

301 Let your light so shine ...

We have been reflecting in recent weeks on the fact that everything that we think, say, do and are is being constantly watched by someone somewhere: watched by God Himself, by our fellow Christians, and by those who are as yet “without” in terms of faith in Christ, salvation itself, and membership of Christ’s Church.

We have noted that what we really are as Christian people makes far more impression on those around us than do any words we might happen to say, timely though those words may be. Thinking back over our own lives, about our parents and grandparents for example, or our school teachers and church leaders, or our employers and colleagues, or our neighbours or friends, very little is remembered of their actual words from years ago. What stands in the memory, for good or ill, is what they were as people, with the example they set us and the lessons they taught us, often without their realising it.

That is what is going on for us right now – we too are currently setting an example and teaching lessons, also perhaps without our realising it.

This is all taking place in a rapidly-changing society where fierce, instant, public criticism has become “the new norm”. Such criticism is fanned by social media and so-called “24-hour news”, whereby individuals can find themselves suddenly hounded and pilloried, perhaps even globally, for their alleged misdemeanours. In such a frenzied environment, truth itself can be quickly trampled in the dust.

Not surprisingly all Christians face the possibility of being targets of such criticism, probably caused by our upholding God’s Word over contemporary moral issues rather than blandly drifting along with the modernist tide. If such criticism happens, one Christian response is to say we really don’t care what others may make of us: as long as we are settled in our own minds that we are “OK under the Lord”, then the impression that others may have of us is their problems not ours!

There is certainly some virtue in that approach, though if overdone it can drift into a smug arrogance that is, not surprisingly, most off-putting to the very people we are trying to help forward towards Christ. We see how the Lord Jesus was of course always “His own Man” under His Father in His dealings with those around Him, and His keeping in complete step with His Father was thus His prime concern, come what may (eg., John 4.34; 5.19,30; 6.38). But in doing that He could never be accused of smugness or arrogance in His attitude towards others, whatever their “station in life” happened to be. As always, there is our Example.

A second Christian response to our possible critics, at the other extreme, is to be so fearful of what might be said or done against us that we end up saying and doing absolutely nothing at all! – like the man who hid his one talent in the ground out of fear (Matthew 25.18,25). Jesus never took that line, and nor should we.

The best rebuff to possible criticism is to have nothing to hide, and nothing to answer for, again, just as with the Lord Himself (egs., Matthew 26.59-63a and parallels/ Mark 14.55-59 / Luke 23.13-16, 22 / John 8.45-46 / II Corinthians 5.21 / Hebrews 4.15). Jesus was without sin however – unlike us (I John 1.8-10)! We do fail and will

continue to fail, and are therefore at times subject to fair criticism by others. By God's mercy, by our abiding in the Christ-Vine, and by our attentiveness to the promptings of the indwelling Holy Spirit, may our failings be few, and humbly admitted in the face of any critics when they occur.

Two useful practical checks can help us in our daily conduct and general Christian witness: are there any features of my life or home which, if made known, would allow either the tabloid press to "have a field day" on my account, or the police to raid my home and leave with bags full of "evidence" of some dodgy misdoings? (If the only evidence they could find is of a faithful Christian life, then so much the better).

Meanwhile may we let our Christ-given, Christ-pointing light "so shine before men" (Matthew 5.16), displaying fruit-of-the-Spirit-type conduct (Galatians 5.22-23), "abstaining from all appearance of evil" (I Thessalonians 5.22), and "ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear ..." (I Peter 3.15-16).

For there remains "one mediator between God and men, the man, Christ Jesus" (I Timothy 2.5). If our upholding that single vital Truth, with all that flows from it, brings criticism or worse our way, then so be it, for it is our privilege to utter those words of Peter when pushed to it – "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5.29).

And by God's grace, so we will.

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