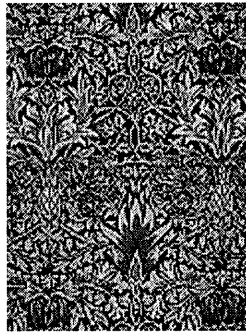


Classics

Cleanse Me From Secret Faults

How can we understand forgiveness if we haven't recognized the depth of our sin?

By John Henry Newman



Strange as it may seem, multitudes called Christians go through life with no effort to obtain a correct knowledge of themselves. They are contented with general and vague impressions concerning their real state; and, if they have more than this, it is merely such accidental information about themselves as the events of life force upon them. But exact systematic knowledge they have none, and do not aim at it.

[Yet] unless we have some just idea of our hearts and of sin, we can have no right idea of a Moral Governor, a Savior, or a Sanctifier that is, in professing to believe in Them, we shall be using words without attaching distinct meaning to them. Thus self-knowledge is at the root of all real religious knowledge; and it is in vain—worse than vain, it is a deceit and a mischief—to think to understand the Christian doctrines as a matter of course, merely by being taught by books, or by attending sermons, or by any outward means, however excellent, taken by themselves. For it is . . . as we search our hearts and understand our own nature that we understand what is meant by an Infinite Governor and Judge; in proportion as we comprehend the nature of disobedience and our actual sinfulness, that we feel what is the blessing of the removal of sin, redemption, pardon, sanctification, which otherwise are mere words.

Most men [however] are contented with a slight acquaintance with their hearts . . . Men are satisfied to have numberless secret faults. They do not think about them, either as sins or as obstacles to strength of faith, and live on as if they had nothing to learn.

We all have secret faults.

Now the most ready method of convincing ourselves of the existence in us of faults unknown to ourselves is to consider how plainly we see the secret faults of others. At first sight there is of course no reason for supposing that we differ materially from those around us; and if we see sins in them which they do not see, it is a presumption that they have their own discoveries about ourselves, which it would surprise us to hear.

[Yet, even if] all the world speak well of us, and good men hail us as brothers, after all there is a Judge who trieth the hearts and the reins. He knows our real state; have we earnestly besought Him to teach us the knowledge of our own hearts? . . . Not acts alone of sin does He set down against us daily . . . but the thoughts of the heart, too. The stirrings of pride, vanity, covetousness, impurity, discontent, resentment, these succeed each other through the day in momentary emotions, and are known to Him.

Now reflect upon the actual disclosures of our hidden weakness, which accidents occasion. Peter followed Christ boldly, and suspected not his own heart till it betrayed him in the hour of temptation, and led him to deny his Lord. . . The warning to be deduced . . . is this: Never to think we have a due knowledge of ourselves till we have been exposed to various kinds of temptations, and tried on every side. Integrity on one side of our character is no voucher for integrity on another. We cannot tell how we should act if brought under temptations different from those which we have hitherto experienced.

Call to mind the impediments that are in the way of your knowing yourselves or feeling your ignorance, and then judge. First of all, self-knowledge does not come as a matter of course; it implies an effort and a work . . . Now the very effort of steadily reflecting is itself painful to many men; not to speak of the difficulty of reflecting correctly. To ask ourselves why we do this or that, to take account of the principles which govern us, and see whether we act for conscience's sake or from some lower inducement, is painful.

And then comes in our self-love. We hope the best; this saves us the trouble of examining.

Next we must consider the force of habit. Conscience at first warns us against sin; but if we disregard it, it soon ceases to upbraid us; and thus sins, once known, in time become secret sins.

To the force of habit must be added that of custom. Every age has its own wrong ways; and these have such influence, that even good men, from living in the world, are unconsciously misled by them . . . The most religious men, unless they are especially watchful, will feel the sway of the fashion of their age.

The Bible, Our Guide

Now what is our chief guide amid the . . . seducing customs of the world? Obviously, the Bible . . . Our conscience gets corrupted, true; but the words of truth, though effaced from our minds, remain in Scripture, bright in their eternal youth and purity.

Ask yourselves . . . what do you know of the Bible? . . . Do you know very much more of your Savior's works and words than you have heard read in church? Have you compared His precepts, or St. Paul's, or any other Apostle's, with your own daily conduct, and prayed and endeavored to act upon them? If you have, so far is well; go on to do so. If you have not, it is plain you do not possess, for you have not sought to possess, an adequate notion of that perfect Christian character . . . nor an adequate notion of your actual sinful state.

These remarks may serve to impress upon us the difficulty of knowing ourselves aright.

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JOHN HENRY NEWMAN (1801–1890) was a British theologian, church leader, and author. This excerpt is from the sermon “Secret Faults,” the fourth in his collection titled *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (1868).