

SELF-EXAMINATION

Thomas Watson (1620-1686)

Self-examination defined

Self-examination is a duty of great importance. It is a parleying¹ with one's own heart: "I commune with mine own heart" (Psa 77:6). David did put interrogatories² to himself.

Self-examination is the setting up a court in conscience and keeping a register there, that by strict scrutiny a man may know how things stand between God and his own soul. Self-examination is a spiritual inquisition, a bringing one's self to trial. A good Christian doth as it were begin the Day of Judgment here in his own soul.

Self-searching is a heart-anatomy. As a surgeon, when he makes a dissection in the body, discovers the intestines, the inward parts, the heart, liver, and arteries, so a Christian anatomizeth himself. He searcheth what is flesh and what is spirit, what is sin and what is grace. "My spirit made diligent search" (Psa 77:6).

As the woman in the Gospel did light a candle and search for her lost groat³ (Luk 15:8), so conscience "is the candle of the Lord" (Pro 20:27). A Christian by the light of this candle must search his soul [to see] if he can find any grace there.

The rule by which a Christian must try himself is the Word of God. Fancy and opinion are false rules to go by. We must judge of our own spiritual condition by the canon of Scripture. This David calls "a lamp unto his feet" (Psa 119:105). Let the Word be the umpire to decide the controversy, whether we have grace or no. We judge of colors by the sun. So we must judge the state of souls by the light of Scripture.

Self-examination is difficult.

Self-examination is a great, incumbent duty. It requires self-excitation; it cannot possibly be done without offering violence to ourselves.

¹ **parleying** – discussion; negotiation.

² **interrogatories** – *law*: particular questions to a witness, who is to answer under the solemnities of an oath.

³ **groat** – English silver coin worth four pence, used from the 14th to the 17th century.

1. Self-examination is difficult because *the duty of self-examination in itself is difficult*. It is a work of self-reflection; it lies most with the heart. 'Tis hard to look inward! External acts of religion are facile. To lift up the eye to heaven, to bow the knee, to read a prayer—this requires no more labor than for a Catholic to tell⁴ over his beads. But to examine a man's self, to turn in upon his own soul, to take the heart as a watch all in pieces and see what is defective—this is not easy. Reflective acts are hardest. The eye can see everything but itself. It is easy to spy the faults of others, but hard to find out our own (Mat 7:3-5).

2. Examination of a man's self is difficult because of *self-love*. As ignorance blinds, so self-love flatters. Every man is ready to think the best of himself. What Solomon saith of love to our neighbor is most true of self-love: it hides a multitude of evil (Pro 10:12). [When] a man looks upon himself in the glass of self-love, his virtues appear greater than they are, and his sins less. Self-love makes one rather excuse what is amiss than examine it.

We resist self-examination.

As examination is in itself difficult, so it is a work which we are very hardly brought to. That which causes a backwardness⁵ to self-examination is:

1. *Consciousness of guilt*. Sin clamours inwardly, and men are loath to look into their hearts lest they should find that which should trouble them. It is little pleasure to read the handwriting on the wall of conscience. Many Christians are like tradesmen who are sinking in their estates. They are loath to look over their books, or cast up their accounts, lest they should find their estates low; so they are loath to look into their guilty heart, lest they should find something there which should affright them—as Moses was affrighted at the sight of the rod turned into a serpent.

2. Men are hardly brought to this duty because of *foolish, presumptuous hopes*. They fancy their estate to be good, and while they weigh themselves in the balance of presumption, they pass the test. Many take their salvation on trust. The foolish virgins thought they had oil in their lamps, the same as the wise (Mat 25). Some are not sure of their salvation, but [yet feel] secure. If one were to buy a piece of land, he would not take it on trust, but examine the title. How confident are some of salvation, yet never examine their title to heaven.

3. Men are not forward to examine themselves, because they rest in the *good opinion of others*. How vain is this! Alas, one may be gold and pearl in the eye of others, yet God may judge him reprobate silver. Others may think him a saint, [but] God may write him down in His black book. Judas was looked upon by the rest of the apostles as a true believer. They would have been ready to have given their hands to his certificate; yet he was a traitor. Standers-by can but see the outward carriage;

⁴ **tell** – count.

⁵ **backwardness** – unwillingness; reluctance.

they cannot tell what evil is in the heart. Fair streams may run on the top of a river, but vermin may lie at the bottom.

4. Men are hardly brought to examine themselves, because they *do not believe Scripture*. The Scripture saith, “The heart is deceitful above all things” (Jer 17:9). Solomon said there were four things too wonderful for him, that he could not know (Pro 30:19). He might have added a fifth: the way of a man’s heart! The heart is the greatest imposter; it will be ready to put one off with *seeming* grace, instead of *saving* [grace]. The heart will persuade that a slight tear is repentance, [and that] a lazy desire is faith. Now because the generality of people do not believe that there is such fallacy⁶ in their hearts, therefore they are so slow to examine them.

This natural backwardness in us to self-reflection should cause us to offer the more violence in making a thorough investigation and search of our hearts. Oh, that I might prevail with Christians to take pains with themselves in this great work of examination! Their salvation depends on it. It is the note of an harlot: she is seldom at home. “Her feet abide not in her house: now she is without, now in the streets” (Pro 7:11-12). It is a sign of an harlot-professor to be altogether abroad, spying the faults of others, but never at home with his own heart.

Oh, let us try our hearts as we try gold: by the touch-stone.⁷ Let us examine our sins, and finding out this leaven, burn it. Let us examine our grace, whether it be of the right kind. One went into the field to gather herbs, and he gathered wild gourds, and then death was in the pot (2Ki 4:40). So many think they have grace, the right herb, but it proves a wild gourd and brings death and damnation.

The results of self-examination

That we may offer violence to ourselves in this great business of examination, let these few things be seriously weighed:

1. Without self-examination *we can never know how it is with us*. If we should die presently, we cannot tell to what coast we should sail: whether to hell or heaven. It is reported of Socrates⁸ when he was going out of the world he had this speech, “I am now to die, and the gods know whether I shall be happy or miserable.” That man who is ignorant of the state of his soul must needs have the trembling at the heart, as Cain had a shaking in his flesh. By a serious scrutiny of our hearts, we come to know to what prince we belong, whether the “Prince of peace” (Isa 9:6) or the “prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2).

2. If we will not try ourselves, *God will try us*. He will examine us, as the chief captain did Paul, by scourging (Act 22:24). He will ask that question as Christ,

⁶ **fallacy** – deceit.

⁷ **touch-stone** – the test by which quality is tried; derived from a black, glossy stone by which metals were examined for hardness.

⁸ **Socrates** (469-399 BC) – Greek philosopher who profoundly affected Western philosophy through his influence on Plato.

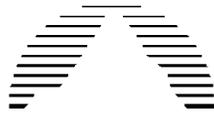
“Whose is this image and superscription?” (Mat 22:20). And if we cannot show Him His own image, He will reject us.

3. There is *secret corruption within*, which will never be found out but by searching. There are in the hearts (as Austin⁹ said) hidden pollutions. When Pharaoh’s steward accused Joseph’s brethren of having the cup, they durst have sworn they had not the cup in their sack (Gen 44:1-12). Little doth a man know what atheism, pride, and uncleanness is in his heart till he searcheth.

4. *The great advantage will accrue to us*. The benefit is great, whichever way things turn. If upon examination we find that we have not grace in truth, then the mistake is discovered, and the danger prevented. If we find that we have grace, we may take the comfort of it. How glad was he that had “found the pearl of great price” (Mat 13:45-46)? He that upon search finds that he hath but the minimum, the least degree of grace, is like one that hath found his box of evidences; he is heir to all the promises, and in a state of salvation.

And that we may go on the more successfully in this work, let us desire God to help us to find out our hearts. “That which I see not teach thou me” (Job 34:32). Lord, take off the veil; show me my heart; let me not perish through mistake, or go to hell with hope of heaven! ❧

From *Heaven Taken by Storm*.



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⁹ **Austin or Augustine of Hippo** (354-430); early church theologian born in Tagaste, North Africa. Known by many as the father of orthodox theology; taught the depravity of man and the grace of God in salvation.