

Introduction

Today, I'm going to preach about something that's vital to us all, so much so that Socrates said all other pursuits are **"laughable"** without it. The forecourt of the ancient Greek temple in Delphi contained 147 inscribed maxims, the most famous of which is this, **"Know thyself."** That's the something that's vital to us all. It's self-knowledge. We need to know ourselves. Let's look at our text and see what that's about.

Knowing Ourselves

The church at Corinth, which Paul himself founded, was a troubled one. It had a host of problems, one of which was a group of Christians who disliked and disparaged Paul. They claimed he was hypocritical and weak, and not an approved apostle of Jesus.

It was a serious charge that he needed to address, which he did. He stated in verse 6 that he could give his critics evidence of his apostleship. But according to verse 7, he prayed to God instead that they would **"do no wrong,"** that is, stop thinking and behaving badly toward him. He also prayed that they would **"do what is right,"** that is, start thinking and behaving rightly toward him.

But they'd have to do something else first, in verse 5. Paul urged his critics to **"see if you are in the faith."** He then asked them a question, **"do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?"** Do you get what he was telling them? The problem wasn't him. It was them. They weren't **"in the faith"** as they should be. Jesus wasn't **"in"** them as He should be. They were spiritually immature, in other words, and needed to **"see"** or **"recognize"** that about themselves, to use Paul's words in verse 5.

Those words, **"see"** and **"recognize,"** are about **"self-knowledge,"** which makes our text timeless. I say that because we need self-knowledge as much as Paul's critics did. We need to know ourselves. To know ourselves means something specific. We *affirm* what is the case

about us. That is, we *recognize* and *admit* what is true or so about us.

Self-knowledge goes to various aspects of us: our ideas or beliefs, our feelings, our reactive behaviors or bodily habits, our chosen behaviors, our body language, our tones of voice, and most importantly in verse 5, our standing with Jesus. We should know ourselves when it comes to those and other aspects of us.

About 30 years ago, for instance, I gradually came to recognize and admit something that was so about me. I had a Westernized worldview. I had allowed certain un-Biblical cultural ideas to shape what I believed about money, sports, the "**Sabbath Day**," and other important issues. Or several weeks ago, one person said to another person about me, "**He was a great baseball player.**" I recognize and admit what is so about me. I was a good baseball player, not a great one, and said that to the two people with whom I was conversing.

That illustrates what it means to know ourselves. We affirm what is the case about us. We recognize and admit what is true or so about us.

Blind Spots

The problem is that many of us don't truly know ourselves. We have what psychologists call "**blind spots.**" We don't see some of the important things that are true or so about us. We're oblivious to some of the important positive and negative traits we have. For our purposes today, I'm going to focus on the negative traits we have.

We assume in that regard that we know ourselves better than anyone else does. But that isn't always so. There's an idiom we use, "**That's like the pot calling the kettle black.**" It's usually directed to a person who has a blind spot about something. Everyone sees it but him or her. I knew a Christian, a leader in her church, who was one of the most self-righteous persons I've ever known. She had relational problems almost everywhere she went as a result – home, church, work, PTA – you name it. She was constantly at odds with people. I once talked with her about that and shared the Bob Principle, "**When Bob has a problem**

with everyone, the problem is usually Bob.” She picked up on the word **“usually”** and claimed she was one of the exceptions. The problem wasn't her. It was everyone else around her instead.

In reality though, it wasn't. She was self-righteous and everyone saw it but her. She was blind to the obvious about her.

And sometimes so are we – especially when it comes to our non-verbal communications. I knew a well-intentioned Christian who was oblivious to the body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice with which she often spoke. They conveyed a critical or even angry spirit to which people reacted defensively. Everyone saw it but her. The lesson is that since we can't usually observe our non-verbal communications, we're often unaware of them.

Anyway, the bottom line is this. Many if not most of us have blind spots. We don't see some of the undesirable and sinful traits we have.

The Reason for Blind Spots

There is a primary reason we have blind spots. It's usually because we want to have them. In an article she wrote titled *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, psychological scientist Erika Carlson identifies what she argues is the main obstacle to self-knowledge. It's the motivation to see ourselves in a desirable way. In order to *ward off negative feelings* or to *boost self-esteem*, we often overestimate our virtuous qualities, and/or underestimate our vice-like qualities. I think she's right. I, at least, have done both of those things.

There's a word we give to that, to avoiding the truth about us. It's **“denial.”** Denial is an ability we have that's strongly related to our will. We will to have certain virtuous qualities that we don't have. Or we will not to have certain vice-like qualities that we do have. So, for our personality and life to proceed with joy and peace, our mind accepts what is not true – that we have the virtuous qualities. Or it rejects what is true – that we have the vice-like qualities. It does so by devising what are called **“sham”** truths, fabrications that are compatible with the

falsehoods about us that we want to maintain.

Let's go back to the self-righteous person I mentioned earlier. She did realize that she had far more relational problems than most do. But she was able to explain it away. She's a special kind of humanity. She's so spiritually advanced and deep, she said, that others are alienated and even guilty by it. And that's why they reject her.

She's a classic case of denial. She knows self-righteousness is a vile sin. Her personality and life, therefore, would break down to one degree or another if she affirmed she was that. So, she doesn't. Her mind devises a "**sham truth**" instead, that she's a special kind of humanity. That fabrication is compatible with the falsehood about her that she wants to maintain, "**I'm not self-righteous.**" We call this mental component of denial "**rationalization,**" which is the primary cause of our blind spots.

Why We Need to Know Ourselves

Now, it's urgent that you and I remove those blind spots if we have any. It's urgent that we know ourselves, and here's why.

According to the Association for Psychological Science, "**blind spots in self-knowledge can have negative consequences, such as poor decision-making, poor academic achievement, emotional and interpersonal problems, and lower life satisfaction.**" Those four negative consequences of blind spots imply four positive consequences of self-knowledge: good decision-making, good academic achievement, emotional and interpersonal stability, and high life satisfaction.

But there's another positive consequence. It's personal growth. Growth by definition means change from bad to good or good to better. As we all know though, we change only when we know we need to. And the only way we can know we need to is to affirm (recognize and admit) our undesirable and sinful traits. Knowing ourselves, in other words, is the very first step in personal growth.

That includes growth into Christlikeness. Please grasp something.

Becoming like Jesus doesn't lie in the direction of denial. It's lies in the direction of self-knowledge instead, which is the first step in it. But self-knowledge is a continuing life-long step as well. Listen to the insightful words of Saint Teresa of Avila. Referring to spiritual growth, she wrote, **"This path of self-knowledge must never be abandoned, nor is there on this journey a soul so much a giant that it has no need to return often to the stage of an infant and a suckling."**

How to Know Ourselves

There's no doubt about it. We need to know ourselves and in verse 5 of our text, Paul tells us how to do that. Notice the language he used there: **"test yourselves"** and **"examine yourselves,"** which mean the same thing. He turned the table on his critics. He was saying, **"You've been examining me, but what you should have been doing was examining yourselves."** His critics needed to examine themselves – and so do we. That's how we know ourselves. There are various ways to examine ourselves, four of which, in my view, are primary.

First, deliberate over the comments of others about us. Socrates developed a method called **"Socratic dialogue."** In it, we talk with one we trust and invite him or her to communicate what he or she perceives about us, good and bad. People often see things about us, good and bad, that we don't see. And when they reveal those things to us, whether we solicited that or not, we need to think about them and determine if they're true. Some years ago, a person told me, **"You're too d _ _ _n cheap."** I was offended at first but later deliberated on her comment and realized it was true. I was too cheap.

Second, deliberate over what we think, feel, say, or do in our unguarded moments. What we think, feel, say, or do in our unguarded moments, more than anything else, reflects what we truly are. So, we analyze that and determine what it says about us. I once learned that a high school classmate of mine had succeeded in business – had become a millionaire. My first thought was I wished he hadn't. I quickly analyzed

that spontaneous thought and determined what it meant. I was a self-absorbed jealous person. So I repented and have sought not to be.

Third, apply the fundamental truths of human life to us. We stack ourselves up against those truths and infer what doing so says about us. Consider one that I've shared before. Attention is the first response of love. Years ago, I applied that fundamental truth to me. **Truth** – Attention is the first response of love. **My practice** – I frequently don't listen attentively when my wife speaks. **Inference** – I don't love my wife as I should. So, I repented and began listening attentively.

Fourth, practice the spiritual discipline of “**examen.**” We get alone with God and concentrate on His nearness. We meditate on His closeness to us. We then ask Him specifically to reveal to us what we don't know about us that He wants us to know. Having done that, we then become “**all ears**” as we say it to the still small voice of the Holy Spirit.

So there you have it, four ways we can examine ourselves in order to know ourselves. I would caution you though. Examining ourselves can destroy us if we aren't ready for it. So be ready for it. Learn and constantly keep in mind the measureless love and mercy God has for us.

Conclusion

That then is what we should do – examine ourselves in order to know ourselves. But if we're like most people, we won't. Bishop J. Fulton Sheen explained why, “**Most of us do not like to look inside ourselves for the same reason we don't like to open a letter that has bad news.**” He was right. We don't like bad news, especially if it's about us. So, we don't examine and thus know ourselves.

But we must. John Calvin opened his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, one of the most famous treatises in Christian history, with these words, and I leave you with them: “**The knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also as it were, leads us by the hand to Him.**” That alone is reason enough. Know thyself.