

Introduction

"The unexamined life is not worth living." Can someone tell me who said that? The 5th century BC Greek philosopher Socrates said it - at his heresy trial. The Athenian democracy put Socrates on trial for undermining state religion and corrupting the young. During that trial, he pointed out that he was totally committed to truth about everything, including himself. Referring to self-knowledge, he then declared to the jury, **"The unexamined life is not worth living."**

Socrates was right about that, which raises a question. Are you examining your life so that you know yourself? I hope so because someone far more knowledgeable than Socrates tells us to do just that. I'm talking about Paul in the text I read earlier, 1 Corinthians 11:27-32.

Examine Ourselves

Verses 27-32 are part of Paul's explanation of the Lord's Supper, what we call communion.

In verse 27, he talks about eating the bread and drinking the cup **"in an unworthy manner."** Commentators disagree as to what that means. I think it means taking communion with "unrepented of" sins in our lives. A Christian named James, who doesn't attend here, was jealous of a person in his church and habitually bad-mouthed him to others because he was, without remorse. His feelings toward and actions against that person made him unworthy to partake of the Lord's Supper. Unrepented of sins do that same to us - make us unworthy.

The last line in verse 27 and verses 29-30 reveal the consequences of people eating and drinking in an unworthy manner. They're **"guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord."** Their doing so profanes the death of Jesus on the cross in other words. It denigrates it. God, as a result brings judgment on them. He brings spiritual or even physical adversity into their lives, commensurate with the unrepented of sin. He does so, according to verse 32, to discipline not destroy them.

Because that's the case, Paul calls us to examine ourselves in verse 28 before we eat the bread and drink the cup. Our implied purpose in doing so is to identify any of our sins that need dealt with. Paul comments further on examining ourselves in verses 31. Notice the opening phrase, "**but if we judged ourselves.**" William Barclay's translation of that phrase is a good one, "**but if we truly discerned what we are like.**" You and I, according to Paul here, need to do that on a systematic basis. We need to examine ourselves in order to discern what we're truly like. There's an old aphorism attributed to six different Greek sages, including Socrates, "**Know thyself.**" Well, that's essentially what Paul's saying here in verses 28 and 31, "**Know thyself.**"

I can't impress upon you enough the importance of self-knowledge. People in all generations have understood what a treasure it is, including Christians. Saint Teresa of Avila, for instance, wrote these words 450 years ago: "**This path of self-knowledge must never be abandoned. Self-knowledge and the thought of one's sins is the bread with which all palates must be fed no matter how delicate they may be; they cannot be sustained without this bread.**"

Paul, Socrates, and Teresa valued self-knowledge and so should we - so much so that we examine ourselves to discern what we're truly like.

But what is it about ourselves that we should examine? It's two things, both of which I want to explain.

Examine Our Competence

First, we should examine our competence. Competence refers to our abilities, meaning, our intelligence and talents.

I once overheard a mother tell her seven year-old gymnast, "**You can do whatever you set your mind to do!**" Where did she get that idea? One world-renowned televangelist continually contends, "**If you can dream it, you can do it.**" Then there's an elementary school sign I saw that quoted Walt Disney, "**You can achieve all your dreams if you have the courage to pursue them.**" Some people Christianize that

concept by misinterpreting and quoting Philippians 4:13, **“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”** What we have here is the idea that we can do anything if we’re committed enough to doing it. That idea is so frequently modeled and taught in our current culture that people, without even thinking about it, equate it with reality.

But it isn’t reality. There are many things that all of can’t do no matter how hard we try. Certainly dreaming something, envisioning it, is the first step in achieving it. But we’ll achieve it only if we’re competent enough, only if we have the abilities it requires of us.

Thus, we must examine our competence so that we know what our abilities are. The rule in that regard is this. When it comes to competence, we need to grow in our areas of giftedness. We should move out of our comfort zones but not our gift zones. We should develop and use abilities, the gifts, we do have, and not the ones we don’t have.

But many people don’t. Corporate executive Cloyce Box said it this way: **“Stay with the things that you can do the best. Too many people waste time trying to do things that they can’t do.”** He was right. So many people waste time, effort, and money trying to develop and use abilities, gifts, they think they have but don’t.

According to sociologist Tony Campolo, that’s what happens in the inner city. Well-intentioned but misguided people who work with young people there tell them if they can dream it, they can do it. That in turn compels them to pursue goals that they don’t have abilities to achieve, like play in the NBA, be a surgeon, be an attorney, and so on.

The lesson is this. We need to know what our abilities are and are not and grow in our areas of giftedness or strength.

I had a friend at Malone College who wanted to be a pastor and tried but shouldn’t have. I say that because he didn’t have the skills that even surviving as a pastor requires. He went to four years of college and three years of seminary and then took his first church, from which he was fired three years later. At that point, he took inventory of himself and realized he didn’t have what it takes to be a pastor. But he did have

what it takes to be an administrator and that's what he's doing now. He has an administrative position with a county agency that he loves and does well.

Do what my friend eventually did. Examine your competence. Know your abilities and grow in your areas of giftedness or strength.

Examine Our Character

There's a second thing that we should examine – our character. That's the thrust of verses 28 and 31. Paul wants us to examine our character and know what our sins are.

That shows us how we need to grow with regard to our character. Remember what I said. When it comes to our competence, we need to grow in our areas of strength. But when it comes to our character, we need to grow in our areas of weakness.

Renowned historian and social critic Thomas Carlyle shared a profound insight about just that, "**The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none.**" That's so true. Not knowing our sins and faults will certainly diminish our lives and possibly even destroy them. The fact is that our problems in life are often the result of personal sins or faults of which we aren't even aware.

The most destructive person I've ever known, for instance, was a Christian. Her critical and self-righteous attitudes and behaviors alienated everyone around her in every social context – family, brothers and sisters in Christ, co-workers, neighbors, and more. Almost everyone she knew eventually came to break off or avoid relationship with her. But the problem, she thought, was always them not her. She saw herself as a special kind of humanity - so exceptionally spiritual and holy that ordinary people just couldn't handle it. She never grasped what King David called "the hurtful ways" that were in her.

She illustrates that we often go through the adversity we go through because we're stubborn, lethargic, timid, proud, self-righteous, testy, rigid, lustful, hateful, or any other sin or fault. And we'll quit going

through it when the Holy Spirit is able to change what's wrong with us. But He isn't able to change what's wrong with us until we examine our character and know what that is. Listen to the first step in AA's Twelve Step Program, "**We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.**" That step rightly recognizes that people will never change until they admit they need to. But they can't admit that unless they know it. And they can't know it unless they examine their character. The process then is this. Step #1 – examine our character. Step #2 – know our sins and faults. Step #3 – admit our sins and faults. And step #4 – do whatever is necessary to change.

Those then are the two things about ourselves that we should examine. We should examine our competence and grow in our strengths. We should also examine our character and grow in our are weaknesses.

How to Examine Ourselves

But how do we do that? How do we examine ourselves as a practical matter? It's by doing four things.

First, deliberate over the comments of others about us, whether we solicited them or not. Socrates himself developed what is called "Socratic dialogue." In this methodology, we talk with someone 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 ourselves don't see. And when they reveal those things to us, we need to think about and consider whether or not they're true. A husband got mad at his wife and told her she was narcissistic. She got mad right back but later reflected on what he said and realized he was right.

There's a second thing we do to examine ourselves. Deliberate over what we think, feel, and do in our unguarded moments. What we think, feel, and 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 felt a tinge of satisfaction years ago when I heard that Jimmy Swaggart had been caught with a prostitute. It made me feel better

about myself that he had. I began reflecting on that and recognized what it meant. Contrary to 1 Corinthians 13:6, I rejoiced in his unrighteousness and thus, didn't love him.

There's a third thing we do to examine ourselves. Apply the fundamental principles and truths of human life to us. Certain principles and truths comprise the substance of human life. So we stack ourselves up against them and infer what doing so says about us. Referring to the destructive Christian I mentioned earlier, I shared with her what is called "The Bob Principle." It goes like this: **"When Bob has a problem with everyone, Bob is probably the problem."** That is a fundamental truth of human life and I asked her to apply it to her. She would have seen if she had that the problem wasn't everyone. The problem was her. Hurting people hurt people. Quarrels depend on attitudes more than subject matter. Attention is the first response of love. Birds of a feather flock together. We are paid in our own coin. Those are just a few of the many principles and truths we can use to identify what we are.

Fourth and finally, practice what is called "examen." In examen, we invite the Lord to search our hearts to the depths. We get alone with Him and in the silence ask Him to help us see ourselves as we really are, good and bad. Quaker author Richard Foster explains this practice in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*.

Conclusion

Those then are the four things we need to do and I'd say this in closing. They help us see our blind spots. People who don't examine themselves have blind spots. They're oblivious to many of the strengths and weaknesses of their competence and character. That in turn sabotages their lives in every respect. Consequently, and I quote CEO John Stayer, **"If you want to keep from becoming your own worst enemy, you have to look at yourself realistically."** Paul agrees in verses 28 and 31. He commands us, **"Look at yourself realistically."** Or as Socrates would say it, **"Make your life an examined one."**