
**FOUR STEPS TO
SPIRITUAL FREEDOM**



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Freedom Tools

If spiritual freedom is not a “thing” that can be hung onto, but rather an inner garden of the spirit that must be continually cultivated with use of the right tools, what are some of those tools?

We have seen how the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius are really about developing a discerning heart and providing people with tools for discernment in their decision making (discussed in Step Two) as they head back into mission with Christ. A general, all-seasons tool like this is necessary because the only constant in life is change, and life will continually present us with decisions that need to be made. The challenge is to stay close to the deep desire to find, love, and serve God in all things and to keep the intentionality alive “to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.”

At the end of the Step Two, I related how affected I was by the recurring critique of Christianity that I encountered from Westerners in India: “Christianity doesn’t teach us practical methods by which we can go deeper in the spiritual life.” I want to end this book with three very practical ways of daily dedicating one’s life to God, of keeping one’s intentionality alive and active, of moving toward spiritual freedom.

Earlier in our reflections on Step Four, I wrote about both active and passive methods of prayer each having a place in our spiritual lives. The first and third ways described here are active and the second one is passive. The first one is the primary tool

for staying close to our desire to find, love, and serve God in all things and to keep that intentionality fresh.

A. The Examen

The examen¹ is a way for us to literally submit our lives to God each day. In addition, it is a very effective instrument for helping us become aware of God acting in our lives throughout the day. It sharpens our awareness of where and how God is acting. This addresses one of the key obstacles to our desire to grow spiritually: We are not in the habit of *looking*. We all need to develop a discerning attitude in which we are seeking God in all things and keeping that intention close to our hearts.

In the examen, we bring the personal encounters, the events, and the feelings of the day before the Lord so he can enlighten us as to their meaning and significance and gradually change our way of seeing into his own faith vision. His faith vision is the way he looked at the world during his lifetime. He could see the world as it was and at the same time see the reign of God that was coming into the world through him and taking root in people’s hearts.

Everything, then, is data for discernment as we learn to look at our lives with a faith vision. The faith vision enables us not just to see the event or encounter the feelings around it, but to see what God is doing there. The conversation you had with a friend over lunch. The feelings about your job that emerged in the course of the staff meeting. The unexpected letter that came in the mail. The article that seemed to leap out as you were reading the newspaper this morning. The examen brings all these things and the feelings you have about them into the presence of

Christ, asking him to enlighten you on their true meaning. This practice effectively develops within us a discerning heart ready to follow the Spirit's lead.

If one uses Teresa of Avila's three key ingredients for the spiritual life—self-knowledge, rootedness in Christ, and perseverance—as a measuring stick for the value of any particular practice, the daily examen of consciousness rises to the top. Through it, one grows daily in self-knowledge. And because the particular focus of the examen has been arrived at in dialogue with Christ and through his choosing, one remains reliant on him throughout in striving to improve in the area he has indicated. Finally, because one's strength and hope is drawn from him and not from oneself and one's own resources, perseverance is made possible. No wonder then that Ignatius indicated to his followers to stick with this practice even if they had time for nothing else. It is a powerful instrument. In striving to know ourselves better, it is important that we become aware of the motivations for why we do things. This is precisely what the Lord reveals to us during the time of the examen. One of its fruits is a peace that comes from living in alignment with the Holy Spirit's lead in our lives.

In practice, the examen is very simple. The whole process takes from five to ten minutes. There are four steps.

Step 1: An Act of Presence

Imagine yourself in the presence of Jesus. Express the hope that with his help you can understand the deeper significance of what seemed like just another ordinary day (or a very special or traumatic day). It is a mental *dialogue*, not an introspective

monologue. Ask to understand the events of your day as an integral part of your unique spiritual journey to God.

Step 2: A Petition for Light, Wisdom, and Humility

Ask for light that you may see clearly what the Lord wants you to see. Ask for wisdom that you may understand what he shows you. Ask for humility that you may accept it and learn from it.

Step 3: Examination with Thanksgiving and/or Sorrow

Now let the day prayerfully pass by in stream of consciousness like a moving train. You are watching it go by with Jesus. Let him take the lead in stopping the train whenever he wants to look at something more closely. When Jesus stops the flow by bringing something to your attention, look carefully at the feelings you have around it. Whenever you feel comfortable in his presence in looking at some event in your day, say a simple "Thank you." Whenever you feel uncomfortable and know he is displeased, say "I'm sorry," and ask him why he is displeased. His answer turns what seems like an obstacle into an opportunity for spiritual growth. Everything is potentially a gift if we can see how it is either taking us to God or obstructing our way.

As we become attuned to see things as he sees them, we may uncover both false joy and false guilt. Suppose, for example, that you feel very good about something that you did during the course of the day, but not when you look at it during the examen. As you look at it through Jesus' eyes, you see that you were seeking your own self-advancement and not the advancement of his reign in people's hearts. Or suppose that you got angry with someone. Afterward, you felt guilty about it, but in looking at it through Jesus' eyes at the time of the examen, you see that he is

not displeased. He shows you that your anger was justified and appropriate. And so it goes: We can grow in self-knowledge.

Step 4: Request Help for Tomorrow

Resolutions often don't work because they are "I" centered; they are built on our own sense of self-will—"I can do it if I just try hard enough." We fail because our resources are limited. The examen invites one to keep Christ and his resources at the center of focus. In looking at what is ahead the next day, we do so with the awareness that we are reliant on him to give fruit to our efforts.

There is a way to make daily use of the examen particularly effective, to tighten the screws on it, as it were. Desire is key in the spiritual life. We go nowhere unless we really want to get somewhere. Choose a topic (predominant desire) that is meaningful and important for you. Ask Jesus to help you realize that particular predominant desire in the coming day. If, in looking ahead at that day, you can identify a particular obstacle to the realization of your desire, ask him to help you overcome it or deal with it constructively.

The desire comes from you. The obstacles come from the situation.

For example, if my predominant desire is to live the value of "people before things," I look with particular attention during step 3 at my encounters with people during the course of the day. Did I stop what I was doing and give each one who came in to see me my full attention? Did I stop to share a personal word with colleagues in the course of the day's work? What was the quality of my interactions? Then, during step 4, I look ahead to the coming day to see what opportunities there might be to enjoy

a few personal moments with people, and ask the Lord's help to keep me mindful of this desire as the events of the day unfold. If I am looking at a staff meeting as a good opportunity but see that my schedule is very tight both before and after the meeting, I have identified a particular obstacle. How can I work creatively with this to realize my desire?

In other words, your topic becomes the focus of your examen for the next day. It also determines what Jesus looks at with particular attention when you review the day with him. He is working with you for positive, concrete change by helping you take practical steps toward your deep desire.

Choosing an identifiable desire that is important to you, something you really want, is key; desire is the mainspring of growth. When using the examen with a focus on a specific topic or area, it moves it from being a general examen of consciousness to being a particular examen. When you do it, you look at everything through the filter of your predominant desire. If I do not have a topic, the examen only gives me self-knowledge. It doesn't give me Jesus as a support for my future.

Working to realize that desire in partnership with Jesus represents invaluable and effective help toward future growth. It keeps us Christ centered, living just one day at a time, and trusting in God's help to effect the transformation in us that God desires. It enables us to go forward into the future filled with hope because Jesus is going with us.

In order to discover your predominant desire, think of three or four things that you think are important for your spiritual growth. Write them down. Then imagine that you are with Jesus and have the opportunity to talk about this list of needs. Ask him if the first item you have written down is the important one for you.

When you are satisfied with his answer, then go on to ask him about the second one, and so on through your list until you are finished. Hopefully, one item will have gained ascendancy in your dialogue. That is your predominant desire, and Jesus has revealed it to you.

Once you have your topic, keep working with it on a daily basis until it is clear to you that something else is now more meaningful and needs your immediate attention. You might work with the same topic for a month, a year, or several years. The key to growth is to have a topic that is manageable and that reflects a real desire. Until another topic surfaces for you on three or four consecutive days, stay with the one you have chosen.

The examen is a particularly effective way of rededicating our lives to God each day because we literally bring the content of each day's living before Jesus, listen to and learn from his judgment, align ourselves with his wisdom, and go forward with his blessing. A convenient outline for using the examen is provided here.

Examen

1. Act of presence

Enter into dialogue with Jesus and leave behind introspective monologue.

Jesus, I want to become aware of your presence. Please be with me.

Please be patient with my "absence" from you during the day.

Make me aware of how you love me and call me to be both a friend and a disciple.

Journey with me now through my entire day and help me to see where you have been...where I missed you...

2. Petition for light, wisdom, humility

Light: that I may see clearly.

Wisdom: that I may understand what you show me.

Humility: that I may accept it and learn from it.

3. Examination with thanksgiving and/or sorrow

Look at the events and encounters of your day through Jesus' eyes, with particular attention to your predominant desire.

Let Jesus do the judging and stop the flow of your review of the day.

Where there is something for which to give thanks: "Thank you, Lord!"

Where there is something at which you experience sorrow/regret: "Forgive me, Lord!"

4. Request help for tomorrow

Focus on your predominant desire and look ahead into the next day to foresee where you are likely to need help.

End with the Lord's Prayer.

B. Meditation

One of the great graces of our time is the recovery in Christian spirituality of the earlier, rich tradition of prayer forms that are more passive in style and that dispose one to receive God's gift of

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