

Examine Yourself

In the longest passage about the Lord's Supper is the line, "Therefore, whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But, let a man examine himself and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." (1 Corinthians 11:27 – 28)

This can sound scary. Examine myself? Those who participate in an unworthy manner are guilty of the body and blood of the Lord? What does that mean? Where's the line between worthy and unworthy? The context doesn't help. No details or explanations are given.

So, I set about to figure that out. I looked up all 91 passages that contained the Greek word that is translated, examine. In the passages that will appear on the screen and in your handout, the word that is translated from the same Greek word is in italics, because, often, different English words are used. Overall, it turns out that it should not be that scary. It is not so much an examination, but deciding what you think about yourself. How do you see yourself? The connection to the Lord's Supper is simply asking you to be realistic about yourself, be honest with yourself, then go ahead and participate.

Of course, we could make a list of all the things we wish we did better, but that is a depressing way to approach life. Think about when you were in school. When you got a test back, the score was written as the percentage you got right, not the percentage you got wrong. If the teacher handed back the chemistry tests, and at the top is said 94%, would you be bummed out over the six points you got wrong? Certainly, the teacher wants you to go over the things you missed so those problem areas won't trip you up later, but it is not a terrible task. You already got your 'A.' You should be pretty happy, and fixing the few things you missed is no big deal.

So, this morning, we will look at the wide range of things that are on the test. Of course, we don't want to fall into the problem expressed in Galatians 6:3 – 4, "For if anyone thinks himself to be something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. But let each one *examine* his own work, and then he will have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another." See, the point is to rejoice, not to get depressed. And, it's about you doing what you do, not how you compare to others. On top of that, through all of the passages we will look at this morning, notice something very important: God thinks we are capable. We can assess ourselves. And God thinks that this should be a positive experience, counting what you did right.

I categorized the passages about how to evaluate yourself into four areas, the first being simplicity. You should feel good about yourself if you keep it simple.

In the paragraph in which Paul compares the church to a body composed of many different parts, he wrote, in 1 Corinthians 12:22 – 23, "Those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. And those members of the body which we *think* to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor." His point is that all the parts work together; they can't make it on their own. And, the parts of our bodies we keep covered up, we tend to consider really important. So, when I examine myself, do I work in harmony with the other parts, even though we are all different? Are all my friends just like me, or do outsiders wonder how we could all be family. I mean, you don't even look like each other. Am I one of those parts that no one sees? That's a good thing, a plus point on the test.

Or 1 Corinthians 3:18, "Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you *thinks himself* to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise." If the outside world thinks of you as one of those great thinkers, that's a problem. The gospel should be so simple

that ordinary working people think it's easy, that it makes sense. Use your mental ability to find the simplest way to introduce Jesus. If outsiders think, "Why didn't I think of that?" then you are on the right path. I know a man who thinks little of himself in the kingdom, and neither does his wife, because he can't call to mind just the right Scripture at just the right time. But he is honest and hardworking and kind, so when he makes a simple statement about the gospel, people know that it is sincere and sensible. He should mark that one a plus, not a red mark.

Some church people think they should run things because they have the knowledge. But Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 8:2, "If anyone *thinks* that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know." The context surrounding this chapter is about people in the early church who wanted to make grand generalizations, to answer questions before they became questions. They started with the way they wanted to see things done, and made them into rules so everyone would be just like them. The problem with rules is that we don't foresee the future very well. We want the comfort of having everything lined out in advance, not considering that there may be other circumstances that make my rule silly. Rather, evaluate each situation as it arises, in its own context. If you find yourself trying to make a one-size-fits-all rule, that's a minus. If you use your wisdom to figure out what to do as each situation develops, that's a plus.

And, 1 Corinthians 10:12, "Therefore, let him who *thinks* he stands take heed lest he fall." Various groups of Christians through the centuries have tended to follow the guy with the answers – or at least he thought he had the answers. But, looking back, he was almost laughable he was so far wrong. If you know that you don't have the answers, but are absolutely confident that the Spirit of God that dwells in you will help you choose well, that's a plus.

And that's my transition to the second area in which we should examine ourselves, Christ in you. You can be simple and successful because of the Spirit who is given to every faithful person as a helper and remodeling contractor. Like 2 Corinthians 13:5, "Examine yourselves [more accurately, "Look at the evidence about yourself.]" as to whether you are in the faith. *Test* yourselves [more accurately, "How do you see yourself?"]. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you? – unless indeed you are disqualified."

Most church-going people examine themselves and compare themselves to an artificial standard. Perhaps they have been told that they are OK – or not OK. Many make up their own "good enough" standard. The New Testament says that you know that God approves of you when you see the Holy Spirit working in or through you. But what does that mean? Here are the benchmarks of self-examination that are actually in the New Testament.

Romans 8:13 says that you know that the Spirit is hard at work in you when you overcome what Paul calls "the deeds of the body," bad habits that you tried and tried to defeat but couldn't. Then, it just happened. It doesn't have to be something dramatic like drug or alcohol addiction. It could be anger management, the development of patience, suddenly making sense of the Scriptures, and many other things you can look up under "works of the Spirit" on the web site.

1 John 4:12 – 13 goes a step further, "If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been made consistent in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit." Love – doing what is best for the other person regardless of the effect on me. The world does not have it. The ability to love as God loves is one of the jobs of the Spirit (Romans 5:5). That is why outsiders have so much trouble being selfless – no Spirit. And the longer you are a Christian, the harder it gets to understand how people can be so self-centered.

1 John 3:23 – 24, “And this is His commandment, that we should believe on the name of His Son, Jesus, the Christ, and love one another, as He gave us commandment. Now he who keeps His commandments abides in Him and He in him. By this we know that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.”

This is how we are to examine ourselves. Do we love one another? Do we think about the needs of the others in the group (one-anothering) all the time, as we go through our daily lives? Do we see opportunities for them? Sale prices on things we know they have been thinking of buying? Job openings? Fun, wholesome, and cheap things to do? One of the main reasons Christians get together is to get into each other’s lives, to share successes and comfort those having problems. Armed with those connections, we see opportunities for the others as we go about our normal activities.

Seeing the Spirit working in ourselves is sometimes difficult. We don’t want to seem arrogant. I think that the problem is that we see ourselves every day, and we tend to forget that what we see today is not what has always been. It’s like when someone comes to visit, like a relative you see a few times a year, and says, “Wow. Your kids have really grown.” And you’re thinking, “Really? They look about like they did 10 minutes ago.” So, how can we have this confidence that the Spirit works in me, that I am growing, so that I can examine myself and say, “Yes, the Spirit is working in me, so God thinks I am OK”? My suggestion is that we should do this for each other. When we get together, we need to tell one another what we see, how I can see the Spirit working in you. When someone else can see it, it means a lot more than when you decide such a thing about yourself, which is another good reason for getting together, to encourage and to be encouraged by people who are just as ragged as you are. And, such a practice gets us outside of ourselves as we build up the others, which, in itself, is a work of the Spirit. And, if you want a convenient list of what promises God has made about our growth, and a list of the promised works of the Spirit, check out our web site, ThomasTheologyHub.org, and search on Promises or Indwelling Spirit.

My third area in which we examine ourselves – Seeking good. One of the ways in which we examine ourselves is asking ourselves, “Am I seeking that which is good?” The question is, “What is good?”

Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:8 – 10, “For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the light is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), *finding out* what is acceptable to the Lord.” The big point there is, “Finding out.” It’s not all or nothing. Our examination is based on finding out, which is one of the jobs of the Spirit that is given to all the faithful, to help us figure that out.

The world is full of messed up people, all trying to find their way. Except for a very few mentally unbalanced people, everyone is seeking what is good – for themselves. Many people think they seek what is good by making more money, or by relieving their stress through drugs or alcohol, or by filling their lives with entertainment, or achievement or a host of other possibilities. Very many people reject the idea of seeking what is “acceptable to the Lord” because they don’t think it will make them happy. On the contrary, they think Christianity will suck all the joy out of their lives. Over the centuries, the church has done a very bad job of presenting joy. Our task, our examination of ourselves is, partly, “Am I seeking good stuff and, just as importantly, is that good stuff making me happy?” As Paul wrote in Philippians 1:9 – 10, “And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may *approve* the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ.”

Again, it's a growth thing, "that you may abound still more and more."

So, when examining yourself, ask the question, "Am I sorting through the many options and finding what is actually good?" As Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 5:21, "*Test* all things; hold fast to what is good." We should be experimenting – testing all things. Then, keep the good stuff. Part of a successful self-examination is, "Am I seeking or am I stuck in a rut?" I'm not saying that you need to try out everything the world offers. You would probably die within a year. Some of that stuff out there is just plain dumb. But, we should be checking things out – with reasonableness and caution. If we haven't changed in years, we aren't testing the limits of how joyful life can be.

And this joy is not just for me. Consider Romans 12:2, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may *prove* what is the good and acceptable and consistent will of God."

When European explorers of the 16th through the 19th century went out to discover strange new lands, they didn't keep it to themselves. They overthrew old ideas and opened up whole new ways of thinking. The generally accepted flat-earth point of view, at which we laugh today, was irrational. It generated more questions than answers. Why don't the oceans drain out over the edge? What if you do get to the edge? What happens if you fall off? To where would you fall? What holds the whole thing up? Explorers in Africa and in the Americas searched for fabulous societies of unimaginable wealth. But they found only poverty and disease.

We are the explorers of a strange new land, in search of joy and peace and meaning for life. We, like those who searched Africa and the Americas, are blowing up old, inconsistent, sometimes ridiculous theories about life and bringing in reality. We prove what is good and acceptable and consistent.

That's the test. Are we exploring, bringing light to the self-defeating objectives of the world? Or, as the legalistic, authority-driven church, are we looking for the right practices, the right leaders, and the right doctrines so that we can stop exploring and settle back into nothingness. Sounds more like Buddhism to me. In every age, from the time of the apostles all the way to the end of the universe, we will be seeking and growing. Every era has its laughable inconsistencies. We fix some of the problems of the past and introduce whole new ones. The point is not that we get it just right, but that we are growing, searching, and hanging on to the good stuff. When we examine ourselves, we need to see exploring and growing.

Many people hear that line about examining themselves and set out finding all the things they have done wrong. No, it's about seeking good, hanging on to what you find, and demonstrating that the good you found is real, leading to joy and peace. Most churches, and the world in general, teach fear of failure. That's wrong. The gospel, the good news is that we have a confident expectation of success. We need to be asking the question, "Am I the explorer or the one stuck in the way it has always been?" Explorers rarely find El Dorado. But they do find the truth, and that is worth more than that mythological gold.

This takes me to my fourth area of examining ourselves, that we need to be looking forward, beyond the need of the moment.

Hebrews 12:10 – 11, "For indeed they [parents] for a few days disciplined us as *seemed* best to them, but He [God] for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness. Now no discipline seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."

First, some definitions. Discipline and punishment are very different, although children often cannot tell them apart. However, discipline looks forward; punishment looks backward. Discipline is training for the future; punishment is a penalty for the past.

Although Paul compares this discipline with that of parents for their children – to make the point that God is a good parent, not a tyrant – we might make the comparison to training or practicing. Parents with children who played a musical instrument in school enforced practice time, or tried. The child thought it was agony, cruel and unusual punishment. But it was training so that, when the concert or contest arrived, the child could perform well. Paul says the result of God’s enforced practice time is the peaceful fruit of righteousness – so when the hard choices come, the child will be able to do the right thing without a lot of stress. It will be reflex.

One of the ways we should examine ourselves is to evaluate our training regimen. Are we practicing so that, when the tough choices come, we can choose the right thing without stress? Do we have a character-building training program? When training for a sport, you must show up and train or the coach won’t put you in the game, maybe not even keep you on the roster. Our God is like that coach in some ways, but different in others. For example, God is not leaning over your shoulder, watching you practice your math facts, or shouting instructions during a football drill, or playing the role of a boot camp drill sergeant. God presents the exercises and occasionally engineers a test scenario to sharpen our skills, but He is not hovering over us to keep us on task. We have to choose to get with the program.

So, what would such a character-building training program look like? I think there is considerable flexibility in how it might be done, but certain basic exercises are necessary so that you don’t throw out your back or pull a hamstring the first time you get in the game.

As with any exercise program, you have to warm up or you will hurt yourself just practicing, let alone when you face something more difficult. Further, an exercise program must be regular, not all at once. Imagine trying to pack a month’s worth of training into the day before the game. Also, you must practice at the same level of intensity as you play or, when game day arrives, your enthusiasm will just cause worse injuries because there is no strength to back it up.

So, what should our character-building training program look like?

I would think it would involve regular prayer, so when you really need some help, you know how to reach the guy who can provide it.

Character-building requires that you know your objective, so training must include reading (or listening to) the gospels in order to see how godly character plays out in the real, messed-up world.

Character-building requires that you spot the flaws in your technique. Shooting free-throws requires a reproducible sequence of motions – always exactly the same. A baseball swing must be smooth, not jerky or hitched in the middle as you turn your wrists over. Follow-through is essential in everything. So, we read the letters to see how other well-meaning Christians overcame their hitches, inconsistencies, and blind spots. We examine ourselves as we train for life in the real world.

Also, recognize that training is a lot easier than the real contest. You can go back and repeat something you messed up in practice, no harm, rather than making all your mistakes in the game. You don’t feel nearly so stupid when you mess up in practice, because that’s what practice is for – to iron out the bugs. Whereas, in the game, you are supposed to do it correctly, and everyone can see how you do.

So, what is your training program for life in the kingdom of God? Do we put in the time or just wing it? Bible classes are good training, but what if you trained for anything else just an hour a week? We need to train daily – maybe not the exact same thing every day, but a diversity of exercises so you improve coordination and skill. Pray every day. Read (or listen) every day. Think out the things of God every day. Then, when you have to leave the house and interact with the messiness that is life, you have the skills to do it right.

Examine yourself.

- Keep it simple. Boil down what you believe into short, easy-to-remember sentences.
- See Christ in you. Observe the work of the Spirit. Learn what the Spirit has been promised to do in you. Help others to see it in them.
- Seek good, don't spend a significant part of your life fighting evil. First, if you talk about what is good, people will want to hear what you have to say because it is positive. Second, you want to end up with good stuff, so know it the best. Spending a lot of time defining evil is discouraging, and does not advance you to where you want to be.
- Look forward. Have a training program so you will have the coordination, skill, and muscle memory to pull off the character of Jesus when confronted with the troubles of this world. Training takes time and energy, but is absolutely necessary if you want to play the game of life and win.