the verses by his unsearchable sense of timing. If the time you set aside for looking into his Ten Commandments “mirror” is too long to endure, start with five minutes and add one minute a day. You might also reserve it for seasons of evaluation during Lent, Communion, or a spiritual retreat or you might apply it to a particular meeting, conversation, or product-development in which you participated.

² Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 32.

Practice Together

Practicing examen as a group requires discipline, gentleness, humility, and trust. After all, it is often easier to acknowledge our faults to God, who assures us of his forgiveness (1 John 1:9), than to the human whom we have sinned against. Furthermore, it is possible for members to abuse this practice, breaking confidentiality or using confessed weakness to manipulate others. Groups should consider the strength of internal relationships and trustworthiness of individual members before asking this of one another.

On the other hand, an exercise in honest group examen can yield unparalleled depth and freedom to your community life as you confess your sins to one another and receive forgiveness and healing (Jas 5:16). Groups who are new to one another can start by practicing step 7 above. From there, groups may eventually explore accountability with one another, confessing weaknesses or sins for which individuals would welcome prayer support and other help. Groups who have made longer lasting commitments to one another may dig deeper for the sake of group unity by examining sins against the group or darkness between individuals within the circle.

Begin by inviting God and his Son's sacrifice to set the example for your group (Phil 2:5–8), and ask the Holy Spirit to direct your words and your interactions with one another. Give everyone a portion of the passage to read aloud. After each one reads, wait in silence before God. Then share what he has brought to mind for confession.

Perhaps only the one who has taken his turn reading will share, trusting that the Lord guides even the distribution of the verses to the exact person who needs that verse that day. Or perhaps everyone who has heard something for that particular commandment will share. Set the ground rules ahead of time in order to avoid adding confusion to a season of prayer that may be intense already.

If confession of sin is made, and the one who has been sinned against is present, grant that person a chance to forgive the offender (Matt 5:23–24). If deeper reconciliation or restitution seems necessary, the group should come alongside the two in need (Phil 4:2–3).

Whether or not immediate reconciliation is possible, someone should answer the confession of sin with a confession of the truth about God from his promises. For example if someone recognizes and admits a tendency toward self-deception, another can remember aloud that God has granted an “antidote” to the difficulty of remembering the truth about ourselves: looking into the law of freedom and obeying that (Jas 1:22–25).

End the season of examen together by thanking God for his mercy and agreeing to receive the liberty that comes with that mercy.

Consider

1. “The just shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17 KJV) is a foundational phrase in the Reformation. Who are “the just”? What does it mean for them to “live by faith”? How does this theology influence your feeling of confidence under the scrutiny of this kind of prayer?

2. In John 8:32, Jesus says, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (RSV). What truth does he mean? How is there freedom in hearing the truth? If Jesus is love, how is it loving for Jesus to tell you truths about the darkness within yourself?

3. Focusing on long-suppressed fears or habits of sin can be a little dangerous. On the other hand, ignoring these things can be dangerous, too. Do you see either tendency in yourself? If so, how have you dealt with this in the past? How might the prayer of examen provide you with a different option? How can you avoid your default tendency while practicing examen?

4. God calls communities of believers, not just individuals. He convicts and encourages his people as a group, too. What special direction(s) or theme(s) would your particular group need to practice this prayer in unity?

Study Further

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