

# *Spiritual Formation*

with The Examen

## **The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation**

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Spiritual formation is an important part of the Christian life. It is the life-long process of being conformed in the image of Christ which allows us to live a life like Jesus, full of fruitful relationships, authentic rest, satisfying service, meaningful struggle, and pure contentment. Without transformation in our life, we can feel stagnant and without purpose. But as we are formed in the image of Christ, we move toward full spiritual maturity, being able to fully enjoy God and all his creation. (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Spiritual disciplines are the avenues that allow us to learn from God about our relationship with Him, ourselves, and others. They are habits, practices, and experiences that promote spiritual maturity in all who desire to be formed into the image of Christ. When we allow the practice of spiritual disciplines to open our hearts and minds to God, the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation within us. From there, we begin responding to God in ways that show our trust and dependence on Him.

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*Every spiritual discipline tutors us in relationship.<sup>1</sup>*

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Our relationship with God also grows with the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines. Thomas Green describes how our relationship with God deepens through spiritual practices using a marriage analogy. Couples typically advance their relationship in stages. A familiar progression we see is from courtship to honeymoon and then on to marriage. Each stage of the relationship produces a depth in knowledge and intimacy.

The courtship stage is for getting to know each other. The two learn about themselves while learning more about the person they are involved with. The two begin to ask what it means to spend the rest of their life with this person. Once the couple has learned enough, they may choose to move to the honeymoon stage. During the honeymoon, the two begin to experience love for each other that is satisfied by simply being in each other's presence. Finally, the marriage stage transforms the superficial love of the honeymoon into a more profound, self-sacrificing love for one another. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Newly Revised Edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014: p. 11.

stage, the couple learns to serve and support each other. Like human relationships, our relationship with God goes through these same stages (see Figure 1).

| RELATIONSHIP STAGE | CHARACTERISTICS    | GOAL  | SPIRITUAL PRACTICES  |
|--------------------|--------------------|---|--|
| <b>Courtship</b>   | Knowing God        | Understanding what it means to spend my life with God.        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditative prayer</li> <li>• Imaginative prayer</li> <li>• Bible study</li> </ul> |
| <b>Honeymoon</b>   | Experiencing God   | Learning to experience God's presence.                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Retreat</li> <li>• Lectio Divina</li> <li>• Contemplative prayer</li> </ul>       |
| <b>Marriage</b>    | Transformed by God | Allowing yourself to be transformed into the image of Christ. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Examen</li> <li>• Confession/Repentance</li> <li>• Simplicity</li> </ul>      |

Figure 1

Spiritual disciplines help us to deepen our relationship with God by providing experiences that put us in the presence of God for increased knowledge and love of God, self, and others. As we do so, not only do we grow in intimacy with God, but we are also continually shaped into the image of Christ, enabling us to live life to the fullest.

The Examen is just one spiritual discipline that can help you grow your relationship with Christ while being formed in his image.

# Examen

## Definition

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The Examen is a practice of discerning God's works within us and the world.

## Intent

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The Examen teaches us be aware of God's presence in our life. We often ask the question, "Where is God?" The answer? God is always with us, but we often lack awareness of God's presence in the daily activity of our life. The examen trains us to be aware of God's presence in all things.

## Scripture References

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*"For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives" Colossians 1:9*

*"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God." Philippians 1:9-11*

## Historical Background

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The Examen as a spiritual practice started with St. Ignatius of Loyola. In his twenties, Ignatius experienced a life-threatening injury that brought a spiritual awakening. With nothing else to do during his recovery, Ignatius read books on the life of Christ and stories of saints. As he read about saints' lives, Ignatius thought about life void of God. The idea of life without God gave him a sense of discontentment. But imagining a life with God brought a sense of joy. The sense of discontent he called "desolation," and the sense of joy he called "consolation." Ignatius became convinced that God was speaking to him through his feelings of desolation and consolation, so he began to pay care attention to his feelings in prayer.

Ignatius learned to become aware of God’s activity in all areas of his life by contemplating his emotions. He believed that his feelings about life experiences could help him discern God’s activity within himself and the world. To help with this realization, Ignatius developed the prayer of Examen. It encouraged him to reflect on how God was moving through his feelings each day and how he might respond to God’s activity moving forward.

## The Practice

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The Examen enables us to see God’s activity in our lives. Praying the Examen helps to:

- See what is going right and wrong while appreciating the balance.
- See the difference between who we are in Christ and who we are trying to be in the world.
- See patterns and meaning in the insignificant things of life.
- See and acknowledge how we honestly feel, and the authentic needs hidden in those feelings.
- See the purpose God has placed within us.
- Uncover matters for prayer.

The prayer of Examen has been adapted in many forms over the centuries. The traditional and contemporary versions of the Examen are described below. Read over each version and choose which you would like to try. The Examen can be done three times a day (morning, noon, and night) or once at the beginning or end of your day.

**Preparation:** You may wish to light a candle to represent the Spirit’s presence with you. Prepare your heart for the exercise by doing something that helps you to experience God’s unconditional love. For example, imagine yourself in a favorite place with someone whose love you trust, such as a friend, Jesus, or God. Put your feet flat on the floor, take a few deep breaths from the bottom of your toes, up through your legs, your abdomen muscles, and your chest. Breathe in God’s unconditional love. Then breathe out, filling the space around you with love.

### Traditional Method

1. **Seek the Spirit’s Help:** Ask for the wisdom to discern God’s voice and guidance. Then, ask the Holy Spirit to highlight not only what you can see, but also the things that only the Spirit of God can uncover.
2. **Give thanks:** Give thanks for the gifts God has given you today. Ask the Spirit to bring to your awareness the gifts you see and the unseen gifts that God wants to reveal to you.

3. **Review and recognize failures:** Allow the Holy Spirit to guide you in reviewing the day. Ask the Spirit to highlight any areas of sin that need to be confessed. Wait quietly until the Spirit reveals what requires attention. Where did you fail to respond to God's gifts? When did you ignore or turn away from God's love? What happened in your relationships with other people? Were you faithful in carrying out your vocation in the world? How are you being called to conversion or transformation? Pray for God's Spirit to cleanse you and set you free from sin. Give thanks for God's faithfulness.
4. **Ask for forgiveness and healing:** If you find any sin, ask God to forgive you and set you on the right path again. If you find any mistakes made throughout the day, ask God to heal any harm that might have been done. Receive God's love and forgiveness so that you can move forward in your calling and purpose.
5. **Pray for the next day:** Ask God to guide your actions for the next day. Ask for help with anything that you think might be difficult. Ask for help to get through moments that might tempt you to repeat past failures.

## Contemporary Method

1. Place your hand on your heart and ask the Holy Spirit to bring your heart to the day's moment you are most grateful for. If you could relive one moment, which one would it be? When were you most able to give and receive love today?
2. Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so special. Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.
3. Ask God to bring your heart to the day's moment you are least grateful for. When were you least able to give and receive love?
4. Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult. Be with whatever you feel without trying to change or fix it in any way. You may wish to take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.
5. Give thanks for whatever you have experienced. If possible, share as much as you wish of these two moments with a friend.