

Searching Our Heart

Lesson 5 in "More Like Jesus"

Lesson Aim: To learn the importance of searching our hearts, and of experiencing Godly sorrow over sin, so that we can grow in Christ.

Key Verse: Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. ²⁴ See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting. Psalm 139:23-24

To Search or Not to Search

In order to grow in Christ we must search our hearts and experience Godly sorrow over sin.

In that search we should expect to find considerable contrast between ourselves and Jesus; and between our life and that which He calls us to. This relates to our actions; and to the attitudes, motives, and values of the heart. It deals with both the inner and outer man.

There may be several reasons why Christians fail to check how they are doing and to identify areas that need attention.

- 1) Some churches don't emphasize spiritual maturity, so the members are ignorant of this call.
- 2) Self-righteousness blinds them. They think they are actually doing quite well and feel little need for change.
- 3) Many Christians feel they are close enough to God to make it to heaven when they die and they don't want to be much closer right now. They fear the price of knowing Him intimately and are ignorant of the blessings of that.
- 4) Others have a concept of a very harsh God. They think He requires them to be humanly perfect. They cannot honestly search their hearts because they would see something there that would condemn them. They think that to confess struggle or defeat is like admitting one is lost, because certainly one who is in such a condition could not come into the presence of a holy God. They see God's

judgment against sin but don't know of His grace toward sinners.

- 5) Still others are in churches that focus on faith and victory. To admit that one struggles with temptation is a betrayal of the brotherhood. Everyone pretends he is doing well and most assume they face an unusual struggle with temptation and sin. Each becomes a pious fake, secretly bearing his struggle; hoping against hope he is never found out.

Each of these attitudes produces a denial of our struggle with temptation and makes it difficult for us to search our hearts and acknowledge areas of need.

Our Common Struggle

You can know that I struggle with temptation. Sometimes I sin. I regret that but it's still true. You can also know that I know that *you* struggle with temptation, and that sometimes you sin. I know you regret it too.

The only people who don't struggle with temptation are those who yield without a struggle, and dead people! Anyone who would lead you to believe otherwise is either terribly deceived about himself, or a liar. There are no "super-saints"!

The healthy Christian is one who can search his heart; humbly acknowledge areas of struggle and sin; grieve over that in a healthy way; and then walk with God in pursuing righteousness.

In a healthy church, members will love and help each other in the light of this truth, with encouragement instead of condemnation when a member's struggles or failures become evident.

In a *really* healthy church, members can confess their faults to one another without fear of betrayal or rejection. They will help one another experience growth and victory!

We may never be careless about our struggles and sins. We may never excuse ourselves and say, "Oh well, that's just the way I am." But Satan constantly attempts to exercise dominion over us through our flesh and sometimes we do fail. Acknowledging that is a crucial step toward growth and victory.

The Way We Are

We are born with a nature that is inclined toward sin. As we learned in Lesson 3, when we are born again we receive a new nature, which is inclined toward God. However, the voice of the flesh is still there and we still have the capacity to sin! We will face spiritual temptations as long as we live.

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Eph. 6:12

There is an important distinction between sinning, and wrestling with the temptations of the flesh! Temptation is not sin! Satan falsely accuses us of sinning when we have been strongly tempted, and sometimes we feel stained and unacceptable to God.

We need to understand at what point sin occurs. Sin occurs when we act upon the temptation. Considering its desirability and contemplating reaching toward it are warning signs that must be heeded because sin itself is near.

But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed.¹⁵ Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. James 1:14-15

Isn't it humbling to acknowledge this truth? We'd like to think we're above this kind of thing! Pride is certainly a factor in that. And consider that to call it what it is, means that we need to accept responsibility for our response to it.

Doesn't it feel awkward to talk about our temptations and sins? It's humiliating, but to pretend they're not there is like pretending the snake isn't in the grass! We won't be bitten by the snake if we know its there and take appropriate steps (pun intended).

Godly Sorrow and Worldly Sorrow

When God's Holy Spirit speaks words of conviction to us, He intends that it lead to Godly sorrow; cleansing; and Christian growth. Consider Psalms 32:1-6

Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2 Blessed is the one whose sin the LORD does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit. 3 When I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. 4 For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer. 5 Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD." And you forgave the guilt of my sin. 6 Therefore let all the faithful pray to you while you may be found; surely the rising of the mighty waters will not reach them.

It is important that we are able to receive God's word of conviction, because it leads to life. However, when the Holy Spirit speaks, Satan has other plans for us! Let's look at II Cor. 7:8-11 and note:

V8 Paul does not regret making them sorrowful or causing them to feel badly!

V9 Their sorrow led to repentance, but;

V10 Two kinds of sorrow are possible:

- *Godly sorrow*, leading to repentance.
- *Worldly sorrow*, which produces death. (Sin is revealed and its consequences are feared, but it is not dealt with through confession and repentance and the crushing weight of guilt continues.)

V11 The fruit of Godly sorrow is wonderful! It produced tremendous change and growth in them!

Think of some Bible characters who experienced sorrow over sin. Indicate which kind of sorrow each of the following men experienced:

	Godly Sorrow	Worldly Sorrow
David	_____	_____
Peter	_____	_____
Judas	_____	_____
Saul/Paul	_____	_____

Conviction and Condemnation

There is another dimension to this discussion on godly sorrow versus worldly sorrow. It deals with how we hear the Holy Spirit's word of conviction, which is to lead us to repentance and life. Satan comes quickly to distort the word of conviction and turn it into condemnation. Consider this comparison between conviction and condemnation.

	Conviction	Condemnation
Its source	God's Holy Spirit	Satan
Its messages	What you <i>did</i> was bad	<i>You</i> are bad
	Come for cleansing	Could you <i>ever</i> be forgiven?
	Deal with it, and come back to me	You will <i>never</i> get the victory
	I love you very much	If people really knew you - -
Our responses	Confess (agree, acknowledge)	Clamp up, lock the sin in us
	Repent (turn from this sin)	Pattern of sin continues
The results	New life	Further distanced from God
	New zeal for God	Discouragement
	Pressing on	Held back in our Christian walk

Every honest Christian will acknowledge that he hears both conviction and condemnation. It is important that we learn to discern between the two. And we need to grow in the discipline of choosing the word of conviction over condemnation!

Can you think of times when you experienced condemnation and worldly sorrow, instead of receiving conviction and godly sorrow, as God tried to lead you to repentance and new life? Will you determine to handle it differently now?

Quiet Moments

Find a quiet spot and read Psalm 51:1-17. Feel the acknowledgment of temptation and sin; the pleading for mercy, forgiveness, cleansing and renewal; and the declaration of new life! Can you feel both the descent and ascent of emotion there? Can you identify that in your own life?

Search Me, Oh God

In Psalm 139:23-24 David opens himself to God's searching. He identifies three levels of "knowing" within us.

He asks God to search his *heart*, i.e. the deepest part of himself. This is the inner being with its affections and motives. Only God knows our heart until He reveals it to us. We don't know each other's hearts and we hardly know our own.

He then moves on to his *anxious thoughts*. This would be a more conscious part of himself, known to both God and himself. To a substantial degree his thoughts emerge from his heart, and shape his actions.

The third area is his *ways*, or actions, which are known to God, himself, and others. He wants to know if there is any way in him that could produce hurt; possibly toward his own life, others, or God's kingdom.

David not only wanted to be searched; he wanted to be tried and tested. He knew that only then could he walk in the blessing of God's way. When David said "try me," he meant "prove me on the basis of your Word." He may also have meant "Put me into situations where I can see what's inside of me!"

This Psalm is a wonderful expression of sincerity and humility, but its spirit is foreign to many Christians. They would rather God *didn't* bother showing them the darkness of their heart, thoughts, and actions!

We would all do well to admit some reluctance here! We need to grow in our freedom to invite Him to search us. And isn't that simply part of the growth process?

Prayer

God my Father, Who knows me best yet loves me most, I see afresh my need to invite you to search me and tell me what you see.

I acknowledge that the potential to sin lies near the surface of my heart. I want to see my weaknesses and my sin and deal with them according to truth. Please lead me in the path of Godly sorrow, repentance, and new life.

Father, I want to refuse worldly sorrow. Grant me discernment so that I might recognize condemnation and the false accusations of the enemy.

God my Father, please lead me to new depths of soul searching and honesty, and to new heights of purity in heart, mind and deed. Thank you, Father

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- 1) How free have you felt to take an honest look at yourself and acknowledge your weaknesses and sins?

- 2) Which of the five reasons given on why Christians don't pursue righteousness (first page), best describes the church community you know? Are there other reasons?

- 3) What do you think of the definition of "a healthy church" that is given here?

- 4) What are your thoughts on conviction versus condemnation?

- 5) What is your response to the discussion on Psalm 139 and the three levels of knowing? Are you ready to ask God to show you yourself at all three levels?

- 6) Why is the thought of doing that so scary?

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