

## John Newton's Personal Self-Examination

John Newton points out that while most Christians succeed in avoiding more gross sins, many do not actually experience much in the way of actual spiritual growth.

Newton lays out a very convicting and specific example of the kinds of Christian people who coast on their strengths but do nothing about their weaknesses and so rob themselves and others of joy and God of his glory. These blemishes are often seen by their bearers as mere "foibles." Newton says they "may not seem to violate any express command of Scripture" and yet, they are "properly sinful" because they are the opposite of the fruit of the Spirit that believers are supposed to exhibit.

☐ **Austerus** is a solid and disciplined Christian but abrasive, critical and ungenerous in dealing with people, temperamental, seldom giving complements and praise, and almost never gentle.

☐ **Infitalis** is a person of careful and deliberate character but habitually cynical, negative, and pessimistic, always discouraging ("that will never work"), unsupportive and vaguely unhappy.

☐ **Pulsusis** is passionate, yes, but also impulsive and impatient, not thinking things out, speaking too soon, always very quick to complain and lodge a protest, often needs to apologize for rash statements.

☐ **Querulus** is a person of strong convictions, but known to be very opinionated, a poor listener, argumentative, not very teachable, and very slow to admit they were wrong.

☐ **Subjectio** is a resourceful and ambitious person, but also someone who often shades the truth, puts a lot of spin on things (close to misrepresentation), is very partisan, self-promoting, and turf conscious.

☐ **Potestas** gets things done, but needs to control every situation, has trouble sharing power, has a need to do everything him or herself, and is very suspicious and mistrustful of others.

☐ **Fragilis** is friendly and seeks friends, but constantly gets feelings hurt, easily feels slighted and put down, is often offended and upset by real and imagined criticism by others.

☐ **Curiosus** is very sociable, but enjoys knowing negative things about people, finds ways of passing the news on, may divulge confidences, and enjoys confronting too much.

☐ **Volatilis** is very kind-hearted and eager to help, but simply not reliable—isn't punctual, doesn't follow through on promises, is always over-extended, and as a result may do shoddy work.

Look at these and ask which one or two most describe you. Have the courage to ask someone else you know, too.

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How can we be shaken out of our lethargy and awakened to our need to grow? Here are some principles that I have gleaned from Newton's letters over the years.

### 1. Know that your worst character flaws are the ones you can see the least.

By definition the sins to which you are most blind, that you make the most excuses for, and that you usually minimize—are the ones that most have you in their grip. As we said before, one way we hide our blemishes is that we look at places that our natural temperament resembles spiritual fruit. For

example, a natural aptitude for control and self-discipline can be read as 'faithfulness', and a natural desire for personal approval could look like 'gentleness' or 'love.' Or we mistake a bubbly, sanguine temperament for joy, and a laid-back, phlegmatic temperament for peace. We give ourselves spiritual credit for these things, when actually we aren't growing spiritually at all. The lack of other fruit shows that real supernatural character change is not happening.

## **2. Remember that you can't learn about your biggest flaws just by being told—you must be shown.**

There are two ways we come to see our sins and flaws more clearly. One way is that we are shown them by troubles and trials in life. Suffering is 'God's gymnasium'—it reveals our spiritual weaknesses just as a workout reveals physical weaknesses.

Secondly, we learn by Christian role models. Sometimes the best conviction comes when you are brought near a person who is living as you should be living. You may not think of yourself as impatient, or abrasive, or over-sensitive until you are brought into close proximity to someone much more patient, peaceable, and content than you. What this means is that we should make use of these opportunities to grow. They are painful—even being near very holy people can be uncomfortable! But it is at such times, when we most feel the need for grace, that we find God's grace most desirable.

## **3. Be willing to listen to correction and critique from others.**

We just said that no one ever learned about his or her sins by being told. We have too many layers of self-justification to grow without hard knocks. But in addition, as a complement, we need critique and accountability from brothers and sisters.

There are at least two kinds. First, you can create your own Hebrews 3:13 community. Hebrews 3:13 says we are to "exhort one another daily" so we are not "hardened by the deceptiveness of our sin." Take some other believers that you trust and give them "a hunting license" to talk to you about where you need to grow.

Secondly, don't forget the "Balaam's ass" principle. You must learn how to profit from criticism even given by people who are badly motivated, or who you don't respect. Even if only 20% of what they say is true, it may be God speaking to you.

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John Newton is remarkable in giving equal weight to self-examination and grace.

"You have not, you cannot have, anything in the sight of God, but what you derive from the righteousness and atonement of Jesus. If you could keep him more constantly in view, you would be more comfortable. He would be more honored.... Let us pray that we may be enabled to follow the apostle's, or rather the Lord's command by him, 'Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, Rejoice.' We have little to rejoice in ourselves, but we have right and reason to rejoice in him."

If we are going to grow in grace, we must stay aware of being both sinners and loved children in Christ. We need a high and due sense of our sin before God and a deep and profound sense of our union with and acceptance in Christ.

*These last two sections adapted from Tim Keller*