

THE MENACE, MYTH & MAYHEM — OF — AUTONOMY

Every culture has its “manhood” myths. In contemporary America and much of the world, the myth seems to revolve around “autonomy,” the idea that if we manage to do what we want to do, when we want to do it, with a steady supply of funds and protection from consequences, *then and only then* have we succeeded. But the Christian tradition and the history of humanity reveal some cracks in this mythos. The truth is that there has never been such a thing as a fully autonomous human being, and even if any of us somehow succeeded in this pursuit, it would be a disaster. Because humanity wasn’t created for autonomy. We were created for *community*.

Start Talking

1. Everybody has that one Christmas or birthday wish— the thing you wanted worse than all the other things you wanted during childhood holidays. What was yours? Did you get it? How did your life change?
2. When I say the word, “autonomy,” what’s the first image that comes to mind? (*If people have difficulty coming up with anything, here are examples:* For some of us, this may be John Wayne or Clint Eastwood standing alone against a desert landscape. For others, it’s a titan of industry or art like Elon Musk or Beyonce. Still others picture Michael Jordan, Ernest Hemingway, Teddy Roosevelt. Some people may simply picture a survival scenario where one person tames the wilderness and thrives on a beach somewhere all alone.) Why do you picture what you picture, here?

Looking Back

1. What did you do to affect the way that people who don’t look like you experienced you this past week?
2. We get caught up thinking in terms of “southern culture,” or “pop culture,” etc... Where did you find your ideas about *your* culture getting in the way of loving and valuing other human beings? What parts of your own cultural experience or heritage did you set aside to carry someone else’s burdens this past week?
3. What destructive attitudes did you have to resist within yourself this past week? How did the battle go?
4. What tangible steps did you take to move from simply *not* being racist, to being actively *anti-racist*?



What About You?

1. Think back on your life so far. When was the first time you noticed that getting the thing you've desperately been wanting doesn't necessarily scratch that "wanting" itch?
2. Have you ever found yourself isolated from people who have access to the substantive parts of your life? What have those seasons been like?
3. Why do you think "autonomy" is so tempting to us? What inspires pretty much half the world to define this as the ultimate end goal of life?
4. Why do you think most people who "achieve" their goal of total control end up making decisions that ultimately undermine their own autonomy and stability?
5. Have you ever found yourself resenting the people who "represent" your current contingency, or the dependent nature of your circumstances? What was it like? (Examples: When we feel constrained at work, we often resent our boss. In marriage, our spouse. Etc...)

Look It Up

Read the Following Passages: 2 Samuel 11: 1 – 15.

1. Why do you think the writer focuses so intensely on the *season* in which David began roaming the rooftops to watch Bathsheba bathe?
2. In what ways do we see David become increasingly isolated from community and accountability as the story unfolds?
3. What do you make of Uriah's conduct throughout this sequence of events?
4. Does David's desire to control the outcome succeed? He manipulates events and even murders a friend to keep his sin secret. Does it protect him from the consequences in your opinion? (I mean, technically Uriah never finds out!)
5. Think for a moment about the emotional reality that David's quest for autonomy created in ancient Jerusalem. Who all loses? What do they lose?

Putting It All Together

1. What stories and accounts of your life do you hope survive you after your time on earth is over? How does your current trajectory in life square with the way you hope to be remembered?
2. Where do you find yourself (to quote Albert Speer) failing to resist "the evolution of a court?" In other words, where are you slipping into isolation and the quest for autonomy?
3. Who gets to challenge your decisions? Do they depend on you for money or well-being? Do you invite honest, difficult feedback?
4. What would it look like to intentionally resist isolation and autonomy this week? What are three tangible steps you could take to live in the dependence of community and accountability?
5. How can you make yourself vulnerable this week? Where can you get uncomfortable social?

