

# Examination of Conscience

by Doris Donnelly

An examination of conscience is a way to hold ourselves accountable before God and each other for the evil we do and the good we do not do. Some refer to it as an examination of consciousness: scanning our motives, thoughts, and actions to detect our loyalty to or betrayal of the priorities of the reign of God.

The delicate and difficult part in this process involves what we hold as our guide for accountability. For centuries the blueprint for good conduct was the list of Ten Commandments, until Jesus proposed a very different set of guidelines with the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1- 13).

As early as A.D. 150 in a document written by the Shepherd of Hermas, the Beatitudes were accepted as the positive norm of morality for Christians, stressing the ideals of their founder and avoiding the “do nots” of the decalogue.

What follows is an examination of conscience and consciousness based on the Beatitudes. It makes sense only if we truly believe that the teachings of Jesus have practical applicability in the world in which each of us lives and breathes. If we admit that relevance, we will find enough power in our fidelity to these counsels to renew the face of the earth.

1. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
  - Do I fear being poor, in spirit or otherwise, and prefer to be rich in money, brains, or influence?
  - Is my desire for poverty of spirit congruent with my lifestyle?
  - Do I use the word of God to rationalize my lifestyle, or am I willing to have God’s word criticize it?
  - Do I cling to my own ideas, opinions and judgments, sometimes to the point of idolatry?
  - Do I contribute my time, talent and money to the poor of the world?
  - Do I make it my business to examine the causes of poverty in our world and work to eradicate unjust systems?
  
2. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”
  - Do I grieve over loneliness, despair, guilt and rejection in the lives of others?
  - Am I willing to admit my own despondencies and need for comfort?
  - Do I minister consolation and healing, or do I blandly encourage people to “have courage,” thereby avoiding the opportunity to mourn with another?
  - Am I doing anything to dry the tears of those who mourn over war, poverty, hunger, injustice?
  
3. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”
  - Do I see any value in meekness or nonviolence?
  - Do I cringe at the thought of being called meek?
  - Do I understand nonviolence as a way to fight evil with good, and do I choose to live that way?
  - How much are intimidation and force part of my lifestyle?

- Do I work for nonviolent social change?
  - Do I foster a cooperative spirit in my children?
4. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”
- Have I kept myself ignorant of important current events that are manifestations of injustice?
  - Are my energies and passions focused on Christ, or are they scattered, disordered, divided?
  - Am I honestly trying to improve the quality of life around me?
  - Am I trying to improve the environment, racial relations, care for the unborn, sexual equality, the lives of the poor and destitute?
  - Have I decided that I will not be satisfied until justice is fulfilled in my own life, within my family, my church, my community, my world?
  - Have I let fear keep me silent when I should have spoken out against prejudice, injustice and violence?
5. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”
- Do I operate on a double standard of expecting mercy but not wanting to grant it?
  - Do I prefer the strict law and order approach, or that of mercy, tenderness and compassion?
  - Are there places in my life where people are suffering because of me and my unforgiving attitude?
  - Am I devoid of a merciful spirit toward those I call “enemy”?
  - What is my attitude toward capital punishment, ex-convicts...?
6. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”
- Am I trusting and trustful?
  - Do I value living without pretense, or am I constantly fearful that someone will take advantage of me?
  - Am I open and honest about who I am and what I do?
  - Do I deflect the attention and honor due to God and claim these things for myself?
  - Have I been untrue to myself, even a little, for advancement, money or good opinion?
  - Have I failed to take time for prayer, solitude, reflection?
7. “Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called children of God.”
- Am I eager for reconciliation, or do I antagonize and yearn for revenge?
  - Do I think apologizing is a sign of weakness?
  - Am I willing to be a bridge in family and community arguments?
  - Do I support violence in films, television and sports?
  - Have I studied peace and taken initiatives to stop violence and war?
  - Have I read, and do I support, the many official church statements against the arms race, nuclear weapons, war?
  - Do I see the Christian vocation as one of peacemaker?
  - Is my presence a source of peace to those around me?
8. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

- Do I criticize or ridicule those who suffer for their beliefs?
- Am I embarrassed to step out of the mainstream to stand up for a principle?
- Who are my heroes? Are there any among them who gave their lives without vengeance for what is true?
- Would I do the same?
- Do I worship security and fear costly discipleship?
- Have I called myself Christian without making my life a witness to the teachings of Jesus?
- Have I openly supported those who defend justice and give their lives for peace?

9. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

- Do I live confident of the promises of Jesus?
- Do I surrender to pessimism and anxiety?
- Do I perceive that there is a paradoxical victory in the cross of Jesus that breaks through power structures and conquers in peace and love?
- Have I become cynical rather than hopeful?

*From The Fire of Peace: A Prayer Book – available from Pax Christi USA; #542-217; \$12 plus shipping and handling.*