Know Thyself

By Mark Mayberry
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INTRODUCTION

Self-awareness is a good characteristic; self-deception is not. Addressing Timothy, Paul warned, “But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (2 Tim. 3:13).

According to an article on Wikipedia, entitled “Know Thyself,” this ancient Greek aphorism (observation) was given by the Oracle and carved into Apollo’s temple at Delphi. The maxim “know thyself” has had a variety of meanings attributed to it in literature. The Suda, a 10th-century encyclopedia of Greek knowledge, says: “the proverb is applied to those whose boasts exceed what they are”, and that “know thyself” is a warning to pay no attention to the opinion of the multitude. Plato employs the maxim ‘Know Thyself’ extensively by having the character of Socrates use it to motivate his dialogues. Plato makes it clear that Socrates is referring to a long-established wisdom.

In 1734, Alexander Pope wrote a poem entitled “An Essay on Man, Epistle II”, which begins “Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is Man.” In 1750 Benjamin Franklin, in his Poor Richard’s Almanac, observed the great difficulty of knowing one’s self, with: “There are three Things extremely hard, Steel, a Diamond, and to know one’s self.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson was an American essayist, lecturer, and poet, who led the Transcendentalist movement of the mid-19th century. Transcendentalism developed during the late 1820s and ’30s in the Eastern region of the United States as a protest against the general state of spirituality then dominant. Among the transcendentalists’ core beliefs was the inherent goodness of both people and nature. They believe that society and its institutions—particularly organized religion and political parties—ultimately corrupt the purity of the individual. They have faith that people are at their best when truly “self-reliant” and independent. It is only from such real individuals that true community could be formed.

In 1831, Emerson wrote a poem entitled “Gnothi Seauton (‘Know Thyself’), on the theme of ‘God in thee.’ The poem was an anthem to Emerson’s belief that to ‘know thyself’ meant knowing the God which Emerson felt existed within each person. Consider the following excerpts:
Thou art unto thyself a law,
And since the soul of things is in thee,
Thou needest nothing out of thee.
The law, the gospel, and the Providence,
Heaven, Hell, the Judgment, and the stores
Immeasurable of Truth and Good,
All these thou must find
Within thy single mind,
Or never find.

Thou art the law;
The gospel has no revelation
Of peace and hope until there is response
From the deep chambers of thy mind thereto,—-
The rest is straw.

Who approves thee doing right? 
God in thee.
Who condemns thee doing wrong? 
God in thee.
Who punishes thine evil deed? 
God in thee.

While Transcendentalism, as such, has lost its currency, the concept that man is the measure of all things, and that human thinking alone distinguishes purity from defilement, right from wrong, and wisdom from folly is still very much in vogue.

The 12th Psalm, written by David, depicts God as a Helper against wicked men, who defiantly say “With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?” (vs. 4).

Man is inclined to follow his own wisdom. Yet, Solomon affirms this is a pathway of folly (Prov. 14:11-12; 16:20-25). Jeremiah declares, “I know, O Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself, nor is it in a man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer. 10:23-24).

**Know that Man is Not Pure, In and Of Himself**

Commenting upon the universality of sin, David says, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, they have committed abominable deeds; there is no one who does good. The Lord has looked down from heaven upon the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Psa. 14:1-3).
Discussing the corruptions of mankind, Proverbs says, “There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes, yet is not washed from his filthiness” (Prov. 30:11-14, esp. vs. 12).

What, then, is the solution? We must seek purity on God’s terms, through the forgiveness that He alone offers, and by living in harmony with the truth of His inspired word (1 John 3:1-10).

**KNOW THAT MAN IS NOT RIGHT, IN AND OF HIMSELF**

In the second giving of the Law, given at the end of the wilderness wanderings, Moses said, “You shall not do at all what we are doing here today, every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes; for you have not as yet come to the resting place and the inheritance which the Lord your God is giving you…” Rather than follow their own will, Israel was to seek God on His terms, worshipping in the place that He would choose, and in the manner that He prescribed (Deut. 12:8-12).

While Israel was largely obedient during the days of Joshua, the nation once again degenerated into a state of lawlessness and spiritual anarchy during the days of the judges (Judg. 17:6; 21:25). Isaiah faced a similar spirit of rebellion (Isa. 30:9-11).

What, then, is the solution? We must seek righteousness on God’s terms, according to the truths revealed in His inspired word (Psa. 19:7-11; Prov. 12:15; 21:2).

**KNOW THAT MAN IS NOT WISE, IN AND OF HIMSELF**

Through prideful irreverence, sinful man transgresses in word and deed, yet he flatters himself in his own eyes. Despite their self-deception, such individuals have ceased to be wise and good (Psa. 36:1-4). In like manner, the similitudes of Proverbs 26 repeatedly address this moral shortcoming (Prov. 26:4-5, 12, 16).

What, then, is the solution? Let us seek wisdom on God’s terms, according to the standard of divine revelation (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 2:12-16).

**CONCLUSION**

Returning to the passage we considered at the beginning, note Paul’s solution to the peril of self-deception: “You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them...” Like Timothy, our faith must be rooted in Revelation; all that we teach and practice should harmonize with Sacred Scripture (2 Tim. 3:13-17).