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CCF: 09-06-2020

The Rock: 01-31-2021

First reading: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Title: Taking inventory

Scripture: Psalm 139

Theme:

Can we, do we, have the ability to look deeply and honestly at ourselves and ask God to do the same for us? All for the purpose of being conformed to the likeness of His son Jesus.

Introduction:

Every year I sit and reflect on the year prior in order to assess successes, failures, goals met, and things like that.

I don't do it to feed an ego or to even find ways to pat myself on the back. More often than not, taking the time to reflect unsettles me.

Not in a bad way, but in a way that moves me forward to ask God to help me do better in the coming year.

Part of my regimen each day is to journal. It helps me to process thoughts and ideas as well as keeps me aware of what I've got going on inside. Keeps me honest.

One of the first things I wrote for January 1st 2020 was the following:

"Remember: 'You will always find time for what you feel is important.' I followed that up with this:

So, the question to ask in your time of reflection is, 'What is important to me?'" Why do I ask that?

Because the patterns and actions in your life will reveal that to you.

Spiritual inventory, not some bizarre self-abuse and belittling. Although that can become a pattern for some, and we will talk about that.

The Story:

The Bible actually has a lot to say about self-reflection and assessment. There are a lot of places to go in order to learn how and what we ought to be doing as God's people to create and maintain a healthy life and balance, as we go through each year.

King David, of all people, is one of the best to look at if we want to see patterns of healthy awareness of self.

One of the key factors in having a healthy view of yourself is what your view of God is, and how you see yourself in light of Him rather than the world around you.

What David helps us with is no exercise in futility, nor is it a motivational speech intended to make us "feel good" about ourselves.

Although, biblically speaking when we are this open and honest before God, and with ourselves, it becomes much easier to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus, and frankly, that becomes the most fulfilling and happy of lives.

The Psalm opens up for us this way:

"O Lord, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether."

-Psalm 139:1-4 ESV

All of the things that David is going to address here are affirmations (his

admitting) what God already knows, but they are things David needs to acknowledge as well as admit to himself.

Self-reflection before God is not for His benefit. It is for ours. We see that in verse four. (re-read)

Nothing at all that David unpacks for us here is a surprise to God. But for him to acknowledge these things before God, helps him and us to admit and identify that we are aware of ourselves.

This is in my view, a confessional prayer. Where David at the same time, is thankful for God and to God for everything. He is also laying out before Him the things he knows and the things he needs.

As I looked at this Psalm, there are so many things to talk about, but one that really stands out is the verses that are perhaps the most well-known:

"For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth."

-Psalm 139:13-15 ESV

We know these best because we use them often as our go to when it comes to life beginning at conception. While that is very true and it is a good use of it, that is nothing at all of what David had in mind when he wrote them.

You see, beyond the mystery of life's creation, is the plan and purposes of God for each of our lives in total. The successes he has for us as we grow into His grace and calling:

"Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them."

-Psalm 139:16 ESV

His desire for us to know ourselves as well as we can, to take that spiritual inventory, comes from the truth that: In knowing ourselves, we will actually know Him better, and have the desire to be conformed to Jesus (being his image-bearers in this world).

It is then that we have a deep desire and confidence to do the works he has called us to. Our desire then is to know Him and to grow in Him. Listen to David:

"How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I

would count them, they are more than the sand. I awake, and I am still with you.

-Psalm 139:17-18 ESV

His joy is in knowing God and what God has for him. The fullest life lived, is one that is lived in Jesus, by grace through faith. This is just what Paul talked about in his letter to the Ephesians:

"But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ— by grace you have been saved."

- Ephesians 2:4-5 ESV

"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

-Ephesians 2:8-10 ESV

The only way we can walk in these things is to know God and know ourselves in light of HIM.

That means self-assessment, honesty with ourselves before Him. This is not some self-help, motivational speech stuff.

This is the deep stuff of knowing and learning what makes us tick -all so that we can bring ourselves into submission and under God's care.

Neither is this an exercise in self-abuse here as David writes. This is not our typical: "I'm a failure in everything, the victim of circumstances or stupidity -I'm just going to go home, feel sorry for myself and eat worms."

That is never the Biblical intention of honest self-reflection. Rather, this is honest, heart-felt, self-reflection before the God who created David and knows David's heart.

The key, in my estimation, is the end of David's Psalm:

"Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!"

-Psalm 139:23-24 ESV

The only way we will ever be all that God desires us to be, is to start with this kind of honesty before him.

The Christian life does not start and finish with a salvation prayer, any more than a marriage starts and finishes with the wedding day.

NO! That is simply the beginning of a life-time of hard work. The hard work always starts after the "I do's".

And within that context, God never starts with the general -it's always with the particular. Most especially as it relates to us as individuals.

"Search me and know me", is not some vague concept or an ethereal notion. It hits home at the deepest level of who David is before God.

He is not looking for a cheerleader, he is looking for God to conform him in a way that makes him the best human being he can be, and as a result, the most useful here in this world.

Understand this: That when we come to the end of ourselves, we tend to see that as part of our problem.

Why? Because we are so self-sufficient, that if we can't do it all ourselves, we are somehow a failure.

When in truth, in actuality, in the plans and purposes of God, coming to the end of

ourselves is actually the beginning of the solution.

Winston Churchill was quoted once as telling a story of a soldier who worked his way up the ranks to great success.

Upon receiving a medal, he made the comment that he was a self-made man, that his success was all his doing.

To which the comment was then made back to him by Churchill: "Well son, you have relieved God of a very sacred burden."

Our effort is essential, for we are not called to sit on our couches as a bunch of belly-button gazers, hoping everyone else takes care of things. However, to think that it all begins and ends with us is also a very false and prideful notion.

This is the paradox of the Bible, of the Gospel. In the identifying that we are actually weak, and in desperate need of God to help us in our weakness.

It is in that moment, when we do that, where we are actually at our strongest, because it is Christ in us, the hope of glory who is working.

It's upside down, isn't it? At least when we look at it how this world does. We have a role to play and gifts to use, but it is always from a perspective that God

knows us, has formed us and strengthens us for the tasks He has given us to do.

Paul, again, realizes this very thing, and tells the Church in Corinth, that in all of this boasting and "self-sufficiency" of man, Paul has his weakness to boast in:

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

-2 Corinthians 12:7-10 ESV

This is grace! As well as the recognition of our need for God. The more we are aware of ourselves, our needs, and our shortcomings, the easier it becomes to be dependent on the one who knows us better than ourselves -and loves us anyway!

Now, again, we need to be careful not to fall into the trap of knowing ourselves, and our weaknesses, and then using that as the excuse for our endless cycles of messing up, repenting, and saying: "Well that's just me, it's the way I am, what else would or should I expect?"

And then doing the same things over and over again. That's really not Biblical and spiritual growth. Listen, I know better than anyone that I am going to screw up at least once per day, if not a hundred times more.

That's not the point. What I do with it and about it, that is the point! That's working out our salvation -with fear and trembling.

Sadly too, it's one of the reasons why so many identify bad patterns and habits, and know they need to change them, but simply settle for the same old way of being.

"That's just the way I've always been."
"No matter how hard I try; I still can't get it right."

I want to encourage you, if you struggle this way, we don't see any of this in King David. He knows there is nowhere he can go to get away from God. Look, staring at verse 7:

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night," even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you."

-Psalm 139:7-12 ESV

Why would he or any of us want to be where God isn't? The story of the Bible is that God comes looking for us, not to condemn us, but to SAVE us, through Jesus of Nazareth.

Avoiding growth and spiritual formation should never be our goal. Being very self-aware in light of who God has made us and then doing the hard work of seeking Him, is the working out of our salvation, isn't it?

I want to leave you with a quote and then some tools as we all begin to navigate this new year.

In her book: *The emotionally intelligent pastor: A guide for clergy and other*

church leaders, Jeannie Clarkson hits on this notion. It's a long quote but one I think is helpful:

"Healthy introspection is a lost art in our culture. Mention the importance of being reflective, and you'll get blank stares or protests about how such a contemplative lifestyle is all but impossible. Granted, if we fill our calendars with activity, and if we stay plugged into media 24/7, there's precious little time left over for simply being, thinking, and reflecting...The Biblical Mary was described as thoughtful and contemplative, prone to ponder deep things. Modern day Mary's are rushed and distracted, pulled in a thousand directions, and prone to ponder, "How will I ever get it all done?" Hard as it may be, we have to cultivate self-insight. Socrates was right, "The unexamined life is not worth living." And an unexamined life is certainly not worth inflicting on others! We need to recapture the lost art of self-reflection...King David modeled this courageous, humble practice when he prayed: "Search me God, and know me..."

-Jeannie Clarkson Pg. 65

She then gives some tools, which I want to give to you to perhaps think on, and

hopefully implement and use in the days, months and year(s) ahead:

Stopping: Detach from the frantic world to reflect and take an unflinching look at your heart and life.

Solitude: Getting alone.

Silence: being quiet and still.

Prayer: Talking at length with God.

Bible reading: Listening to God speak in His word. (As an aside. Stop wondering what God's will "is", for you in life. Read the Bible, it's clear what he has for you. BE salt and light, be a good citizen, and preach the Gospel.)

Community: Seeking insight from a small circle of people you trust. (Again, an aside- I know there is a group of people who pray for me always)

Journaling: Honestly expressing thoughts, feelings, questions, concerns, hang-ups, hurts, prayers, etc. on paper or a computer screen, perhaps in a password protected file.

-Jeannie Clarkson Pg. 66

David ends the Psalm in this way:

"Lead me in the way everlasting!"

-Psalm 139:24b ESV

This is the hard work of an examined life, of a life well lived before God and man, and frankly, it becomes the most productive life for our world and community in which we live.

We have no idea what 2021 holds for us. If we are focused rightly, and seeking Him in all things, He will always have us in the right place, at the right time, and in the right way to be the most helpful.

That is the Church in this world.