

MISUNDERSTANDING JESUS

Matthew 16:13

When I was in Junior High School, with more hormones than brains, I'd sometimes ask my buddies, "What do you think that cute girl thinks about me? Can you find out if she likes me?" My motive was to find out if my cool moves had pleased or impressed her. The thought of asking the girl myself was unimaginable. I wanted to avoid humiliation. If my friends told me she liked me, then I would have a chance to walk her to class, maybe even sit by her. If they told me she didn't like me, then my feelings were spared. It was a neat system. Most of the time it worked. Isn't it amazing the lengths we humans will go to avoid the pain of even the *potential* of rejection? Isn't it amazing how we try to avoid being misunderstood?

Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say I am?", not out of a desire to please or in hopes He'd made a good impression or out of fear of rejection, but in an attempt to determine if His message was getting across. He tried to be clear about who He was and why He was here. He tried to keep things simple. He healed the sick, forgave sins, taught with authority, and performed miracles; but the masses just didn't get it. They thought He was a prophet, a teacher, a good person, someone to follow, someone full of wisdom. Most people rejected Jesus, not because they didn't like Him, but because they misunderstood who He was and what He was all about.

And here's the thing: *It didn't seem to bother Him all that much!*

Most people battle discouragement when they are misunderstood, but Jesus took it all in stride. He continued the work at hand, without hesitation, because He knew who

He was. What others thought of Him did not shape His understanding of Himself. Most of us can't imagine what it would be like to be so sure of ourselves and our worth that the opinion of others holds no sway on our self-esteem.

So, Jesus asked the question, "Who do people say I am?", not out of a desire to please or in hopes He'd made a good impression or out of fear of rejection, but in an attempt to determine if His message was getting across. He lived, not to please others, but to please God. How do we know this is true? Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work" (John 4:34). Pleasing His Heavenly Father was as necessary and nourishing to Him as lunch or dinner, bread and water. Carrying out His Father's instructions was His total focus. This focus kept Him from being side-tracked by the tyranny of the urgent or the approval of others. He served and obeyed an audience of One; but He loved, cared for, and ultimately died for, a world of millions.

An Audience of One

As a pastor who observes and talks with people, I've discovered something I think is interesting. I think I have stumbled onto a spiritual law. Do you want to know what it is? *When we get our minds off God's approval and on the approval of others, life becomes complicated.* This is true, regardless of who you are.

Some people feel pressure to constantly impress others. You know the type: You have to be the expert in everything. You are always right (or so you think). You have to be the person people come to for advice and for answers. You're a "people pleaser," and you live with one constant, nagging fear: *One day the applause will stop*

and you will be discovered for the fraud you really are. You are afraid that all you have worked so hard to build will crumble like a house of cards—what would people think then? And so you work even harder trying to impress others while relieving your own insecurity.

Other's, however, don't feel like frauds, they feel like failures. You know the type: No one wants your opinion. No one wants to hear what you have say. No one is impressed with you. You feel left out, unappreciated, and are afraid of what other people think (or don't think) of you. Everyday you get up you are reminded of your own insignificance.

Whether it's feelings of being a fraud or a failure, we all have fears and a natural desire to seek approval from others. Though it is a natural inclination, yielding to these fears makes life complicated and unfulfilling. Life is simplified when you decide to live for an audience of One. Until you accept who you are in God's eyes you will either focus on applause or failure—and miss the whole point.

Applause of Others / Approval of God

Before I began my first pastorate—at the age of 23—I took a respected pastor friend to lunch for advice.

“If I was your son,” I asked, “and there was only one thing you could tell me about ministry, what would it be?”

Without hesitation he answered, “Always remember that your walk with Christ is more important than your work for Christ.”

This wise mentor went on to explain that if I based my self-esteem on how my ministry was going I would eventually be an emotional wreck; but if I based my identity on who I am in Christ, I could remain calm and steady during the storms of life. I understood the wisdom of his advice intellectually; but after almost 20 years of ministry, I now understand the wisdom of his advice intimately.

How do I change? I do I quit living for the applause of others and start living for an audience of One?

To begin with, living for an audience of One instead of the applause of others means letting go of your dreams in exchange for God's dream. What are your dreams? To be successful? To be the biggest and best? Is your dream recognition and fame, all for God's glory?

I thought this is what it meant to be like Jesus—well known, large crowds, successful—but I'd not taken a deeper, closer look at the life of Christ. I had much to learn. Like those in Jesus' day I misunderstood who He really was.

As I studied more, I realized that Jesus would have been perceived a failure. Oh sure, there were a few high points, but instead of being famous, He was infamous. Instead of being liked, He was crucified. Most people did not come to Him to learn about the Kingdom of God, they came to see a show, and to get something—a healing, a meal, or a thrill. Jesus wasn't at all impressed, or enamored, by celebrity status or earthly success. In fact, He was often eager to slip away anonymously from the crowds who could have fed his ego with praise and applause.

When we give up our dreams, it can feel as though we are admitting defeat. It sounds painful to give up your dream, but in the long run, it is much easier than clinging

to a corpse of a man-made plan. Exchanging your dream for God's is anything but a sacrifice. God's dream is for you to be like Jesus Christ, and—though it may not seem so at this moment—that is a far greater privilege and joy than anything you could ever dream for yourself.

Second, living for an audience of One means letting go of other people's dreams for you. Life coach, Margaret Beck, points out that we all have our personal "Everybody's." It's that little mental panel of people who sit on your shoulder when you are making choices for your life—from which brand of shaving cream to buy, to what career you should follow. Usually our "Everybody" is made up of three or four people whose opinions have come to mean much to us, which isn't a bad thing unless they mean more than God's opinion, or contradict your own heart's truest calling.

For example, a young lady decides to go to medical school, when her dream is to be a school teacher—because her father and grandfather are doctors—and it's what's expected. Or, a young man goes into business so he can take over the family store, but deep down he knows God has called him to be a missionary. He goes on to have a successful career, but in rare, contemplative moments, his heart whispers, "You are not living God's dream for you."

I guess it's easier to disappoint a God you can't see, then family and friends, whom you see everyday. Still, I wonder sometimes, how many people are living someone else's life? How many young men and women followed someone else's dream only to wake up to a nightmare, struggling to live an inauthentic life? God's dream for you is beyond your wildest fantasy, which may be the reason it is so hard to

follow. Sometimes what God wants for us just seems too big, too much for our minds to handle, too good to be true.

If we live our lives according to what we perceive others want us to do we are living out a false self. Sociologist, Charles Horton Cooley, described this as the “looking-glass self.” The idea is that others represent a mirror (or “looking glass”) in which we see ourselves. We see ourselves the way we think others see us. We do, and become, what we think others want us to do and become. We live someone else’s dream, or our perception of someone else’s dream, instead of God’s dream, losing sight of who we are and what we are in Jesus Christ.

Are you living someone else’s dream? Are you pursuing someone else’s life? Are you ready to give up their dream for God’s dream? Be careful and thoughtful before you answer.

If you are living for an audience of One, that One needs to be someone worthy of tremendous trust. Is God trustworthy? Does He have your best interest at heart? Though you may doubt it at times, the Bible says, “For I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). The God who created you, created you for a purpose. He knows what makes you tick. He knows what gives your life meaning. He knows how to give you peace and fulfillment. Not only does He know these things, He desperately wants to give them to you.

As God’s dear child you can be sure His dreams are bigger and better than yours. God loves you and knows you better than you love and know yourself. His

opinion of you is the only one that truly matters. If you really believe this, it will give you the fortitude to follow Him, and Him alone, even if it means you will be misunderstood.

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu was born to an upper-middle class family on August 26, 1910. By the age of twelve, she felt called by God to aid the poor and downcast. At eighteen years of age, inspired by Jesuit missionaries working in Bengal, India, Agnes left home to work with a community of Irish nuns in a mission in Calcutta, India. She changed her name to Sister Teresa, and later became known as Mother Teresa.

One day, in front of a Calcutta hospital, Mother Teresa found a woman half eaten by maggots and rats. She sat with the woman until she died and then set out on a campaign to build a shelter where people could die with dignity. Her shelter, the Nimal Hriday¹ Home for Dying Destitutes, became a place where the uncared for and unacceptable were washed, fed, and allowed to die in a place filled with love.

In 1979 Mother Teresa won the Noble Peace Prize. Accepting the award wearing the same \$1 white sari she had worn for years, she said, "I choose the poverty of our poor people. But I am grateful to receive (the Nobel) in the name of the hungry, the naked, the homeless, of the crippled, of the blind, of the lepers, of all those people who feel unwanted, unloved, uncared-for throughout society, people that have become a burden to the society and are shunned by everyone."² She took the Nobles' \$192,000 to help finance her charitable work.

When Mother Teresa opened her home in Calcutta, local people complained and tried to get the police commissioner to evict her. Moved by the misery he saw, the commissioner said he would evict her only if the local people decided to take over her

¹ Nimal Hriday means "Pure Heart."

² "Mother Teresa: A Profile." 1997. The Associated Press.
www.cnn.com/WORLD/9709/mother.teresa

work. During her life of ministry she was accused of impropriety because she accepted contributions without questioning the source. She was criticized for “exploiting her fame,” and of being a “spiritual colonialists. Throughout her life, people questioned her motives, rejected her attempts to love, twisted her words, and misunderstood her reasons for doing what she did.

However, Mother Teresa knew who she was. She responded to these criticisms by saying, “No matter who says what, you should accept it with a smile and do your own work.”³ Her self-worth was in Jesus. She said, “Jesus is my God. Jesus is my Spouse. Jesus is my Life. Jesus is my only Love. Jesus is my All in All. Jesus is my everything.”⁴

Do you have that confidence? Do you know who you are in Jesus? Are you overly concerned with what others think? Jesus asked His friends, “So tell Me, who do people say I am? What do people think of me?” God said, “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Jesus was misunderstood by the masses and sometimes by his closest buddies, but because He knew who He really was, He walked onward and upward, one foot in front of the other, toward a cross...and a tomb...and a glorious resurrection that would free His children from Satan’s grasp. He fulfilled His mission. He focused on the audience of One, and even when the world labeled him “failure” and ridiculed his ways, Jesus tuned his ear toward heaven, heard the applause of His Father.

That was all He needed. Indeed, that was all that truly mattered.

³ “Mother Teresa, patron of the poor, dead at 87.”
http://www.lubbockonline.com/news/090697/mother_teresa.htm. Copyright Lubbock Avalanche—
Journal 1997.

⁴ <http://www.ewtn.com/motherteresa/words.htm>