

LOVING THE PRAISE OF MEN?: John 12:42.

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: John 12: 37-50.

The Lord is coming to the end of His public ministry (v36). He is now about to retire from the public gaze to spend time with His disciples. The blindness of the people is something that had been prophesied (v40). Many people, when they had heard and seen the ministry of the Lord Jesus, had willfully chosen to reject it. Most of the members of the ruling council were going to reject the Lord, although some, like Joseph of Arimathea, would not consent to the Lord being put to death. Yet, while the Lord had disciples among the ruling Jewish leaders, they would not openly declare for the Lord because of the fear of man (v42). They were disciples, but not openly.

1. The tyranny of other people's opinions

We are social creatures and we like to belong together. We like to be liked by a group, and we like to contribute to the wellbeing of that group. We do not like to disappoint people. All of this can work well to furnish support and cooperation to a group and in its common aims together.

But it can also go badly wrong. Our membership of such a group comes under strain when the group chooses to go in another direction. We then have to make a decision, whether or not we are going to follow, whether we are going to continue to support the group or not. If, as well, the person making the choice is a ruler or has some extra responsibility within the group, the stakes then are higher. There is more to lose by dissenting from the group. Perhaps previously, the position the person had reached had owed something to the help of older leaders, against whom now they were going to go against. Perhaps, being a public figure, the criticism would be more hurtful and personal. There is also the fear that, perhaps, the person would lose their position of leadership with all the implications that this would have.

This was the situation for some of the rulers on this occasion. They believed in the claims of the Lord Jesus, but dared not admit them because of the consequences to their reputation. They were paralysed, unable to act, unable to declare themselves as being for the Lord Jesus.

2. The biggest decision of your life

The stakes are similarly high for us. Will we stand for the Lord Jesus or not? Will we be openly His disciples or not? The options are very limited. We are either opting for heaven or hell, for God's favour or for God's wrath.

We may be unable to move because we love this life too much (v25). There is simply too much at stake for us. Our popularity is too precious to us to lose it and so we do not own the Lord as our Saviour. But in so doing we lose what we are trying to keep because there is no popularity to gain or keep in hell. We have no freedom there and there is no favour to enjoy. On the other hand, if we are prepared to 'hate' this life, things like the popularity and the good wishes of sinners, we will actually retain precious things like our freedom, our purpose in life, meaning and wellbeing, because we will find all these fulfilled in heaven. The rulers loved their standing in the world too much. They loved the greetings in the market places, the deference that people showed them, the honor that they were held in. It was too much to give up. So, faced with the big decision of whether or not to openly follow the Lord, they choked.

We might ask ourselves, 'What is our sticking point?'. Sometimes it might be the opinions of our parents, whether dead or alive. We shudder at the thought of them saying of us that we have 'got religion'. Or the opinion of our friends may be a difficulty for us. If we confess the Lord, there will be a part of our life that we no longer share with them, and we feel the tension of that. Likewise, there are our work colleagues where we will not be such an easy part of the office banter, and will not fit in so well. Or we might just feel that there is not much of a future for us without these things, that somehow the Lord will not be able to provide us with good things.

3. The praise of God

In the end, the only praise worth hearing is uttered by the Lord, 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' Or to hear the Lord describe us, as His disciples, as being His friends. Or to hear that we are loved by God the Father, just as He has loved His Son. These are infinitely more precious words to hear than the world can give us, and these are actual things that God says of His people.

But for us to hear these things from Him and to know that they are true, we must put Him first. He will not tolerate a rival. We cannot have God and mammon. We must decide that we will have the Lord assert His right to rule over us. We choose His pathway of obedience over and against anything else. We determine, in His sight, that we will have no other hope of salvation other than His Son. He will be the only hope of our acceptance in God's eyes, nothing else and no-one else. We will not allow ourselves any sneaking self-regard, no other prospect, and no other route. We have to remind ourselves that the Christian faith is not a story-time, just a bit of make-believe. We should believe in the Lord, who is generous enough to call us friends, and put ourselves entirely at His disposal.