

Small Group Series: Being Transformed – Followers Made New! Jan-May 2009

From Session #2 Take Home Article (also online at gloryonline.org)

This short article deals with the nature of sanctification from a different or maybe unusual angle. It touches on the question of what our motivation is for pursuing sanctification. What is our motivation for pursuing to really be in our daily experience what God has declared us to be in our justification in Christ? Peter Swanson has added some interactive commentary following it, to help bring out some key issues and wrestle with some of the phrases Thomas uses. There are a few questions at the end to help you prepare to discuss this at your next in-home small group meeting. Enjoy!

Identity adapted from Thomas Merton

A TREE gives glory to God by being a tree. For in being what God means it to be it is obeying him. It “consents,” so to speak, to His creative love. It is expressing an idea which is in God and which is not distinct from the essence of God, and therefore the tree imitates God by being a tree.

The more a tree is like itself, the more it is like Him. If it tried to be something else which it is never intended to be, it would be less like God and therefore it would give Him less glory.

No two created beings are exactly alike. And their individuality is no imperfection. On the contrary, the perfection of each created thing is not found in its living up to some supposed ideal, but in its fully being itself. A particular tree will give glory to God by spreading out its roots in the earth and raising its branches into the air and the light in a way that no other tree before or after it ever did or will do.

Therefore each particular being, in its individuality, its concrete nature and reality, with all its own characteristics and its private qualities and its own inviolable identity, gives glory to God by being precisely what He wants it to be here and now, in the circumstances ordained for it by His Love and His infinite Artistry.

THE FORMS and individual characteristics of living and growing things, of inanimate beings, of animals and flowers and all nature, make up their holiness in the sight of God.

The special clumsy beauty of a particular colt on an April day in a field under the clouds is a holiness consecrated to God by His own creative wisdom and it declares the glory of God.

The pale flowers of the dogwood outside this window are saints. The little yellow flowers that nobody notices on the edge of that road are saints looking up into the face of God.

While sin does affect all things, the glory given by these things to God is effortless; as they “worship” God in and of themselves in their unique nature.

BUT WHAT ABOUT YOU? WHAT ABOUT ME?

Unlike the animals and the trees, it is not enough for us to be what our nature intends. It is not enough for us to be individual men or women. For us, holiness is more than humanity. If we are never anything but men, never anything but people, we will not be saints and we will not be able to offer to God the worship of our fully sanctified self.

It is true to say that for me sanctity consists in being my regenerate self and for you sanctity consists in being *your* regenerate self and that, in the last analysis, your sanctity will never be mine and mine will never be yours, except in the shared community of the body of Christ.

FOR ME to be a saint means to be myself – the person God originally intended me to be. Therefore the problem of sanctification is in fact the problem of finding out who I am in Christ and of discovering my true self in Him.

Trees and animals have no problem. God makes them what they are without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied.

With us it is different. God leaves us free to be whatever we like. We can be ourselves or not, as we please. We are at liberty to be real, or to be unreal. We may be true or false, the choice is ours. We may wear now one mask and later another, and never, if we so desire, appear with our own true face. But we cannot make these choices with impunity or without any ramifications.

OUR CALLING as justified believers is not simply to *be*, but to work together with God in the creation of our own life, our own identity, our own destiny. We are free beings and sons of God. This means to say that we should not passively exist, but should actively participate in His creative freedom, in our own lives, and in the lives of others, by choosing the truth. To put it better, we are even called to share with God the work of *creating* the truth of our identity. We can evade the responsibility by playing with masks, and this pleases us because it can appear at times to be a free and creative way of living. It is quite easy, it seems to please everyone. But in the long run the cost and the sorrow come very high. To work out our own identity in God which the Bible calls “working out our salvation,” is a labor that requires sacrifice and anguish, risk and many tears.

God works in all things for the good of those who love him, so in the present moment we should be aware of what God is bringing to us and strive to respond according to His commands and His will. To refuse the changes He intends to make in me is to refuse everything; it is the refusal of my own existence and being: of my identity, my very self. Not to accept and love and do God’s will is to refuse the fullness of my existence.

Interactive Commentary by Peter Swanson

Why does Merton spend so much time talking about trees and animals? I think the idea is to just forget about yourself, your situation, your perceived obligations, and all your worries and concerns for a moment. Just look at the rest of creation. It has no calling. Each thing already is being what it is supposed to be. In other words, trees are not called to a process of sanctification. Yes they are in some way affected by the corruption of sin, but they have no responsibility to make an effort against that sin or to help remove its effects from the world or to be a part of ushering in the reign of God. All they need to do is just to *be*. In light of that being true for everything except man, it shows the amazing uniqueness of man and highlights the wonder of our freedom and our responsibility. We can’t “just be.” We have to act and *become*. We are free to either rise, with God’s help, to be more and more ourselves (to act more and more in accordance with our new position as children of God and to live a life more and more “worthy of the Gospel”) or to be pathetic, lame, stunted Christians. Both those avenues are open to us. We alone among God’s creatures can proceed towards or fail to become who we really are. That both of these options are open to us is clear from Romans 6. Merton’s dwelling on trees and other creatures highlights our freedom by contrasting our freedom with the lack of freedom of everything else.

Doesn’t all the “real you” talk sound like new age gurus or shallow, self-serving televangelists? Definitely the “real you” language has been used in bad ways, but we shouldn’t let poor use of language define right use of language. After all, “meditation” has a lot of new age connotations, but it is also used to name an important biblical practice. For us to “become real” can just be another way of describing the new man versus the old man, or living according to the flesh or according to the spirit. The language of “becoming real” can help us fulfill Paul’s command to “*consider yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus.*”

Who do you consider yourself to be? Do you include your long-standing weaknesses and bad habits and unique sinful desires or tendencies to be the *real* you, while the person God wants you to be is the vague, faraway, “ideal” you? If we change the way we think about ourselves and reflect this in our language, it can aid in growth. In fact, it may be better to consider what we usually think of as the “real you” as actually the false you. It is sin, death, ugliness, and weakness that are fading and passing. Heaven is true reality, the really real world, and your fully sanctified state, who you are in the eyes of God is the really real you. But we have to put in effort, by God’s grace to *achieve* our real selves. If we think of ourselves as yet as mere shadows of our true self, wouldn’t that give us motivation to grow? Our “real self” is a child of God, a “slave of righteousness.”

If that really is who you are, and you come, through effort and practice, to be able to be the real you, wouldn’t that would bring the most glory to God because that is who he created you to be?

But what does this mean: “we are even called to share with God the work of creating the truth of our identity.” How can we create truth? This is just poetic language. It means we participate in making ourselves to be truly (to be in our daily experience) what and who we have been declared to be by God in justification. This is a statement of our role and responsibility in sanctification. It is not automatic that we become truly what we are already legally declared to be in the

eyes of God. We aren't really "creating truth," but we are helping to conform ourselves to the truth of what we are supposed to be, to God's idea of who we are. But again, back to the difference between mankind and the rest of creation; we can fail to become who God sees us as, who he wants us to be. In a mysterious way God has given us a key role in bringing about our own growth. There is an old saying that captures this tension: "Pray as if everything depends upon God, and act as if everything depends upon you."

Christian writer C.S. Lewis captures in a striking way the significance of our own choices:

People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says, 'If you keep a lot of rules I'll reward you, and if you don't I'll do the other thing.' I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing either into a creature that is in harmony with God, and with other creatures, and with itself, or else into one that is in a state of war and hatred with God, and with its fellow creatures, and with itself. To be the one kind of creature is heaven: that is, it is joy and peace and knowledge and power. To be the other means madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us at each moment is progressing to the one state or the other.

Thankfully, by God's grace our choices happen within the legal security of being fully forgiven by the sacrifice of Christ. But within that legal security, there is no actual security determining what kind of life we will lead here on Earth. God has given guidelines in scripture and resources through His grace and the Holy Spirit to enable us to become who he has designed for us to be, but we are free to refrain, as well.

1) From this article, how would you answer the following questions: "Why should I put effort into my sanctification? Why should I try to stop sinning and try to pursue righteousness?" What are some specific quotes for the article you think most directly answer this question?

2) Considering the thoughts of this article, what would you think about and feel for a fellow believer who has admitted his or her spiritual laziness, and says they are content to remain the way they are.

3) How does this article compliment Romans 6:1-7:6? Is there anything it helped you understand better? Is there anything that you think is in disagreement with the passage in Romans?

4) What advice is there in this article to help to "consider [ourselves] to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus?" Pastor Ron highlighted the meaning of the word "consider" here. Which phrases of points from the article give advice on how to do this?