

Question: "Is "know thyself" or "know yourself" a biblical concept?"

Answer: “Know thyself” is a saying found in numerous religions, worldviews, and self-help philosophies, which have each tailored the phrase's meaning to fit its unique perspective. The widespread use of the phrase across various cultures and contexts makes many people wonder if it reflects the Bible’s theological and moral teachings.

The saying “know thyself” originated in ancient Greece, though who coined it is unknown. According to Greek and Roman historians, artisans chiseled the phrase into the stonework of the temple of Apollo, located in Delphi in Central Greece. Though the temple has laid in ruins for centuries and people no longer believe in Greek gods, the saying has endured.

The temple of Apollo was a common place for Greeks to go when they wanted answers to questions about life, especially the future. Visitors believed the temple resident, a prophetess named Pythia, channeled the Greek god Apollos. For centuries thereafter, consulting the men and women who played the part of the Delphi Oracle was a popular form of pagan divination.

People who traveled to the temple were mainly looking for supernatural insight they thought the oracle could give them. However, the message “know thyself” implied that thinking about their own thoughts and feelings was also a key part of their visit. The saying encouraged people to think deeply about their internal qualities: their strengths and weaknesses, as well as their hopes, fears, and motives. It was believed that such self-reflection could offer valuable understanding of their own lives.

The Bible calls Christians to understand themselves in a manner consistent with its divinely inspired teachings. For example, David tells people to search their hearts (Psalm 4:4); Jeremiah encourages people to “test” their direction in life (Lamentations 3:40); Haggai invites people to give careful thought to their priorities (Haggai 1:7); and Paul instructs believers to “examine” themselves to see if their faith is genuine (2 Corinthians 13:5), and self-examination is especially important prior to observing the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 11:28). While the Bible encourages self-reflection, the Christian approach differs significantly from that of non-Christian belief systems in its process and purpose.

A biblical worldview of “know thyself” starts with understanding that God created all people in His image (Genesis 1:26–27). Also essential to knowing yourself is the acknowledgment that all people are born separated from God because of sin (Romans 3:23). If we don’t believe that God created us in His image, or if we reject the nature and extent of sin, we can’t truly know ourselves.

Furthermore, it is vital to a Christian’s self-understanding to know what the Bible says about who believers are in Jesus Christ. For instance, the New Testament teaches that believers are children of God (John 1:12; Ephesians 1:3–8); in Christ, they are chosen, accepted, forgiven, and redeemed. Self-reflection that focuses on aspects of a person’s identity in Christ is essential for a believer to truly follow the dictum to “know thyself.”

Christians should make the purpose of their self-reflection conformity to God’s righteous standards as the

Bible reveals them. The result of inward examination can lead to correction, such as when Job became aware of his own sin (Job 13:23); or inspiration, like when the psalmist committed himself to Scripture (Psalm 119:59–60). All inward and outward applications should have sanctification as their aim, like growing in holiness and bearing the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–25), for the purpose of Christlikeness.

In summary, Christians can “know thyself” through learning what the Bible says about them. That knowledge should be followed by yielding to the Holy Spirit’s conviction of those truths in their minds and hearts, with the aim of being more like Jesus.

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