



## Sanctification and All That

One of the most hopeless things I ever hear from people is when they say, “God loves me just as I am.” Like most pop theology, it contains a small measure of truth and quite a bit of extreme error. Most assuredly, the first part of this phrase is true; the statement “God loves me” is absolutely and fundamentally true, no doubt about it. But the trouble is with the second part, “just as I am.” What a hopeless statement! God does not, most assuredly, love the mess we have made of our lives, the harm we have done to others and ourselves, or the self-destructive patterns into which we fall. No, rather, God loves us enough to want us to be better than we are; to be, in Paul’s words, a new creation. God looks past the mess in our lives and says, “You are better than that, and through my love you will be transformed.” Perhaps the statement should be “God loves me, and wants me to be the best.”

The other problem with the statement “God loves me just as I am” is that it is far too often said in lazy resignation. I often hear it said in a context like this: “I am what I am and I will never be better, but that’s okay, because God is okay with me.” In other words, it is said in a fashion of self-absolution, papering over and excusing our personal failures, a surrender to our sinful selves. This is simply a counsel of despair or lazy resignation, saying in effect that we will never be any better, and we do not need to try. But God is not okay with that; God wants us to be better, because the ways we are now are all too often harmful and destructive.

In Christian theology, the question concerns our struggle to achieve the holiness that God intends for us, and especially the process of sanctification. As with many other elements of the Christian faith, this often entails a balancing act that many believers simply cannot manage alone. On one side of the equation is God’s law, which relentlessly measures us and finds us wanting. Given this constant measuring, some people are driven to attempt moral perfection in an extreme legalism, where the Christian faith is reduced to following the rules (as if we could). The other side of the equation is equally pernicious: the abuse of God’s grace as if any attempt to make ourselves morally better, and to strive for God’s holiness, is

somehow rejected. This is the sin of antinomianism—the rejection of God’s law. When did *sanctification* become a dirty word?

The problem here, as in many areas of our modern Christianity, stems from wrong-headed and simplistic views of the human person, which tend toward narrow reductionisms. We often fall prey to the idea that we simply have to work harder at being better people, and just follow the rules. This can be found in both conservative and liberal forms, either a strict personal morality or, on the other hand, our own personal responsibility for transforming society and the planet. There is enough works righteousness going on here to make a Pelagian blush!

Neither of these forms is inherently wrong, but misplaced. We need to improve ourselves, and we need to improve our world. But if we start with these elements, they are hopelessly doomed to failure, as our old sinful selves are not capable of doing the tasks we set out for ourselves. Eventually, realizing this, we fall back on resignation and “self-acceptance.”

But holiness is not ours; it is God’s. The only hope we have for holiness is if it comes to us as a gift through the Spirit of God. We cannot make ourselves holy, but God can make us holy. Holiness is not a state; it is a goal—a goal toward which we are running and yearning through God’s transformation of our lives. We will never achieve it in this life, but the outcome is certain. In light of this certainty we abandon our attempts at self-justification or self-sanctification, and simply strive to work toward the holiness we are assured to eventually reach, certain that this is God’s work and not our own.

In the history of Christianity, there have been periods of renewal and awakening when this realization has become central. It is amazing the energy and commitment that such a realization invariably unleashes, as Christians throw off the shackles of self-justification or despair, and simply work for the renewal of their lives and of God’s world. These periods of renewal have led, in turn, to Christians taking up their work as disciples. Discipleship is a natural corollary to holiness, rightly understood. The freedom and vitality of the discovery of God’s holiness fervently and joyfully pushes Christian believers to join their lives to God’s work in the world: the work of making disciples. The two are deeply interconnected and lie at the core of the Christian life. May God so work in our lives that we may work in God’s world!

Mark Granquist