

Living for God's Approval in a World Obsessed with "Likes"

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Preacher: Wy Plummer

[0 : 00] Our scripture reading comes from Proverbs 29.25. It's rather brief but powerful.! And it reads, This is God's word.

Let us pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, God and King, we thank you for your word. Even in its brevity, it's powerful because it's you speaking.

The God of the universe, the Almighty, the King of all creation. We pray that you would bless our souls as we hear this word, as you articulate it through your servant.

And pray that we would be convicted and convinced that you are Lord and Jesus Christ, your Son. We pray these things in his name. Amen.

Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. When you are the pastor of a church, you have a responsibility to preach God's word faithfully.

[1 : 22] And one of the best ways to do that is to preach a balanced diet by preaching through whole books of the Bible. The struggle with preaching throughout books of the Bible is dealing with difficult passages.

And one of the benefits of being an occasional speaker is that I get to choose my favorite topics. Amen. Amen. Amen. And one of my favorite topics is living in a broken world and how we grow as Christians.

And to that end, I titled today's sermon a little longer than the scripture verse even, Living for God's Approval in a World Obsessed with Likes.

We live in a world addicted to applause. Some of us measure our worth by the number of likes, followers, and reposts.

And I have to admit that this is not one of my weaknesses. I don't even have a social media account. But my generation has its own way of finding our likes. But long before there was social media, Proverbs 29, 25 diagnosed a problem with the human heart when it says the fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe.

[2 : 52] We all want to be liked. But the problem is that when that desire becomes our compass, our master, and our God, it becomes a problem.

Why do we live for approval of others even when we have the approval of the one whose opinion counts? This is not a psychological problem.

It's a theological problem. Because at the root of our fears of not getting likes is forgetting, doubting, minimizing the only verdict that really counts, and that's God's verdict.

So I have two points and a question between those points. The first point is fearing people is a problem.

Proverbs 29, 25 says that the fear of man lays a snare. The Hebrew word for snare refers to a trap used to catch animals.

[3 : 54] It's hidden. It lures. The New Living Translation gets to this when it reads, fearing people is a dangerous trap.

We have an Old Testament biblical example in the example of Saul, Israel's first king, whose fear of people led to his downfall. We read the story in introduction to the story in 1 Samuel 15, 1 through 3.

It reads, Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have.

Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman and child and infant, oxen and sheep and camel and donkey. It sounds like an incredible, harsh command, but there is a story behind it.

Long before Saul became the first king of Israel, the Amalekites had attacked Israel when they were weak and defenseless coming out of slavery in Egypt.

[5 : 21] God said then that their injustice would not be forgotten. Now, hundreds of years later, their judgment has come. This was not an arbitrary act of violence on God's part.

This was God's holy justice after centuries of unrepentant evil. God gave Saul a clear mission. Completely obey, leave nothing. This was a test in the trust of obedience, but Saul had other ideas. He obeyed mostly, but not entirely.

He spared the king, Agag, perhaps as a trophy of war. He let the people keep the sheep and the cattle, perhaps to keep himself popular. It was a partial obedience dressed up with spirituality. Saul even justified his behavior religiously when he says, Well, we kept the animals to sacrifice to the Lord. But God was not interested in sacrifices. He says that obedience is better than sacrifice.

[6 : 31] When Saul finally admits the truth, here is what he says. I have sinned, for I have transgressed the commandments of the Lord and his words.

Why? Because I feared the people and obeyed their voice. He got trapped. He feared the people and obeyed their voice rather than God's voice.

Proverbs 29, 25 warns, The fear of man lays a trap. Saul got caught. He wanted the people's approval more than he wanted God's approval.

He feared losing his image more than he feared disobeying the Lord. And it cost him everything. We are not that different from Saul, although we are not commanded to kill people.

In fact, we are commanded to love our neighbor as ourselves. But I wonder if we do that 100%. Or if that neighbor that annoys us, we wonder whether God really wants us to love that neighbor.

[7 : 42] We're commanded to even love our enemies. That sounds impossible without the grace of God to love our enemies. We're commanded to make disciples and we need to share our faith.

But how uncomfortable are we with sharing our faith? How uncomfortable are we with wondering what they might think of us? We're commanded to give thanks in all things.

But I wonder if some of us are uncomfortable giving thanks in public over a meal. We'll look around and wonder, hmm.

Maybe it's a little different in the South. I don't know. I know that I was uncomfortable. And I'm not here to beat you up. I'm here to just bring to our attention the reality of how difficult it is for us to do the things that God has called us to do 100% when we need and desire and long for the approval of people.

There's another person in the Bible who was trapped by the fear of what people thought of him. And that person was the apostle Peter. Peter shows us how fear can trap even the most passionate disciple.

[9 : 06] This is the same people who once said, even if everyone falls away, I would never fall away. It's the same Peter who drew his sword in the garden to defend Jesus.

But then came the courtyard scene where Jesus had been arrested, the disciples scattered, and Peter followed at a distance. He found himself warming his hands at a fire surrounded by strangers. A servant girl looked closely at him and said, this man was with Jesus. What did Peter do? Woman, I don't know him.

Another person said, wait a minute, you also were with him. And Peter denies it again. And finally someone says, surely you are one of them because your accent gives you a way.

And right then a rooster crowed. And Jesus turned and looked at Peter. And then Peter remembered. He had promised loyalty.

[10 : 19] But the fear of man got him. The fear of being exposed, rejected, or perhaps arrested, trapped him. And he wept bitterly.

Peter wasn't a coward. That wasn't his nature. But at that moment he feared people more than he feared God. And like Saul, he fell into the snare.

But the difference is that Peter's story didn't end there. He was broken but not abandoned. Because God's incredible love and grace restored him.

Peter was later restored on the beach by Jesus who asked him three times, do you love me, Peter? To which Peter would say, you know I love you, Lord. And each time Jesus would tell him to feed my lambs.

Peter was restored. All is well. Peter had learned his lesson. You think? You think? Having experienced the curse of the fear of man.

[11 : 31] Having fallen into the trap. Having seen the gaze of Jesus. Having known the riches of the forgiveness and love of Christ. Peter learned.

Peter learned. Now, Paul tells us how the story continues with Peter in the book of Galatians. Galatians 2 when Peter was in Antioch. You see, Peter was eating with the Gentiles. He was having fellowship with the Gentiles. Enjoying them. But then when certain men came from James, men of the circumcision group, Peter's friends and associates, his fellow Jews, Peter pulled back. He stopped eating with the Gentiles. He became afraid again. And not of a servant girl this time, but his religious peers. The fear of man returned and with it hypocrisy.

Paul saw it and confronted it and rebuked him to his face publicly. I wonder if we would do that. If we see one of our fellow brothers or sisters falling into sin, doing something public.

[12 : 48] Would we publicly address them? Would we have the fear of wondering, I wonder if I can do this in front of other people? Peter's actions were horrible because he was not in line with the truth of the gospel.

And his behavior denied the very grace that had restored him. And others followed, even Barnabas. The fear of man is a trap.

It's a serious trap that any of us could fall into. So how do we avoid this trap? I see, I'm going to answer that in the second point.

But before I answer that, I want to ask a question. Why do we long for approval? Let's be honest. None of us is too far from caring about what other people think.

We care what they think. We care what they think about the way we talk and how we dress, how we parent, how we lead, how we worship. But we care so much sometimes that we won't even speak the truth.

[14 : 02] We won't fully follow God because someone might misunderstand us or disapprove of us. So I ask the question again. Why do we care so much about what people think?

To answer this question, I've relied on Edward Welch's book, When People Are Big and God Is Small.

Wonderful book. I would highly recommend it. And he gives numerous examples in the first four chapters in the introduction of his book. And I summarize these answers, which I'd like to give you now.

Why do we care so much about what people think? One, because we are spiritually empty and desperately needy, coming from his introduction.

We live like people who have love tanks with a leak. We need others to fill us through approval, attention, respect, affirmation, because we feel empty.

[15 : 12] When we don't feel loved or valued, we don't feel okay. I love what he says here when he says, Regarding other people, our problem is that we need them for ourselves more than we love them for the glory of God.

I thought this was a powerful quote. Secondly, he says, we long for disapproval because we carry shame and try to hide it.

It comes from his first chapter. The fall introduced shame and with it the instinct to cover ourselves and to hide from being seen by others.

Adam and Eve feared the gaze of others. The fear led to hiding emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. We don't see God clearly, but we accurately are aware of other people's scrutiny.

You see, God sees us all the time. Psalm 139. But we're just not aware of it as much as we are aware of the eyeballs of other people. Another thing he says is because we crave belonging and fear rejection.

[16 : 25] We fear being excluded, ignored, dismissed, unloved. We look to others for our sense of identity. This creates people-pleasing where we live for the applause and acceptance.

Rejection becomes a kind of idol for us, which we worship. From the third chapter.

Because we think people have the power to harm us. The fear of man is also a survival instinct. We think others have the power to hurt us.

Trauma and abuse deepens this fear. If we've been harmed by others, we may give them too much power in our minds and hearts. Our fear becomes idolatrous when it overrides God's promises and replaces trust.

Lastly, he says, because the world trains us to worship people's opinions. Our modern culture shapes us to define our value by reputation, self-esteem, and how others perceive us.

[17:27] We are told that we are what other people think of us. Identity becomes a matter of self-expression and performance. Even spirituality gets twisted into self-focus, where we use God not to know him, but to feel better about ourselves.

I recently attended a wedding in New Orleans. And our hotel was on Bourbon Street. And if you've ever been to New Orleans on Bourbon Street, there's all kinds of interesting people in all kinds of interesting garb walking up and down the street.

Well, this was an African wedding, and I was required to wear a African garb myself. And I still remember putting it on and then looking at Shirley.

I was just so uncomfortable going outside to pick up the Uber so I could go to the wedding. And I was so troubled.

[18:35] And I turned to Shirley, my anchor. And I said, I don't know whether I can do this. And Shirley just turned to me and said, why, have you looked outside?

Really? I just fit right in. I just fit right in. You know, here's the irony.

Our over-concern about what people think is really interesting. Because most people are too busy thinking about themselves to be too concerned about us. The other irony about being overly concerned about what people think is that we actually don't know what they think.

Which really brings us to the second point. We need to learn to trust God.

Because we know what He thinks because He has told us in His Word. So the second point is trusting the Lord is safety.

[19:51] The good news of Proverbs 29, 25 is this. Whoever trusts in the Lord is safe. And the word safe here literally means high or lifted out of danger.

The one who trusts God doesn't have to manipulate perception or chase affirmation. They are secure because they have God.

Paul was a good example of someone who believed that. In 1 Corinthians, he shows us that. In his letter, the Apostle Paul is addressing a divided church.

The believers were choosing sides. They were lining up behind different apostles that they liked.

They liked some like Paul, some like Peter, some like Apollos.

And they were judging them, evaluating their worth, comparing their styles, deciding who was better. And Paul had come under criticism. Some thought he wasn't impressive enough.

[20:56] He didn't speak well. Apollos was probably better. They were essentially saying, we don't like you, Paul.

You know, you're weak. Not impressive. But how does Paul respond? He doesn't defend himself. He doesn't try to win them over.

He doesn't even get angry. But what he does say is recorded for us in 1 Corinthians 4, 3, and 4.

When it says, With me, it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against me, but I am not therefore acquitted.

It is the Lord who judges me. What an incredible response from an apostle. Let's look at what he says. He says, It's a very small thing that I should be judged by you or any human court.

[22:01] I really don't care what you think of me. Can any of us really honestly say that? He's not being arrogant.

It's just that he just doesn't look at himself that way. He says, Your opinion of me doesn't count. Now, some of us may say your opinion of me doesn't count because it's only my opinion that counts.

But Paul doesn't say that. Paul says, Interestingly enough, most of us live inside of our head constantly evaluating ourselves.

Did I do enough? Am I good enough? What will people think? Paul says, Even my own opinion of myself carries no weight. Why? Because God is the judge.

He says, I'm not aware of anything against myself, but I am not therefore acquitted. This is humility.

Paul says, Even though my conscience is clear, that doesn't mean I'm righteous.

[23:06] He knows that only God sees perfectly. And he says, It is the Lord who judges me. This is the key. Paul's safety key is in resting and his confidence coming from God.

Not from people's approval. Not even your own approval. How many of us beat ourselves up? Stop it. I need to stop it.

It's the Lord who judges, not us. Paul is safe because he entrusted himself to the Lord's verdict, not the crowd. Not his own.

Not his culture. And that's what Proverbs 29, 25 means when it says, Whoever trusts in the Lord is safe. Safe from the trap of people's approval.

Safe from the anxiety of self-evaluation. Safe from the exhausting treadmill of performance. Safe from the anxiety of self-evaluation. To trust the Lord is to rest in his opinion of us.

[24 : 13] And his verdict is that not guilty because of the Lord Jesus Christ. He's given us safety through his son.

So the big question is, How do we live this way? How do we stay out of the trap? We need to first of all remember whose judgment matters most.

Like Paul in 1 Corinthians 4, 5, we need to learn to say, I don't care what you think of me. I don't even care what I think of me.

It is the Lord who judges. Do you believe that? We need to recenter our identity in Christ daily.

The world tells you what your worth is and it's measured by applause and likes and reputation. But in Christ, your identity is secure.

[25 : 23] You see, you've been chosen, redeemed, forgiven, and loved. Ephesians 1, Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who has blessed us in the heavenly realm with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight. In Him, we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.

Our identity is in Him. Is that a reality to you? Is that real to you? Have you made that real to you?

I'm recalling a Tim Keller sermon in which he was trying to explain this to a teenager in his congregation.

And he read all this and she said, What is all of that if I don't have dates? And often we think that way. Yeah, that's all good for the by and by.

But what about now? We need to pray that God makes that reality stronger than the reality that we see with our eyes.

[26 : 43] That the spiritual reality of what He has given us, how He has blessed us in the heavenly realm would open our spiritual eyes so that we have a different foundation and not one that comes from the world.

Our identity is in Him. He writes our resume. No one else's does. Romans 8. There is now no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus and that includes your own self-condemnation.

Stop it. I'm preaching to myself. Because if you don't actively root your identity in Christ, the world will assign you one.

So begin each day by remembering, I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live. But the life I live in the flesh, I live through faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself up for me.

Before social media, before emails, before your meeting, rehearse the truth. In Christ, I am fully known, fully loved, fully accepted.

[28 : 00] Find a friend to remind you. I constantly forget it. And so I text a friend. Sounds like a game show.

I text a friend and say, pray for me. I am really struggling. And God answers my prayers. God answers those kinds of prayers. Because it's part of His promise to us.

So feed your faith. Read the Scriptures. Find a friend. Be encouraged. Preach to yourself. the message that are in the Scriptures.

Fill your heart daily with the truths of the Scriptures. Read it. Pray it. Sing it. Sing it in your devotional time. Nobody will hear you.

It's between you and Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus. We're called to run with perseverance the race marked out for us.

[29 : 02] Fixing our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith who for the joy set before Him endured the cross spawning the shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

The safest place to be is not where everyone's approval lies but the safest place to be is with your Lord. Let's pray.

Our gracious God, King, Father, we thank you that you hear us when we call. We thank you that you have made provision through your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

You have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realm. Often this reality, it doesn't excite us because we can't see it. And we tend to believe things that we see first over the things that you have said through your revelation.

So I pray that we would believe the things that are said before we believe our eyes secondly.

There's a lot of things in this world to fear.

[30 : 12] So it's understandable that we would succumb to them. But we pray for your grace to uphold us, to lift us up, to open our eyes to the reality of what we have in Christ Jesus.

I pray if there's any here who don't know you, Lord Jesus, that you would open their eyes that they would see. I pray for my brothers and sisters as we struggle through this life, as we run the race set before us, that we would run with the perseverance that you've given us, fixing our eyes on Jesus. In whose name I pray. Amen. Amen. Please stand as we sing our closing song.