

# Let Go of Reputation March 6, 2011

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Texts: Matt. 5:10-16,(7:21-23)

This is the last in our “Fantastic Future: Let Go of...” series and perhaps the most difficult to accept or apply in our lives. In fact, it may sound counterintuitive as Christian teaching. After all, don’t we all want to be thought of as fine, upstanding citizens in our community, respected and liked by everyone? Who could argue with that? Isn’t that what being a Christian means anyway?

In one sense, it is true. God does expect us to **“live at peace with all persons, as far as it is within our power,”** Heb. 12:14 says, but adds, **“and, be holy, for without holiness no one will see God.”** That would have been fine if he hadn’t added that “holy” stuff, right? God expects us to live peacefully as good citizens, but that is not enough. God also expect us to be different from the rest of the world, because we are citizens of another world where the court of public opinion is not important, but righteousness and obedience to Christ’s commandments is all important. Paul says to the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:27 f) **“God chose what is foolish in this world to shame the wise, and the weak to shame the strong... what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.”** There is a part of me that doesn’t like that much. I would rather be thought of by the world as wise and strong, but that is not important to God, even contrary to God’s ways.

Jesus was constantly getting in trouble with public opinion. He spoke to and touched women in public in order to heal them. He hung out with the most vile characters in society, tax collectors, prostitutes, the crippled and the criminally insane. He **“saw dead people”** and even touched them to raise them to life...a big No No! He said, **“It’s the sick who need a physician, not the well ‘healed’.”**

My Pastor, Jimmy Ray Scott, once said, **“If God thought so little about Jesus’ reputation, just how much does he care about ours?”**

I’d like to tell you a story of Fred Craddock I heard him tell in 2005. Years before, William Coffin, himself a great preacher and pastor of Riverside Church in New York City once invited Craddock, considered by many as one of the foremost of American preachers of our day, to preach there. That is one of the most prestigious pulpits in American, and yet to hear Craddock talk about it you would think that “he had been invited by his brother to come over for coffee,” as someone put it. Craddock told of finding a note on Coffin’s frig that said, “No food here, but you can go to the Church if you want breakfast.” Going down to the Riverside Church early Sunday morning for breakfast, he found himself in line with a motley crowd of homeless humanity. Ever the congenial southerner, he made conversation with those standing in line around him. As he joined them at table he visited asking the reason they were there and heard all kinds of responses. He found himself chatting with an older man seated across from him and learned that the homeless gentleman held a Ph. D. and had a former career as a professor at a university in the city for several years. He had been quite successful and well off, but the pressure of the responsibilities weighed so heavily on him that he eventually could no longer continue and found himself not only unemployed but homeless. This once respected educator had been admired by many but was left with nothing. Craddock said he felt a deep connection with this poor man. When Craddock was asked how he came to be there for breakfast, never one to put on airs, he just said, “I was invited.” They had no idea that he would be the one who would don the clerical robe and mount the pulpit upstairs in the sanctuary for thousands of expectant worshipers. Of all who had reason to feel superior, he chose humility and love without regard to his own reputation.

Jesus asks us to turn our back on our obsession with keeping up appearances. For many of us in the Church we have our primary circle of friends here sharing similar Christian values. So our reputation among our church friends is not usually the issue, or is it? Our reputation in the public world is something quite different. What are some of the things that contribute to our public reputation? Keeping a decent personal appearance is worthwhile, but if we are not careful it can become a matter of arrogance and reputation. Proper care and appearance of our property are part of being a responsible citizen and good neighbor, but that too may become areas of sinful pride. Dr. Scott Peck wrote a book about such people who keep up appearances at all costs, entitled **People of the Lie**.

But, we all feel the pressure to be accepted by the majority just the same. Perhaps not so much in this small community, but we feel it in other places, such as in the workplace, school, and other social settings. "Keeping up with the Jones'" can mean more than just wanting a nicer house and car.

There are times when Christian values strike crosswise with that of the majority. I have felt it and you may have too, when the conversation begins to take on a racist or sexist tone, when stories and jokes go from off-color to harsh and caustic. Hatred toward some group or nationality or racial or religious group raises its ugly head, and we must make a choice whether to participate. Keeping quiet is only grants tacit approval of their values or **lack thereof**. What happens if we risk being thought ill of by speaking up to the contrary, defending those who are being broadly condemned for a few wrongdoers? What happens to our reputation then? It's easy to say, "What difference can I make? It isn't worth the risk of losing my friends." We have all heard the famous expression "What would Jesus do?" That is a tall order to ask us to follow what Jesus did in his lifetime. The situation is so different and it's hard to compare with what we face. Our young people may find it hard to relate to the ancient Jesus. But, if we ask, **"How does Jesus expect us to act in this situation?"** we may find it makes more sense. **Jesus, ever the defender of the least, the last and the lost, expects us to step up and take a stand for love and truth rather go along or simply remain silent.**

In our scripture lesson from Matt. 5, Jesus challenges us, "You be the **light of truth for the world, the salt that preserves and improves the quality of life** for all, especially those without voice or power. To refuse to do so renders us useless, unfit for God's kingdom. If we endure criticism or persecution for it, then we are blessed in unseen ways, in heaven. We are in the good company of God's chosen. **The one that is most threatening to most people is the one who is closer to God than they are.**

There is a powerful example of one who resisted public opinion, disregarding his reputation, and changed the course of history. The Roman Empire had been under the legal influence of Christianity for nearly a century, and had ceased the blood games of the coliseum. However, there was still a hunger in many for the excitement and near the end of fourth century they resumed. Captured enemy soldiers were trained and prepared for one-on-one combat matches to the death as public spectacle. One day in 404 a simple monk, Telemachus, in typical dress jumped into the arena determined to stop the bloodshed. He stood between the competing warriors shouting to stop such a heathen practice, but a fury arose in the stands overwhelmed his single voice, hurling every kind of insult at him for interrupting their entertainment. Eventually, they found stones to hurl at him putting him to death. Upon seeing this holy man's blood spilt in the place where many martyrs had also died in previous centuries, a sense of remorse began to sweep across Rome until the Emperor Honorius banned the practice first in Rome and eventually throughout the empire.

Who knows what good may result if we take action with thought of preserving our reputation with the world. **The real question is "Whose opinion of us matters most? The world's or God's?"**