

Glory in Exile: creational differences

During our last virtual devotion, I spoke about sanctification as a means and remedy for accomplishing the unity Jesus prays for in the church in John 17. This unity confirms the message of the Gospel and is our high calling. I also spoke of salvation past, salvation present, and salvation future. In particular I focused on salvation present and our ongoing sanctification. As an illustrative side note, I mentioned that in the process of sanctification (becoming more and more conformed to the image of Christ) our personalities are not obliterated. Very significantly, however, they ARE brought under the redemptive work of the Lord, even while we maintain the unique, key characteristics He originally designed in us. Because these characteristics were, tragically, distorted by the fall...they need reformation.

Therefore, in follow up to our last virtual devotion, I wanted to share a little bit more about how our personalities are renewed from a Christian, biblical perspective. I hope this is both edifying and informative. Please know that there is not an abundance of published material in this particular area from a biblical counseling perspective. I have, though, spent over a decade thinking through these ideas and am sharing them with you here in an (somewhat) organized format for the first time. Which is to say that these are not final thoughts, but thoughts I have intentionally wrestled through.

To begin, our personalities are part of the **creational differences** we are imbued with when we were “knit together” in our mother’s wombs. Creational differences are God-given distinctions that include our personal thought processes, desires, drives, commitments, and affections – among other things. These differences create innumerable, glorious, and natural distinctions between us. These are the personal distinctions that cause us to either immediately relate to another person, or scratch our head and marvel at how different we are!

Personally, I believe that creational differences are morally neutral in their nascent form. That is, those personality traits that God designed to characterize us are neither good nor evil as they exist within us. How we express these distinctions bring in to reality whether they remain corrupted by sin or are being transformed by grace. The degree of sinfulness manifested through our personalities depends on two things: whether or not we have been *converted and united to Christ* by faith, and the degree of our *sanctification in Christ*. All creational differences expressed through our personalities must gradually be brought under the redemptive mercy of God as we cooperate with His ongoing work of salvation present.

Okay, so here is where the fun begins. In the age of the DSM-V categories and Myers-Briggs or Enneagrams personality tests DSM-V, it may be an interesting shift in perspective to look at personality through the lens of a different construct. Now, before you cancel me because I’m not a ride or die personality test devotee, let me tell you that I am an INTJ and have been genuinely *helped* by this knowledge. BUT, I have not been *sanctified* by it. While personality models and psychological categories can provide us with very helpful descriptions, they cannot provide us with true explanations and remedies. Therein lies the rub, and that makes all the

difference. Personality tests can provide descriptions of characteristics you presently and consistently exhibit, but they do not provide direction for where you can (and perhaps ought to) go with those tendencies. Whereas, if we look at our personalities as the *expression* of our unique creational differences, we can then discern the God-given raw material that is meant to become a manifestation of His nature and glory.

Now, personality traits are not actions. That's also important to remember. They are not actions that require an equal and corrective re-action. Whereas we can almost always find the remedy to sinful actions in chapter and verse of the Bible (mercifully God has told us what we are to DO in very clear terms). On the other hand, personality is related to the affections and traits *of the heart*. These inborn characteristics, as I mentioned before, can be sinful or sanctified in their expressions. More often than not these traits require some conscientious work to find their redeemed expressions. And again, I believe that these traits represent a potential good that is present within us, but was distorted by the fall. These traits need God's mastering grace to reform them away from our natural bent as fallen beings. "*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.*" 1 Corinthians 2:14

The good news is that...

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. (10) But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. (11) If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. (Romans 8:9-11)

Salvation rescues us. Sanctification re-humanizes us as the Spirit of Christ redeems our whole being, including our personalities. Ultimately, I've concluded that the distortions of our personalities come from one thing: Jesus being neglected in their varied expressions. Renewal in these expressions comes as He finds His rightful place, directs our gaze to a different endpoint, or re-orientes our starting point. Which means that these distortions are merely the weak, un-sanctified underside of our topside strengths...sanctified strengths waiting to be revealed and developed. Two sides of the same coin: one is undeveloped and bound by the natural man, the other is rooted and grounded in Christ.

I'm going to use three umbrella categories of life-dominating struggles (the weak underside) to help us manage this information regarding re-formed personalities and how we can move from weaknesses to redeemed (topside) expressions of strength. Those three categories are: Fear of Man, Unbelief, and Pride. Within each category, I've listed a few examples of distorted (or undeveloped) personality traits I've taken note of over the years, along with the redeemed expressions they can become once they have been mastered by God's grace.

Fear of Man is exactly what it sounds like, we tend to be overly concerned with what other people think of us. Think of Moses worried about his stutter and Elijah cowering in fear of

Jezebel. Fear of man is *when we look at life and ourselves through the eyes of other people* rather than through the gracious gaze of God the Father. Personality traits that are tied to fear of man are:

- **Despair** - which turns in on ourselves as we grieve the fallenness all around us, as well as the failure of reputation, honor, position, power, progress that we experience personally. Despair causes us to talk to ourselves and results in us becoming burdened and heavy-laden. Redeemed by God's grace, despair becomes lament that honestly looks up and speaks to God. Lament grieves the challenges of this life' yet endeavors to remain steadfast in calling those around them to faith, while flourishing in the life God has called them to. Lament leads to looking **up** to God and to courageous trust.
- **Boasting or Arrogance** is our attempt to make ourselves look better in the eyes of others. It is how we try to increase our reputation and power by speaking much about who we are and enlarging our view of ourselves. It says, "look at me, look at me!" Mastered by grace, boasting becomes a heart for evangelism as it desires to make much of God the Father while promoting a high view of all God the Son has done for us. It becomes a heart desiring that all men would look to Christ.
- **Lust** that desires more and more to satisfy the appetites of the flesh that will, in reality, *never* be satisfied. Lust says that I want to *use* this thing in front of me to provide me with a sense of completion, this object of my lust should see its obligation to me (whether it be food, alcohol, sex, power, etc.). Mastered by grace, lust becomes stewardship as it continues to look at the resources of the world around it and is overcome by the absurd generosity of that which has been given to those whom the Lord has called to Himself. Rather than greed, the redeemed expression becomes a grateful stewardship of all that is available to us, and desires to *care for* these things rather than callously consume them.
- **Violence or aggression** that comes on too strong and turns hostile to personal affronts and attempts to squelch anything or anyone who stands against us. Aggression wants to be seen as powerful, good, and even great. But mastered by grace, this kind of violence becomes zeal that stands firm against that which *God* stands against, and contends for that which *God* calls good. In this way, aggression becomes forgetful *of self* and focused on the ways of the Lord, that He would be seen as great.

Unbelief is often expressed in some form of doubt, lack of trust, anxiety, fretting, and worry that leads to disobedience. Unbelief occurs *when we do not know (or forget) where to fix our eyes* and end up being easily tossed about. Think Aaron and the golden calf or Nadab and Abihu offering strange fire. Personality traits associated with unbelief are:

- **Anxiety** that continually asks questions, particularly "what-if" questions that are never answered, but focuses instead on uncertainty. Anxiety flourishes in the atmosphere of the next unanswered question. Mastered by grace, anxiety is life-giving contemplation, curiosity, and scholarship that trusts in truthful answers that bring peace...not because the answers are easy, but because He who speaks truth to our hard questions is a Person. He is our Prince of Peace.

- **Insecurity** that seeks everywhere for acceptance, approval, and esteem...but never *feels* accepted and approved. Insecurity feels the lack of belonging so continues to look to and fro for a source that will finally offer what is sought...to no avail. Mastered by grace, insecurity becomes devotion as it locks its eyes on The Source of acceptance and approval, and recognizes the never-ending supply of security that is offered. The well-developed practice of seeking, becomes a gaze that is finally satisfied and fixed. Devotion is to fix our eyes on one thing and one thing only: the founder and perfecter of our faith that we may run with endurance the race that is set before us.
- **Fearfulness/faintheartedness** is to be continually afraid that the worst will befall us and/or those around us. It struggles to believe that not everything bad will come to pass. Nor does it have the capacity to believe that whatever misfortunes we *do* encounter, will also be met with the power and presence of Christ with us. It looks down, out, and around with a sense of impending doom. But mastered by grace fearfulness becomes mercy, tenderness, and empathy because it is practiced in the anguish of bearing up under the specter of bad things. It has pondered those possibilities so continually that it has a unique understanding of what it is to be caught beneath their oppressive weight. However, renewed in to a strength, fearfulness learns to *look up in the midst of fear* to be comforted by the voice of He who says, “*Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid*” (Matt 14:27, John 6:20). And then is able to look out to others and minister both from the understanding of feeling hopeless AND the life-giving ability to look up.
- **Selfishness** is the great ability to fixate on, well, self. It says, “What more can I do to benefit meeee. What more (good, fame, renown, etc) can I gain for myself.” Selfishness is essentially a high view of self, accompanied by service to self. Mastered by grace, selfishness is worship. It is the same great ability to fixate, derive benefit from, gain renown, and serve but re-directed from self to Savior. Worship is exactly all of those things listed above, but offered to the Lord instead of to ourselves. The manifestation of selfishness is misdirected worship.

Pride occurs *when we look at life through our own eyes* and evaluate circumstances, people, and situations according to **our own** standards. Pride tells us that we know best, we are the best, and that our ways are the best ways. I think of the transformation of Saul to Paul as a prime example of these traits becoming re-formed.

If you’ve read this far...thank you! And also if you’ve read this far, I’m sorry to say that I’m going to cut this section short. I don’t want to delay in getting this follow-up devotion out and posted. Maybe someday I’ll elaborate more here, but for now, let me simply summarize. (And maybe you’ll enjoy connecting the dots on these last expressions for yourself :-)

Some manifestations of pride in personality form are:

- **Stubbornness**, when mastered by God’s grace is perseverance (putting all our energy in to a resilient *forward-moving* determination rather than in to a determination that digs in its heels.)

- **Criticalness**, when mastered by God's grace is leadership and wisdom (utilizing the spiritual gift of discernment for the benefit of people rather than for judgement over them).
- **Anger**, when mastered by God's grace is justice (Instead of declaring "I'm against that!", declaring "God's against that...and for this!")
- **Legalism**, when mastered by God's grace is administration (Pursuing systems and structures that will *support* the good of our fellow man, rather than *suppress* our fellow man).

To close, you'll remember that in our last devotion I spoke of the church being the glory of God. This is the reality we pursue *"until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."* (Ephesians 4:13-16)

Which is my encouragement to you to neither despise nor exalt each other's creational differences as they're manifested through our distinct personalities. We all need to seek Jesus to shepherd and renew our unique differences until they wholeheartedly express Him in His perfections. For *"... I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:6).*