

What God Thinks of Us

John 1:40-51

What people think of us, or what we think they think of us, is a powerful influence in our lives. The opinion of others directly relates to our own self-image and, ultimately, it affects the way we act. No one can honestly say, “I don’t care what others think about me.” We do care. In fact, we tend to live up to or to live down to their estimation of who we are and what we do.

That’s why it’s so vital that children be told that they are loved and that they are capable of great things. The cellist Pablo Casals once said: “When will we teach our children in school what they are? We should say to each of them: Do you know what you are? You are a marvel. You are unique. In all of the world there is no other child exactly like you. In the millions of years that have passed there has never been another child like you. And look at your body—what a wonder it is! Your legs, your arms, your cunning fingers, the way you move! You may become a Shakespeare, a Michelangelo, a Beethoven. You have the capacity for anything. Yes, you are a marvel. And when you grow up, can you then harm another who, like you, is a marvel?”

For all of us—young or old—the opinion of others is either a bitter curse or a profound blessing. Attitudes toward us are prophecies that make us secure in who we are or cause us to be driven but forever dissatisfied with ourselves. We fret constantly about what other people think of us, but I wonder how often we take into account what God thinks. What’s God’s opinion of us? How strongly are we influenced by it?

Many persons want to avoid that question. There was a time when I didn’t want to think about it. I literally grew up in the church. Every week I attended all five regular services—Sunday School, morning worship, Training Union, evening worship, and Wednesday prayer meeting. I was immersed in Bible study and in the teaching of the church. I was taught that God was to be feared. I was told that God had standards and expectations that I had to meet. Failure to live up to

God's standards, to make the right kind of profession of faith, and to live the right kind of life would result in an eternity in hell. Now, if that message is imprinted on your consciousness, what are you going to think about God? You come to believe that God is threatening and judgmental.

Fortunately, I began to read and study the Bible for myself. I discovered that the scriptures teach that god is a Father of everlasting love, whose will is that none should perish, who knows us better than we know ourselves, who has called us his children, who constantly bids us accept our true being. In my study of Christian thought I discovered the concept of grace and came to see that God's love is active in every part of life. Grace covers our sins, assures our hearts, gives us strength, and leads us toward the maturity that God envisions for us. God does not see us with disapproval; God dotes on us.

Why do I think that and how can I support that idea? Here's how. I believe that God has made himself known in Jesus the Christ. I further believe that in Jesus the Christ God has revealed his attitude toward humanity. Through Jesus God gives his opinion of us. One of the most fascinating themes running through the gospels, for me, is what Jesus believed about people. Jesus did not beat persons down in order to make them better. He did not condemn them in order to make a point. He reached out in loving concern and held before them an image of what they could become. That was his consistent pattern. It is important that we see it, for in seeing what Jesus thought of persons we get an idea of what God thinks of us.

There are two stories in the first chapter of the Gospel of John that show what I mean. Andrew, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, was a casual follower of John the Baptist. One day he heard John refer to Jesus as the "Lamb of God." He went to see and hear Jesus for himself. Then he summoned his brother Simon. "We have found the Messiah," he said, and he brought Simon to Jesus.

The gospel writer doesn't say so, but I imagine Simon's reputation preceded him. We know him as intensely human and always interesting, even in his blunderings. Simon was an impulsive man, ready at any time to speak or act. His was the greatest confession in the gospels; his was also the most tragic denial of Jesus. No doubt Jesus knew Simon as a rough, vacillating man.

But Jesus did not tell Simon that he had to become someone he was not. He did not indicate any uncertainty about Simon's personality. He did not question whether Simon could hold out as a disciple. Jesus simply said, "So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas," or Peter or Man of Rock. Can you imagine what that affirmation of confidence did for Simon? It changed his life.

Simon did not become a strong rock of a man all at once. His transformation came about slowly. We know all about his failures. But Simon could never get away from that statement. It was branded on his consciousness. Jesus thought more of Simon than Simon ever thought of himself. He had to live up to what Jesus thought of him. And he did!

John follows that account with the story of Nathanael. Jesus traveled northward from the Sea of Galilee into the little village of Cana, near his hometown of Nazareth. There he found and called Philip to discipleship. You get some idea of the magnetic personality of Jesus when you note in the gospels that almost everyone who met him seemed to need to tell someone else. Philip got his friend Nathanael and said, "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph."

You and I probably would not have liked Nathanael. He was narrow and bigoted. There was jealousy and rivalry between his hometown of Cana and its close neighbor Nazareth. It was absolutely impossible, Nathanael thought, that the Messiah could come from such an undistinguished place as Nazareth. "Can anything good come out of there?" he sneered.

Jesus did not lecture Nathanael about his prejudice. He didn't rebuke him for his bad attitude. Instead, he paid Nathanael the supreme compliment: "Here is a true and genuine Israelite, a man in whose heart is no guile."

Nathanael was stunned, but he accepted the compliment. "Why do you say this? How do you know me?" he asked. "Before Philip called you," Jesus replied, "I saw you under the fig tree." In that day the shade of the fig tree was a place for meditation. Jesus had observed a man deeply concerned and sincere in his desire for the coming of the kingdom of God. He and Nathanael were on common ground. Others perhaps had called Nathanael an idle dreamer; Jesus saw his potential. At last, Nathanael had found someone who understood him.

Nathanael came to life that day! "Rabbi," he said, "You are the Son of God! You are the king of Israel!" Jesus must have laughed as he responded, "Do you believe because I said I saw you meditating? You shall see greater things than these."

These two accounts tell more than just how Simon and Nathanael became disciples of Jesus. They depict something of what Jesus thought of persons. And I think they show something of what God thinks of us. How does God see us? Some things we can say for certain.

First, through the ministry of Jesus we determine that God sees us not as we are but as we can become. God sees not just actualities; he sees possibilities. We are never condemned to be what we are. Every life is redeemable whatever the circumstances. Jesus said on one occasion, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." In calling us sinners, Jesus was not implying that that is our true state. It is really our false nature, a false nature we have willingly assumed. We are summoned to accept our true nature, children of God. In every person, regardless of color, social status, political affiliation, or whatever, Jesus sees a child of God. And that is God's attitude!

Second, the stories of Jesus indicate that God has a trust in us that transcends our understanding. He took the wishy-washy Simon and entrusted to him a faith on which his church would be established. He took the bigoted Nathanael and entrusted to him a universal gospel. To you and me God has entrusted a ministry to carry out, possessions to use responsibly, family and community life to nurture. We have not always shown ourselves to be worthy of that trust, but the trust is there.

Third, God sees us as equals with Jesus. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? We cannot do what Jesus did or be what he was and is. And yet, he said in the upper room to his followers, "You are my friends." In the synagogue that day when his family wanted his attention, Jesus said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother." In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "You must be complete, as your heavenly Father is complete." Through these statements was Jesus not giving God's thoughts about us?

These comments about us and to us astound me. I don't know how you feel about them, but they remind me that God's love for us is so strong, his belief in us so firm, and his goals for us so high that we can find contentment nowhere else than in loving God and living for him.

I'm fond of the tale about a passerby who stopped to watch Michelangelo chipping away at a huge shapeless piece of rock. He asked the sculptor what he was doing. Michelangelo's answer was, "I'm releasing the angel that is imprisoned in this marble." Isn't that what God is doing with us? God made us. He knows us. God thinks more of us than we think of ourselves.

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