



6

MOVING FROM
SELF-AWARENESS TO
GOD-AWARENESS
THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
test me and know my thoughts.
See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.*

—Psalm 139:23–24

THE FIRST NIGHT of my spiritual direction program, we were all handed a brochure called “The Daily Faith Awareness Prayer.” I was told to “do” this prayer every day as an important step in experiencing God in all things. It is a form of a prayer that has been historically referred to as the “prayer of examen,” in which you intentionally reflect on your day, calling to memory what you did or thought about. You try to remember the blessings you gave and received, thanking God for each of them. You also consider all the good you *might* have done but did not, and repent of those sins of omission. Finally, you repent of each harsh word and unloving action and ask God to help you act in more loving ways. Taking stock of the day, with the goal of living more fully for Christ and others each day, is the purpose of the prayer of examen. Some of you may already be familiar with forms of this prayer, but to many Christians this is a new kind of praying.

It certainly was new to me. And honestly, the idea of examining my life in this way was not that appealing, so I did not do it at first. I later found out that the prayer of examen is such a vital way to daily grow in and for Christ that Ignatius taught his followers, the Jesuits, that if they had to abandon any prayer during the day, never to abandon this one—*not even for one day*. To this day, Jesuits are taught that this practice is essential. That caught my attention, so I started to practice the

Ignatius taught his followers . . . that if they had to abandon any prayer during the day, never to abandon this one.

prayer of examen on a regular basis. It is not the most heartwarming kind of praying, since part of the prayer includes an examination of our weaknesses and failures. And since this is to be a *daily examination*, it can seem a little tedious at times. But it is worth it. Many other spiritual practices draw us into intimacy with Christ but do not help us as directly to deal with our weaknesses and build on our strengths.

If practiced regularly, the prayer of examen will help you to be purified of those things that deter you from living more for Jesus. It is a daily gateway for the Holy Spirit to reveal areas of strengths and weaknesses to help free and empower you to live out a more holistic gospel.

What the Bible Says About the Prayer of Examen

When Ignatius told his followers never to forsake the prayer of examen, he was telling them to do what scripture already tells us. Here is a sampling of the many verses on examining our lives:

“When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.”
(Psalm 4:4 NIV)

“Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.” (Psalm 26:2)

“Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord.”
(Lamentations 3:40)

“I the Lord test the mind and search the heart, to give to all according to their ways, according to the fruit of their doings.”
(Jeremiah 17:10)

“The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.”
(I Corinthians 2:10)

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23–24)

These scriptures make it clear that this prayer is not simply a process of self-examination. It is a prayer in which *God* examines our hearts, minds, and motives. As Paul told the church in Rome, “We do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. *And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit*, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God” (Romans 8:26–27, emphasis mine).

The Role of the Holy Spirit in Self-Awareness

Recently, when I was reflecting on the italicized part of the verse just quoted, the idea of the Holy Spirit searching our hearts reminded me of how good antivirus software regularly searches a computer for possible harmful programs. After our computer almost crashed twice in six months due to viruses, we realized that our antivirus software wasn’t one of the good ones. By the time we could see what the viruses had done, it was too late—they had infected so many files that our computer was close to being inoperable. We needed a program that searched regularly and well.

Like a computer virus, a lack of self-awareness can block our sensitivities, and thus our love and service for God and others. We need to regularly ask the Holy Spirit to search our hearts and help us to become more aware of our attitudes, actions, and reactions, as well as the reasons and motives behind them. Then, with the Holy Spirit’s guidance, we can change what needs to be changed so that we can live more fully in and for Christ.

There is a note of caution to be sounded in all of this. Self-awareness alone can too easily lead to self-centeredness. We need always to remember that our goal should be to move from self-awareness to awareness of who we are in God. Richard Foster points out, in his book *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, that the purpose of any intentional introspection is to journey “through ourselves so that we can emerge from the deepest level of the self into God.”¹ This is where true freedom is found, and it is the kind of awareness Jesus possessed. My pastor, Mark VanValin, once said in a sermon that “Jesus had a self-awareness that set him free.” The prayer of examen can help you have this kind of awareness.

Through this prayer God's Spirit can daily search you and make you more aware of your patterns of living. It will not always be pleasant to take more notice of certain things in your life, but if you do it anyway, the Holy Spirit will help guide you to discern when you are acting in love toward Christ and others and when you are not. It is learning to act in love that will set you free.

The Role of Feelings

As you get into this prayer you will notice that a crucial part of the exercise is to pay attention to feelings that surface from your reflection, and then weigh those feelings in your mind and heart. But for some of us, especially those of us who see ourselves as reasonable, rational thinkers, a red flag goes up with the word *feelings*. We may be doubtful that paying attention to feelings will help us become more aware of who we are in Christ. We know that countless people have been hurt, or have hurt others, by acting on their emotions. Perhaps we have learned the hard way that we cannot trust our own feelings, and we may even block them. But we cannot afford to discard our feelings if we want to live for God; Jesus was often "moved with compassion," and we should be too. If we block our own feelings, we can become hard-hearted, unable to feel the kind of compassion that leads to working for a more loving and just world.

On the other hand, some of us see *all* of our feelings as legitimate. This also can hinder us from living a holistic gospel, because focusing too much on feelings is emotionally exhausting, leaving us little time to focus on Christ and others. We need to learn to rein in and discern a variety of our feelings, including those that seem justified or even altruistic. Writer and speaker Joni Eareckson Tada, a paraplegic since age seventeen, told the story of several men who, after reading her story, each wrote to her saying that they felt the Lord told them to marry her. We can appreciate their hearts but still not believe those feelings came from the Lord. Even sincere hearts can be sincerely wrong.

*Even sincere
hearts can be
sincerely wrong.*

The Bible tells us that we must "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (I John 4:1). Our feelings must be tested, which means that we must carefully consider whether what we feel is in harmony with Jesus' holistic gospel, and whether our Christian friends and community agree. Even though the prayer of examen is something we pray in our alone

times with Jesus, we need to be sharing what we are learning with a trusted friend or mentor so that we are not trying to discern without any accountability. In Chapter Nine we discuss further guidelines for discernment.

Preparing for the Prayer of Examen

The prayer of examen is meant to be done every day, so that you can become aware of daily patterns of living—and not living—more fully for God and others. Ignatius taught that the examen should be prayed twice a day, once after lunch and again after supper, but today it is often taught as a once-a-day prayer. If you choose to do it once daily, nighttime may be preferable because you can review the whole day while it is fresh in your mind. However, since this prayer takes only 10–15 minutes, you can pray it anywhere and at any time—during lunch, on a walk, while waiting in the car, at the park, or even at an airport—as long as you find a place where you can block out distractions. It is still a good idea, however, to have a regular daily time and place allocated for it, since that is the best way to develop this prayer into a holy habit. John Wesley wrote that a favorite mystic of his, Monsieur de Renty, “made an exact search into his smallest faults” each day before his noon meal and again in the evening.² My friend Dave does an examen of his day while he brushes his teeth—for most of us, this wouldn’t be enough time, but Dave brushes his teeth for *at least 10 minutes* every night.

I have, however, met a few people who are exceptions to the specific time rule. One person I know often thinks about and analyzes what is happening to her as events occur throughout her day. She has found that it works to do a form of the examen as she goes about her day. When she notices and feels a certain reaction from an encounter or event, she tries to immediately take that reaction to God, asking God to help her discern whether or not what is going on leads to more or less love for Christ and others.

If you find that this more informal approach to the prayer of examen works for you, I still suggest you bring these events back to God in a brief 3- to 5-minute “summary examen” at the end of the day. The Holy Spirit may reveal to you events and patterns you missed as you prayed this prayer a little at a time.

Although there are several different ways to pray for God to examine us, over the years many people have found Ignatius’s steps and directions to be particularly helpful in learning to listen to and obey God in their daily lives. His specific steps have often been paraphrased while still keeping the essence of the prayer. I have attempted to do this by combining

and adapting Ignatius's guidelines for what has been called the "examen of consciousness" and the "examen of conscience" into three steps.

The Three Steps of the Prayer of Examen

If the following steps seem too structured or burdensome, just give them time. After following these guidelines for a week or so, you will feel more comfortable with them and may want to adapt them to your own wording; just be sure to hold on to their essence. Continue to practice all three of the steps, even if you do so in ways that fit your own personality, since the steps intentionally build on each other.

As you regularly engage in this prayer, you will become better able to recognize your inward and outward responses, even as they happen. Still, there will be many times when you may not understand *why* you are

THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN

STEP 1. Prepare yourself by quietly focusing your attention on God.

In him we live and move and have our being. (Acts 17:28)

STEP 2. Review your day with thankfulness and a spirit of reconciliation.

When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth. (John 16:13)

- When did you live out of love and freedom in Christ?

Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence or if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Philippians 4:8)

- When did you *not* live out of love and freedom in Christ?

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the LORD. (Lamentations 3:40)

STEP 3. Thank God for what is happening through this exercise, and ask for guidance and grace for tomorrow.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen. (Ephesians 3:20)



feeling or reacting to something in a particular way. The good news is that further insights come as you continue to do the prayer of examen. Remember to share those insights or questions with trusted Christian friends or a spiritual mentor to help you further discern what is from the Holy Spirit and what is not.

STEP 1. *Prepare yourself by quietly focusing your attention on God.*

Begin by sitting comfortably and breathing slowly and evenly so that you can focus on being in the presence of the One who loves you the most and wants to give you the true desires of your heart. After a few moments pray these words:

Dear Jesus, help me to see myself and my life through your unconditional love and acceptance of me so that your love and power can flow in and through me. Help me to remember that *nothing* can separate me from your amazing love.

Stay in silence for several seconds, repeating the prayer or reflecting on the verse shown with Step 1 in the box.

At this point, if you find you are at a place in life where it is especially hard to accept yourself and to accept God's unconditional love, you may want to consider putting the rest of this spiritual practice temporarily on hold. I have taught the prayer of examen to people who continue to live with guilt and shame over their pasts, and some who struggle with serious addictions. Many of these people find it hard to accept God's unconditional love and forgiveness. If you are one of them, it may be difficult for you to go to the next step, since guilt and shame can destroy the emotions of thankfulness and keep you from experiencing the wonder and joy that this prayer provides. It is therefore important to stay at this first step of the prayer of examen until acceptance of Jesus' love for you begins to take hold. Otherwise you may not be open to learning what the Holy Spirit wants to teach you through the rest of the prayer. You might ask a friend, spiritual mentor, or counselor to help you better discern whether or not you should continue this prayer at this time.

STEP 2. *Review your day with thankfulness and a spirit of reconciliation.*

Start by reading the first verse shown with Step 2 in the box and then praying:

As I begin the review of my day, I ask for wisdom and courage to see what you want me to see. Help me first to recall and thank you for the

gifts of the day. Then help me remember what you want me to remember, and notice what you want me to notice, including my motives—with thankfulness. I want to accept with gratitude what your Spirit reveals to me because I know you love me and want your best for me. When I see areas where I have failed to live in love and purity of heart, help me to be willing to ask for, and accept, your forgiveness. Help me to be open to anything you want me to see and change so that I can more fully love you and others.

I cannot stress enough how important it is that you try always to start with a spirit of thankfulness for what the Holy Spirit will reveal to you, continuing that thankfulness even when something you see as negative is revealed. My friend Paul, a pastor, is convinced that cultivating a spirit of gratitude will change us more than any other spiritual practice. Let God govern your reactions to whatever surfaces, remembering that the Holy Spirit is present and can help you to do *all* of what you prayed.

For the entire Step 2 of the prayer, you are to review the events of your day, as if watching a movie. Do not worry about recalling everything; besides taking too long, this is not the point of the prayer. Instead, be open and trust God to help you bring things to mind. Start on a positive note by recalling external gifts from God such as the birds that may have awakened you (even if they did so too early) or the smell of coffee brewing. As you move through the events of the day, ask God to continue to bring to mind specific pleasures such as a really good laugh or uplifting conversation, a special smile, or the feel of a warm rain. Pay special attention to whoever or whatever especially touched your life that day. Remembering these things as gifts will help you cultivate a spirit of thankfulness to God who gives “every good and perfect gift” (James 1:17). Nurturing this kind of thankfulness helps you to live less selfishly and more generously for God and others.

Next, look to the inner gifts and strengths that you brought to the events of the day, such as your ability to listen, your humor, compassion, patience, or certain skills. Thank God for each of them that may have given love, joy, and freedom to others.

You are now ready to enter the longest section of the prayer, which requires that you address two important questions. The first is this:

1. *When did I live out of love and freedom in Christ?* Start this part of the day’s review with the verse from Philipians, shown in the box. Then ask the Holy Spirit to bring to mind when you acted out of love (or what some call our true self, self in God, or moments of consolation). Here are some examples:

- You began an unusually busy day in quiet time with Jesus.
- You gave money or time to a certain cause.
- You spent time with an individual or group who inspires you to want to be a better person.
- You shared what Jesus means to you with someone.
- You did something that scaled down your use of the world's resources.
- You were friendly to the slow cashier in the grocery store even though you were in a hurry.
- You didn't raise your voice when you were angry at a family member.

Be especially thankful to God if you did the right thing when you felt like doing otherwise.

As you reflect on what comes to mind, pay attention to your feelings—particularly those deeper gut-level feelings that are possible clues for discerning your thoughts, actions, and motives. Pay special attention to when you had feelings such as these:

- Joyfulness
- Happiness
- Peace
- Hopefulness
- Generosity
- Compassion
- Gratefulness
- Satisfaction
- Faithfulness
- Being a part of something bigger than yourself
- Being energized or “fully alive”
- Love and acceptance

The point here is to recognize when you were drawn to living with what comes when the Holy Spirit is guiding you. Paying attention to these feelings can help you discern “the desires of your heart”—these are the true God-given desires that empower you to live in Christ-likeness the rest of the day, tomorrow, and every day.

A CAUTION. It is important to note a potential danger while practicing this part of the prayer. What you see as a strength in your life, could, in reality, be something that hinders you from fully living in love and freedom in Christ. For instance, you may feel good about your heavy involvement in other people's issues, or even your ability to confront when others don't, but God may want you to be less involved or less confrontational. You would then be wise to heed the advice of Thomas à Kempis, author of *Imitation of Christ*, to not become busy with those things not committed to your care. Your overinvolvement can hinder how God wants to work in a situation. I have seen this happen in the lives of some people I know. Unfortunately, I am one of those people.

Before I began teaching, I did some counseling with students. But counseling wiped me out. I felt that I had to solve all of their problems by giving just the right advice. And though I would exhaust myself during counseling sessions, I would walk away thinking that this was how God wanted me to counsel. But it was not, and any good counselor knows that. Counseling is a process, and counselors are guides, not people who have all the answers. It took my training in spiritual direction and practicing the prayer of examen to start driving this point home for me.

Ironically, spiritual direction is often very nondirective. The goal is to help people find God in all things, mostly through listening intently to them, reflecting back certain things they have said, and giving suggestions for spiritual practices. Regarding advice on a particular situation, the spiritual director trusts the Holy Spirit to bring insights. When appropriate, I point out any relevant biblical or traditional church directives I am aware of; but beyond those directives, if no insights come, I try not to give advice. That's hard for me, since I am still tempted to tell a person what I think they should do before either of us have made it a matter of prayer and discernment. I now try to resist that temptation by remembering the best thing I learned about spiritual direction. It was during one of our training sessions when I was busily writing down all the things we were being taught to do when listening. I started to feel overwhelmed. Then Lucia, the teacher, said, "*And when you are in a spiritual direction session with another person, don't forget that God is in the room, too.*" I had forgotten. I was caught up in how to make sure I was good at spiritual direction and forgot that, unlike Elvis, the Holy Spirit really *is* in the building. Lucia's reminder was so freeing. It was that reminder, along with insights from doing the prayer of examen, that helped me continue to see that something I thought was a good thing (taking people's problems into my own hands) was actually hindering me and others from living more

freely in and for Christ. Exploring motives, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is an important part of this prayer.

2. *When did I not live out of love and freedom in Christ?* The next section of the prayer may be the hardest, since it is where you focus on your weaknesses and failures. This part of the examen is not meant to depress you. That is why it's a good idea to start by praying the Lamentations verse in the box. It will remind you that this second question is to help you become more aware of when you might be moving away from God so that you can take steps to "return to the Lord." Still, there could be a temptation during this part of the prayer to get into a "woe is me" rut, and then you can stop yourself, as well as those with whom you come in contact, from growing in freedom. It is especially important to have a teachable spirit when focusing on this part of the examen; otherwise, you can get down on yourself and become preoccupied with self-loathing, which keeps you from reaching out to others and the world.

Another temptation during this part of the prayer is to blame other people or life situations for times when you did not live out of love and freedom in Christ. It can be too easy to avoid working on our own weaknesses and failures when we convince ourselves that it really is not our fault that we acted or responded in certain ways. These blind spots are the most difficult things to change in our lives because they are just that. It can be easy to point a finger at others and not even realize our own faults. Jesus warned about this in Matthew 7:3 when he told us to make sure we take the plank out of our own eye before taking the speck out of someone else's eye. For instance, perhaps you tend to see yourself as innocent, simply reacting to negative situations, rather than seeing how you might negatively affect those situations yourself. Or maybe you put too much energy into blaming others for negative patterns in your life instead of putting that energy into freeing yourself from those patterns. It is crucial, as part of the prayer of examen, that you ask God to protect you from going down these counterproductive paths of blaming others and instead help you to see and reflect on where and how you need to grow in love and compassion.

It will greatly help you to remember that "it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13). God is present and can work even in your failures—there is no area of life where God is not. As Paul wrote, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in

all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

With the awareness that self-loathing or blaming others can get in the way, you now ask God to reveal to you the events and possible patterns in your day that do not lead to love and freedom in Christ (or what some call false self, self outside of God, or moments of desolation). Be open to those times when you might need to be purified or healed from the effects of dark deeds or thoughts, or from hurts experienced or caused.

Here are possible examples:

- You complained to others about a task you were doing.
- You cleaned your house more than your heart.
- You focused too much on looking good, rather than being good.
- You spent too much time with someone who dragged you down (or perhaps *you* are the one who, knowingly or unknowingly, dragged someone else down).
- You were wasteful.
- You said or did too much or too little.
- You didn’t share Jesus with someone when the opportunity seemed right.
- You used money on new clothes you did not need instead of meeting someone else’s need.

Again take note of the feelings your attitudes and actions produced in you, such as these:

- Anger or frustration
- Hate
- Pride
- Sadness
- Jealousy
- Confusion
- Fear or captivity
- Anxiety or turmoil
- Exhaustion
- Abandonment
- Embarrassment, shame, or guilt

Paying attention to what you did or did not do, and how you felt, will help you to become more and more aware of what hinders you, as well as how you might hinder others, from fully living a holistic gospel.

It is important to realize that this new awareness can lead to guilt and shame. Then, instead of focusing on living Christ's holistic gospel, your energies may become too focused on your sins. The good news is that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, delivers you from sin. With this truth in mind, ask God to forgive you and give you the strength to live more fully tomorrow as Christ would have you live out your day. You might want to picture yourself talking to Jesus, telling Jesus you are sorry, asking for, and then accepting, the freeing forgiveness of God. Carrying out this exercise could also lead you to ask forgiveness of someone you feel you wronged, and to seek further ways to restore any strained or broken relationships.

If this part of the prayer proves especially difficult, again ask God to help you see any new awareness as a gift and an opportunity for growth. If you stick with this more difficult step of the examen, you will feel increased freedom from the heaviness of heart and mind that often weighs you down and therefore increased freedom to find God in all things—including your failures and weaknesses. Although it is not easy to confront these things, it *is* liberating, as long as we recognize God's tremendous gifts of love, mercy, and grace in the midst of our sinfulness. "While we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). Acceptance of this truth creates a desire for unity with Christ, which, in the words of the Jesuit priest and writer Joseph A. Tetlow, "is intensely personal and draws us to friendship with Jesus." He goes on to state that this desire for unity is also "widely social and draws us to love one another" because the Second Commandment "does not state a moral imperative but describes the way God lives in us."³

When you accept God's love, forgiveness, and grace, you are drawn in by Jesus' love and compassion to have love and compassion toward others. This is where the prayer of examen should always lead you—to a greater awareness of how you can serve God and others in the world. That is why it is a good idea to take a few minutes during this part of the prayer to focus more specifically on those who live beyond your world of experience, asking God to expand your heart and vision.

At times there will be an area or issue within Step 2 of the examen where God's Spirit will call you to a more focused self-examination. An

example of this in my life is directly related to God expanding my heart and vision. Through the prayer of examen, the Holy Spirit continues to reveal something that in the past was not on my radar—that my fear of confronting and not being liked was stopping me from fully stepping out and speaking more boldly for Christ and for justice issues about which I felt strongly. I dealt with these fears by tuning into my own sphere of family, friends, and coworkers and tuning out many other needs in the world. Even when I watched the news or heard about horrible disasters and hurts, I quickly shut down emotionally so that I did not have to face uncomfortable feelings about those events. I felt better about this tendency after I was reassured by someone that we should, in fact, disengage when we hear or read about all the bad things going on in the world because it is “just too much.” But then I heard someone else say that we must do the opposite if we want to enlarge our hearts to be more like the heart of Jesus. To develop the compassion and sense of justice for the world that Jesus modeled, this person believed that we need to engage emotionally and empathetically with what we hear is going on in the world. One way to do this is to pick at least one news story a day, pray specifically throughout the day for whoever or whatever is involved, and take action if possible—such as calling a political representative, sending money, or even volunteering yourself, depending on the situation.

Further reflection through the prayer of examen helped me realize that the latter advice is the more loving and just approach. I was reminded of what Karl Barth, the great German Reformed preacher and theologian, said about sermons: that they should be written with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. I realized that the same should be true for all of life—we should live as if the needs of the world are in one of our hands and the Bible is in the other.

As I continue to examine my fears and motives, the Holy Spirit gives me increased vision for helping those beyond my own personal and social spheres and increased strength to accept others’ responses to me so that I have the courage to act and to speak out more than I used to. It is still not easy for me, but I am learning what it means to “speak the truth in love” (Ephesians 4:15).

I encourage you to take note of any special focus the Holy Spirit may be inviting you to notice through the prayer of examen. I also encourage you to ask the Holy Spirit to help you honestly confront any ongoing patterns that are hindering you from sharing Christ through your words and actions.

STEP 3. *Thank God for what is happening through this exercise, and ask for guidance and grace for tomorrow.*

Start by reflecting on the verse shown with Step 3 in “The Prayer of Examen” box. Then end your time in prayer, making sure you first thank God for what has been revealed to you before you ask for guidance and grace for tomorrow. Here is a possible prayer:

Thank you, Jesus, for what you have shown to me today. Help me to accept with gratitude all you have revealed. Please give me the grace to be open to what you revealed to me now and to see what you will reveal to me tomorrow. Thank you for all the ways your love is already revealed in and through me. Help me to know what about me must change and give me strength and courage to change those things. Thank you that you have my true heart’s desire in mind and work in me so that I can truly love and serve you and others. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

You may also want to end this time by reciting the Lord’s Prayer. Then, to help you remember, you could write down what you are discovering about what helps and what hinders your relationship with God and others. Again, I strongly recommended that you regularly share what you are learning with a trusted friend or mentor.

Patience Is a Virtue

Remember that you need to be patient and trust the Holy Spirit in this process of examination. This *is* a process, and you cannot know the vast benefits and mercies of God through this spiritual practice if you read about the prayer of examen and try it only once or twice. Commit to praying it daily, and if you miss a day, come back to it the next day, because you will learn through this prayer to develop habits of lifelong discernment of the Holy Spirit at work in the patterns of your life.

In addition, it is important to be aware that the connectedness with God that you seek through the prayer of examen will probably not happen right away. You may have to be into it for several days, and even weeks or months, before you sense the Holy Spirit bringing you into new awareness of how to live more wholly for Christ. But if you are patient and “wait upon the Lord,” new awareness will come and, if you allow it, it will change the way you live.

The Prayer of Examen as a Gateway to Purification

When you engage regularly in the kind of holy habits we are proposing in this book, you will eventually notice that some things you used to spend your thoughts and energies on just don't matter anymore. As the hymn suggests, when you "turn your eyes upon Jesus," some things of the world do "grow strangely dim," without you even trying to rid yourself of them. They simply disappear as you focus more on loving Jesus, and that unexpected gift is incredibly freeing. But other things do not disappear without a battle. We still struggle with "things of the world" that distract us from living a more holistic gospel, even though Jesus told us to seek *first* God's Kingdom and righteousness, and all that we need will be given to us—Jesus said we don't even need to worry about anything else (Matthew 6:31–34).

To seek God's reign first and foremost, we need purer hearts. Søren Kierkegaard once preached a sermon titled "Purity of Heart" based on Matthew 5:8. To have purity of heart, he said, was "to will one thing." That one thing is what Saint Paul calls the "most excellent way," which is love—the kind of love that we live out toward God and all others with our words and our actions, like Jesus did.

Past saints and mystics knew this. They also knew that a process of intentionally deep purification is necessary on this path of love that results in unity with Christ and others. That is why they wrote not only about their intense love for Jesus manifested in their prayer practices and service to others, but also about additional external ways to give up or not seek after whatever distracted them from being more fully devoted to Christ. We can learn much from past and present saints and mystics about how to rid ourselves of what hinders us from the purity of heart that drives us to seek first God's Kingdom. They can teach us the importance of becoming more aware of how things can distract us and crowd Jesus out of the center of our lives; and they also teach us the need to simplify our lives by either removing those things or putting them in their proper place.

Becoming Aware of What Distracts Us

Through the years saints have taught that the "things" that distract us from living a holistic gospel are anything we value or desire that takes us away from more fully loving and serving Jesus, from possessions to pleasure to prestige to power.⁴ We become preoccupied with, worried about, and possibly even addicted to some of these values and desires,

which take our focus off of Jesus. That's what happened to Mary's sister Martha when Jesus was visiting their home. Although Mary had found that "one thing," Jesus told Martha that she had become "worried and distracted by many things" (Luke 10:41).

When my son David was old enough to hold something with his two little hands he started holding any sports ball he could find. It was a rare sight to see him without at least one or two in his hands. One day David and I went with a group of his friends to a kid-friendly place that had cages of colorful plastic balls. David was overwhelmed with how many plastic balls he saw and ran into one of the cages. At one point when I looked over at him, he had so many of those balls in his arms that several were dropping to the floor. He anxiously looked at me and in a very serious voice said, "Too many things." Even though David was visibly upset and even admitted that he had "too many things," he was still so focused on holding on to as many of those "things" as he could that he didn't even want to come out of the cage for pizza.

Trying to hold too many things in our lives keeps us from holding on to things much more important than pizza. These things distract and prevent us from holding on to God and can even create a false sense of security so that we no longer depend on God. When friends of mine were in Kenya, they met a Kenyan pastor named John. When this pastor visited the United States, his first stop was their home. While standing in the kitchen, Pastor John asked what several things were and what they did. My friend Deb pointed out the uses for the microwave, oven, and dishwasher. As Pastor John stood looking at all of these appliances, he said to her, "You have no need for God."

But we do need God—more than anything the world has to offer—and deep in our hearts we know that. Why then do so many of us, including myself, often live as if we believed that we really can love Jesus right along with loving all of the things we think we need? Contrary to popular opinion, we know we cannot have it all. More important, we don't need it all. Yet, as we try to live our lives for Christ, many of us back off of the radical nature of the gospel and embrace other perceived needs, values, and desires. We say Christ is number one in our lives, when in reality many of our choices are guided by selfish and social desires, such as making more money so we can buy more things.

Often we do not even see this happening. But Thomas Merton did. He wrote about the dangers of self-deception regarding false needs and desires. He contended that our deepest desires—for joy, harmony, peace, order, and meaning—have been co-opted by our culture's lie that we can

search for and find meaning in temporal things. We have been strongly conditioned our whole lives to believe that pleasure, possessions, prestige, and power will lead to true happiness and give life meaning. Consequently, we have settled for too little.

Several years ago a former student stood in my living room and announced to me that his life had been transformed. Through Jesus? No. It was through a vacuum cleaner. He was trying to sell me a vacuum cleaner that he claimed had changed his life. I do not doubt that a really good vacuum cleaner can change my carpet, but if something like that changes my *life*, I am in trouble.

Like the song that laments “looking for love in all the wrong places,” we look for fulfillment in all the wrong places. We become blinded by the illusion that we can be satisfied with things that are not of God. Yet when Jesus was tempted in the wilderness with those things that only create an illusion of a fulfilled life—power, prestige, and possessions—he denied all of them. He was then able, “filled with the power of the Spirit” (Luke 4:14), to proclaim his true mission: “to bring good news to the poor . . . release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Luke 4:18–19), which was the year of jubilee or freedom. Jesus’ message was one of freedom from things that bind us all.

Can we have this same “power of the Spirit” that results in living with the same focus Jesus did? Yes. When we become more aware of how our disordered desires and needs distract us from the “one thing,” we are then able to look at ways to disengage from them to make room for that kind of transforming power.

Simplifying Our Lives Through Asceticism

Asceticism is a word that has a bad name in many circles. But understanding the intent of the word can greatly aid us in simplifying our lives. In the religious life, an ascetic is one who leads a contemplative life full of rigorous self-denial for God, based on Jesus’ words to deny ourselves, take up our cross daily, and follow him (Luke 9:23). But over the

*We say Christ is
number one in our
lives, when in reality
many of our choices
are guided by selfish
and social desires.*

centuries, some followers of Jesus have taken this much too far and have focused more on the rigorous self-denial part of the definition rather than the religious purposes part. Although we are called to deny ourselves and follow the way of Jesus, this particular kind of denial often leads to a suffering that really does not have much to do with Jesus.

We are not to take asceticism to an extreme as the Syrian monk Barsauma did by standing on a pillar high up in the air for days or sometimes wearing an iron tunic “for maximum discomfort in all seasons”⁵ (he also refused to sit or lie down). Although the intention of these seemingly eccentric behaviors was for mortification (deliberately choosing a form of suffering to reverse disordered desires so as to live more for Christ), they often became much too extreme and lost their original purpose. As Paul said to the Colossians concerning regulations, “These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-imposed piety, humility and severe treatment of the body, but they are of no value in checking self-indulgence. So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 2:23–3:3).

Living “one thing” by imitating Christ does not mean denying for denial’s sake or suffering for suffering’s sake—it means sharing in the sufferings of Christ (Philippians 2:10). This kind of sharing is for the sake of others. There is enough suffering in this world without inflicting irrational or extreme suffering on ourselves. Suffering is not to be an end in itself. We enter into the sufferings and injustices of others not so much to give up something, but to “set our hearts” on the things of Christ. The true purpose of ascetic practice, according to the Cistercian monk M. Basil Pennington, is “to free ourselves from the imperious domination of our own thoughts, passions, and desires, to free the spirit for the things of the Spirit. It is paradoxical, isn’t it, that what seem to be life-denying practices actually open the space for new life?”⁶

We give up so that we can gain new life in Christ. As Jesus said in Mark 8:36, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” John of the Cross called this kind of giving up or asceticism “the active night of the sense.” By “active night” he meant an intentional process, because he knew that after some time our affections and intentions toward Jesus could lessen, while our previous attachments to various things could again come to the forefront and keep us from Jesus. This active night, however, was not intended to be a giving up of everything. Saint John’s way to exemplify this “active night of the sense” involved “being in the world but not of it.” As Saint Paul said in I Corinthians,

“All things are lawful,’ but not all things are beneficial. . . . So whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God” (I Corinthians 10:23, 31).

But there is still another kind of asceticism that is of the highest order. It is the result of the kind of self-denial that is directly related to lovingly sacrificing ourselves and all that we have as we try to meet the physical and spiritual needs of others. We find this kind of asceticism in the life of Saint Francis, who often went without the basic necessities of life as he gave all that he had in ministry to the poor. Dietrich Bonhoeffer embraced an ascetic lifestyle as he endured hunger himself in order to give food to others who were confined with him in a Nazi prison.

Saint Ignatius called this kind of giving up or asceticism “detachment.” He believed that we can hold on so tightly to possessions, prestige, power, pleasure—and even people—that all of our time is consumed with unhealthy, even addictive attachments. Ignatius believed that it is only through a proper spirit of detachment that we can be freed to truly love God and others.

Louis Dupré, in *The Deeper Life: An Introduction to Christian Mysticism*, described this same spirit of detachment when it comes to *people* in the following way: “No mysticism can claim to be Christian that does not include a spiritual love for the creature. . . . To love creatures requires no effort, particularly if they are lovable—we all do that as a matter of course. . . . But to love creation, to be deeply involved with it, and yet to remain detached from it, demands more than common virtue.”⁷

There is a note of caution that should be sounded here. This use of the word *detachment* should not be confused with *uncaring*. Ignatius saw detachment as a way to love more selflessly. He talked about disengaging from unhealthy obsessions or codependencies so that we can freely love others without having selfish desires dictate how we treat them.

The most powerful example of detachment from possessions I have heard came from Gordon College art professor Bruce Herman. He and his wife, Meg, often had students live with them, especially when the students had limited funds for their education. Eventually, Bruce began to grumble a little about these extended stays. One night, Meg informed Bruce that she had invited yet another student to stay, even after Bruce had expressed the need for a break. She reminded him that before they built the house, they had prayed over the land and dedicated it to the Lord. Bruce said he came to his senses, “acknowledged this was right,” and realized that he shouldn’t complain.

The very next day their house caught on fire and burned; Bruce said he felt convicted for the bad attitude he had been harboring. As he and Meg watched the firemen try to put out the fire, which was taking most of their

possessions, including many of his original paintings, Meg whispered to Bruce, “All this hangs lightly on us, doesn’t it?” Bruce nodded. Meg already knew the real meaning of having a proper spirit of detachment that frees us to live that one thing—the most excellent way of love (I Corinthians 12:31b).

How do we allow the things in our lives to “hang lightly”? This is where the prayer of examen can help. It will help you give up your disordered desires to make room for the true desires of your heart.

Using the Prayer of Examen to Simplify and Purify

Allowing the Holy Spirit to examine your disordered desires through a slightly modified version of this prayer will help you to, in the words of Saint Benedict, “prefer nothing to Christ.” Start by adding on a few minutes, or an even more extended time each day, during your regular prayer of examen. Better yet, if you commit to two examens a day, one of them could be for this more focused purification. Then follow these adapted steps of the prayer of examen:

1. Come into Jesus’ loving presence and tell him you want to live a more purified, simplified life for him.
2. Thank Jesus for what will be revealed to you as you seek purification and simplification.
3. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you a specific disordered desire or perceived necessity in your life that needs purifying.
4. Reflect on how living with this desire or perceived need hinders you from living in more love and freedom.
5. Reflect on how giving this up would help you to live in more love and freedom.
6. Ask Jesus to forgive you for making whatever it is too important and to give you the willingness, courage, and determination, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to give it up. At this point you may need to pray, “Make me willing to be willing.”
7. Thank God for what was revealed to you and ask for grace and guidance for tomorrow.

Continuing the Prayer of Examen

As you continue to pray the prayer of examen, you will find something wonderful happening. More and more, the things that once had such a hold on you will no longer have the same effect, and you will experience

an expanding love for God and others. You will desire more time to seek to live like Jesus and less time with the things that used to be important to you. You will not be totally freed from all “things of the world,” but you will be increasingly open to getting rid of whatever holds you back from fulfillment in Christ.

Purifying our lives is never a completed process this side of heaven—it is a lifelong journey into Christ-likeness. An image that has been useful for me in understanding this process is a spiral. As we grow in Christ, we may find that old issues and concerns that we thought we dealt with surprise us by coming around and resurfacing again. But when they do, because we have been spiraling upward into greater intimacy with Christ, those same issues and concerns are treated in a different manner. At times we may not even be consciously aware of these new ways we are handling certain circumstances.

The prayer of examen, if practiced regularly, will give you increased freedom from the things that hinder you from “making the most of every opportunity” (Colossians 4:5 NIV) and increased freedom to be more like Christ, every day, in your words and in your actions.

Even though this daily faith-awareness prayer plays a crucial role in empowering us to live in greater love and freedom for Christ, it is not enough. There are things in our lives that we will still not notice, or that will be difficult to change, hindering us from fully living a holistic gospel. That is why the focus of the next two chapters is on two more prayers that draw us deeper into Christ’s transforming love and amazing grace. Through these prayers we will continue to spiral, in the words of C. S. Lewis, “further up and further in,” as we help God’s Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven.