

What will people say?

This essay, written by Benjamin L. Sommer, was originally published in 1929 along with a collection of essays in a booklet entitled "The Fascination of the Race", which is available from Apostolic Christian Publications.

It has been argued that the fear of the criticism of their fellow men is a strong factor to keep people from wrongdoing. "What will people say if we quarrel, if we don't pay our debts, if we don't go to church, if we don't shovel the snow from the walks in front of our houses, etc., etc.?" Without denying this power of human criticism we want to point out its narrow limitations and also its dangers.

The first great weakness is that it affects only that part of our conduct which is known to men. Our secret acts, our thoughts, and the feelings of our hearts do not pass before this bar of judgment. He who is scrupulously careful that his conduct, as seen by men, shall be approved of men and even praised by men may be, in fact is, apt to be quite lawless in acts which are done in secret and in matters of the thoughts and feelings of the heart. Thus to pass our acts before the judgment bar of human criticism has a strong tendency to make for hypocrisy - for a mere outward appearance of virtue rather than for the reality.

That was Christ's frequent complaint against the Pharisees: "Woe unto you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you make clean the outside of the cup and of the platter, but within they are full of extortion and excess." (Matt 23:25) "And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they *may be seen of men.*" (Matt 6:5) Thus while the fear of criticism or the love of the praise of men may have somewhat of a corrective influence upon the wicked, it is more likely to develop hypocrisy than real virtue.

But if we really live a true Christian life, ever walking under the guiding and corrective influence of God's Word and Spirit, then "What will people say?" Very likely they will say something very similar to what they said about Christ himself. Some will praise, some will condemn, some will ridicule, and some will blaspheme. "By honor and dishonor, by evil report and good report, as deceivers and yet true." (2 Cor 6:8) So the world praises, criticizes, flatters, condemns and ridicules God's children. It will prove to be a big step forward for followers of Christ when we learn to give but little heed to "what people say", except that when they make criticisms that are justified, even though the criticism be not made in a friendly spirit, we shall still conscientiously try to remove the cause for such criticism. Aside from this, it is best for us if the praises, as well as the condemnation and ridicule of the world, influence us not at all.

Ridicule is one of the most powerful weapons against any cause. If the enemies of any cause can make it appear in a ridiculous light they have gained a tremendous advantage. This weapon has been used relentlessly against the Christian cause from the beginning.

I remember hearing a dear old brother, now long since gone to his reward, telling of his experiences when he was a young man and newly converted. He was a happy, enthusiastic young Christian and often, alone in his room, he enjoyed himself singing Christian hymns. Across the street was a saloon. A more timid brother, visiting him, said, "Does it not embarrass you when you sing, to know that the ruffians over there in the saloon overhear you?" He said, "Why no, they are the ones that should be ashamed for the kind of songs they sing and for their conduct. I have no reason to be ashamed of my songs."

Thus, he lifted himself above the criticism of the ignorant unbelieving world. (When we say ignorant, we do not necessarily mean devoid of intellectual education, but lacking spiritual understanding - lacking knowledge of God.) What manliness and what comfort there is in the simple faith and courage to bear the banner of Christ, to make a good confession of Him, even in the face of criticism and ridicule from the world! The apostle Paul said: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth...." (Rom 1:16).

The world loves to assume a role of superior intelligence and to ridicule as dark age superstitions some of the most sublime truths of divine revelation, calling itself "enlightened", whereas it is in gross darkness, in spite of all the much boasted progress in material science, if it shuts out, through unbelief, the knowledge of God and of His beloved Son.

Oh, what unnecessary embarrassment and unrest has not many a timid Christian soul suffered because it gave too much heed and regard to "what people will think", and "what people will say", thus allowing its own faith and life to be brought before the judgment seat of the world, to be jeered, condemned, and laughed to scorn, and often suffering intensely thereby. All of this is avoided by Christians who are strong enough and wise enough not to heed what people say and what people think.

How wise was the apostle Paul in this regard! He said: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment;...but He that judgeth me is the Lord." (1 Cor 4:3-4) Here we have the correct answer and solution to our problem.

The dear old brother above referred to, who was none other than the beloved Brother Hohulin, whom I have no doubt many of my readers have known and loved, taught us in Sunday school that the first step in the conversion of a soul is when it begins to realize clearly that before God there are no secrets, but that our every thought and act, even the most secret and best covered, is open and nakedly exposed before the all-seeing eyes of the Almighty God.

It is He who gave us life and who giveth us days upon earth and every blessing and gift we possess and enjoy. It is He to Whom we owe all things and it is He Who calls us unto His service and Who offers grace and mercy to us. It is He before Whom we must appear to be judged.

So let us not have regard to what people will say or to what people think. They have no authority or power to judge us. But it is "God who judgeth". He has a right as our Creator to pass final and effective judgment upon our life. So let us be careful that before Him, through His help and grace, we may so walk, so live and love and believe that on that great day of judgment He may say to us, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21).

Having regard to what people will say or think may have somewhat of a correcting influence upon that part of the conduct of the ungodly which is apparent to men, but upon the life of a Christian believer it is bound to have a blighting effect. It would give us false standards and instill false fears and puts us under an unwholesome bondage. Like a ball and chain it would hamper us when we should be making forward steps and straight upon the paths of right and truth. Like a ton of lead, it would hold us down when we should be making lofty flights into the realm of the knowledge of God. It would hold us down to the human, earthly level.

So let us break the spell of human opinion and yield ourselves ever more fully to the influence of the divine Word and Spirit. Our concern shall not be "What will people say?" but, "What does the Lord say? How do I appear before Him? Is my life, my belief, my thought, and conduct approved of Him?" That is all important. "For He that judgeth me is the Lord." And the code by which He judges is revealed in the Holy Scripture. There we may learn His ways and receive the light and strength to walk in ways approved of God even though ridiculed by men.

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