

The Exam

A Parable of a Soul Searching Prayer
by Rick Carlson

Introduction:

Not all prayer looks out to the great expanse of the creator God of the stars and planets. God is not just way out there, he is close, very close, so intimately close that he knows you completely inside and out.

The prayer of Examen is prayer that looks inward into our own heart. The word "examen" is rooted in Latin and is where we get the English word, "examination." When we pray a Prayer of Examen, we look inward and seek God in the most intimate places of our hearts and minds. For most of us this is as intimidating as going to the doctor for a physical.

To illustrate, I offer this parable of a soul searching prayer.

Story:

I didn't want to pray that morning. I was hyper-conscious of the time which is a natural reaction for me when I'm under stress. When I am anxious I compensate by trying to be efficient with my time and am impatient with how others use theirs. So, I sat in my prayer chair and waited like a patient in the waiting room of a doctor's office - waiting for the Great Physician to keep his end of this divine appointment.

At last my name was called. My prayer began with well rehearsed routines much like the routines a nurse puts you through to get your measurements and vital signs.

"Lord, thanks for the day, for my family, for my life. I submit myself this morning to your measurements – weigh me and see if my inner life is in balance to do your mission. Take my temperature and see if it points to an infection of sin. Take my blood pressure – see if I am holding onto anxieties that could be dangerous to my well being. Take my pulse and see if my heart is beating strongly for you."

As is typical in a doctor's office, I didn't know if any of my vital signs would throw up red flags but I knew the great physician would let me know if there was something to be concerned about. I waited in the little room with nothing to do, nothing to read except the charts and signs on the wall. "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness", "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding", "Cast all your anxiety on the Lord for he cares for you." The words comforted me as I rehearsed them over and over in my mind.

At last, I heard the turning of pages outside the door. The Great Physician was reading my chart.

His handshake was warm and friendly. His smile was disarming and his eyes made me feel welcome. He could see that I was nervous and put the chart on the desk and rolled his chair around so that we could talk. "Tell me, how are you feeling?" I exhaled. This was a good place to start. I wasn't ready to be scolded for not losing weight or hanging on to some of my typical anxieties like money or my concern for my kids.

"I'm feeling OK, I guess, Lord. I can't complain, or at least I shouldn't complain. I have it pretty easy compared to other people, you know."

"Yes, I know," he responded, "but I will deal with the other people when I see them but I need you to tell me how you are feeling." The choice I had to make right then was whether or not I would let him know my symptoms or else put up the same front of perfect spiritual health that I do with other people. I decided that if I was going to ever be spiritually healthy, this was a safest place to be vulnerable and say what needed to be said.

"I have been pretty tired lately. I feel like I'm fighting something because I don't have any energy. I've been having weird pangs of guilt that hit me out of nowhere. To tell you the truth, I'm afraid that something is seriously wrong and I don't know what to do."

The Great Physician looked me square in the eye, "Well, that's why you're here, isn't it? Let's take a look." Spinning around again on his chair, he grabbed the chart and scribbled something and put it down again. He took the otoscope, a handheld instrument with a little light on the end. I didn't get the impression that he was in a hurry but rather he knew that I was still nervous about the exam.

First he checked to see if my eyes reacted to the light. A person whose inner eyes are not able to follow the Great Physician's small light in an exam will not react quickly to the light of truth in the rest of life. Discerning the difference between the light of truth and the lies of darkness is vital to good sight. "Are you seeing well?"

"I run into things a lot like rotten attitudes and old sins that I've tripped on before. I look back at where I've been and what I've done and clearly see the mistakes that I've made. But as for what's ahead, that's a different story. Lord, what do I need to do to see more clearly to walk by faith and not by sight?"

Well, for one thing, stop looking backward so much. If all of your attention is on what is behind you, you will never be able to see what is ahead. You have been so afraid of making mistakes that you keep forgetting that your focus needs to be on the finish line and not on the missteps of your past. Your eyes are fine, just make sure that you keep them focused on the prize.”

He clipped a small black cone over the end of the otoscope and looked through the eyepiece into my ears. “How is your hearing?”

“Not very good. I hear every noise in the world just fine. People telling me what to believe, advertisers telling me what I need, tempters telling me what I want but when I want to listen to your voice, I don’t hear a thing. You are silent so, what’s going on?”

Your spiritual ears are working fine but if you want to hear God speak, you’ve got to get away from all the noise. I’ll keep talking, the question is, will you turn down the volume of the world long enough to listen? Please lay back.”

I laid back on the uncomfortable paper covered exam table. This was the part of the exam that I was most anxious about. The pains that I had been feeling were not normal. I was afraid. On one hand I wanted him to find out what was wrong with me, on the other I didn’t. If he were to find a tumor of un-confessed sin, a hernia of divided loyalties or something else I would face strong medicines of discipline and potentially, spiritual surgery.

Carefully and deliberately the Great Physician applied pressure to various parts of my abdomen always asking, “Does this hurt?” He checked my joints, my spine and neck. He looked carefully at my skin to see if there were signs of disease or sun damage. He assessed my strength, reflexes and pain tolerance. Most of the time I didn’t know what he was looking for but I was obedient to his commands to push, pull, cough and relax.

Finally, he put the stethoscope in his ears and warmed the cold metal listening cup with his hand. “Just breathe normally.” Of course, as soon as you think about breathing normally you start breathing abnormally. He just smiled. “Now take a deep breath... now exhale. Again.” He shifted the listening cup from the left to the right side and then listened to the left and right on my back.

I braced myself for the bad news. I have heard so many times that the primary cause of all spiritual maladies is that we are born with a bad heart. We have no control over our misfortune and will certainly suffer the consequences of deformed spiritual genetics passed down from Adam and Eve. I saved him the trouble of telling me the bad news.

I know, Lord, that my heart is corrupted with sin. I grieve over my depravity and unworthiness of your love. I long to have a good heart but am powerless to change my spiritual genetics.

He put his hand on my shoulder. I think he wanted me to hear the weight of his words by feeling the weight of his arm. "Listen carefully. It is true, that before you came to faith in Christ your heart was doomed by the disease of sin. But you have a new heart, a good heart, because your heart beats with the spiritual genetics of Christ. You are transformed, you are a new person. Your sinful nature does not define who you are anymore. The glory of God is within you. What we need to do is work to help you live with your true identity.

The Great Physician's words penetrated the core of my being. I was not prepared to hear the truth with such care. My anxieties about being examined in prayer were replaced with gratitude and relief. (pause)

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