

## When People Are Big and God Is Small

Galatians 1:10

I am always impressed by a good book title. Maybe it is because I appreciate the ability of a writer to summarize an entire volume of his work so succinctly. Maybe it is because a good title gives me the ability right from the beginning to understand what I'm reading, and to remember what I read for a long time afterward. Either way, Ed Welch's book, *When People Are Big and God Is Small* has one of those very impressive titles.

As you might know, Ed Welch is an effective counselor. He works and writes in conjunction with the Christian Counseling and Education Foundation in Philadelphia. And the subtitle of this book is also very helpful. The language clues you into the fact that he is acutely aware of modern psychological struggles. The subtitle is, *Overcoming Peer Pressure, Codependency, and the Fear of Man*. His main thesis is that so often today, we are controlled or enslaved to the fear of man. To quote Welch, "Of course, the 'fear of man' goes by other names. When we are in our teens, it is called 'peer pressure.' When we are older it is called 'people-pleasing.' Recently, it has been called 'codependency.' With these labels in mind, we can spot the fear of man everywhere."

He then asks a series of questions. "Have you ever struggled with peer pressure? 'Peer pressure' is simply a euphemism for the fear of man." "Are you over-committed? Do you find that it is hard to say no even when wisdom indicates that you should? You are a 'people-pleaser,' another euphemism for the fear of man." "Is self-esteem a critical concern for you? This, at least in the United States, is the most popular way that the fear of other people is expressed. If self-esteem is a recurring theme for you, chances are that your life revolves around what others think. You

reverence or fear their opinions. You need them to buttress your sense of well-being and identity." "Are you always second-guessing decisions because of what other people might think? Are you afraid of making mistakes that will make you look bad in other people's eyes?" "Are you jealous of other people? You are controlled by them and their possessions." "The desire for the praise of men is one of the ways we exalt people above God."

Do you fear shame in the sight of other people? Do you fear rejection from other people? Do you feel the threat of harm by other people? All of those questions Welch uses to diagnose this ever-present problem. And as he begins to formulate his conclusions, he writes, "All experiences of the fear of man share at least one common feature: people are big. They have grown to idolatrous proportions in our lives. They control us. Since there is no room in our hearts to worship both God and people, whenever people are big, God is not." He then begins to describe how we can cultivate a sense of the bigness of God.

But all of that is an introduction, because my text this morning is not Ed Welch's book. Our text is a single verse of Holy Scripture, Galatians 1:10. And my point of that long introduction is to demonstrate just how relevant and important this subject is to the everyday matters of our entire lives. The point the apostle makes is so penetrating, and so personal. I don't think any of us could listen to each one of those diagnostic questions I just read and come away thinking, "I am not affected by that." It is a frequent temptation and a very timely subject.

So let me address the question as Paul expounds the gospel which was given to him by revelation of God. And let me remind you, Paul considers this gospel of grace to be of such importance that he says to those who are troubling the churches of Galatia, verse 9: "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the

one you received, let him be accursed.”

Paul is certainly not under the control of the fear of man when he writes those words! Instead, the danger he must confront is well identified.

### **I. SEEKING THE FAVOR OF MEN.**

He puts it in the form of a question.

v.10

That question is translated in a number of ways. The most common translation of the Greek verb is to persuade, “Am I seeking to persuade men, or God?” That is the question. But what does it mean to persuade? I think the idea of seeking approval is the clearest explanation, and it is one with which we can all identify. Whose approval am I most interested in? Whose friendship am I trying to gain? Whose favor is most important to me? Who am I trying to persuade to give me their approval? Another human being, or God!

Do you see how the question applies to you? Or even, do you feel how it does? Do you sense the relevance of the question? Let me use a couple examples. How about your appearance, you clothing. Whose approval are you most interested in obtaining?

This is often most evident in young people, and perhaps, most often with young women. Consider the whole realm of fashion, clothing. What determines the styles of fashion that become popular? That’s true of men and women. Why are certain types of clothing fashionable? Why, popularity! So often, clothes are not popular because they are fashionable, but rather they are fashionable because they are popular! You have to dress like other people. You have to be accepted by other people. You have to be liked by other people. You have to gain the approval of your

peer group, and that is sometimes just as true for adults as it is for youth!

We are, indeed, people-pleasers. We feel the effects of peer-pressure, and we conform. What is most important is winning the approval of others. We seek to persuade people to be our friends, because we feel that need within our hearts.

Paul’s question is such a penetrating one. “Am I now seeking the approval of man?” When you do, people become very big and God becomes very small. To put it another way, you begin to worship a false god.

#### **A. The god of man.**

So ultimately that question of verse 10 is what we might call an ultimate question. It is a question of worship. The question is not simply, “Am I seeking the approval of man, or of God?” The question is, “Who is the object of my worship?”

Do you see how those things are connected? If you are seeking approval, if you are acting in a certain way or saying certain things in order to persuade someone else to give you that approval, they become the object of your devotion, your worship.

Interesting for Paul to say this, isn’t it, for he wrote to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 9:19 “For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. 20 To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. 21 To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. 22 To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I

have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. 23 I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”

That sounds like a people-pleaser, doesn't it? He even had Timothy circumcised, according to Acts 16:3, in order not to be an offense to the Jews in Macedonia. In that case, it was a matter of Christian liberty, a free choice made by Paul in order to avoid any unnecessary offense of the gospel. He is not seeking the approval or the favor of the Macedonians, but simply removing any obstacles that he can to the hearing of the gospel. But here in Galatians it is different, because circumcision is being required as an element of the gospel, as a necessary ingredient for salvation. In other words, a good work that is performed in order to earn God's favor. And that becomes a different gospel, a false gospel.

Paul's point in Galatians is the identification of that false god we erect, the false god of man. And so that question, "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?", becomes, "Am I fearing God, in the sense of reverent worship, or am I fearing man?" At the end of the day, the fear of man is idolatry.

### **B. The fear of man.**

I believe the fear of man is the emphasis in verse 10 when this idea is repeated, with different words. "Or am I trying to please man?" "Do I seek to please men?"

"Please" there means to accommodate yourself to the wishes and desires of someone else, in order to bring them pleasure. In order to bring them honor. If your ultimate commitment is to the pleasure and honor of another person, then you are a man-pleaser, aren't you? If you live for the approval of man, you are a man-pleaser, living your life under the burdensome slavery of this

fear of man.

So please try to identify where this enters into your own life and thinking. Identify how and where these thoughts apply to you, where you are tempted to fear man rather than God. Identify how and where the approval of men is more important than the approval of God. When popularity is more important than doing what is right. Where does this hit home with you?

Are you afraid of other people? Afraid of their rejection? Afraid of their disapproval? Are you conscious of the need to be accepted, the need to be popular? Are you willing to compromise on what you believe is the right thing to do because you want to be popular? Are you willing to be an enabler, enabling someone to continue in their sin because you want to avoid conflict? Are you unwilling to admonish or rebuke because you fear someone might become angry with you? Are you afraid to speak the truth in love, because you fear it will be offensive?

Are you a people-pleaser? Do you seek the favor of men? Are you controlled by the desire for approval?

Surely, none of us is exempt from these temptations. I face that temptation every time I preach. Someone might take offense at what I say. Or don't say. Someone might disagree. And they might leave the church. What a temptation it is to say what people want to hear, and how easy it is to fall into that temptation. I feel it every time I preach. I especially feel the burden of the impossibility of that task, given the conflicting expectations and requirements that are sometimes laid upon me here. The temptation to win the approval of men rather than to seek the favor of God I have to resist by remembering how Paul charged Timothy in,

1 Tim. 4:2 "...preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. 3 For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, 4 and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. 5 As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry."

Fulfill your ministry. As Paul is able to declare of himself,

1 Tim. 4:6 "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing."

Paul's goal was to win God's approval. He desired to gain the crown of righteousness which God would award him. Rather than seeking the favor of man, clearly he was,

## **II. SEEKING THE FAVOR OF GOD.**

And that's what we find here in our text as well, the last phrase of...

v.10 "If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."

Let me put that in the positive form, and say the very same thing. The goal of our lives is to seek the favor of God, to seek the approval of God, to seek to please God. So what do you do if you struggle with temptation to fear man? What do you do if some of those questions I have asked this afternoon pricked your conscience?

Surely it is not enough to rebuke what is wrong, to identify what is amiss without defining how it is to be corrected. What are the new clothes which we are to put on, as Christians? What is the newness of life to which we aspire? What difference does it make? Beloved, the answer to those questions starts here, with the honest and sincere commitment to make the goal of life,

### **A. Pleasing God.**

Not pleasing man. Pleasing God. Winning the approval of God. Doing what is right before God. Clearing your conscience before God. Paul expresses it this way,

1 Cor. 4:2 "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."

There is so much personal application here. So much personal reflection is needed, because these words reach down to your heart. They apply to your soul. To your desires and your motives. And you alone can engage in that search. You, alone, with God's help, can search your own heart and judge your own motives. So are you seeking, in everything you do, to please God? Or, are you trying to look good in the eyes of men? Are you seeking to glorify God, or to satisfy your own need for approval and acceptance from other people?

Beloved, the goal of life is to glorify God. The goal of life is to do what is right before God. The goal of life is to seek God's

pleasure. That's what matters, not the approval of man!

Which is to say, the fear of man must be replaced by,

### **B. The fear of God.**

Seeking the approval of God. That's the fear of God. Seeking to please God. That's the fear of God.

In his *Institutes*, John Calvin uses the word piety to describe the fullness of this desire to please God that we would call "the fear of God." He puts it this way: "By piety I mean that union of reverence and love to God which the knowledge of his benefits inspires. For, until men feel that they owe everything to God, that they are cherished by his paternal care, and that he is the author of all their blessings, so that nought is to be looked for away from him, they will never submit to him in voluntary obedience; nay, unless they place their entire happiness in him, they will never yield up their whole selves to him in truth and sincerity. Besides, it is not the mere fear of punishment that restrains him from sin. Loving and revering God as his father, honoring and obeying him as his master, although there were no hell, he would revolt at the very idea of offending him."

That's the fear of God. As Calvin continues, "Such is pure and genuine religion, namely, confidence in God coupled with serious fear — fear, which both includes in it willing reverence, and brings along with it such legitimate worship as is prescribed by the law."

The fear of God is lived out in your life when you live out what Paul writes at the end of Romans 11.

Rom. 11:36 "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever."

The fear of God is real when you live out what Paul writes in, 1 Cor. 10:31 "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God."

The fear of God is expressed when you sing with the saints in heaven,

Rev. 4:11 "Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for you created all things, and by your will they existed and were created."

And as we read in our text,

v.10 "...am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ."

That brings me to the final aspect of what it means to seek the approval of God. Again, phrasing verse 10 in the positive context, seeking to please God means living as,

### **C. Bondservants of Christ.**

True it is, that if you live for the approval of others, if you are a people-pleaser, you cannot be a servant of God. The alternative is obvious, and it is the call to such servanthood. It is the call to you as a Christian to be a bondservant of Christ.

Rom. 12:1 "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

Paul then defines what that means,

Rom. 12:2 "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind."

A bondservant is one who gives his whole life as a living

sacrifice to God. That is our calling as Christians. Not to be people pleasers. Not to live in the fear of man, seeking the approval of others. But instead to live as a bondservant of Christ Jesus.

So don't let people be big and God be small. Turn that around, and let God be big and people be small. In everything you do, seek God's pleasure. Even if there were no threat of hell, even if there were justice or retribution, seek his approval and his glory in everything.