

WHO DO YOU LOVE?

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, September 7, 2014

John 12:42-43

“Many people did believe in [Jesus], however, including some of the Jewish leaders. But they wouldn’t admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue. For they loved human praise more than the praise of God.”

Anticipation

Can you identify with the excitement of the man who fairly shouted, “God answered my prayer!”?

Or the woman who said with a bursting smile, “I’m pregnant!”?

Or the young man who said, breathlessly, “I proposed, she accepted!”?

Or with the mother of three who said, “I got the job!”?

Anticipation, dreaming, praying, hoping... followed at last by success! When you receive something that you have earnestly wanted, it begs for a celebration. It’s normal to be excited about the result, and it’s normal to share your excitement with someone else.

Be a Witness

That’s the essence of what we call witnessing—sharing your faith in Christ with others. It is the joyous overflow of a heart that’s been redeemed, cleansed, and filled with the Spirit.

That’s why the most effective witnesses are new converts. For one thing, they have lots of unconverted friends. Plus, they’re overjoyed about what Christ has done for them. So, they want to tell everyone.

And that is just what Jesus prescribed: *“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere”* (Acts 1:8).

So why don’t we do it? I mean, why don’t we actually tell everyone about Jesus? What’s happened to us?

Aren’t we *grateful* to be saved?

Don't we *care* about others ending up in Hell?

Hasn't Jesus *completed* the way of salvation for everyone?

Isn't Jesus willing to save *anyone* who comes to Him?

Changes in Life

Part of the answer is that we came to Jesus. We set our eyes on Him. We dug into His Word. We've been learning to pray and intercede. We practice worship. We've joined the church.

And, as a result, we've developed more friendships with Christians, and friendships with non-Christians have diminished. It's natural. It happens.

Our values have shifted, our lifestyles have shifted, and our schedule of activities has shifted. Some non-Christians have abandoned us, because we don't like to do what they like to do anymore. Some have rejected us because we always bring Jesus into everything, and they aren't comfortable with that.

It could be members of your own family. It could be employers, or employees. It could be former best friends. It could be next-door neighbors, or roommates.

It hurts to lose them, but the hurt is usually treated by diving into the culture and life of the church more and more, as a soothing substitute. This makes us feel better, but widens the gap between us and non-believers.

That's why the first two years of your Christian experience, generally, are the most fruitful. After that, you may spend many years nurturing other believers and improving your relationships with them, but rarely tell a non-Christian about Jesus and your faith in Him—because you hardly know any non-Christians well enough to have such a personal conversation with them.

Unless.

Unless you recognize the slippage, and make intentional efforts to prevent it.

Secrets

You don't want to end up like the Jewish leaders mentioned by John in today's text. They believed in Jesus, but they would not admit it, because they were afraid.

Some are afraid of the questions that may be posed to them, doubtful that they are familiar enough with the Scriptures to give a convincing answer.

Some, who have tried, have taken the rejections personally, and their low self-esteem cannot bear to be turned away again.

Some have driven off every non-Christian they have known by their unfriendly techniques or arrogant attitudes.

What was it that silenced those Jewish leaders? Why wasn't their faith enough to encourage their testimony?

John said, *"They wouldn't admit it for fear that the Pharisees would expel them from the synagogue"* (John 12:42).

Rejection is hard enough, but ostracism is far worse. They would not only lose individual friends, but they would be expelled from their entire social network. They would be shunned, on principle.

A synagogue was like a neighborhood church, to which the members could walk from their homes. Multiple generations of neighbors shared their culture and faith around and through the activities of the synagogue.

It is painful to be pushed out. Even more so, to be cut off.

These people, even some of the leaders, believed in Jesus. They believed that He really was the Son of God—God in human form. They believed He was their Messiah—fulfilling the prophetic Scriptures and bringing in the Kingdom of God. They believed He was the Savior—come to release them from their sins.

Nevertheless, they remained silent. They kept their faith a secret. They lived it in the shadows, like Nicodemus, who came to talk with Jesus at night, under the cover of darkness. They dared not mention His name, for fear of the backlash. Intimidated, they hid their love and light.

It's just not right.

Let It Shine

Jesus declared, *"You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden"* (Matthew 5:14). Yet, they did hide it.

He said, *“No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house”* (Matthew 5:15). Yet, they did cover it, and left others in the darkness.

It may be common, it may be normal, but that doesn't make it right. It's not what light is for. It's not why you light a lamp in the first place. And it's not why God lit your lamp. Still, it happens.

Drifting Into Sin

Part of it is the natural shift from friendship with the world to friendship with Christ and the church. That's a good shift to make, but it can carry us too far, like a strong wind that's pushing us in the wrong direction. We'll have to adjust our sails, if we hope to reach our destination.

But another part of it, at least in the case of the Jewish leaders we've been reading about, was more than a natural shift; it was a sinful shift, dodging responsibility.

John revealed their motive: *“They loved human praise more than the praise of God”* (John 12:43).

Sometimes we just need to hear the words: “Nice work!” “Good job!” “You look beautiful!” “You're the best!” But this is insidious. There is nothing inherently wrong with receiving the praise we deserve from other people. (It's certainly better than receiving their just condemnation!) The sin is not in their praise, but in our misplaced preference. Who do you love more?

This is why Jesus asked, *“Do you love me more than these?”* (John 21:15)

Consider the Source

Who would regard the praise of men above the praise of God? One who is insecure—unsure of God's sovereignty, of God's love, and of God's eternal nature. It's a matter of identity.

Each of us derives his identity from someone outside of himself—parents, teachers, friends, spouse, employer (all figures of authority), or from God Himself, if we have relationship with Him. They build into our identity either security or insecurity.

The chief problem is that all people are selfish and fickle (not all the time, but at some crucial moments). At some point, they are likely to let us down, misunderstand us, or mistreat us—leaving us with a bruised ego and insecurity.

Only God can change that in a lasting way. Only our Maker can impart a secure identity that the storms of life cannot shake. He Himself cannot be shaken. *“From everlasting to everlasting, [He is] God”* (Psalm 90:2). Therefore, if He identifies us with Himself and we, in turn, identify ourselves with Him, we also will become unshakable.

Who gives you your identity? The people around you, or the Lord above you? If you get your identity from the Lord, then others will have to get past Him in order to get to you.

If you derive your identity from the Lord, then you will value His praise more than the praise of others, and you will have eliminated the danger that led to the Jewish leaders' predicament. What God alone *thinks* about you, is more important than what all men together think of you.

Mending Your Way

If you have been intimidated, how can you fix it?

First, you must recognize the drift.

Second, you must decide to change.

Third, you must apply your energy to regain your proper position. You'll have to put your oars in the water and paddle. It will take some effort, especially at the beginning.

If you want to develop an ear for what God says about you, you can do so by (1) believing what He says and does in the Bible, (2) spending time listening to Him in prayer, and (3) reminding yourself of what He has said about you. Be a David—strengthen and encourage yourself in the Lord. Then, don't let what people say—whether flattery or accusation—turn your head or heart away. Then, (4) identify yourself with Him by beginning to tell people everywhere about your confidence in Him.

Jesus said, *“I will send you the Advocate—the Spirit of truth. He will come to you from the Father and will testify all about me. And you must also testify about me because you have been with me from the beginning”* (John 15:26-27). That's why the Holy Spirit has come: to testify about Jesus. And that is also why you are here today.

Don't be intimidated. Be encouraged!

Remember who has loved you with an everlasting love. Then, share His love with others.