

BEING AN AUTHENTIC PERSON

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ROMANS 5:12-19

The bold ideas of facing up to our sinfulness and placing our complete trust in the free gift of God's grace as given are not all that easy in a culture obsessed with ownership and earning. Paul, however, wants to make it clear that because we are human we sin, and that the only way out of our sinfulness is the acceptance of the gift of God's grace as shared in Christ. This passage can be a most helpful one in the season of Lent to broaden our understanding of self-examination and the difference God's grace seeks to make in and through such an experience.

Clemency, Exposure, Sympathy, Pardon, Blessing

I. Self-examination Helps Us See Our Need for God's Grace

The temptation with the idea of self-examination is to understand it as something we do for ourselves, out of a sense of duty and obligation to God, so that we can better serve God. Such a discipline, done in such a way, misses the point of Paul's understanding of the free gift of God's grace. Self-examination does not begin with us; rather, it begins as we see ourselves in the light of God's grace. Such grace given freely in the moments we live exposes the shadows of who we are.

In Paul's way of thinking, we can only be the humans God created us to be. Being human means we are sinners. If we are to truly be involved in a self-examination that will be honest, such an experience must begin with grace. With the emphasis in our culture on self-help, this becomes a most ambitious understanding to relate.

II. Self-examination Is Valueless without God's Grace

Paul clearly identifies where such thinking leads. Left to the self, we will be left with judgment, condemnation, and death. Any Lenten self-examination not rooted in the experience of God's free gift of grace will end up leading to a try-harder mentality so as to win the approval of God. To do so is to miss the whole point of grace and what grace does in us and through us. The Lenten experience must include feelings of sorrow and resolve, and it must also seek, to express with joy and thanksgiving the difference God's grace makes in our lives.

The underlying reason for the Lenten experience both begins and ends in grace. To focus on self to the point that we are going to do better, outside grace, is to miss the whole point of the Lenten experience. For Paul, the human experience must be lived from only one perspective: grace.

Katherine Ann Power lived a life of hiding. As a college student in the early seventies, she was involved in a bank robbery that led to the murder of a police officer. Just recently, she left the life she had created that included a husband, a son, friends, and a job to turn herself in to authorities after two decades as a fugitive. Emerging from the shadows into the light, she stated she did so "in order to live with full authenticity in the present . . . with openness and truth, rather than hiddenness and shame."

That is what this passage and Lent are. It is a time whereby with the goodness and love of God's grace in Christ persons seek to live with full authenticity in the present . . . with openness and truth, rather than hiddenness and shame. For Paul, the human experience must begin and end in God's grace. Anything less than that experience has somehow failed to find God's vision for each life. All God has ever wanted for us is to be the authentic human beings we are. Only God's grace will help make that so. (Travis Franklin)

IN THE WILDERNESS

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Lou Holtz, who coaches football at Notre Dame, was interviewed after a Cotton Bowl game. People and the press were going on and on about the great impact of the game, and Lou said, "Wait a minute. The game isn't all that important. There must be three billion people in China who don't even care what happened."

Sooner or later we must leave behind all our mountaintop experiences, and we must return to the valley below—down where the dangerous days are for life and for faith. The peril to faith and trust comes in the ordinary days when monotony and the commonplace stretch out, like forty days in the wilderness. The same Holy Spirit who brought Jesus the announcement of God's approval at baptism now leads him out into the days of temptation and letdown.

I. Temptation Often Comes in the Wake of Commitment

It is always true that once we have accepted a high challenge and made a great commitment, there comes the temptation to forsake the cause. There is always the temptation to give up the commitment to the best and settle for something less. Once we have made a