

September 30, 2018
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PARTICIPATION TROPHIES JUST DON'T CUT IT
Proverbs 29:25

Edward Welch wrote a book titled, *When People Are Big And God Is Small*. In it he tells a story of something that happened to him when he was at the end of his high school years. At the end of the year there was a big assembly with the entire student body there. He knew that he was up for one of the biggest awards his school gave. He thought there was a really good chance he would be given the award, but when it came time for that award to be given out he sat there in that auditorium full of 2000 students and broke out in a sweat. He was terrified. He imagined what it would be like if they called his name and he had to walk up in front of all of his fellow students and give an acceptance speech. The thought of everyone looking at him, at walking up there, at speaking in front of all those people, almost made him physically ill. He imagined what people would be thinking, wondering if some would believe he didn't deserve the award. He prayed asking God to have them not give him the award.

The person giving the award introduced it by giving a brief description of the winner and though it was generic it sounded just like him. Oh no, what would he do? Finally the presenter said, "And this year, the award goes to...Rick Wilson." His prayer was answered as the award went to someone else. But a strange thing happened. He didn't experience the relief that you might expect given what he was feeling seconds before. Instead, he was hurt and disappointed. He found himself thinking, "Why not me? I should have gotten the award." He felt let down that he wasn't given the approval that he wanted. He went away feeling hurt.

What a strange situation. He was not going to be happy whether he won the award or not. It was a no win situation. That situation existed because he was so dominated by concern with what other people thought of him. Going up on stage in front of all those people was unbearable because he would feel so exposed. But losing the award was painful because he wouldn't feel like people appreciated him the way he desired. No matter what happened, he would lose.

As we are thinking about fears that we all deal with, today I want to talk about one of the most human, and most pervasive fears on the planet. This fear puts us all in a no win situation. We will look at a verse that warns us about this fear. Let's look at Proverbs 29:25.

FEAR OF PEOPLE'S OPINIONS IS COMMON

What will they think? That's a question that plagues us continuously. Often we don't even consciously ask it, but our decisions and our actions are significantly affected by how we think we might look to others. I think of it as FOPO, standing for Fear Of People's Opinions. It impacts every human being, and it is constant. We are very much concerned about what others think. In his book, *Running Scared*, Edward Welch wrote, "The opinions of other human beings are by far the scariest thing on the planet...the fear of other people is so common that it can be assumed; it sits in the background of all of our lives...this fear is everywhere."

Psychologists equate this fear with low self esteem. Sometimes we know it as being a people pleaser. One of the more recent psychological buzz words for it is codependency. That's not quite as hot as it was a few years back, but for a time all you had to do was put the term "Codependency" in the title of a book and you were sure to sell a lot of copies. Melodie Beattie wrote a book titled *Codependent No More* and made millions of dollars with it. Her answer for the problem was that you need to love yourself more. It turns out her answer was wholly inadequate

In a survey people were asked what their greatest fear was. 26% of them said it was speaking in public! They were more afraid of that than death, so they apparently would prefer to die rather than speak in public. Why would a person be that terrified of just speaking in front of other people? It's because they are afraid of what people will think!

My job would be unbearable if I feared speaking in public. I don't, but I am as human as the next person, and as a result I also struggle with FOPO, just in different forms. I recall a time a few years when I made a mistake in church. I was doing a child dedication and somehow, in the course of trying to say the things I wanted to say as part of the ceremony, I failed to mention the name of the child. I wasn't even aware of that. Later Laurie said, "Did you know you never mentioned the child's name? Did you intend to do that?" I couldn't believe it. I thought that couldn't be right, but I ran through my memory of the thing, and I realized it was true. It was a dumb mistake, kind of inexcusable. In the scope of life this is not a big deal, but that mistake nagged me for a long time.

I still have a very clear memory of something that happened to me more than 40 years ago. A friend asked me to be one of the groomsmen in his wedding, and I happily agreed. The problem for me was my job at the time required that I be in

Colorado for a couple of months and I wouldn't be able to get back to the LA area until the day of the wedding. How was I going to get the rented tux I was supposed to wear in the right size? No problem. I was to go to a tux shop there in Colorado and have them take my measurements. Then I could send them to the groom. He would give them to his tuxedo shop, then he would pick the suit up for me. I just had to get there in time for the wedding. I flew into town and headed straight for the church. I arrived before the wedding but not with a lot of time to spare. They gave me my tux, and I put it on. It kind of fit, but the pants were a bit tight. Much worse, to my horror, the zipper on the fly was broken. It would not zip up! I was supposed to go out and stand in front of a church full of people at my friend's wedding with my fly open! This resulted in panicked efforts on the part of several people, including to my chagrin, a female wedding coordinator, to fix the problem, all to no avail. In the end the best they could come up with was to use a couple of safety pins to pin it. It sort of worked, kind of a little, but it was definitely not perfect. I insisted all the groomsmen had to stand with their hands folded in front of them. Unfortunately I had to go through not just the wedding but the reception wearing that suit. Man did that make for an uncomfortable evening. You know it is not true, but it feels like everyone is looking at you and your zipper problem. If I had no fear of what people think it would have made for a much easier evening.

When you are invited to an event you've never been to before, don't you ask whoever invited you what they are wearing? Yeah, because I don't want to show up at a formal event wearing a tee shirt and jeans. I also am not crazy about showing up in a suit at a place where everyone else is wearing shorts and flip flops. We care what people think. It controls how we dress and groom ourselves. But it controls a whole lot more than that.

Studies have been done where people are to look at a series of lines on a paper. One of them is clearly longer than the others. Then in a group setting the people are asked whether the lines are the same length or if one of them is different. They put one subject in a room full of plants. This person has the correct answer, but everyone else in the room says the lines are the same length. Guess what happens. Very often the person who has the correct answer bends to the opinion of the group. That's the power of FOPO. We sometimes won't even believe our own eyes if it means being the only one in a group.

Fear of what other people think is a two edged sword. First we crave approval. We all have a great need to be affirmed and accepted, so we often twist ourselves into pretzel shapes to gain that approval. The Bible tells us we should strive to live in

such a way that we have a good and godly reputation. In Matthew 5:16 Jesus said, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” However, there is a big difference between that and feeling like we absolutely must have the approval of others. Second, we are terrified of rejection. Most of us hate the idea of someone thinking negatively about us. And having people reject us is unbearable.

Do you have trouble challenging the opinions of others? Are you afraid of making mistakes? Do you struggle making decisions and often second guess them? Are you easily embarrassed? Do you fear that you will be found out and exposed as a fraud? Do you have trouble saying no? Do you ever avoid saying something because of what someone might think? These often can be indications that you are worried about what they think.

This is a uniquely human fear. Charles Darwin was fascinated by the fact that humans blush. He called it “the most peculiar and the most human of all expressions.” It is associated with this fear of what others think, and scientists tell us we are the only humans that do it. I can verify that this is so. Toby and Anna have a dog I have mentioned before that, to be honest, is kind of unfortunate. He is a very sweet natured dog, but he is a piece of work. He is an Australian Shepherd who could have been really cute. However, he has ears that were supposed to fold over but they didn’t. So they stick straight up. He has one blue eye and one brown eye. He has a condition called “cherry eye” that makes his eyes look weird. He just looks like he’s kind of crazy. Then he has such a desperate need to have you pay attention to him that he won’t leave you alone. And he has an extreme form of doggy ADHD. He makes hyper look calm. Despite all these oddities he is never embarrassed. He never seems to notice that he gets on people’s nerves to the point where he gets banished.

A little of this fear can be a good thing. When people completely lose the filter of this fear it is a bad thing, for they often will say things or do things that range from totally inappropriate to downright offensive. This fear of what people would think keeps me from trying out my hip hop artist skills in church. If the opinions of others stop me from committing offenses like that, then that’s a good thing and a blessing for everyone. But we should recognize that this fear plays a huge role in our lives, and often is very negative.

On the Church of Facebook blog Jessie Rice wrote that because of fear of what people think she feels like she runs around all day thinking, “Like me, like me, like

me!” She says, “The spotlight is always on, and I’m center stage. I’d better keep dancing, posturing, mugging or else the spotlight will move and I’ll dissolve into a little meaningless puddle, just like that witch in the Wizard of Oz. I can never live up to the expectations of my imaginary audience, the one that lives only in my head but whose collective voice is louder than any other voice in the universe.”

FEAR OF PEOPLE’S OPINIONS CAN BE DANGEROUS

Proverbs 29:25 says, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe.” What is a snare? It is a trap. Is a trap generally intended for its victim’s good? No. Being trapped is a bad thing. So know that the fear of people’s opinions is intended to trap us and do us harm.

Many of the Proverbs are actually a form of Hebrew poetry. In Hebrew poetry the key was parallelism. The second line is a parallel that completes the thought of the first. You see that in this verse. The contrast to the fear of people is trusting in the Lord. Where fearing people is a trap, when we trust the Lord we are safe. The implication of this is when we fall to the trap of fearing people we are, in fact, not safe. We are in danger! Something damaging is about to happen to us. There is irony there. We fear people because we don’t want to get hurt, so we act out of our fear and it results in us being hurt, the very thing we feared.

This fear is dangerous because it keeps us from doing what we should do. Writer Anne Lamott in her book, *Traveling Mercies*, wrote of how she came to faith in Jesus. It wasn’t an easy process for her. Her life was truly a hot mess and had hit bottom. But even then she didn’t go willingly. She said in that miserable situation Jesus confronted her in a way that was almost tangible, but she still wanted no part of him. She said, “I was appalled...I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, ‘I would rather die.’”

In John 12:42-43 after saying that most in Israel did not believe in Jesus even after he had done many miracles, John wrote, “Yet at the same time many even among the leaders believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they would not openly acknowledge their faith for fear they would be put out of the synagogue, for they loved human praise rather than praise from God.” They were afraid of what people would think and do, so they did not admit to believing in Jesus. That’s kind of like Anne Lamott’s situation.

Geri Scazzero is a director of Marriage Ministry and a staff member of a church. She wrote a book titled *I Quit* in which she tells of how she came to a drastic place in life because of the devastating effects of just trying to please people. She wrote, “While I had been a committed Christian for many years, my primary identity was defined not by God’s love for me, but by what others thought of me. This negatively impacted every area of my life...The fear of what others might think paralyzed me for years.”

The fear of others’ opinions is also dangerous because it keeps us from doing what we want to do. In the early years of our marriage Laurie decided she wanted to learn how to ice skate, so she took an ice skating class. There she was, a 20 year old woman out on the ice with a bunch of 12 year old girls. At one point she almost quit in frustration. Part of the frustration was just not being able to do what she was trying to do as well as she wanted. But part of it was being out there on the ice failing (at least in her mind) for all the world to see, especially since the 12 year olds were doing just fine. She persevered and got pretty good, but the temptation to quit was very real, in large part because she didn’t like the optics of it. She didn’t like looking like a failure.

Unfortunately we are never going to get away from this completely. We will always feel the awful pull of the power of what people think. But it is possible to at least not be dominated by it, and to increasingly defeat it in our lives. What can we do that will help us not be snared by this trap?

APPLICATION

GOD’S GRACE FREES US

Galatians 5:1-2 says, “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” Paul was referring to freedom from the principle of Law. But the same truth applies here. God has made it possible for us to be free from enslavement to fear of what people may think. So just as we should stand firm and not allow ourselves to live under the burden of slavery to law, also we should stand firm and not be enslaved to fear of people. In 2 Corinthians 3:17 Paul wrote, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.” To the degree that we live in the Spirit of Christ we will experience freedom, including freedom from the tyranny of the opinions of others.

God does not want us to be enslaved by fear of what people might think of us. He wants us to live in glorious freedom to just be who we are in him, to be the people

he has made us to be. Not only is that his will, he has also made it possible through his good news of grace in Christ. His grace tells us we are accepted, approved, loved by God, not because we earn it, but because Jesus did. That means nothing can take that away from us. We don't have to prove anything, we don't have to perform to gain approval. We just accept the gift and rest in his grace.

God wants us to live without fear of what people think, and that he can enable us to do that. That is important because just deciding not to care what people think doesn't work. I can decide that all I want, and I still care. I still want approval and it still hurts when people criticize me, reject me or ignore me. We need something more than just deciding not to care.

FREEDOM IS ROOTED IN SECURITY

Many in our society have recognized that if a person is secure in who they are, then the opinions of other people don't carry so much weight. So they have hit on this idea of self-esteem as essential to freedom from tyranny of others' opinions. They conclude if we have enough esteem for ourselves then what someone else thinks won't matter so much.

Unfortunately, this idea proves to be disappointing in practice. First, it proves to be nearly impossible for people to have enough self esteem so they don't care about what others think when in fact they don't have all that much to be especially proud of. Some schools have sacrificed the idea of educating children on the altar of giving them greater esteem for themselves based on nothing other than the fact that they exist. Sadly, it has been a failure.

Have you ever had a child get a participation trophy? My son got a number of them. He played in some hockey leagues where everyone on the team got a trophy. How much did those trophies mean to him? There was probably a little pride when he first got it. But it wasn't much and it didn't last more than a nanosecond. Kids aren't stupid. If everybody gets the same trophy, then the trophies don't mean anything. Hey, you're breathing, congratulations. We're going to give you a trophy because that's so outstanding. Yeah, that will really pump up the old self esteem. Self esteem based on nothing more than the fact that you exist is going to be ridiculously low. In fact, experts are now seeing that the emphasis on self esteem when there's nothing to be proud of actually has a negative effect in the long run. It tends to make kids more narcissistic and entitled.

But there's a bigger problem with this self esteem approach. It doesn't work. Think about some of the most famous people in the world, Hollywood stars. Generally they are beautiful, rich, talented and famous. They have enough reasons to have loads of self esteem and security to fill a supertanker. And yet, they are often insecure, still afraid of failure, fearful of losing their fame, still in need of approval from...someone, or everyone. They are still vulnerable to what people think.

Actress Amy Schumer said of her fame, "it turns out that it's not fun...I'm learning that my dreams have been a sham, and it's actually not great." Thom Yorke, front man of the band Radiohead was asked in an interview why he does what he does and he said, "It's filling a hole. That's all anyone does." The interviewer then asked, "What happens to the hole?" He paused before answering and then admitted, "It's still there." The problem is even if you succeed and win great approval it won't give you freedom from the fear of what people think.

But let's suppose we view ourselves and other people through a lens that is different than the normal human lens. Let's look through the lens of the gospel of Christ. How does that change things? It says first of all that you are God's creation, and that what God has created is good. One of the problems for us is that no matter how good the world might think we are, we know the truth about ourselves. We see ugly things in ourselves that we don't let others see. This makes having esteem for ourselves and feeling good about ourselves, thus secure, rather difficult.

Look at Psalm 139:7-8. David wrote, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens, you are there; If I make my bed in the depths, you are there." In verse 11-12 he says, "If I say, 'Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me, even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.'" In other words, I may be able to fool other people, but I can't hide from God. I can't get away from the truth about me, because God sees it.

But look at the incredible thing he says in verse 14. "I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well." This is what God says about you. You are fearfully and wonderfully made. What God has made when he made you is wonderful. God made you as you are, and you don't have to be anybody else. You don't have to let anyone else's ideas about you weigh upon you.

Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are God’s handiworks.” That kind of says the same thing as David wrote. But let me read you the Greek words that make up that sentence. It reads, “*autou gar esmen poiema*.” The first word, *autou*, means “his.” The word “*gar*” just means “for.” “*Esmen*” means “we are.” So that reads, “For we are his...” That brings us to the last word, “*poiema*.” Does that sound familiar to you? It should. In English it comes out “poem.” We are God’s poem. We are his masterpiece. You are God’s poem. What if someone in this world doesn’t like God’s poetry? Tough beans. That’s what God thinks of you. Who cares if some critic thinks he could do better poetry than God? That’s his problem, not yours.

When I was in grad school for a while I worked in a grocery store. There was a guy who went to the same school I went to who also worked in the store. He was an unusually handsome guy, and he had an outgoing, charming personality. This guy had Hollywood idol good looks. One day while I was going about my business, doing my work, I overheard a bit of conversation between two young women who also worked at the store, in which they were talking about this guy. They talked about how he was “so hot” and went on at some length about it, and about how they’d like to get his attention. I was close enough to those women that I could hear them, but they totally ignored me. I was practically invisible to them. I realized that no women were looking at me and thinking, “that guy is so hot.” I am as average as it is possible to be, and people, women included, do not take note of me. But here’s the thing. One woman, for some inexplicable reason, thinks I’m God’s gift to her. She chose me out of all the men on the planet. And the astounding thing to me is, she’s the most amazing woman I’ve ever known. I would choose her a million times over, rather than any other woman I’ve ever seen or known. So how does it affect me if I am the invisible man to other people? I don’t much care. The woman who matters loves me and thinks I’m great. She has a far higher opinion of me than I do of myself. So it doesn’t matter even a little if others don’t share her opinion. And that’s how we can be when it comes to the one who matters in this universe. He thinks you are his poem, his masterpiece, so if someone else thinks you are nothing to write home about, who cares?

In Christ God loves you unconditionally. You are his child as a result of what Jesus did for us. Nothing can separate us from his love. When you live counting on Christ’s grace, you are walking in the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. The Spirit of Christ will increasingly give you freedom from the tyranny of what others think because you know in Christ you are loved.

Oddly, sometimes people know the truth of the gospel of grace, but still feel controlled by the opinions of others. Part of the issue here is the depth of grace's grip on our hearts and of our understanding of God's love for us. The more we experience the power of his love and grace the freer we will be. But there is also one more element that is crucial to real freedom.

FREEDOM IS FOUND IN WORSHIP

This fear of what people think in the end is a worship problem. God is the one who is to be honored above all. Does it honor God if we say what he thinks does not matter? Obviously not. Does it honor God if we don't think we need to serve him? Of course not. If we truly worship God above all else, we will say what he thinks is by far the most important thing in our lives, and that our lives are actually about serving him. In short, he becomes the ultimate audience for everything we are, think and do.

What happens when we are controlled by what people think? We are putting them in the place of God! **This is a bizarre form of idolatry**, for we are in effect, worshipping them instead of God.

Our fear of people's opinions gives them power, for that fear impacts the way we think, act and feel. It gives them a power they don't actually possess. Every year in the fall there are some creatures that appear around our house. They are a certain kind of spider. I don't know the species, but it is a huge spider and they spin these large webs. We usually end up with one out in our yard. I realize this is not a very manly thing, but they creep me out big time. They have an affect on me, because I try to avoid them. The thing is, they are not dangerous. It's not a brown recluse. It's not going to hurt me. It's just that I feel like the thing can maybe ugly me to death. The point is, the spider is no threat, but my fear gives it power. Our fear of other's opinions gives them power that they do not actually have.

In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul was in the middle of dealing with criticisms leveled at him by some Christians in Corinth. Paul was, they claimed, not dynamic enough, not an inspiring speaker, not deep enough. Sure, he had led them to faith in Jesus, but they'd moved on and wanted more. Don't you think that had to hurt? He had sacrificed for those people. He led them to Jesus and planted the church there in the face of a great deal of opposition. And now they were rejecting him. That could not have felt good. In verses 3-4 he said, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me."

Paul said, “God is the audience for my life, and what you think just doesn’t matter.” That is the key for us. When what we want more than anything is to honor God, to do his will, to bring him glory in everything, the tyranny of the opinions of others will be broken. Even Jesus’ enemies had to admit something obvious about him. In Matthew 22:16 they said to him, “We know that you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by others, **because you pay no attention to who they are.**” In other words, you don’t care what people think or say, no matter who they are. How was Jesus able to be so secure? In John 8:28 Jesus said, “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me.” Jesus lived his life only to serve the Father.

One of the most important things to help us ignore the opinions of others is having a mission. You are an image bearer of God. You are alive to display his character and to bring him glory. That is your mission. When you focus on that mission and live for it with passion, what other people think won’t matter very much. Oh, yes, you will hear those fears, you will feel the rejection, but you will live for the much greater mission of worshiping and glorifying God. You will care little about their opinions, just like Paul, just like Jesus.

When it comes to people you will realize that when you are concerned about what they think about you, you are not loving them. You are actually trying to use them to make you feel better about yourself. You will remember that you glorify God by loving them. Instead of worrying about what they think you will focus more on loving them.

There was a time early in Laurie’s and my ministry when we were going through a very difficult time. Due to personal tragedy we were struggling just to keep going. To add to the degree of difficulty our church at the time was struggling. We had been growing, but now we were losing people. We were meeting in a situation that was adding to the difficulty and was discouraging. One day a guy who had been at one point a supporter of mine and who was playing a significant role in the church, came to see me. In our conversation he laid all the troubles of the church in my lap, informed me that because of me he and his family would no longer be a part of our church, then said, “I just don’t think you are cut out for ministry. You should look for some other line of work.”

I can remember exactly where I was when that conversation happened even though it was over 30 years ago. I remember how bad it felt. I remember that he wasn't the only one who expressed thoughts like that and it caused me to wonder if I should maybe go back to that degree I got in math and get a job in that field. As bad as it felt and as hard as it was, I chose to stay the course in ministry. There were two things that enabled me to do that. One was that I had a wife who believed in me and encouraged me every single day. The other was that I knew down in the pit of my being that God had given me this job to do. He had called me to it, and if I was to serve him and not just protect myself from the hurts that others inflicted on me, then I needed to have some courage, and do what he had given me to do. To this day I don't like it much when people think poorly of me, but I also will keep doing what God tells me to do. When we worship God above all with great passion, we will find that what people think may still feel bad, but it won't impact our choices.