



The Journey of Thomas

Authenticity

By John J. Smid

Luke 6:45

The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks.

Authenticity is a word that is very popular these days. It seems everyone is looking for authenticity and is saying they want this from others. The definition of authenticity is to be genuine, real, not false or an imitation of yourself. Are we sure we know what we are asking for?

The challenge to a discovery of authenticity is that it requires of us to know ourselves deeply. To live out an authentic life means that we must be willing to live as who we were created to be.

Psalm 139 14-16

*14 I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.*

*15 My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place.
When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,*

*16 your eyes saw my unformed body.
All the days ordained for me
were written in your book
before one of them came to be.*

If God knows us intimately and formed us for His own purposes and design, then our role is to seek Him for who He made us to be. Authenticity can therefore only be lived out if we know the original plan. This would require of us to speak to our Creator and hear His responses. Hearing from Him His original design for our lives can be a lifelong process but in our discovery process we are given the option to accept it or to reject it.

God's created design is not so complicated. First, we are humans. He has shown us many things in His Word about how He designed us to live as human beings. Then, he created us "male and female, He created them". There are clear designs for men and women as well. After that, we are individuals with many unique qualities.

What are our talents, our gifts? Do you know how you were designed to function within our human culture? Have you hungered to be like someone else thinking life would be better if you had their gifts? In some cases, trying to be like someone else would be like putting a Toyota emblem on a Chevrolet; not only would it not be honest, but it might look awkward to the discerning eye.

There are many questions that we have concerning whether or not God intentionally created some people with birth defects or weaknesses. Without getting into a theological study on this; living an authentic life includes the acceptance of things the way they are without trying to hide this reality.

For example, I remember a speaker that was born with half of one of his arms missing. He wore a prosthetic arm. When he got up to speak, the first thing he did was tell us the story of his arm. His authenticity put us all at ease and took the attention off of the curiosity that could have been there had he not mentioned it.

False Images

We can also learn to apply “false images” to ourselves through the course of our lives that can deceive others as they get to know us. When I was figuring out how to live my life I went through stages of clothing styles, haircuts, and mannerisms that I remember with embarrassment today. I am sure I looked pretty weird to some people as I passed through my phases of self-discovery. I realized that there were also times when I conformed to what I thought others may have expected, blending in so as to not draw attention to myself. Either of these can be an extreme if it isn’t lined up with my own authenticity.

Sometimes we misrepresent ourselves to others. I have known a couple of young men who are artists. When I first saw them they appeared to me to be counter-culture. Therefore, I judged them to be cold and emotionally hard due to their tattoos and ragged clothing. I later had the opportunity to hear them talk about their lives. I was so wrong! They were both sweet spirited, kind, and very connected to the real spirit of the Lord. They were mature in their walk with Christ as evidenced by displaying His heart. The sad thing is that they had adopted an appearance that was misrepresenting their true heart and likely were rejected by many who were thrown off by their external attire.

When we lack authenticity, others can sense that and steer away from us, avoiding something they perceive is not genuine. I believe we can experience this more than we know. People don’t always know why they may avoid someone or walk in separation from others and sometimes it’s because they don’t sense genuineness about them.

I was at a conference once where a young man was dressed in a very unusual manner. He was wearing clothes that were too big, dyed hair that was a strange shade of red and overall just kind of clownish. During our conversation I felt the open door to ask him about his clothes. He said the he wore them because he didn’t trust people. He explained that if someone were willing to get to know him through the strange appearance then he believed they could be trusted more. I was very honest with him in my reply. I said, “I feel manipulated by your clothing and appearance. That isn’t fair to me or anyone else that comes in contact with you and it isn’t fair to you!” He was not living authentically and I am sure it created loneliness for him and much discomfort for others.

I ran into this same man when he came to hear me speak about six months later. He told me that when I saw him previously he had just become a Christian about two weeks prior. He had learned a lot in those six months and was no longer dressed in such an extreme fashion. I was really grateful that the Lord allowed me to see the change in his life.

Another situation I ran across had to do with a man who came from a certain ethnic background. He was talking about a sense that he was being judged harshly at his place of employment. When he

told me the story he was speaking with an ethnic lingo as well as a posture that was recognizable in a stereotypical way. I questioned him about this and asked him if that was the way he was at work because I had not seen this from him in our previous interaction. I suggested that he talk in his non-affected manner and lose the ethnic posture and he might find a better reaction at work. He took the challenge and things did change for him. His accent and posture were false images and stemmed from self-protection. They did not truly represent who he was authentically.

Not Always Comfortable

No matter how much we may want it, true authenticity isn't always comfortable! I have found that when we stop playing the games of pleasing, cloaking, and hiding, this can create realness that many people aren't used to. The unfamiliarity with true authenticity can be uncomfortable. We need to discover who God made us to be and find the best way for us to reflect the genuine model of whom we are even in the face of making ourselves or others uncomfortable.

Authenticity May Not Look "Normal"

I also knew a lady who was a very creative lady. She saw the world through colorful eyes and unique perspectives. She dressed in flowing fabric, colorful and creative collections of jewelry, and hair that was tossed in very random ways with color that was off the shelf for sure! There was no falseness in her appearance and she was very comfortable if not very pleasurable to be around. In her case, she was creative from the inside out and she remained true to who she was.

Authentic Christianity

So, as we think about those that we may judge to be so different from us, how do we look to them as Christians? What is an authentic Christian life? Is it a man in a suit or a woman in a nice dress? Is it the two parents with delightful little blonde children? Does it mean we speak with "Thee's and Thou's"?

I think we can all agree that these do not define an authentic Christian. However, there is a sense from our world that Christians aren't authentic. So what's the problem? I think it is often that we carry an image that we don't have problems or that we just "love" Jesus so much that we hang around in the clouds of religious romance.

I have found in my walk with Christ that I have many unanswered questions about life; I also remain in bondage to sin that causes me to struggle with my faith. I don't always "love" Jesus in an emotionally relating way and as a believer in Jesus Christ; I know why He offered me forgiveness from my sin because I need His forgiveness each and every day.

As I think about what it means to be a Christian, I find myself confused and not always in sync with other Christians I know. I can feel lonely, fearful, and not always as well received by my Heavenly Father as I hear preached from some pulpits. I recoil at some of the proverbial plastic Christian rhetoric and at times feel cautious around some Christians who seem to be "in love with Jesus" without ever exhibiting any real doubts or struggles. I can be judgmental, critical, and rebellious in making wrong choices that I know will not benefit me in the end.

What I do know is that all of this is in fact why He died for me and offered me a new life that includes an eternal destination of living in His kingdom of perfection at the appointed time.

Our Daily Lives as People

What about the man who goes to work as a corporate executive who as a youth had his heart set on working with his hands in creating order out of mechanical disorder? Or how about the church pastor whose heart is more in foreign missions and finds himself frustrated each day with his congregation's lack of interest in missions?

Or think about a woman whose most significant desire is to raise her children and yet she gets in the car each morning leaving her children for a job that she is not truly invested in. Or, maybe her job gives her the financial ability to maintain an image she desires and yet her family could live on less.

These people, by emotionally shutting down, will begin to experience the consequences of living a daily life of confusion. Maybe they have feelings of disconnectedness from their soul in their daily lives that leaves them deeply searching for more in places that are unsatisfactory. There may be an invisible barrier around them that keeps others at a distance or that keeps them from reaching out for true relationship.

Prov. 10:9

The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.

Choosing to walk in authenticity is a choice of integrity. A lifestyle of integrity is to be the same all the way through. It is costly to develop a willingness to be just what God created us to be. The simple life may not feel so simple until we rid ourselves of those things that don't fit us and get comfortable with who we are.

Prayer for today: Lord, I know you made me the way you wanted me to be. I trust that you knew what you were doing at that time but I've done a pretty good job of covering that up. In my life, I have allowed others to make me into what they wanted me to be rather than what you created me to be.

Please show me who I am and give me the grace to live that out. I want to glorify you in all that is seen and unseen. I know that the only happiness I will find is to be who you created me to be. I want to figure that out and find your joy in it.

Practical Application:

Evaluate your personal presentation and see if you are putting up a false image that isn't authentic to whom you know you really are. Ask yourself if you are feeling any fear of taking something away from your life that is covering up something you don't want others to see in you, or about you.

Are you living a lifestyle that carries with it an image that either adds to your true image or takes away from it? Are you wearing clothing that bears a particular look because you fear what someone may think if you wore something you really want to?

Do you feel you have to have a house that is spotless when you have guests because you feel insecure about them knowing that it doesn't "always" look like that?

Is it imperative that you have a certain career (even when it severely costs you your family time) out of a need to financially maintain a certain image?

What about the practice of your faith? Does going to church or a holding to a certain doctrine become a bondage to you out of a fear that you will not “look” like you or others may think a Christian should look?

Write three feeling statements regarding the concept of authenticity:

“I feel _____

About the way I was born

Because _____”

“I feel _____

About letting go of _____ (a false image that you have embraced)

Because _____”

“I feel _____

About walking more freely as I discover who I really am

Because _____”

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