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#70

“Watered Down Faith”

John 12:41-50

Introduction

It's not uncommon for many of us to struggle when it comes to being a man pleaser. After all, who doesn't like being liked? Who doesn't enjoy the acceptance and praise of others? The Bible warns us about being conformed to the world. The idea of *being conformed* means to be squeezed into the mold of everyone else. The world is most happy with us - most accepting of us - when we do what every one else is doing. Consequently there is enormous pressure put on you every day to do what is expected of you. For teenagers, we call it peer pressure. You high school kids know what it's like when everyone is doing something that you know is wrong. To stand up against that pressure takes great courage and faith. It's so much easier to have everyone else like you. You adults face it in your jobs, families and neighborhoods. Everyone else lets their kids do certain things, why won't you? Everyone else thinks a certain way, why can't you? Everyone else is willing to lie or cheat if there's little chance of getting caught, what makes you different. The pressure to agree with falsehood, laugh at what is impure, go where the crowd goes and do what they do is enormous. And the pressure is greatest when the cost is the highest. If you have to endure physical, emotional or social discomfort or disgrace to stand for what is right, it can be even more difficult. It easy to see why sometimes we would just rather please men.

The truth is that we naturally love the approval of men rather than the approval of God. Most people are by nature, man pleasers. It takes a supernatural work of God's grace to overcome these tendencies. But we can do so – if we believe in the gospel; if we learn to see Christ; and if we fear God. This morning we are going to read the story of some men who cared more about what men thought than what God thought.

[John 12:41-50]

Verse 37 of this passage tells us that *though Christ had performed many signs before them, yet they were not believing in Him*. Last week we studied why they weren't believing. But this week our text opens with a rather surprising confession. *Nevertheless, many even of the rulers believed in Him*. This is surprising because it was not an easy thing to believe in Christ, as we've seen, but it was even more difficult for the leaders because they were the ones overwhelmingly bent on destroying Christ and who had openly plotted His destruction.

But the text qualifies their belief. *But because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue, for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God*. This qualifier begs the question, *Was their faith a real faith or a counterfeit faith?* We know that Paul taught in Romans 10 that *if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead then you will be saved*. And so we might wonder about these rulers who were not confessing Him.

But consider the question another way. *Is it possible to have a weak faith that fails in some areas?* Put that way I think we can all admit that our

faith falls short in many ways. A study of the Scriptures confirms the same thing. Abraham's faith was weak at first when it came to the promises of God. Before Isaac, Ishmael stood as testimony to his struggles to believe. And Romans 4:20 tells us that Abraham needed to grow strong in faith, implying that strong faith is preceded at least at times with a weak faith. Jacob's faith was anemic throughout much of his life. Yet we know he believed. Jonah had a major crisis of faith. The father of the boy with the demon cried out to Jesus, *yes I believe but help me in my unbelief*. At times in the gospels Jesus rebuked his own disciples says *why is your faith so weak*.

So it's fair for us to take the text here for what it says. These were rulers who had genuinely come to believe in Jesus and yet their faith was watered down. Matthew Henry reminds us that we can't always rightly see what it in a man's heart. *Often their faults are known but their repentance is not*. It would certainly be good to remember that today! We often can't tell what's really in a person's heart. Remember that even Elijah, as he looked around at the people of God, thought he alone was left when in fact there were 7,000.

There are many ways for a Christian to stumble. Seeking the approval of man over God is certainly one of them. If we study the sin of these rulers we can see a few things:

- Action – they would not publicly confess Christ. That is they would not stand up for Him in the council.
- Reason – Fear. They were afraid they would be excommunicated – put out.
- Sin – Idolatry. They put man ahead of God. Romans 1:25 explains. *For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and*

worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen.

I'm not sure we usually think about being a man pleaser as equaling idolatry – but on some level, if we care more about what another thinks than God, then that is exactly what is happening.

There are a lot of reasons why we struggle with this problem. If you've ever struggled with worrying about the the approval of men, see if any of these questions are ones that you've found yourself asking.

1. What will people **do** to me?

You may not have to fear physical persecution, but it's not uncommon to worry about how others will treat you. You may have a tendency to seek the approval of men because you enjoy their friendship. You may enjoy the pleasures that come with not rocking the boat. But remember the warning James gives in 4:4. *You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

2. What will people **say** about me?

The word *approval* is really the Greek word that is most often translated *glory*. Some of your translations actually use that word. Others use the word *praise*. The idea is that we have a natural desire to be honored, praised and glorified. In the same way that you glorify God by speaking good things about Him to others, so we have a desire for others to speak good words about us. We want the glory of men.

Now certainly there is nothing wrong with commending one another and praising another for demonstrating the glory of Christ. But the problem comes when we live for the praise and honor and

acceptance of men. That thirsting for glory will lead to compromise.

There are reasons we like the praise of men.

- It appeals to our natural pride. We like being the center of things.
- It gives immediate gratification.
- It is based on tangible and temporal accomplishments. In other words the praise of men is usually based on things that we can see and touch and measure – things that are defined as valuable to the world. (Consider the most valued and praise men in our culture – athletes and movie stars. Why are they praise? Because they've accomplished things the world considers valuable.)

So we need to be careful that our motives are not driven by the praise and desire for self glory.

God's approval and praise has a different structure.

- It gives honor to Christ and what He has done in and through us. When we praise people we ought to try and acknowledge the ultimate glory of God.
- It is not always immediate, but holds the promise that in heaven we will receive a *well done good and faithful servant*. God's approval is not always manifested with immediate and public recognition.
- It is based on eternal, often unseen things that are valuable only in the kingdom. (Character, faithfulness, vision for the Kingdom)

3. What will people **think** about me?

And maybe this is just a summary of our overall concerns. Too often we measure our "rightness" or

our value based on the approval of men. We need to recommit ourselves to the standards of God's Word. Whatever you do, do to the glory of God. Live your life in the light of the Scriptures. If you do that, then ultimately it doesn't matter if others approve or not. Listen to I Corinthians 4:3-5. *"But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."*

Here's the thing. If you fear men or seek their approval it will change what you say and what you do. You won't speak when you ought to speak. You won't live the way you ought to live. In the classroom over here at Purdue, it's not inconceivable that a professor would ridicule Christianity and Christians. It's also not inconceivable that after he's done railing against Christ that he would look at the class and ask, *Is there anyone any here who believes that garbage?* To raise your hand surely means you will receive the full brunt of the professors wrath. It will by no means be a level playing field in which to defend your faith. What do you do? (What do you do if the same thing plays out in your workplace breakroom, or in an extended family debate over the holidays, or at your neighborhood gathering?) If the whole crowd is set against you, are you willing to take what they give you or do you remain silent? That was the essence of the situation for these rulers in our passage.

How can we find the strength and courage to stand up for Christ when it hard? Jesus gives us the

answer in the last few verses of this passage. There are three things that you need to fortify your faith so that you might seek the approval of God rather than men.

1. A growing faith.

Verse 44 – *He who believes in Me, does not believe in Me but in Him who sent Me.* It's obvious that the starting point for all of this is faith in Jesus Christ. That's the only path to life. There were these number of rulers who believed in Him. But clearly their faith needed to be strengthened. But isn't that true for all of us? It's not just faith, but it's strong faith the we are exhorted to have. But strong faith only comes by exercise. Abraham grew strong in, but how. Romans 4 tells us that it happened by him *being fully assured that what God had promised, He was able also to perform.* You can't ever be satisfied that your faith is all it needs to be. You need to see that behind believing in Christ are the vast promises and provisions of the living God. When you believe in Christ, you believe in the God who created the heavens and the earth – the God who can do anything. You need not fear men because God is upholding you by the strength of His power.

2. An ability to See Christ.

In verse 45 Jesus says, *He who sees Me sees the One who sent Me.* What will seeing Christ do for you? What will seeing God do for you? It will change your life! Consider Isaiah. Up in verse 41 we read a summary of Isaiah 6. *These things Isaiah said because he saw His glory, and he spoke of Him.* What happened when Isaiah saw the glory of God in the temple? He saw his own sinfulness. *Woe is me for I am undone!* Seeing the light of God's glory revealed to Isaiah his weakness and his sin and it brought him to confession and repentance.

It will do the same thing for you. If you will see Christ, you will see your tendencies to please others before God. You will see your friendship with the world and your pride and your worldly value system. So much becomes clear when we see Christ. When we see the glory of God we will crave His approval above all else. Too often we think too highly of the praise of men because we have seen too little of the glory of Christ.

3. A Proper fear of God.

When Jesus said in verse 47 he didn't come to judge the world, He didn't mean that there would be no judgment. He merely was indicating that His first coming was for the purpose of redemption. He didn't need to become a man and die on a cross to find adequate reason to justly judge sinners. He came to save His people from their sins.

On the other hand, He is very clear in verse 48 that if we reject Him we do face a judgment. And what a reminder that is to us that we have a judge to whom we will give an account. You ought to long for the approval of God not man because in the end, it will only be His opinion of you that really matters. And you will answer to Him for every word, thought and deed. That reality leads to a proper and healthy fear of God - a fear that is lived out in a loving relationship with Him if we know and love Christ.

So if you are one who struggles with worrying about what others may think and say about you, take heart today. You don't have to have a weak faith that is tossed about by the opinions of men. Grow strong in your faith. Spend time every day looking at Christ. And live your life for the glory and pleasure of God. In that kind of life you will find great liberty – great freedom from the fear and anxiety of others.