

Are You Well Thought of?

We would like to think we are men and women of character, not influenced by opinions, trends and styles. We would like to class ourselves as people of principle, unaffected by what others think of us. Why then do we cut and comb our hair in style? Why do we have large mirrors? Of course we would like our neighbours to consider us a “normal” family. Of course we would like those at work to think we have “good taste” in our dressing style. Of course we are deeply concerned of what others Christians think of us, especially those we regularly fellowship with! We would discreetly welcome expressions such as “he is a spiritual brother”, “a godly sister”, “a warm hearted believer”, “a pillar in the assembly”, “an example of a disciplined life”, “what a virtuous wife”... but what does the Lord himself think of us? What we are in God's eyes, that is what we are. Nothing more.

So far, the Greatest Man

What then makes a man or woman great in God's books? Are we sure we are fighting the right battle? Are we looking at life through “God's eyes”? Sooner or later we shall all give account to the Lord on how we have invested our life. How are we doing so far? A few years ago I was struck by the way Jesus rated the life of John the Baptist: “I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” (Matthew 11:11). Why such an elevated view of John the Baptist? Greater than Abraham? Greater than Moses? Greater than King David and Solomon? Greater than the prophet Isaiah who also predicted Christ's arrival? What did Christ see in John the Baptist to give him such a glowing reference? John's life is clearly worth exploring.

A short and unusual life

What do we know about John the Baptist? He was a relative of Jesus and 6 months older (Luke 1:36). He was the only son of an elderly couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah the priest, both descendants of Aaron, and described as “upright in the sight of God” (Luke 1:5-7). Some miracles surrounded his birth, but he himself never performed a miraculous sign (John 10:41). He was beheaded in his early 30's while in prison (Matthew 14:10). What made this short life so special?

You can't please everybody!

Scriptures do not attempt to hide the fact that John the Baptist was a bit of an odd character. In contrast with the priestly “social status” of his father, John displayed an eccentric diet and rough dress code (Matthew 3:4). How did his parents (if still alive) and neighbours view this nonconformist young man? Due to the well known miracles surrounding his birth, many locals had been asking “what then is this child going to be?” (Luke 1:66). His style was not orthodox. His message was not popular within the religious establishment. In fact, he was drawing people away from the temple and the God ordained sacrifices. The people, however, considered John a prophet (Matthew 14:5). As to local governmental authorities, he was an enigma to king Herod. On the one hand he tried to protect John because it was evident that he was a “righteous and holy man” (Mark 6:20). But it was not politically convenient to let John speak his mind in public. Herodias saw in John a threat to her sensual “free” life. She hated him. She had him beheaded (Matthew 14:1-12). Evidently John would not fit comfortably in any form of organised religion. Yet, Christ's words still stand: “Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist”.

Seeking the Lord's approval may sometimes conflict with social approval. Seeking the “well done” by fellow believers may blind us to the necessary conditions for a “well done” by the Lord himself. Let's be clear on one thing: a Godly life will not please everybody. It never has. If we sincerely seek the Lord's commendation, we must be prepared to face criticism. We are not to use this as an excuse to be asocial or unnecessarily confrontational. The apostle Paul's instructed: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Romans 12:18). What then did the Lord see in John? At least 4 qualities are strongly evident:

1. John was obedient to his divine mission

Unlike the calling of Moses, John's calling would never lead him to a prominent position. His divine mission was to prepare the way for another who would follow. John was happy with this secondary role and arranged his life in order to complete this mission. Each one of us is created with a purpose. You and I also have a divine mission. We shine best doing what we are called to do. But John's obedience was not easy. It is painful not to fulfil the expectations of those we love. Unlike Moses, John had no miraculous signs to increase his popularity ratings or to accredit his ministry. Christ values the enthusiastic and faithful plodding on until our task is complete. Jim Elliot once wrote “a man is immortal until God has finished with him”. If you are sure your mission is God given, keep at it. Finish it. Don't give up!

2. John wanted Christ to increase

“After me” John preached, “will come one more powerful than I, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie” (Mark 1:7). The day came when these words of humility were tested. Some of John's faithful disciples were leaving him to follow Christ (John 1:35,36). Some of John's disciples felt uncomfortable and insecure with this trend. They tried to protect John's ministry (John 3:23-28). But John himself was delighted. His ambition was not to create a religious institution. His goal was not to replace the failing Jewish priesthood. His satisfaction did not come from numbers or popularity. He likened his feelings of happiness with those of a

young man whose best friend is about to get married. "That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3: 29,30). Is Christ becoming more central in your life? Is the presence of Christ more evident in our ministry and service? Are we happy when friends leave us to follow Christ more closely? Sooner or later the day will come when we should "let go", "hand over" or "step off stage". Not do so would hinder the work of Christ. Let's do so joyfully!

3. John actively rejected sin

When missionaries are visited by friends from the home land, visitors usually react strongly to the dirt, the noise and the poverty around. But after a few weeks or months, it feels normal. The dirt, the noise and the poverty are still around, but we've adjusted. In a similar way, we can get used to sin. The first time we did it, we felt guilty. We knew it was wrong. But now, we don't think twice about it. The first time we noticed something morally odd or some strange unscriptural practice in our assembly, we couldn't sleep. But we've got used to it. In fact, we now cooperate with it. John the Baptist was different. Personally he was known to be "a righteous and holy man" (Mark 6:20). He hated that which was wrong, unjust, perverse. He was not a man for "cover-ups". He lived convicted that sin was sin regardless of common practice or who did it. He devoted himself to promote repentance, true repentance which would show itself in changed behaviour. It was this denouncing the evil practice of influential people that cost him his life. If we are seeking the approval of secular or religious leaders, we are prone to turn a blind eye to their sin. Do we remain passive in the face of sin? Do we react when we become conscious of sin in our life, in our family or in our assembly? Christ valued John's radical rejection of moral sin. He still does.

4. John burned with passion for Christ

Conversations can be somewhat calm and heartless until you hit a theme of mutual interest. Have you noticed how some wake up at the theme of football or cricket, education or human rights, plants or cooking recipes, computers or the latest electronic gadget? I find it surprising and sad, that even among established Christians, the person of Christ seems to evoke little passion. We seem to struggle to know what to say as we come together to worship Him. Not so when it comes to our pet doctrines and our religious distinctives. Over these we can discourse for hours. We can even become emotive! The apostle Paul could say "For to me, to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). Christ was also the passion of John's life. "John was a lamp" explained Jesus to some Jews, "that burned and gave light, and you chose for a time to enjoy his light" (John 5:35). Picture in your mind one of those burning Roman lamps. John's passion for Christ consumed him, and in the process he gave off light and warmth. A passionate, Spirit filled Christian life is very attractive. It is contagious. Would those who know you use the word "passionate" to describe your Christian living? Does our talk and life style set others "on fire" for our Lord? Those privileged men who walked with Jesus to Emmaus exclaimed "Were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32). It is only communion with Christ Himself that sets our hearts on fire. May Christ Himself be the burning passion of our life.

Are you well thought of?

Who thinks well of you? We mortals tend to place too much value on that which is temporal. We prize the claps and good wishes of fellow mortals. The approval of men cannot be worth more than the men themselves. And what are we worth? "You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14). "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 Samuel 16:7). Those we work with may consider us as exemplary workers. Our neighbours may class us responsible citizens. Those we worship with may describe us as "doctrinally sound and very spiritual". But how does Christ see us? What we are in God's eyes, that is what we are. Nothing more.

Philip Nunn
Armenia, Colombia
January 2003

Source: www.philipnunn.com