

"Know Thyself"
Psalm 139:23-24; Luke 11:37-44

INTRODUCTION

I'd like to begin by telling you about a professing Christian I know, not from our church. This man is the most caustic, cutting, and critical person that I know. He is quick to see the worst in people and just as quick to express it. The problem is that he doesn't know this about himself. He doesn't recognize this hurtful way that's in him. If you asked him if he is a hypercritical or even critical person, he'd say "no."

But why is that? Why doesn't he know how he is? And what about us? Do we know how we really are? Do we recognize the hurtful ways that are in us? If we don't, why don't we?

The celebrated Greek philosopher, Socrates, spoke a famous dictum. He said, "*Know thyself*" and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to the passages I read, Psalm 139:23-24 and Luke 11:37-44.

ANY HURTFUL WAY IN ME

Let's start with Psalm 139:24 and the words, "*any hurtful way in me.*" Those words refer to anything that we habitually are, say, or do that is harmful to God, others, or us. It refers to the evil that is in our persons and lives.

Notice who wrote this Psalm. David did. Also remember what God called him, "*a man after My own heart.*" That teaches us that even long established disciples of Jesus can have hurtful ways in them.

I had been a follower of Jesus for decades when I realized something. I rejoiced in the unrighteousness of others. If someone failed or sinned, I sometimes felt a tinge of satisfaction that they did. That's because their failure or sin made me feel better about myself. That "hurtful way" was in me for years after I decided to follow Jesus.

Which makes me wonder. What hurtful ways are in me – and you – right now? Is it seeking the praise of others, anger, a hypercritical spirit, a hypersensitive spirit, materialism, gossiping, lusting, duplicity, jealousy, unforgiveness, or more.

JESUS AND THE PHARISEES

Many people don't seem to know the answer to that. They don't seem to know the hurtful ways that are in them. The Pharisees, in Luke 11, are a case in point.

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Jesus' day. They controlled the local centers of teaching and worship, the synagogues. They were also the acknowledged experts in the Old Testament law.

According to verse 37, one such Pharisee invites Jesus and other Pharisees to his home for lunch. Jesus accepts and when He gets there, eats without ceremonially washing first. The Old Testament did not require this washing but the Pharisees' oral tradition did. It was so significant to them that his host is surprised when Jesus doesn't do it.

Jesus then responds to his surprise by denouncing the Pharisees. Notice what He tells them in verses 39-44. Verse 39-40: You're clean on the outside, physically, but dirty on the inside, spiritually. Verse 41: You're uncharitable. Verse 42: You do insignificant things like tithing herbs but utterly disregard significant things like justice and love. Verse 43: You vainly play to an audience of many, seeking people's praise. And finally, verse 44: People who walk on a concealed tomb are ceremonially unclean and don't know it. In the same way, people who follow you are morally unclean and don't know it.

DENIAL

Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees is so instructive. They thought that they were the most righteous of all people. But He tells them that that they were the least righteous. They were in a state of denial in other words and so are many of us.

All of you know what denial is. It's rejecting what is the case on one hand or affirming what is not the case on the other. Several weeks ago, a Browns fan told me that they aren't really that bad. That is denial, specifically, rejecting what is the case. Yes, the Browns are really that bad and I say that as a fan of theirs.

The denial I'm discussing now though is about us. We deny the hurtful ways or evils that are in us. We reject what is the case, that they are in us. Or we affirm what is not the case, that they aren't in us. We are in denial, in other words, just like the Pharisees were.

I had a friend growing up who was lazy as a boy and still is as a man. He's a lethargic worker who gives far less than 100% effort 100% of the time. I know I'd never hire him. Anyway, he told me one time that he applied for a job and then declared, "*I'd get it if they knew what a good worker I am.*" That is a classic case of denial.

There's a reason that we deny the hurtful ways that are in us. It's because we can't bear knowing we're that way. Dallas Willard explains it well in his book *Renovation of the Heart*. Denial is an ability we have that is inseparable from our will. Our will cannot psychologically sustain itself for very long contrary to what it clearly acknowledges to be true. So, in order for our life to proceed, it rejects what is true. It denies or evades it.

Take the two people that I've already mentioned. Suppose that the professing Christian acknowledges that he's hypercritical. Or suppose that my friend acknowledges that he's lethargic and lazy. Their personality and life would eventually break down to some degree if they did. So, the force of denial comes into play. They have the capacity to deny what is true, and in order for their life to proceed, do just that.

The mind, of course, is actively involved denial. Its role is to devise a so-called "truth" that is compatible with the falsehood about ourselves that we're maintaining. The Pharisees excelled at doing just that. They maintained the falsehood that they were righteous by simply redefining what righteousness means. Jesus tells us all about that in Matthew 5:20-48. They were sexually impure, for instance, because they looked lustfully at women. So, according to verse 27, they just redefined sexual purity as something they did, not committing adultery. We're sexually pure, they said, because we don't commit adultery. That illustrates the mind's part in denial. It devises "truths" that are

compatible with the falsehoods about ourselves that we're maintaining.

Take that hypercritical Christian. He has totally justified this evil that's in him. God gives some the gift of mercy and others the gift of prophecy, he says. He has the gift of prophecy and that's why he's always so "point blank honest" with people. He'd be violating his God-given gift in fact if he wasn't. Do you see what his mind did? It devised a "truth" that's compatible with the falsehood that he isn't hypercritical.

We call that "rationalization." Human beings have an almost infinite capacity to rationalize, which is the mental component of denial.

So that's one thing that Jesus' denunciation of the Pharisees teaches us. All of us are up against a great world-historical force, denial.

KNOW OURSELVES

There's a second thing that it teaches us. All of us need to overcome this force and know ourselves.

Let me ask you a question that some have asked me. Why was Jesus so hard on the Pharisees? With other sinners, like Zacchaeus and the Samaritan woman at the well, He spoke in a way that seems gentle and warm. But with the Pharisees, He spoke in a way that seems pitiless and harsh. Why was that?

It was because their denial was so deep. They were so strongly self-defended that approaching them as He did was the only way that Jesus could help them. They needed to know themselves. They needed to know the hurtful ways that were in them. And this was the best and, really, the only way that Jesus could assist them in doing that.

The Pharisees needed to know themselves and as Socrates said it, so do we. We need to know what is the case about us. We need to understand and admit the hurtful ways that are in us.

When I say "need to," I mean that literally. We talk all the time around here about Christian spiritual formation, about becoming like Jesus. That kind of formation, believe me, does not lie in the direction of denial. Knowing ourselves, in fact, is the very first and necessary step

to it. That's because the only way that anyone will change is to know that they need to. And the only way that they can know that they need to is to know themselves, to know the hurtful ways that are in them. That is true for alcoholics becoming dry. It's just as true for disciples becoming like Jesus.

For decades after deciding to follow Jesus, I denied that I rejoiced in the unrighteousness of others. Consequently, for decades, I rejoiced in the unrighteousness of others. But I finally quit denying it and acknowledged it instead. That was the first step in a process of spiritual formation that led me to where I am now. The unrighteousness of others now saddens and even grieves me.

Do you want to become like Jesus? If so, there's something that you have to do. Know thyself.

EXAMINE OURSELVES

There's only one way to do that and Paul tells us what that is in 1 Corinthians 11:28 and 2 Corinthians 13:5. We must examine ourselves. We know ourselves by examining ourselves. That's what Jesus was trying to get the Pharisees to do. That's what we need to do as well.

As Psalm 139 makes clear, examining ourselves is a joint search. It is a divinely led introspection. In verses 1-6, David writes that God knows literally everything that there is to know about us. Then, in verses 23 and 24, he invites God to jointly search his person and life with him, to reveal what's in him. We should do the same.

You can devise your own methodology for doing that. But here's a suggestion in that regard. We get alone with God and do six things.

First, verbalize verses 23 and 24. Either recite them out loud from memory or read them out loud from the Bible.

Second, make those verses our own personal prayer. Actually ask God to do what we just recited or read - to search out and reveal what's in us.

Third, concentrate on God's nearness. Take several moments and

acknowledge that He isn't way out there someplace, in heaven, but right here, all around and in us.

Fourth, meditate on a Bible passage that reveals what God wants from us. We might use, for instance, Romans 12:9-21; 1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Galatians 5:19-24; Ephesians 4:25-5:5; Colossians 3:5-21; or 1 Peter 3:1-12. Read the passage. Then go over all the things it says that should and should not be part of our person and life.

Fifth, reflect on things that can reveal what's in us. One is the critical comments of others. Others often see things about us that we don't see. A second is the things that we say and do. The Bible teaches that our outer acts come from, and thus reveal, our inner condition. A third thing is our thoughts and feelings. Thoughts and feelings are actually discernible parts of our inner condition. Those three things can reveal what's in us. So we reflect on them to determine if they do.

Sixth and finally, be "all ears" to the still small voice of God. That voice comes to us from and through our mental and emotional processes. So enter into a time of silence and be attentive to it. Listen carefully for anything about us that God may say to us.

We should examine ourselves like this periodically. Becoming like Jesus requires it. That because examining ourselves is the only way to know ourselves. I would caution you though. Knowing ourselves can destroy us if we're not ready for it. So, be ready for it. Constantly keep in mind the measureless love and mercy that God has for us.

CONCLUSION

What I've preached about today, most people aren't going to do. As bishop J. Fulton Sheen said it, *"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's right. We don't like examining ourselves but I challenge you. Have the courage to do it. Make it a regular part of your life. To examine thyself is to know thyself and to know thyself is the first step in becoming like Him.