

Whose Approval Do We Seek?

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Part II

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Several years ago Carolyn and I were in the Philippines working with a pastor in an outreach to a neighborhood. The Filipino pastor we were working with was a very large man. I noticed that everyone with whom he spoke was very respectful and courteous to him. Even strangers acted as though he were a man of importance.

When I questioned another Filipino about my observations, he told me that Filipinos, who are often small people, highly regard a fellow Filipino who is physically large. Obviously this is part of the culture of Filipino people.

This simple story illustrates a point I want to make. All of us use external criteria when we look at and then judge others. It can be the kind of house someone lives in, how he or she dresses, or whether or not the person has a car.

Tragically we bring these same judgments into the church. Last year while I was in Tanzania, I taught this subject to the student body of a Bible school, most of whom were pastors or would become pastors upon graduation. As I looked at these students, I knew that very few of them would ever pastor large churches or become well known in church circles. In fact, most of them will end up pastoring their whole lives to a few families in rather small churches.

What bothered me about this was the fact that their fellow ministers will judge these pastors by the size of their congregations, or the size of their church building, or whatever. Worse yet, most of these men and women will accept that judgement of themselves, a judgment based on what can be seen with the eye.

False Judgment Criteria

The criteria about which I have been speaking is the *world's judgment*. The world judges people, places, things and events based on wealth, beauty, influence, power, and so forth.

An excellent example of the world's standards is *Time Magazine's* recent selection of the most important person of the 20th century. *Time* put forward for consideration such men and women as Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Golda Meir, General Dwight Eisenhower, Pope John, the Wright Brothers, Dr. Jonas Salk (developer of the anti-polio vaccine), etc. They even proposed athletes and movie actors! The criteria used by *Time* was, "What did this person accomplish in his or her lifetime? What did he do to benefit people? What performance standards or athletic records did he or she establish?" Now, there is nothing wrong with *Time* doing this. In fact it honors people for their accomplishments and

contributions to humankind.

The problem is that while the above criteria for judgment is perfectly valid in the world, it has no place in the church of Jesus Christ. We are born into this world, we are educated in this world, we live in this world, and we work in this world. Consequently, when we become a Christian, it is only natural to bring our worldly judgment criteria along with us into the church. While this may be excusable for young converts who don't know any better, it is quite inexcusable for those of us who have learned to walk with Jesus in the truths of His word.

Judgment Based on Money

All too often we in Christian circles look at a Christian leader and make judgments of his or her importance based on wealth. Like the world, we look at what house he lives in, what kind of vehicle she has, or how he is dressed. We even notice how much money he has to spend. When we look at a pastor who has these things most of us automatically regard him or her as a very important leader in the body of Christ.

Judgment Based on the Size of a Congregation

Or, we look with a jealous eye at the pastor who has hundreds, or even thousands of people, in his or her congregation. Immediately we start thinking that this pastor is a success in his ministry.

Judgment Based on The Ability to Speak

Finally, there are pastors or church leaders who have what we often call a velvet tongue. Everything he or she says is brilliant! He always says the right thing. His preaching is dynamic. His oratory skills are widely recognized. If someone has these skills, we think, "Surely, he is very important in today's church!"

The Error of These Criteria

Let me make clear that I am not criticizing pastors who have money, large congregations, or are very anointed preachers. Praise the Lord for them. Nor am I saying that these things are not important, perhaps they are.

The problem is that we have for so long not only allowed, but condoned, the use of these criteria in the church that they have actually become today's Christian church's judgment standards!

In our Bible schools and churches we continually parade as important those who have met the world's standards of success. At times we even know that something is very wrong in a person's life or ministry, yet we chose to ignore it and continue to hold them up before our students and congregations as examples of a successful ministry.

I believe this is what Jesus was talking about when He said, "But many who are first will be last; and many who are last will be first." (Mat 19:30 NIV) Many church leaders who appear to be very important, or first, will be last in the day when God judges our work. And many who are poor, unknown and seemingly insignificant, will be first in that day.

Last year in Uganda I preached in a small church made of sticks with a dirt floor and a grass roof. There were perhaps forty people present. The pastor was a gentle man of humble means. But just three weeks before my preaching in that humble Ugandan church that pastor raised two people from the dead in the name of Jesus!

To the world this pastor may appear to be among the last. But on the day of God's judgment, I believe this pastor will hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Mat 25:21 NIV)

Anyone who has ever worked with chickens knows that chickens have a definite order of rank. It extends from the weakling of the flock to the most dominant hen. This ranking is called the "pecking order."

Anyone who has attended many ministers' conferences has seen the pecking order at work. As the ministers socialize you hear questions like, "How many people are in your church?" "How many attended your meeting in such and such a place?" "Do you own your own building?"

I understand that there are times when exchanging such information among church leaders is helpful. But painfully, what is often really happening is that those ministers are subconsciously setting up their own pecking order. How sad! And how wrong!

Perhaps the biggest error of all when we use the world's judgment criteria is that we deceive ourselves. If my church is small, if my offerings are not enough to meet the church's needs, or if I am not a great preacher, I begin to think of myself as unimportant.

Of course, the devil comes along to reinforce the negative thoughts you have about yourself. "That was a lousy sermon you preached Sunday," he tells you. "No wonder your church is so small. Furthermore, unless God does a financial miracle, like He did with the loaves and fishes, you're not going to make it" and on he goes . . .

Years ago I heard a preacher tell this story which I think illustrates what I am saying very well. It seems that a traveling evangelist had spent a week preaching a revival meeting in a small church. When he returned home his wife asked him how the meetings went. He replied, "Not very well. Only one small ten year-old boy got saved." But God said, "Wrong! *The meetings were highly successful!*" Why? Because that boy's name was Billy Sunday, and he grew up to be one of the greatest evangelists in American history! The revivalist used the world's criteria (just one

little boy.) God used His criteria (one of His chosen ones!) We must break ourselves loose from such false standards of judgment. One's righteousness or importance in the church must be based on spiritual, biblical criteria, not what the world thinks is important.

God's Viewpoint

"As for those who seemed to be important--whatever they were makes no difference to me; God does not judge by external appearance . . ." (Gal 2:6 NIV)

"But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'" (1 Sam 16:7 NIV)

Jesus affirmed this principle, "You judge by human standards; I pass judgment on no one." (Jn 8:15 NIV)

All false judgment among church leaders (indeed, among all Christians) is sin! Jesus tells us, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged . . ." (Lk 6:37 NIV) Jesus is telling us that we are not to look at a poorly dressed pastor of a small church and regard him or her as less important than another. In God's eyes, he may be one of the most highly exalted people in the kingdom of God!

Several years ago I was teaching this subject in a Bible school in Africa. To drive home my point I asked the students to describe a successful pastor. Here are some of the comments I heard. "A successful pastor would have a church that has good growth with new people coming in regularly." "There is enough money to pay the bills." "The church owns its land and buildings." "People in the community know and admire the pastor." "The pastor is important in the community." "The pastor is becoming more important in his or her denomination." I listened and wrote on the board all their comments.

Then I asked the students to turn to 2 Corinthians. Here is what we read:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? (2 Cor 11:24-29 NIV)

Of course, we all recognize these words as penned by the Apostle Paul. While Paul's call was as an apostle, I

doubt most of the Christians of his day would have called him a terrifically successful apostle by the world's standards. Paul certainly wouldn't have qualified as successful based on those students' comments, would he? Yet he is quite possibly the most effective minister of the gospel of all time in God's eyes!

Obedience Should be the Only Criterion

I believe the only criterion which should ever be used in the Church of Jesus Christ is, "Is he or she, (or am I) a Father pleaser?" In other words, "Do the meditations of my heart, do the words of my mouth, and do my actions please my heavenly Father? Do they please my Jesus?" This should be the only measuring stick we use, and it should be used firstly and primarily on ourselves, not others!

And what is the most basic, most fundamental way we can please the Father? By obedience to His word and His directions. Let us look at just a few of the many verses in the Bible on the requirements and blessings of obedience.

But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams." (1 Sam 15:22 NIV)

I have kept my feet from every evil path so that I might obey your word. (Psa 119:101 NIV)

For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous. (Rom 2:13 NIV)

Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. (Jam 1:22 NIV)

If you love me, you will obey what I command. (Jo 14:15 NIV)

We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. (1 Jo 2:3 NIV)

If they obey and serve him, they will spend the rest of their days in prosperity and their years in contentment. (Job 36:11 NIV)

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him." (Jo 14:23 NIV)

We have confidence before God and receive from him anything we ask, because we obey his commands and do what pleases him. (1 Jo 3:21b,22 NIV)

If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the best from the land . . . (Isa 1:19 NIV)

Learning to Use God's Criterion

Now that we have seen how absolutely vital it is that we are obedient, let us ask the question, "What must I do to obey God?"

For ministers it seems to me that there are three obvious steps in obedience.

Step One - Find out what God wants of you

Many people struggle with this, but in one way it is quite simple. "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." (Ps 37:4 NIV) This verse is key to learning God's will for your life. How? By daily delighting yourself in the Lord. This means to daily, continually worship and love the Lord. Immerse yourself in His word and seek to obey everything you see in the Bible. Once you begin to make this a lifestyle, God's will for your life will become clear to you. He will show you your call, where you are to go, and so on. And these very things will become the desires of your heart.

Step Two - Prepare Yourself

To prepare yourself means that you are to do everything in your power to learn the Bible. It means you should be in church every time there is a service. It means you are to attend Bible studies. It means you should seize every opportunity to teach or preach the word of God. It means you are to make every effort to attend Bible training seminars. It means you are to go to Bible school if that is possible. It means you are to start leading people to Jesus through your personal witness. Preparing yourself also means you are to develop a strong prayer life.

As you begin to do these things God will open doors of ministry. They may not be doors of your choosing, but when they open, go through them. Begin to prepare messages to preach. Make preaching and teaching outlines. Rehearse them in your mind. Preach them to yourself. Before long, God will give you an audience.

During this process, you will also begin to develop spiritual discernment. In 2 Kings 6 there is the wonderful story of Elisha and his servant. God was showing Elisha the military secrets of the king of Aram and he then revealed them to the king of Israel. The king of Aram learned about this and sent his army to capture Elisha.

"When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. "Oh my lord, what shall we do?" the servant asked.

"Don't be afraid," the prophet answered. "Those who are with us are more than those who are with them."

And Elisha prayed, "O Lord, open his eyes so he may see." Then the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." (2 Ki 6:15-17 NIV)

I love this story because it so clearly illustrates the value of spiritual eyesight. By spiritual eyesight I mean the ability to see beyond the natural circumstances into the spirit realm. Jesus had fully developed spiritual eyesight. ". . . I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because

whatever the Father does the Son also does." (Jn 5:19 NIV)

As we prepare ourselves to do His work, we will begin to see with His eyes and to hear His slightest whisper. We will readily recognize His hand at work. As we obey His voice and place our hand alongside His, our spiritual eyesight and hearing will become more and more developed.

Step Three - Obey

Remember James' exhortation, "Do not merely listen to the word and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." (Jas 1:22 NIV) It doesn't get any clearer than that! Once you have done, or are in the process of doing, what we have discussed in steps one and two, the last, and ongoing step is to do whatever it is that God has told you to do. And part of this doing is to not let anything stand in the way.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run the race with perseverance, the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith" (Heb 12:1,2a NIV) It is easy to obey when the task is something we want to do. But often God's word reveals something in our lives that is sinful, or simply out of His will. We must get rid of whatever that is so we can move fully into our call. And remember, Jesus is the one who will do it by His Holy Spirit. He will do it by whatever means He chooses if we just cooperate. It is His love that causes Him to do whatever it takes to get us free from all hindrances. As Paul wrote, "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure." (Phi 2:13 KJV)

God's Promises

God has promised us that if we are moving in obedience to His word and His call on our lives, we will have an inward joy, a peace, and a contentment that the world

cannot give. There will be a genuine peace and satisfaction about your call when you know you are where you are supposed to be and are obedient. Now I'm not saying everyday will be a wonderful mountain top experience. No, life doesn't work that way. What I am talking about is that inner peace and sureness that you are rightly seeking God and that you are a Father pleaser.

What are some of the ways to tell whether or not you are a Father pleaser in your ministry call? Let me list just a few.

- You don't view other ministers with envy. You can look to other, seemingly more "successful" ministers, without the slightest envy or jealousy. You can wish them well and simply continue on with your own ministry.

- You don't care about your reputation. You have reached the place where you genuinely are not concerned about what others think of you. Not that you are antagonistic or apathetic, but there is no concern about the opinions of man about yourself.

- You have a compelling desire to finish the race. As did the Apostle Paul, you find yourself striving to finish the course the Lord has laid out for you. And you want to finish it well.

Conclusion

So as we walk in our called ministry, let us strive to be Father pleasers and avoid at all costs falling into the trap of being man pleasers, that is, seeking the favorable judgments of man. As long as we try to please man we will use the world's criteria of judgment. If we strive to please man, we will constantly be straining for the bigger, better and more of what the world calls success. This is so deceptive. Rather, let us reflect the attitude of Paul when some people in Corinth were judging him by world standards. He responded, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment . . ." (1 Co 4:3 KJV)

Indeed, let us put aside man's judgment. Let us run the race as God wants us to do. Let us strive to please an audience of one, God. He is the only one that really counts!

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