

WHEN ALL MEN SPEAK WELL OF YOU

Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.
Luke 6:26

It is interesting how, in spite of all the warnings in Scripture against gossip, slander, and tale bearing, just how much stock we tend to place in people's opinions. It is said that where there is smoke there is fire. However, the smoke may be no more than dust and hot air.

As Mark Twain observed: "*A lie can travel halfway across the world while truth is still getting its boots on!*" In this age of E-Mail a lie can go around the world several times over before truth can get its boots on.

The great Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, warned: "*Believe not half you hear; repeat not half you believe. When you hear an evil report, halve it, then quarter it, and say nothing about the rest of it.*"

The great Reformer, John Calvin, declared: "*No greater injury can be inflicted upon men than to ruin their reputation.*"

Thomas Brooks taught: "*Of all the members in the body, there is none so serviceable to Satan as the tongue.*"

C. H. Spurgeon wrote: "*The more prominent you are in Christ's service, the more certain are you to be the butt of calumny. I have long ago said farewell to my character. I lost it in the early days of my ministry by being a little more zealous than suited a slumbering age. I have never been able to regain it except in the sight of Him who judges all the earth, and in the hearts of those who love me for my work's sake.*"

John Calvin wrote: "*There is nothing more slippery or loose than the tongue.*"

The Scriptures command us "*to slander no-one, to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humility toward all men.*" Titus 3:2

"Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." Ephesians 4:31

Gossip in the Church

Yet gossip remains prevalent within the church, and the arrogance, bitterness, jealousy and malice that so often accompany it generally remains unchallenged.

King David wrote: "*Whoever slanders his neighbour in secret, him will I put to silence; whoever has haughty eyes and a proud heart, him will I not endure.*" Psalm 101:5

Today, however, it is more common to publish the slanders than to silence or rebuke them.

Few seem to consider that whoever gossips to you will gossip of you, behind your back.

Jesus on Slander

The teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ are very clear. "*In everything do to others what you would have them do to you. For this sums up the Law and the prophets.*" Matthew 7:12

When we pray we are to say: "*Forgive us our debts as we have also forgiven our debtors.... For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.*" Matthew 6:12-15

"Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

"Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets...Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets." Luke 6:22-26

Enslaved to Public Opinion

Why then do we continue to place such value upon people's opinions? After all, mass murdering tyrants like Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse Tung have been "Man of the Year" of Time Magazine.

Men Pleasers

"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I was still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." Galatians 1:10

Our Lord Jesus Christ warned us: *"Many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other."* Matthew 24:10

The Judas Factor

Even one of Jesus' hand picked disciples, Judas, who was trusted as the treasurer of "The Twelve" took money from the high priests to betray our Lord Jesus Christ into their hands (Luke 22:8; John 13:21).

When Moses sent out twelve scouts to explore the land, ten returned with a negative and defeatist report and "made the whole community grumble" to the point of even wanting to stone Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:36). Only Joshua and Caleb, of the twelve, came back with a good report. The Lord severely judged the ten complainers and mightily blessed the faithful Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 16:38).

Criticising Calvin

The great French Reformer, John Calvin, transformed Geneva through his preaching, teaching, writings and Academy. Under John Calvin's ministry, Geneva became the intellectual centre and hub of the Reformation, a place of religious freedom and refuge for Protestants fleeing persecution. Geneva also became a sending base for evangelists, pastors and missionaries who established literally thousands of Reformed churches throughout Europe and further afield.

Yet historians have noted that: *"No good man has ever had a worse press; no Christian theologian is so often scorned; so regularly attacked."*

Throughout his life Calvin faced major opposition, often from fellow Protestants and other theologians: "whose objections to Calvin were incessant and, usually, unpleasant." Even today, there are those who maintain that John Calvin was a vicious tyrant who oppressed the people under an unbearable dictatorship. And that he had people executed for disagreeing with him.

Yet, the facts are: Calvin never ruled Geneva. The city was not a totalitarian society, but a republic with elections and dissent. Calvin held no civil office, he could neither arrest nor punish any citizen, nor could he appoint or dismiss any official. (To argue that his eloquence and logic constituted tyranny, is to invent a new standard.)

History records that refugees from all over Europe flooded to Geneva to find the freedom there that they were not able to enjoy in their home countries. Under Calvin, Geneva developed into Europe's greatest concentration of printers and publishing firms. It became the epicentre of the movement for freedom world wide. Yet Calvin continues to be slandered by ignorant and prejudiced people.

Libel Against Luther

Similarly, the great German Reformer, Martin Luther, continues to be slandered to this day. Whole websites are dedicated to depicting Luther as an anti-Semite who laid the foundations for the holocaust!

The accusation that Martin Luther was an anti-Semite, responsible for massacres, reveals an ignorance of history. Luther was pro-Christ and he was zealous in evangelism. For decades he lovingly and patiently reached out to the Jewish people in his area with the Gospel. In 1523, Luther accused Catholics of being unfair to Jews in treating them "as if they were dogs". Luther was outraged and declared that such mistreatment made it even more difficult for Jews to convert to Christ.

Luther wrote "*I would request and advise that one deal gently with the Jews...if we really want to help them, we must be guided in our dealings with them, not by papal law, but by the Law of Christian love. We must receive them cordially, and permit them to trade and work with us, hear our Christian teaching and witness our Christian life. If some of them should prove stiff-necked, what of it? After all, we ourselves are not all good Christians either.*"

Fifteen years later, however, the persistent rejection of Christ and repeated blasphemies of those Jewish people in his community, provoked Luther to write: "On the Jews and their Lies." In this pamphlet, Luther wrote against the "madness and blindness that blasphemous Christ" in the Rabbinic teachings. Luther declared that he could not "have any fellowship or patience with obstinate blasphemers and those who defame our dear Saviour." These blasphemies included describing our Lord Jesus Christ as "the bastard son" of "that whore Mary", and even worse. Blasphemy was a civil crime. Luther taught that to tolerate such blasphemy was to share in the guilt for it. Therefore, he proposed measures of "sharp mercy" which included confiscating all Jewish literature which was blasphemous and prohibiting Rabbis to teach such blasphemy.

However, to quote these reactions of Luther without explaining their local context of opposing the repeated blasphemies of Jewish individuals in his community and then to project guilt for the anti-Christian holocaust of World War II upon the great 16th century Reformer is ludicrous. How can any Christian Reformer of the 16th Century be blamed for the evils perpetrated by humanists (who clearly rejected his teachings) nearly 400 years after his death!

Luther was not an anti-Semite. His arguments against Jewish individuals were theological, not biological or cultural. He was speaking out against blasphemy and heresy, not opposing an entire race or nation of people.

It is most disturbing that such a humble and God fearing man, who, against all odds, gave to the church and the world the Bible, freely available in the common tongue; who introduced congregational singing; championed justification by God's Grace, received by faith, on the basis of the finished work of Christ; who stood for sola Scriptura - that Scripture alone is the ultimate authority; and who was so wonderfully used of the Lord to bring about the greatest Biblical Reformation and birth of freedom that the world had ever known, could be the target of such vicious slander.

The Scriptures implore us: "*Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the Law and judges it.*" James 4:11

Malice and a Contentious Spirit

There is a disturbing tendency throughout the church, seen regularly in homes where they have "roast pastor for Sunday lunch", to set ourselves up continually as judges of those who are better than us. Many have the gift of criticism and a ministry of discouragement. Few recognise how seriously their casual criticism, of what are often trivial matters, erodes and undermines the ministries of those called of God to service.

"Therefore, rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy and slander of every kind." 1 Peter 2:1

As the Scripture so plainly shows us, slander of every kind is inseparable from malice, deceit, hypocrisy and envy. (The middle letter of pride is "I", the middle letter of lie is "I", the middle letter of sin is "I", so too the middle letter of Lucifer is "I".) Self centred pride is often at the root of our desire to slander great men and women of the past, and to drag down others whom God has raised up.

Jonathan Edwards, one of America's greatest theologians, and a man most closely associated with the Great Evangelical Awakening, was actually dismissed by his own church for applying Biblical discipline. The elders of his church would not accept his position that unbelievers should not be allowed to participate in The Lord's Supper. In his farewell message, Edwards declared: "...avoid contention. A contentious people will be a miserable people...heat of spirit, evil speaking and things of the like...directly contrary to the spirit of Christianity...watch against a contentious spirit..."

Condemning Carey

The father of modern missions, William Carey, and his co-worker, John Marshman, had to endure vicious and unjust criticisms from young new missionaries who came "to help" at the mission base in Serampore, India. Many of these new volunteers actually split from the Serampore mission and spent an inordinate amount of time slandering William Carey and his co-workers (the controversy lasted thirteen years). So much so that the Baptist Missionary Society in England actually turned against William Carey for a time.

Writing of this, Carey said: "the evil they have done is, I fear, irreparable; and certainly the whole might have been prevented by a little frank conversation with either of us; and a hundredth part of that self-denial which I found necessary to exercise for the first few years of the mission would have prevented this awful rupture...but now we are traduced and the church rent by the very men who came to be our helpers...judge for yourselves whether it is comely that a man who has laboriously and disinterestedly served the mission so many years should be arraigned and condemned without a hearing by a few men who have just arrived, one of whom had not been a month in the country before he joined the senseless outcry."

Slandering Samuel Marsden

On a recent speaking tour to Australia, a couple of people commented on my including Samuel Marsden in *The Greatest Century of Missions*. They frankly admitted that they had never before heard anything good about Samuel Marsden, but only that he was a vicious "hanging judge" and "religious hypocrite".

In fact, Samuel Marsden was a pioneer missionary and founding father of Australia and New Zealand. He was a man who upheld justice impartially, and who diligently preached the Gospel. Throughout his life he remained a humble and generous Christian who laid the foundations for the Christian Church in Australia and New Zealand. Although he came to Australia as a chaplain to the convict colony of New South Wales, the Governor compelled him to also be the magistrate. Combining both demanding vocations in one person involved Marsden in one controversy after another. Samuel tried his utmost to provide for the prisoners, to establish a school for orphans, and to right the wrongs suffered by Aborigines.

His attempts to uphold principles of justice placed his life in danger and he endured many threats to his life. On one occasion, he travelled to England to call the attention of the government to the unacceptable conditions and to secure intervention. He presented these grievances to King George III himself.

Samuel Marsden had a great missionary vision which also extended to bringing the Gospel of Christ to the cannibals of New Zealand. Despite vicious disputes between some of the missionaries answerable to him, and relentless criticism, Samuel Marsden conducted the first public worship service in New Zealand, interceded between two warring tribes, and introduced education, standards of justice, and law and order to the country.

It was his sad experience to continually be a victim of malicious and unfounded charges throughout his time in Australia. His fearless denunciation of sin made him numerous enemies, but the Lord vindicated Samuel Marsden. Within 31 years of his first service in New Zealand, 98% of the Maoris had embraced Christianity.

Harassing Hudson Taylor

In 1865, Hudson Taylor prayed for 24 "willing, skilful labourers" for his new China Inland Mission. Willing and skilful they may have been, but four of these new recruits also brought dissension and controversy. Soon these dissidents had poisoned the fellowship with their increasing bitterness and resentment. After two years of backbiting and disruption, Hudson Taylor had to dismiss the ringleader, Louis Nicole, from the mission. Other troublemakers left with him.

More unrelenting slander and lies undermined the work of the China Inland Mission. One of the accusations against Hudson Taylor was that he was "too familiar with the young ladies." Hudson and Maria Taylor kissed some of the girls on the forehead before they went off to bed. The ladies themselves denied any inappropriate behaviour, but still the complaint reached London, and for a time led to a fall in support for the mission.

As Hudson Taylor wrote: "*If the Spirit of God works mightily, we may be sure that the spirit of evil will also be active.*" The China Inland Mission was engulfed in opposition, dissension, controversy, fire and death from the beginning. Their mission house in Yangchow was attacked and set on fire. Furious persecution engulfed them. Storms of criticism and controversy erupted. However, in spite of constant controversies, the number of CIM missionaries grew, in time becoming the largest mission organisation in the world. By the end of Hudson's long life, the very mission organisations that had belittled and ridiculed his methods had begun adopting many of them.

Libel Against Livingstone

On his Zambezi expedition, pioneer missionary explorer David Livingstone was afflicted by interpersonal conflicts amongst his team leading to everyone abandoning him in the field, even his own brother Charles. By the time he returned to England seven years later, Livingstone found that his disgruntled ex-co-workers had so spread an ill report against him, that no-one even came out to welcome him back. He was ostracised. Presumed guilty without even a chance to defend himself.

From Outcasts to Textbooks

The greatest Baptist preacher of all time, Charles Spurgeon, was actually the target of vicious and slanderous attacks by the Baptist Union of his day. Now his books are textbooks of Baptist colleges and his statue stands outside the Baptist Union headquarters.

George Whitefield, one of the greatest evangelists of all time and a key figure in the Great Evangelical Awakening, was actually excluded from the Church of England that he had served so faithfully. Today the Church of England in South Africa has named its college after George Whitefield.

A Price of Success

Dr James Kennedy in his book, Delighting God, writes "*if you rise just a little bit above the common herd, if you achieve just a modicum more success than your neighbours, most surely those barbs of criticism are going to be shot your way.*"

"To avoid criticism: do nothing, say nothing, be nothing. There is no defence against reproach - except obscurity."

Delighting God quotes one wise old man "*if I tried to read, much less answer all the criticisms made of me, and all the attacks levelled against me, this office would have to be closed to all other business. I do the best I know how, the very best I can, and I mean to keep on doing this, down to the very end. If the end brings me out all wrong, ten angels swearing I had been right would make no difference. If the end brings me out alright, then what is said against me now will not amount to anything.*"

An Opportunity to Glorify God

There is no doubt that **adversity builds character**. A faith that can't be tested, can't be trusted. Smooth seas do not make skilful sailors.

But unjustified criticism is still better than flattery - and less dangerous! We can always benefit - even from the most unbalanced criticism. What man means for evil, God can use for good. (Genesis 50:20)

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." Romans 8:28

Such trials should drive us to prayer, humble us and deepen our devotional life as we search the Scriptures and ask: "What is God saying to me through this?"

It can also enable us to empathise with and comfort others who suffer such injustices.

Christians suffering unjust criticism should find opportunities to glorify God and to witness for Christ. Ultimately, God's opinion and approval is the only One that counts. It is He whom we should continually be seeking to please.

Forgive Those Who Slander You

One thing that Christ requires is that we forgive those who sin against us - unconditionally, wholeheartedly. We who have been forgiven much should love much.

"Blessed are you when men hate you and when they exclude you, and revile you and cast out your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy. For indeed your reward is great in heaven, for in like manner their fathers did to the prophets...Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so did their fathers to the false prophets." Luke 6:22-26

It's Not the Critic That Counts

As United States President Theodore Roosevelt wrote:

"It is not the critic that counts

nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbled;

nor where the doer of deeds could have done better.

The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena;
whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood;
who strives valiantly;
who errs and comes short again and again;
who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions
and spends himself in a worthy cause;
who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and;
who at worst, if he fails, at least fails while doing greatly,
so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls
who know neither victory nor defeat!"

A Test of Character

Everything in life is a test of character. Extreme situations expose and bring out the best, or the worst, in people. A person's character is accurately measured by their reaction to unfairness or bad treatment. The measure of a person's character can be seen by the size of those things which upset him. The true flavour of a tea bag is only tasted after it has been placed in hot water, and so it is with ourselves. Our reputation is what men think we are. Our character is what God knows we are. And this is only revealed under extreme crisis situations.

So, when troubles and tribulations come, when you are insulted, excluded, reviled and mistreated, do what our Lord Jesus commanded; "*rejoice in that day and leap for joy!*" Luke 6:26

On the other hand; "*Woe to you when all men speak well of you...*"

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