THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles



The Examined Life

Confronting Sin Honestly

A FORMATION BOOK BY

Kendall Peterson

The Everyday Apostle

THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles

The Examined Life

Confronting Sin Honestly

✦ ✦ ✦

A Daily Bread Formation Book

The Everyday Apostle

INTRODUCTION

The Courage to Look

The ancient philosopher said that the unexamined life is not worth living, and the Christian tradition says something even stronger: the unexamined life is spiritually dangerous, because a man who never looks honestly at himself is a man ruled by forces he has refused to see. Most men live almost entirely unexamined. They are aware of their circumstances, their grievances, their plans, and their appetites, but they rarely turn the gaze inward to ask the harder questions: what is actually driving me, what are the real patterns of my failures, what sin has quietly taken up residence and begun giving the orders. This inward honesty is uncomfortable, and so most men avoid it their whole lives, and pay for the avoidance.

This book is an invitation to the examined life, and specifically to the honest confrontation with one's own sin that a man must undertake if he is ever to be free of it. It is not a gloomy exercise in self-hatred; it is the opposite. Only the man willing to see his sins clearly can ever be rid of them, and the honesty this book asks for is finally in the service of freedom, joy, and growth. The man who refuses to examine himself is not thereby sinless; he is merely blind, carrying his sins around undiagnosed and unaddressed, wondering vaguely why he keeps stumbling. The man who looks, who names what he finds, and who brings it into the light is the man on the road to actually changing.

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

We will begin with why honest self-examination is so hard and why it is worth the discomfort. We will learn the practice of the examination of conscience, both the nightly review and the deeper periodic look. We will face the particular ways a man deceives himself about his own sin, the rationalizations and evasions that keep the truth at bay. We will look at the roots beneath particular sins, the deeper patterns and disordered loves from which the surface failures grow. And we will see how honest confrontation with sin leads not to despair but to the specific, hopeful work of real change, so that the examined life becomes not a burden but the path to the freedom a man actually wants.

CHAPTER ONE

Why We Refuse to Look

The Flight From Self-Knowledge

Before a man can take up honest self-examination, he has to understand why he, like nearly everyone, instinctively avoids it, because the avoidance is powerful, subtle, and mostly unconscious. No one decides in so many words never to examine himself; the flight from self-knowledge is quieter than that, a thousand small turnings-away, a reflexive changing of the inner subject whenever the gaze threatens to land on something painful. Understanding the mechanisms of this flight is the first step to overcoming them.

The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it? — Jeremiah 17:9

The Pain of Seeing

The simplest reason men avoid self-examination is that it hurts. To see one's own sins clearly, the pettiness, the selfishness, the recurring failures, the gap between the man one presents and the man one is, is genuinely painful, and the human organism avoids pain. It is far more comfortable to maintain a flattering self-image, to think of oneself as basically a good person with a few forgivable quirks, than to look squarely at the actual record. So a man protects the comfortable image by simply not looking too closely, keeping the examination shallow, glancing off anything that would disturb the picture. This is understandable but costly, because the sins a man will not look at are precisely the ones that keep their power over him. What is not seen cannot be confronted, and what is not confronted cannot be changed, so the very comfort the flight preserves is purchased at the price of staying stuck.

The Many Masks of Evasion

The flight from self-knowledge rarely announces itself as such; it wears respectable masks. One is busyness, the perpetual activity that conveniently leaves no quiet moment in which the truth might surface. Another is comparison, the habit of measuring oneself against those who are worse, so that one always comes off looking acceptable. Another is blame, the reflex that locates the real problem always in others, in circumstances, in one's upbringing, in anyone and anything but oneself. Another is the vague general admission, I'm a sinner like everyone, which sounds humble but functions to avoid naming any specific sin that might actually have to be dealt with. Each of these is a way of seeming to be honest about oneself while actually evading the particular, uncomfortable truth, and a man does well to learn his own favorite evasions, because the mask he wears most naturally is the one that most effectively keeps him from seeing himself.

The Cost of Not Knowing

A man might ask what it really costs to go on unexamined, and the answer is that it costs him his freedom, because a sin unseen is a sin in charge. The patterns a man refuses to examine do not go dormant for being ignored; they continue to operate, shaping his choices, poisoning his relationships, and limiting his life, all the more powerfully for being invisible to him. The unexamined man is not free of his sins; he is merely unconscious of them, driven by motives he has never inspected, repeating failures whose roots he has never traced, a man who cannot understand why his life has the shape it does because he has refused to look at the one place where the explanation lies. Self-knowledge, however painful, is the price of freedom. A man cannot be master in a house he refuses to enter, and the refusal to examine himself leaves him a stranger in his own soul, ruled by tenants he has never met.

There is a particular irony in this for capable, accomplished men, who are often the least examined of all. A man can run a company, master a difficult trade, or command the respect of many, and remain almost wholly a stranger to his own interior, because the very competence that orders his outer world has never once been turned inward. He assumes that a man so effective in the world must surely have himself in hand, and the assumption is exactly what keeps him from looking. Some of the least self-aware men are the most externally successful, precisely because their success supplies them with a flattering story that makes the inward look feel unnecessary. The examined life asks even, especially, the capable man to grant that competence in the world is no evidence at all of honesty about the soul.

CHAPTER TWO

The Daily Examination

A Practice That Changes a Man

The classic Christian tool for the examined life is the examination of conscience, and in its daily form it is one of the most transformative habits a man can build, precisely because it is small, repeatable, and relentless. A single dramatic bout of self-scrutiny changes little; a brief, honest review repeated every night for years remakes a man, because it gradually brings the whole of his life under the light and trains a running honesty that begins to operate even in the moment. A man who wants the fruit of the examined life without being crushed by it should begin here, with the daily examen.

Let us test and examine our ways, and return to the Lord. — Lamentations 3:40

The Shape of the Nightly Examen

The daily examination need take only a few minutes, and a simple, time-tested shape serves well. A man begins by placing himself in God's presence and asking for the light to see himself truly, because self-examination done in one's own light alone tends either to harshness or to flattery. He then reviews the day that is ending, walking back through its hours and asking where he responded to grace and where he failed it, where he loved and where he sinned, noticing the actual events rather than a vague impression. He gives thanks for the good, the graces received and the things done well, because the examen is not only a hunt for faults. He acknowledges his sins honestly and with sorrow, naming them specifically rather than in a blur. And he resolves, with God's help, to do better tomorrow, perhaps choosing one particular thing to watch. That is the whole of it: presence, review, thanksgiving, contrition, resolution, a few minutes that, done nightly, accomplish more than hours of sporadic intensity.

A word about when and how, since good intentions about the examen die for want of a fixed time. The review works best anchored to an existing moment a man will not skip, most naturally the end of the day, in the few minutes before sleep, though some men find a quiet pause at a set hour serves better. The point is to attach it to something already reliable so that it does not depend on remembering or on feeling like it, because on most nights a man will not feel like it, and the examen done only when felt is the examen soon abandoned. A fixed time, a familiar place, the same simple steps: the very ordinariness is what lets the practice survive the hundreds of unremarkable evenings on which its whole power is quietly built.

Specific, Not Vague

The single thing that most determines whether the examen bears fruit is whether a man gets specific, because vague self-examination is nearly useless and often a subtle evasion. To conclude a day's review with I wasn't very good today is to have examined nothing; it names no sin, demands no change, and lets the actual failures slip past unaddressed. The fruitful examen names particulars: I was harsh with my wife at dinner; I looked at what I should not have looked at at nine o'clock; I cut that man off in traffic and nursed my anger for an hour; I skipped my prayer because I would rather have scrolled. These specifics are uncomfortable precisely because they are real, and that reality is the point. A man cannot repent of a vagueness or resolve against a generality; he can only confront, confess, and begin to change the particular sins he has actually named. The discipline of specificity is the discipline of honesty, and it is where the examen does its real work.

The Running Honesty It Builds

The deepest fruit of the nightly examen appears only over time, and it is something better than a nightly tally: a running honesty that begins to operate in the moment of temptation itself. A man who knows he will review his day honestly that night finds himself, more and more, aware of his choices as he makes them, catching the harsh word before it is fully out, noticing the temptation as it arises rather than only in retrospect. The light he turns on himself each night gradually stays on through the day, until self-examination becomes less a nightly event and more a continuous habit of honest self-awareness, which is exactly the condition in which real change becomes possible. This is why the saints prized the examen so highly despite its simplicity. They understood that this small nightly practice, faithfully kept, slowly rewires a man toward the moment-by-moment honesty that is the examined life, and that no grand resolution accomplishes what this quiet daily habit does.

CHAPTER THREE

The Lies We Tell Ourselves

Unmasking Rationalization

The great enemy of the examined life is not outright denial, which is rare and crude, but rationalization, the subtle and sophisticated art of telling oneself that a sin is not really a sin, or not really one's fault, or not really that bad. Rationalization is far more dangerous than denial because it feels like reasoning; a man rationalizing does not experience himself as lying but as thinking clearly, and that is precisely what makes it so effective at keeping the truth at bay. A man serious about self-knowledge has to learn to recognize the characteristic moves of his own rationalizing mind.

There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. — Proverbs 14:12

How Rationalization Works

Rationalization works by supplying the mind with reasons that make a sin acceptable, and the reasons are often genuinely clever, which is why they persuade. The sin becomes understandable given the circumstances; it was provoked, and so not really the man's fault; everyone does it, so it cannot be seriously wrong; it was a small thing, a one-time thing, a special case; he deserved it, or I deserved it, or no one was really hurt. Each of these contains just enough plausibility to do its work, and the work is always the same: to let a man commit or continue a sin while maintaining his image of himself as a good man who does not do such things. The rationalizing mind is a tireless defense attorney,

endlessly resourceful in finding grounds for acquittal, and a man who trusts its verdicts without suspicion will be acquitted of every sin he ever commits, right up to the ruin of his soul.

Learning Your Own Patterns

Because every man has his characteristic rationalizations, the favorite arguments he reaches for to excuse his favorite sins, a crucial part of self-knowledge is learning one's own. One man always pleads stress; whenever he has sinned, the explanation is that he was under pressure, and the pressure excuses it. Another always pleads the provocation of others; his sins are always reactions, never his own initiative. Another specializes in the future resolution, committing the sin now while sincerely intending to deal with it later, a later that never comes. Another leans on his overall goodness, his record of virtue that surely buys a little latitude here. A man who studies his own evasions, who comes to know the specific lies he most readily tells himself, gains a powerful defense, because a rationalization recognized loses much of its force. The argument that persuades when it feels like reasoning is disarmed the moment a man can say, there it is again, my old excuse, the thing I always say when I do not want to face what I have done.

It helps to notice that rationalization usually arrives with a particular inner tone, a slightly insistent, slightly hurried quality, the feeling of a case being made rather than a truth being seen. Honest self-knowledge tends to be quiet and a little heavy; rationalization tends to be busy and relieved, eager to close the matter and move on. A man who learns to feel that difference gains an early warning system, because he can catch the characteristic briskness of his own excuse-making even before he has untangled the particular argument. When a man finds himself assembling reasons with unusual energy, reaching a comfortable verdict with suspicious speed, the very eagerness is the tell, and the wise response is to slow down and ask what, exactly, he is so anxious not to have to see.

The Test of the Outside View

One of the most useful tools against rationalization is the deliberate adoption of an outside view, because a man's rationalizations are almost always exposed the moment he imagines the same act done by someone else. The thing he excuses so readily in himself, he would see clearly as wrong in another, and that double standard is the fingerprint of rationalization. So a man can test his own reasoning by asking: if my friend had done exactly this and offered exactly this excuse, would I accept it, or would I see plainly that he was deceiving himself? Would I say this aloud, in these words, to a wise and honest person I respect, or does it only sound convincing inside my own head where no one can

examine it? The sins we rationalize are the ones we keep in the dark of our private reasoning; dragging them into the imagined light of an outside observer, or the real light of an honest confessor or friend, is often enough to see them for what they are. Rationalization thrives in secrecy and withers under a second pair of eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

Digging to the Root

The Patterns Beneath the Sins

Honest examination of one's particular sins eventually leads to a deeper discovery: that the scattered failures are not random but connected, growing from a few deep roots. A man who only ever addresses his sins one by one at the surface, pulling the visible weeds while leaving the roots in the ground, finds himself pulling the same weeds forever. The examined life, pursued seriously, digs deeper, to the disordered loves and characteristic weaknesses from which a man's particular sins keep sprouting. This is harder work than surface examination, but it is where lasting change becomes possible.

Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. — Matthew 15:19

Sins Grow From Roots

The Christian tradition has long taught that the particular sins a man commits grow from deeper sources, often called the capital sins or the roots: pride, greed, lust, anger, gluttony, envy, and sloth. These are not so much individual acts as orientations, deep tendencies of a fallen heart, and they function as roots because a single one of them produces a whole crop of varied surface sins. A man's pride, for instance, may express itself as defensiveness in one situation, as the need to win every argument in another, as contempt for certain people in a third, as the refusal to apologize in a fourth, as touchiness about his reputation in a fifth, all of them different acts growing from the one root of pride. A man who examines only the surface acts sees five unrelated problems; a man who digs to the root sees one, and begins to understand himself. Tracing the connections between one's scattered sins back to their common sources is one of the great labors of self-knowledge, and one of the most illuminating.

Finding Your Governing Fault

Among a man's roots there is usually one that is dominant, a single characteristic fault that is the source of more of his sins than any other, and identifying it is enormously valuable. The spiritual masters called this the predominant fault, and they taught that a man makes far more progress by concentrating his efforts against this one deep root than by scattering his attention across all his surface sins at once. For one man the governing fault is pride, for another a disordered sensuality, for another anger, for another a sloth that avoids every difficulty, for another a vanity hungry for approval. A man discovers his own by looking honestly at his sins and asking what lies beneath the greatest number of them, what tendency he returns to again and again, what accusation, if a wise friend made it, would sting the most because it is truest. This discovery is humbling, which is part of why men avoid it, but it is also strategically decisive: the man who knows his predominant fault knows where the main battle of his interior life must be fought, and stops wasting his energy on skirmishes while the real enemy holds the center.

A man should not expect to identify his predominant fault in a single sitting, nor trust too quickly the first candidate that comes to mind, which is often a decoy, a lesser fault he is willing to admit precisely because confessing it protects the deeper one. The real governing fault is usually the one a man is most reluctant to name, the accusation that would wound rather than merely embarrass, and it tends to reveal itself slowly, over months of honest examen, as the same root keeps appearing beneath failure after failure. A trusted confessor or spiritual director is often able to see it before the man can, which is one of the great reasons to let another honest soul into the work; what is hardest to see in oneself is frequently plain to someone who loves us and is willing to tell the truth.

Striking at the Root

Once a man has identified his deep roots, and especially his governing fault, his whole approach to self-improvement can become more intelligent and more effective, because he can strike at the root rather than forever cutting at the branches. This does not mean neglecting the surface sins, which must still be confessed and resisted, but it means understanding them as symptoms and directing his main effort at the underlying disorder from which they grow. If the root is pride, then the targeted work is the patient cultivation of humility, the deliberate practice of the opposing virtue, pursued over years, which gradually weakens the source of a hundred surface sins at once. This is why the tradition pairs each capital sin with its opposing virtue and counsels a man to cultivate the specific virtue that counters his specific predominant fault. The work is slow, because roots are deep and do not yield quickly, but it is the only work that produces lasting change, and a man who gives himself to it finds, over time, that whole categories of his

surface sins begin to fall away, not because he attacked each one but because he weakened the root that fed them all.

CHAPTER FIVE

Honesty Without Despair

Seeing Your Sins and Keeping Hope

There is a danger on the far side of honest self-examination that must be named, because it stops many men from undertaking it at all: the fear that if they really look at their sins, they will be crushed by what they see. And in fact a merciless self-knowledge, honesty without hope, does crush, driving a man to discouragement, self-hatred, and despair, which are not the fruits of the Holy Spirit. The examined life is meant to be honest and hopeful at once, and learning to hold those two together is essential, or a man will either refuse to look, to protect himself, or look and be destroyed.

Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more. — Romans 5:20

Two Kinds of Sorrow

Scripture distinguishes two kinds of sorrow over sin, and the difference is the difference between life and death. There is a godly sorrow that leads to repentance and life, and a worldly sorrow that leads only to death, and they can look similar on the surface while being opposites underneath. Godly sorrow is sorrow for having offended God whom one loves; it is honest about the sin but turns the man toward God and his mercy, and it bears fruit in real change and renewed hope. Worldly sorrow is wounded pride dressed as repentance; it is sorry mainly to have fallen short of its own self-image, it turns the man inward on himself in a spiral of self-recrimination, and it bears fruit in discouragement and paralysis. The test is in the direction: does my sorrow drive me toward God and his mercy, lightening me for the work of change, or does it drive me down into myself, into a brooding self-hatred that accomplishes nothing? The first is the Spirit's work and is to be welcomed; the second is the enemy's counterfeit and is to be resisted.

Your Sins Are Not the Last Word

The decisive truth that keeps honesty from curdling into despair is that a man's sins, however many and however ugly, are never the last word about him, because the last word belongs to the mercy of God, which is greater than all of them. The point of seeing one's sins clearly is not to arrive at a final, damning verdict on oneself but to bring them

to the One who forgives, so that the honest sight of sin always opens onto the greater sight of grace. Scripture's astonishing claim is that where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, which means that no honest reckoning with one's sins can ever outrun God's mercy, and a man who truly believes this can afford to be completely honest about himself, because he knows that whatever he finds, grace is greater. The saints could look at their sins with a clarity that would destroy a proud man precisely because they looked at them from within the certainty of God's mercy, and so their deep honesty produced not despair but humility, gratitude, and love.

The Freedom on the Other Side

What waits on the far side of honest, hopeful self-examination is not the crushing a man feared but a genuine freedom, the lightness of a man who has stopped hiding from himself. There is a peculiar and exhausting labor in maintaining a false self-image, in keeping one's real sins out of sight, in defending a flattering picture against the evidence; and a man who gives it up, who simply tells the truth about himself to himself and to God, discovers that the truth, as promised, sets him free. He no longer has to pretend, no longer has to defend the indefensible, no longer has to flinch away from parts of his own soul. He can acknowledge what he is, sinner and all, and rest in a mercy that has seen it all already and loves him still. This is the paradox at the heart of the examined life: that the honesty men most fear turns out to be the door to the peace they most want, and that the man brave enough to see his sins truly, in the light of grace, is the freest and most peaceful man of all.

This reframes what self-examination is finally for. A man might begin the practice thinking its purpose is to catch and punish himself, a kind of internal prosecution he submits to out of duty, and if that were all it were, the dread men feel toward it would be justified. But its real purpose is liberation, the steady dismantling of the exhausting machinery of self-deception, and a man who has tasted the relief of simply telling the truth about himself before a merciful God stops experiencing the examen as a tribunal and starts experiencing it as a homecoming. He is no longer managing an image; he is known, and known fully, and loved anyway, and the honesty that once looked like the threat turns out to have been the way to the only rest that lasts.

CHAPTER SIX

From Seeing to Changing

Turning Examination Into Growth

Self-examination that never issues in change becomes a sterile and even harmful thing, a perpetual inspection that produces guilt without growth. The whole point of seeing one's sins clearly is to be rid of them, and so the examined life must flow on into the actual work of change, the concrete, patient effort by which a man, cooperating with grace, really does become different. This chapter is about that turn, from the honest seeing to the effective doing, because many men examine themselves faithfully and yet never change, having mistaken the diagnosis for the cure.

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. — James 1:22

One Thing at a Time

The most common reason self-examination fails to produce change is that a man, having seen the whole dismaying array of his sins at once, tries to fix everything simultaneously and so fixes nothing. Overwhelmed by the full catalog, he makes a sweeping resolution to be better in general, which is too vague and too large to act on, and within a week he is exactly where he started, now with the added discouragement of another failed resolution. The effective path is the opposite: to choose one thing, one specific sin or one root fault, and to work on that alone with concentrated effort until real progress is made, before moving to the next. This feels too slow to the man who wants to be rid of all his sins at once, but it is the only pace that actually works, because change is made in particular battles won, not in general intentions declared. A man who genuinely conquers one fault in a year has done more than the man who resolves against all of them every January and conquers none.

Concrete Resolutions and Real Means

Change also requires that a man move from vague intention to concrete plan, specifying not just what he wants to be but what he will actually do. The resolution I will be more patient changes nothing; the resolution I will not raise my voice at my children, and when I feel the anger rising I will leave the room and say a short prayer before responding, is something a man can actually do and actually fail at and actually track. Effective resolutions are specific, they name the triggering situation and the alternative action, and they are paired with real means: the sacrament of Confession bringing grace to the particular sin, prayer asking specifically for help with this fault, the avoidance of the occasions that reliably provoke it, the cultivation of the opposing virtue, and often the help of another person who knows the goal and can ask about it. A man who brings these real means to bear on one concrete resolution at a time is a man who changes; a man who

relies on sheer willpower and good intentions is a man who, however often he examines himself, stays the same.

Patience With the Process

Finally, turning examination into growth requires a long patience with oneself, because real change is slow, uneven, and marked by relapse, and a man who expects quick, clean victory will give up the first time he falls back. The honest truth of the spiritual life is that a man will work on a fault for a long time, make progress, then fall into it again, and must get up and continue, and that this pattern of progress and relapse, discouraging as it is, is the normal shape of genuine growth and not a sign of failure. What matters is not that a man never falls but that he keeps getting up, keeps returning to the work, keeps bringing the same old fault back to God and to Confession without despairing that it is still there. Over years, this patient persistence produces change that no burst of intensity ever could, and a man looking back across a decade of faithful, patient effort against a fault often finds, to his surprise, that it has genuinely loosened its grip, not through any dramatic victory but through the long accumulation of getting up one more time than he fell. The examined life, carried through into patient change, is finally not a grim bookkeeping of failures but a long, hopeful journey into freedom.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Examined Life and the Mission

Why Self-Knowledge Serves Others

It might seem that the examined life, with all its inward attention, is a private and even self-absorbed affair, a man endlessly scrutinizing his own soul. In truth the opposite is the case: honest self-knowledge is one of the great gifts a man brings to everyone around him, and the unexamined man, far from being free to love others well, is precisely the one most likely to harm them unawares. The inward work of this book is finally in the service of a man's whole life with others, and it is worth seeing why.

First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye. — Matthew 7:5

The Unexamined Man Harms Others

A man who has not examined himself does not thereby become harmless to others; he becomes dangerous to them in ways he cannot see, because his unexamined sins and

unacknowledged wounds spill out onto everyone around him. His unrecognized pride makes him hard to live with; his unexamined anger lands on his family; his unacknowledged insecurities drive him to control, to criticize, to wound. And because he has never looked at these things, he cannot understand the damage he does, and tends to blame the very people he is harming. The unexamined man is forever taking the speck out of his brother's eye with a log in his own, correcting in others the faults he cannot see in himself, projecting onto those around him the very things he refuses to examine. Self-knowledge is therefore not self-absorption but a prerequisite for loving others well, because a man who does not know his own faults will inflict them on everyone close to him while sincerely believing himself the injured party.

Honesty Makes a Man Safe

Conversely, the man who has done the honest work of self-examination becomes, over time, safe for others to be near, which is a rarer and more precious thing than it sounds. Because he knows his own sins, he is slow to condemn the sins of others, having lost the self-righteousness that makes a man harsh. Because he has faced his own pride and anger and selfishness, he keeps them more in check, and they spill out less onto the people he loves. Because he no longer needs to defend a false image of himself, he can take correction, admit when he is wrong, and apologize, which transforms every relationship he is in. The examined man carries a humility and a gentleness that the unexamined man cannot, and the people around him feel the difference as a kind of safety, the sense that this is a man who is honest about himself and therefore not forever managing them to protect his self-image. This is one of the quiet ways a formed man witnesses to the faith: not by what he says but by the peace and honesty of a soul that has stopped hiding from itself.

Clear Sight for the Work Ahead

Finally, the self-knowledge won through the examined life gives a man the clear sight he needs for every work God will ask of him, because a man who understands his own weaknesses can guard against them, and a man who knows his own strengths can offer them. The apostle who does not know his predominant fault will have it exploited in the mission; the leader who has never examined his need for approval will be manipulated through it; the father who has not faced his own anger will pass it to his children. But the man who has done the inner work goes out into his responsibilities with his eyes open, aware of where he is likely to fail and able to compensate, free of the illusions that trip up the unexamined, able to receive correction and to grow. The examined life, which looked at first like a private spiritual exercise, turns out to be the foundation of a man's whole

capacity to love, to lead, and to serve, and the honesty a man practices alone before God becomes, in the end, a gift to everyone whose life he touches.

CONCLUSION

The Life Worth Living

The unexamined life, the philosopher said, is not worth living, and the Christian adds that it is also not safe to live, because the man who will not look at himself is ruled by what he refuses to see. This book has been an argument for the courage to look, and a practical guide to looking well: the daily examen that trains a running honesty, the unmasking of the lies we tell ourselves, the digging past surface sins to their deep roots, the holding of honesty and hope together, the patient turning of what we see into real change, and the way all of this inward work finally serves everyone around us.

None of it is easy, and all of it runs against the grain of a nature that would rather not know. But the reward is nothing less than freedom, the freedom of a man who has stopped hiding from himself, who can acknowledge what he is in the light of a mercy greater than all his sins, and who is therefore free to actually change, to grow, and to love. The examined life is not the gloomy thing a man fears before he begins it; it is the door to the peace and the freedom he has wanted all along, and that only honesty can open.

So take up the discipline. Examine yourself daily, honestly, and with hope. Name your sins specifically, unmask your favorite evasions, trace your failures to their roots, and bring all of it, again and again, to the God whose mercy is greater than anything you will find in yourself. Do the patient work of change, one fault at a time, and be patient with the slowness of it. And trust that the man who gives himself to the examined life, honest and hopeful before God, is becoming not a more miserable man but a freer, humbler, more loving one, the kind of man God can use, and the kind of man a watching world most needs to see. This is the life worth living, and it begins with the simple, difficult courage to look.

✦ ✦ ✦