

Sacred Rhythms

Chapters 6 & 7

Chapter 6 ~ Self-Examination: Bringing My Whole Self Before God

This chapter begins with some core truths about the spiritual life/journey...

- Our deepest longing is to be fully known (warts and all) and loved.
- Our deepest fear is to be rejected.
- We hide our dark/shadow side, or the parts of ourselves we are ashamed of, out of fear of being rejected
- In doing so, we miss out on the experience of being fully loved.
- Without experiencing that type of love, we shrink back from the transformative process.

Some questions to consider...

- What were you thinking and feeling as you read the opening section of this chapter? How much could you relate to what RHB was describing?
- How in tune are you with your own longing to be accepted and loved and your fear of being rejected?
- How well do you know yourself? How do you/we even gauge or measure that?
- We all have aspects of ourselves that are not like Jesus. How do you feel about those aspects of yourself that aren't like Jesus? What do you do with those aspects of yourself? What is this chapter encouraging us to do with those aspects of ourselves?
- Looking inward at our own flaws can be very difficult. Is it something that you do often, something you try to avoid, or something in between?
- Who do you accept criticism or coaching from? Why them?

This chapter references Psalm 139 quite a bit. Take time this week to familiarize yourself with it, perhaps even immerse yourself in it. (Perhaps practice a little Lectio Divina with it.)

Many of us, perhaps most of us, have mastered the art of image-management...of only presenting the part of ourselves we like, feel good about, aren't afraid others will reject, to those around us. We have mastered it so well, we often even convince ourselves. But this is actually a form of bondage from which Jesus wants to free us from.

It is one thing to make the theological assertion/affirmation that "God is with me". It is quite another to experience His "with-ness" and to live and function with a keen awareness of and in harmony with His Presence. At their heart, all spiritual disciplines/practices are designed to

help us move from affirming a principal to experiencing a Person..and being transformed in the process.

- What makes you you? How have you become aware of who you really are...the unique person that is YOU? (What experiences, tools, resources, relationships, etc. have helped you in that process?)
- How can we, paradoxically, accept ourselves for who we are and at the same time recognize parts of ourselves we would like to change?

One way to tell if we truly accept ourselves is by asking ourselves if there's any part of who we are that we feel we need to hide or repress. Do you find yourself trying to be who you think others want/expect you to be, or do you allow yourself to be yourself and let the chips fall where they may in regards to how others receive you?

The stark reality is that not everyone will accept us for who we are. The key to being able to handle the rejection of others is being confident in God's acceptance and love for us.

- Describe a time when you tried to "fit it", when you tried to meet the expectations of others while compromising who you really are.

Another stark reality in this world is that we are not always free from the expectations of others. Sometimes we need to put ourselves to the side for the benefit of others. It takes maturity and discernment to know what to do in the moment...or to even recognize what is happening in the moment. This harkens back to our deep wants/desires. We have surface level wants and deeper desires.

Perhaps another way to say all this is that with all the talk earlier in the book about wants/desires/longings, we need to be careful not to think of God as a cosmic Santa Claus or a genie in a bottle granting wishes. God designed us in such a way that connection WITH God is our deepest longing/desire. And we need to be careful of settling for lesser wants. The practice of Examen (self-examination, with God) will help us identify the times and things in life that bring us life and those that suck life out of us. The goal isn't to avoid the life sucking times but rather to learn to recognize that, throughout the highs and lows of life, God is WITH us.

The ultimate example, it seems to me, is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. He wanted to avoid the cross. (Who wouldn't?) But His deeper desire was to do the will of His Father. "*Yet not my will but yours be done.*" Love is the ability, the willingness, to do good for someone else even when we don't want to or feel like it.

Left on our own, we don't have the resources to pull this off very often or for very long. But when we remember that God is WITH us, that His Presence and love are constant and available, we then have the resource to draw upon to love others...because we live in the understanding and experience that God is taking care of us.

- Who do you know that is truly comfortable being who they are, really comfortable in their own skin, who lives in such a way that they don't have anything to prove? How would you evaluate yourself in that regard?

By now you recognize that this study/series is designed to help us take a deeper look into ourselves...as scary or unsettling as that might be. RHB says, "*If we harbor any concern that we might be abandoned because of some lack in ourselves or some untrustworthiness in the other, it will be difficult to give ourselves to God's penetrating gaze.*" It requires deep examination to be able to recognize if this is at play within ourselves. But, as you can imagine, it is vitally important to know if such concern is in us as it will affect so much of our life. While our instinct is self-protection/self-preservation...which demonstrates the deep need/desire for safety...only in deep communion with God do we actually find the safety we need.

- How safe do you feel in exposing yourself to God's penetrating gaze?

RHB outlines the three elements/movements of the Examen of Conscience...

1. Seeing/recognizing something that is wrong (in attitude, action, motive, etc.)
2. Naming it and gaining some understanding of the inner dynamics at play
3. Confession, i.e. bringing it before God (not for His sake—He already knows—but for ours)

This process within the spiritual life is known as Purgation. It's probably a rather foreign concept for most of us. (Sounds rather Catholic, doesn't it?) But let's not get hung up on semantics. The whole point, like everything in this book so far, is a deep dive into our soul in order to discover a new level of awareness...of ourselves and of God. So, let's not get scared off by strange words but rather explore and experiment to see if this is something useful for our journey.

- What is your initial reaction to the idea of Purgation?

Confession has a long history in the historical, global Christian movement, even if it's something we're not particularly practiced at. RHB makes the case that Confession is vitally important to the transformation process, "*...to stop short of confession is to stop short of the deepest levels of transformation...Confession is good for the soul. It is good for the soul because it opens us to the experience of being forgiven and the freedom that comes on the other side.*"

- Honestly, what are your thoughts/feelings about the points she brings up re: Confession?

I suspect that when people like us hear the word "confession" our imaginations go to a very formal setting, like a confession booth with a priest. But perhaps a more helpful image for us to get our minds around would be simply one friend sharing with another trusted friend what's going on inside of them...sharing with another about what they are discovering as they journey with God.

- I'm guessing our initial response to the idea/practice of Confession is resistance. Why do you think that is? (Exploring our resistance to something is itself a good practice.)

- A key gift/promise of our faith is the forgiveness we are offered through Christ. How aware are you of your need for forgiveness? Can you share your experience of the cleansing, release, lightness that has come with forgiveness?

The next chapter, oddly, opens with a good illustration of the practice of Examen (this chapter). Think of a team watching game film and the reasons, purpose, and benefits of doing so. That's a good image of what Examen is all about.

Chapter 7 ~ Discernment: Recognizing and Responding to the Presence of God

Last year (2023) at this time we, as a church, were going through a series on Discernment. How timely that a year later we are revisiting the topic. It really is an important habit to develop. As RHB states, "*The habit of discernment is a quality of attentiveness to God that is so intimate that over time we develop an intuitive sense of God's heart and purpose in any given moment.*" (emphasis added...I really like the words "intimate" and "intuitive" to describe our relationship with God). The practice of the previous chapter, Examen, really helps us to develop the "muscles" needed for the kind of attentiveness to God that we're seeking. As we learn to be attentive to God's ever-Presence, we learn to live in constant communion with Him throughout our days. (This is a very mystical and contemplative orientation to life.)

- What are some adjectives that you like to use to describe your relationship with God (or what you aspire for your relationship with God to be like)?
- Just for fun, and assuming you've been journeying with us for the past year, how would you describe your experience of discernment from a year ago to now?
- When do you feel the presence of God?

In close relationships there is nuance. We catch/notice a look, a tone, a sigh, body language...it's subtle but real. As RHB discusses "consolation" and "desolation" I think it might be helpful to think of the subtleties/nuances that naturally occur in relationships. Even in our relationship with God, and our relationship with ourselves, we can learn to pick up on these fine variations/distinctions of mood and attitude. The imperceptible becomes perceptible with increased knowledge/intimacy.

- Who is someone you know well, in whom you can quickly notice a passing glance, a subtle tone, and know what they are thinking/feeling in that moment? Or, with whom do you perceive what most people miss, and who knows you that closely as well?

"This capacity to recognize and respond to the presence of God in all of life is a spiritual habit and practice that keeps us connected with God's larger purposes for us and for our world rather than being consumed by self-interest. As we become practiced at recognizing the presence and the activity of God, we are able to align ourselves more completely with what God is doing in any given moment, which is when life begins to get really exciting." (emphasis)

added) Living in the world in which we do, we are naturally taught/conditioned to view everything from the reference point of the Self. Adopting the way of Jesus teaches us to view God as the central reference point. All the practices/rhythms of this book are designed to train us in a new frame of reference.

- Over the past year, what shifts have you noticed in how you view things (God, life, yourself, the church)?
- Choices, large ones and small ones, give shape to our lives and who we become. As you consider your present life and who you are today, which choices can you specifically identify that have gotten you to where and who you are? What decisions/choices are you presently considering or wrestling with? What are the considerations at play in your decision-making process?

“[Discernment] is not accessed through a formula or method; it is a way of being with a decision in God’s presence and allowing Him to guide our knowing. The capacity to discern and do the will of God arises out of friendship with God, cultivated through prayer, times of quiet listening and alert awareness.” This makes me think of what pastor/author Brian Zahnd says about prayer: *“The purpose of prayer is not to get God to do what we think God ought to do, but to be properly formed.”* Similarly, the purpose of discernment is not to ensure a favorable outcome to our decision-making but to be properly formed. Or to state it differently, the “result” we’re looking for has more to do with transformation into the likeness of Jesus and a deepening relationship with God and less about the consequences situationally or circumstantially.

RHB states that there are three underlying beliefs that undergird the practice of discernment...

1. Belief that God is indeed good.
 2. Belief that our primary calling is love.
 3. Belief that God communicates to us through the Holy Spirit (a belief that itself is undergirded with a belief/understanding that God gives us His Spirit to guide us and teach us in life).
- Where do you stand in relation to these beliefs? Do you believe them deep in the core of your being? (Again, the goal here isn’t to give the “right” answer but the honest answer. This is a safe place to share your heart. There is no one you need to impress here. There is no shame in admitting that you struggle with believing these things.)

My mind is drawn back to two years ago (roughly) when we went through James Bryan Smith’s book *The Good And Beautiful God* which specifically addresses the first two beliefs listed above. (You’ll recall that the flow of the whole Good and Beautiful series is confronting false narratives and correcting them with true narratives.) I’m also thinking ahead to Lent when we will be studying the Gospel of John, which contains the most concentrated teaching by Jesus about the Holy Spirit. Not surprisingly, the third belief mentioned by RHB lines up well with Jesus’ teaching.

RHB brings up an important piece of the discernment process...the Prayer of Indifference. The goal is to be able to let go of any personal agenda, any attachment to a particular outcome, or at the very least to be able to recognize that we are not yet at a place of indifference. It is a posture of open-heartedness, open-mindedness, open-handedness that allows us to be led by the Spirit. Within the Christ-centered community known as the Church, one of the biggest hindrances to personal and communal growth is personal/selfish agendas...i.e. Wanting things a particular way...our way.

To be clear, there is a distinct difference between indifference (at least as it's being presented here) and apathy. The goal is not to be apathetic but rather to be aware of motives within us that may not be of God.

You'll recall that the opening chapter of this book invites us to become aware of our deepest desires. The goal of indifference is to be able to set aside lesser desires, or competing desires, and to seek God's will over our own. Or, perhaps another way to look at it, the goal of indifference is to be able to say, like Jesus, "*Not my will but Yours be done.*"

"The question that is most pertinent at this place in the discernment process is, What needs to die in me in order for God's will to come forth in my life? Is there anything I need to set aside so that I can be open to what God wants?" (emphasis added...and good questions to discuss)

- What topic, issue, subject matter, or desire, do you sense within yourself in which your will is competing against God's will? Are you willing to pray in the direction of indifference about that?

"In the realm of spiritual transformation, the questions we are willing to ask ourselves are more important than the answers we think we know." I would add to that, the questions we allow others to ask us are an important part of the transformation process as well. The journey of spiritual transformation is not an individual, personal, private matter. We are part of a community, a family, the Body of Christ. What affects me affects others, and vice versa. It is truly a beautiful gift that we don't have to do all this discernment on our own. But it does take a fair amount of vulnerability, humility, and maturity to allow others into the process. This is not something our highly individualistic culture has conditioned us to do.

- Who are those people you seek out in your decision-making/discernment process? Who is allowed/invited to ask you the hard questions?
- In your own words, why is community important to the discernment process?
- Is there anything you are currently seeking discernment about? Care to share?
- RHB talks about "calling" in this chapter. What is your calling? How did you come to an understanding of that? (If you're not sure what your calling is, a question you could ask yourself is "what is something I can't not do"? Like Jeremiah, you just have to do it.)

- There is lots of practical wisdom (and questions) in the section entitled “Gather And Assess The Data”. What particularly stands out to you? What’s most familiar to you...your go-to, so to speak? What’s least familiar and foreign to you?

Discernment is not an exact science...and that’s OK. It’s not about getting everything “right”, but about being well formed. But, “...*what we can know for sure is that God is with us, that the desire to please God does, in fact, please Him, and that He will never leave us or forsake us. That is the most important thing we need to know...Ultimately, discernment is about falling in love...*” At the end of the day, it’s not about every decision working out perfectly, but about growing in our love for God.

Soul Training Exercises ~ Examen & Discernment

Just as a reminder, the last section of each chapter is entitled “Practice” and gives a thorough description of a practice/exercise. Below is simply a paraphrased/abridged version.

Examen

- **Preparation** ~ Sit still and quiet for a bit, breathe slow and deep, and allow yourself to sense how much God loves you.
- **Invitation** ~ Invite God to guide you and to highlight how He’s been with you throughout the day; invite Him to search your soul.
- **Review the Day** ~ Reflect on your day noticing when you were in tune with God and perhaps when you lost track of Him.
- **Give Thanks** ~ Regardless of how good or bad your day was, express your gratitude to God for it, for life, for His Presence and activity with you (even if you weren’t always mindful of it).
- **Confess** ~ Allow Psalm 139:23-24 to be your prayer and specifically lay your sins and shortcomings before Him.
- **Ask Forgiveness** ~ Rather self-explanatory...though allow yourself to also receive His forgiveness. As needed, or as shown to you, commit to resolving whatever may need attention.
- **Seek Out Spiritual Friendship** ~ As your practice Examen with regularity, share with a trusted friend what you’re learning/discovering about God, life, yourself...and allow them to do the same with you.

(FYI...with time and practice Examen will feel less mechanical and will flow more naturally.)

The Habit & Practice of Discernment

Notice times of “consolation” and “desolation”. (This actually fits really well within the Review of the Day part of Examen mentioned above.)

Regarding “consolation” as RHB says, “Ask God to bring to your heart a moment...for which you are most grateful. When were you most able to give and receive love? Which moment seemed to have the most life in it for you? What was said or done that made it live giving for you?”

Regarding “desolation”, RHB writes, “Ask God to bring to your heart a moment...for which you are least grateful. When were you least able to give and receive love? Which moment seemed to drain life from you? What was said or done that made it so draining for you?”

Is there a decision, question, or choice about which you need discernment? If you can presently identify something, consider walking through the process as described in this chapter. Give yourself ample time to go through this process (we’re talking potentially weeks, not minutes or hours). Remember the main goal/result of the process to develop a deeper relationship with God.