

People Pleasing

At some point we've all made a decision based on what others might think about us. Hopefully, we catch ourselves and adjust accordingly, before a poor decision is ultimately made. There are some individuals though, that need to take a harder look inward, realizing that they have become governed by the way people think about them. These individuals are people pleasers; those making decisions, often involving compromise, based on how it pleases others. Sure, there are times in our lives when the approval of others can matter quite a bit; employers and spouses for example. However, there are forms of people pleasing that can be detrimental. This essay aims to highlight the difference between good and bad forms of people pleasing and direct us to the goal of glorifying the Lord in all that we do.

The Bible has much to say about the opinion of others with regards to our choices. Here are some examples. In Matthew 10:37 Jesus said, ***"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me."*** Here's a clear teaching that one's allegiance to Christ cannot be diminished, even by loyalty to family. In Mark 12:14, people said to Jesus, ***"Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth."*** Jesus modeled that He doesn't bend the truth, or cater to the opinion of any person or group. Paul echoes a similar heart in Galatians 1:10, ***"For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ."*** A true Christian cannot be bothered by the opinions of others, not so far as it comes to the ministry of the gospel. He repeats this theme in 1 Thessalonians 2:4, ***"but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts."*** The point of mentioning these verses is to clarify that a Christian cannot be governed by what others think, but must always be yielded to the will of the Lord.

The opinion of others can become one's master. A people pleaser will realize that he cannot stand on his convictions while at the same time trying to make others happy. We can probably all think of a person in our lives that's a people pleaser, but can we identify that condition in ourselves? Do you ever feel convicted, that you're not being authentic, not being true to how you really feel, because it's more comfortable to smile and avoid conflict? God's purpose for you is that you live by conviction and not to bend to the opinion of others. Sometimes we do this, like a chameleon that changes its colors, as a defense mechanism. While Scripture rebukes this type of people pleasing, it's important to recognize that it does show us how to please others in a positive way.

For example, Romans 15:2 says, ***"Each of us is to please his neighbor for his good, to his edification."*** Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 10:32-33, ***"Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit but the profit of the many, so that they may be saved."*** One might read these and quickly leap at the idea that it's good to be a people pleaser. That however is not the intent here. Neither of these examples has anything to do with Paul being concerned about how he feels, as negative people pleasing seeks comfort for oneself. These verses are not concerned about winning the favor of others nor the concern of avoiding criticism from others. Instead, these verses have the other persons interests in view; their edification and their salvation, despite Paul's comfort or how he's viewed. Doing good to others for the sake of building them up is not the same as pleasing others for the sake of protecting oneself. Paul's trying to win people to Jesus, he's not concerned about maintaining any reputation of his own.

Let's look more intently at some instances of negative people pleasing in the Book of Acts, chapters 12 and 14. To begin, we read how the persecution of the first century Christian church got underway. Acts 12:1-3 says, ***"Herod the king laid hands on some who belonged to the church in order to mistreat them. And he had James the brother of John put to death with a sword. When he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also."*** You can see the progression here. Herod starts by persecuting the laymen of the church, seeing how that's received. Then Herod decides to kill James, one of the apostles. As public approval grows, Herod then sets his sights on the leader over the church in Jerusalem, Peter. Herod governed according to how it pleased the Jews, despite his behavior being immoral. Here's the bottom line - When the desire of a person's heart is to please men, he makes himself easy prey for Satan.

Fast forward in chapter 12; Peter has been delivered by the Lord and Herod eventually makes his way over to Caesarea. Caesarea is known for their theatre, which regularly depicted Roman royalty as divine. The historian Josephus writes that Herod traveled to Caesarea to attend scheduled festivities in honor of Caesar Claudius. Just north of Caesarea were two local seaport cities, Tyre and Sidon. These cities were under Roman rule and were apparently guilty of some offense at this time. Perhaps they had failed to tax sea fare as directed by the Roman government. Given Herod's pride, it could have been something trivial. In any case, Herod was extremely powerful and it was wise for the people of Tyre and Sidon to seek peace, regardless if Herod was right or wrong. After all, there was a great famine in the region and these cities were fed by the king's hand. Being that Tyre and Sidon were seaport trading cities, they had little land of their own to yield food. Herod could punish them severely by limiting exportation, etc.

Apparently, a group of notable representatives from Tyre and Sidon come to Caesarea with hopes of gaining Herod's favor; seeking peace and mercy. In order to see Herod, they must convince Blastus, a chamberlain who acted as a handler for Herod and for the events of the day. We're not told how they won over Blastus, perhaps flattery or bribery. In any case, the delegates from Tyre and Sidon now have attendance at an event over which Herod would be presiding. Herod arrives adorned in royal splendor and takes his seat at the rostrum: a stage and platform for public speaking. Josephus writes, *"Herod, having reigned three years over all Judea, went down to Caesarea, and there exhibited shows and games in honor of Claudius. On the 2nd day of these shows, he put on a garment made entirely of silver, framed with exquisite art. Coming before the people his garment was dazzling by the reflection of the sun."*

Here's where the people pleasing really kicks in. Whether motivated by flattery, awestruck by his dazzling brilliance, or moved by something he said, the people shouted, ***"the voice of a god and not of a man,"*** Acts 12:22. Herod receives their worship unabated, saying nothing to correct the people. He could have silenced the crowd and said, *"Citizens of Rome, I am simply a man, just as you are."* Instead, he received their worship. We should all remember that silence is implicit approval! When a person sits idly by and does nothing, he's in approval of what's going on.

The crowd had a motivation in stroking Herod's ego. They wanted him to look favorably upon them, as they were under his heavy-handed rule. God was watching though and was angered by Herod's acceptance of divine worship. Acts 12:23 says, ***"And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died."*** No more Herod. Having his body devoured from the inside out by worms would show the world that his death could not be mistaken for a heart attack, but a death that could only be a punishment from the real God. This type of death would also serve to stain his legacy and keep him from being heralded as something special after he passed.

We have to assume that some in the crowd may have falsely believed that Herod was a god, given that Greek mythology taught that some gods would occasionally appear on earth as men. If some spectators believed in this sort of thing, then that was bad. And if others shouted worshipfully to Herod just to pander to him, that too was also bad. Either way the people were wrong for heaping worship upon Herod as Herod certainly didn't benefit by being praised as a god! Many in the crowd just wanted to help themselves by telling Herod what they knew he wanted to hear. The bottom line is, if I want to help people I tell them the truth, but if I want to help myself I tell people what they want to hear.

The apostles find themselves in a similar situation as Herod, in that they were wrongly spoken of as being gods. In Acts 14:8-15, at Lystra, Paul healed a crippled man and, ***"When the crowds saw what Paul had done, they raised their voice, saying, 'The gods have become like men and have come down to us.' And they began calling Barnabas, Zeus, and Paul, Hermes, because he was the chief speaker...But when the apostles Barnabas and Paul heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, 'Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you that you should turn from these vain things to a living God.'"*** Acts 14 continues to say that the crowd began to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas. In all this though, Paul and Barnabas weren't about to have their egos puffed up by accepting the worship of men. Such a difference compared to how Herod responded.

If you're not sure if you're a people pleaser, then consider these questions. Do you make decisions based on your comfort? Do you need to be validated by others? Do you feel anxious about others' opinions of you? Do you struggle to set boundaries? Do you apologize for things that don't warrant an apology? Are you agreeable with whoever you're talking to? Do you find yourself avoiding key details in conversations, or compromising what you think is best, in order to avoid conflict? Here are some steps to take if you find that you are a people pleaser. First, make God bigger in your mind! This means that God needs to matter most. Obviously, God can't increase in any way, but He can be magnified more in our minds. When God matters the most, the opinions of people become smaller and less critical. Set in your mind that your chief desire will be to please God instead of pleasing men.

Consider Paul's correction to the church in Corinth, as some were making their identity about people instead of Jesus. Some were identifying as followers of Paul, Apollos, or Peter. The apostles weren't trying to become celebrities, not at all, yet the hearts of some of their converts wanted to link themselves with these great men, supposing their status would increase if they were part of "team Paul" or "team Apollos." Maybe some converts also thought they'd curry favor from Paul or Peter if they identified themselves as their followers. In short, if I link my identity with a particular person, like my local pastor, it shows that I have some neediness in me, a neediness that I need to be somebody in the eyes of others. Paul proclaimed to these people pleasers, ***"Let no one boast in men,"*** 1 Corinthians 3:21. I don't need to be somebody in the eyes of others, I just need to be somebody in the eyes of the Lord. It must be enough to solely identify as a follower of Jesus!