

Introduction

I'd like to begin by making a confession. I used to be an addict. I had an addiction that almost every person on planet earth has, including many if not most of you. It's more widespread by far than drug and alcohol addictions and causes untold misery in countless lives. Yet, there aren't any programs, like AA, that address it. But the Bible addresses it in various texts, including the one we read, 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. Let examine it and learn what that addiction is and how we can break it.

The Opinions of Others

Paul founded the church at Corinth and people soon formed strong opinions of him after he did. Notice the words he uses that reflect them doing so. They "**regard**" him, verse 1, "**examine**" him, verse 3, and "**pass judgment**" on him, verse 5.

Those words teach an inescapable fact of life for us all. People form opinions of us. It doesn't matter who we are or what we do. The people we know and encounter everyday are incurably social. So, they examine and assess just that – what we are and do. They judge our competence and character. They form opinions of us.

Those opinions, obviously, are good or bad ones. Some in the Corinthian church, for instance, admired Paul (1:12). Others, according to 4:18 and 2 Corinthians 10:10, didn't. Winston Churchill once described his political opponent Clement Atlee as "**a modest little man, with much to be modest about.**" That's apparently what some in the Corinthian church thought of Paul. The lesson is that people are going to form good or bad opinions of us, of what we are and do.

A Very Big Thing

The issue is how we regard them. We'll have one of two postures toward them, which I'll describe using Paul's words in verse 3.

First, we make people's opinions of us "**a very big thing.**" That

means they matter more to us than they should. We actually seek people's approval and avoid their disapproval. Their praise and criticism actually condition or even direct how we think, feel, and act.

Psychologists use a term to designate this condition of ours, "**approval addiction.**" We're addicted to the approval of others.

In his book *The Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg identifies the following as signs of approval addiction: (1) We "**find ourselves often getting hurt by what others say about us**"; (2) We "**habitually compare ourselves with other people**"; (3) We "**find ourselves getting competitive in the most ordinary situations**"; (4) We "**live with the nagging sense that we aren't important enough or special enough**"; (5) We "**get envious of another's success**"; (6) We "**keep trying to impress important people**"; and (7) We "**are worried that someone might think ill of us.**"

One of the surest signs of approval addiction is our need to impress people. We say and do things to adjust how we appear to them. We say and do things so they'll know our competence and character or so they'll not misunderstand our shortcomings. I tell you about a program I watched and add, "**But I rarely watch TV,**" so you don't think I'm not busy. Or I use big vocabulary words so you think I'm smart. Or I sign "**PhD**" after my name so you think I'm learned. Or I mention my pro-bono work so you think I'm generous. Or I use flowery words in public prayers so you think I'm spiritual. And on it goes. Do we say and do things to adjust how people perceive us? If so, we're addicted to approval. The opinions of others are "**a very big thing**" to us.

The Others

But who are these "**others**"? Notice the term Paul uses in verse 3, "**human court.**" What is this human court, this jury, to which he refers? It's the people about whose opinions we care.

A prominent sociologist, George Herbert Meade, contended that adults orient their behavior toward an amorphous group he called "**the**

generalized other." This is a non-specific jury that we concoct in our minds and before which we plead the case of our competence and character. It is *everybody* and yet it is *nobody* special. It is the generalized other and is part of the human court of most people.

Then there are the "**significant others**" that complete it. These are the people we deem important to us. These significant others usually change as the phases of our lives do. When we're children, they're our parents. When we're teenagers, they're our peers. When we're adults, they're our professors, spouses, bosses, co-workers, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and brothers and sisters in Christ to name a few.

I spoke to a mother who had wanted to hold her summer born son back a year before starting him in kindergarten. But she didn't because, "**My family would have considered me a bad parent if I did.**" Her mother, father, and sisters were part of her human court.

She illustrates that approval addicts have a human court, a jury of people, that they're trying to impress.

And it diminishes or even destroys their lives because they do. Have you ever been before a literal jury in a courtroom about to pronounce a judgment on you? It's one of the most tension producing experiences in life. Well, the human court in verse 3 creates that same kind of tension. Caring too much about the opinions of others is one of the most crushing burdens in human life. Tension, depression, anxiety, fear, and anger are its offspring. Approval addiction diminishes or destroys in its own way as surely as drug and alcohol addictions do.

A young woman became an accomplished violinist and plays in one of the world's fine orchestras. Yet, she considers herself a failure because her disappointed father wanted her to be a surgeon instead. She works and suffers unceasingly striving to gain his approval but to no avail. Her considerable success means little to her because she's addicted to her father's praise.

That's our fate when we're addicted to approval and praise. We live at the mercy of others.

A Very Small Thing

So, don't be. Have Paul's posture in verse 3 instead. Make the opinions of others "**a very small thing.**" Notice he didn't say "**no thing**" but "**a very small thing.**" It isn't that they don't matter *at all*. It's that they only matter *some*, in two specific ways.

First, they matter as confirmations of love. C.S. Lewis explained it well: "**The child who is patted on the back for doing a lesson well, the woman whose beauty is praised by her lover, the saved soul to whom Christ says, 'Well done,' are pleased and ought to be. For here the pleasure lies in the fact that you have pleased someone you wanted (and rightly wanted) to please.**" If we love others, we desire to please them for their sake. Their praise reveals that we've done so, which pleases us. Notice something. It isn't their praise that pleases us. It's what their praise confirms. They've been pleased.

The opinions of others matter in a second way, as elements of witness. Non-Christians judge Jesus by how they judge followers of Jesus. If they have poor opinions of us, they'll have poor opinions of Him, which hinders our witness. If they have good opinions of us, they'll have good opinions of Him, which helps our witness.

Those then are two ways that the opinions of others matter: as confirmations of love and elements of witness.

But apart from that, they shouldn't matter to us *at all*. We don't seek people's approval or avoid their disapproval *at all*. Their praise or criticism doesn't condition or direct how we think, feel, and act *at all*. Consequently, we don't try to impress them. We don't say or do anything to adjust how we appear to them. We don't care whether they know or don't know our competence and character, unless it affects our witness or service. And we don't care whether they understand or misunderstand our shortcomings, unless it affects our witness or service. Simply put, we're unmoved by the praise and criticism of others.

Years ago, a family member of mine, who loves me deeply, unthinkingly insulted me. He commented about me that I'm "**not the**

best preacher in the world.” That hurt I admit because I was addicted to the approval of others. But I’m not anymore and so now it doesn’t.

That clarifies our call in verse 3. Don’t be addicted to approval. Make the opinions of others **“a very small thing.”**

The Smallness of Man and Bigness of God

But how do we do that? How do we break our addiction to approval? Verses 4-5 imply how. Know and live consistently with two realities.

One is the smallness of man. This smallness has two aspects.

One is the limitation of people’s thought. The fact is they rarely think about us. One writer states that when we’re in our twenties, we live to please others. When we’re in our thirties, we’re fed up with trying to please others. And when we’re in our forties, we realize nobody was thinking about us in the first place. He’s right. People have their own concerns and lives. The amount of time they devote to talking or even thinking about us is minimal. It’s hardly worth our concern.

Man’s smallness has a second aspect, the fallibility of people’s opinions. Paul states in verse 4a that the opinions we have of us may be wrong ones. How much more so, he concludes in verse 5, may the opinions others have of us be wrong ones.

Think of it this way. People’s opinions of us are based on four factors: information, beliefs, values, and the logic they use to tie all of that together. Sometimes, their information is faulty or incomplete, their beliefs false, their values distorted, and/or their logic bad, which makes their opinions of us subject to error.

Dennis Kinlaw preached at one of our Yearly Meeting sessions years ago. I came out commenting that it was the best sermon I ever heard. But the man with whom I sat came out commenting that it was one of the worst he ever heard. It was so bad, he said, he almost walked out in the middle of it. What explains that difference of opinion? It’s what he and I value. He values being made to feel (being moved). I value being made to think (being informed). Our values determined our opinions.

The moral is this. We shouldn't think and feel about people's opinions as we would about absolute truth because they're often far from it. We should receive them with their fallibility and bias in mind.

So that's one thing we do to break our addiction to approval. Know and live consistently with the smallness of man.

There's a second thing we do. Know and live consistently with the bigness of God. He's the dominant reality of the universe. He's a unique and separate kind of reality, utterly lovely and utterly competent. His opinion of us, therefore, counts infinitely more than the opinions of others. Suppose all seven billion people on earth have an opinion of us. God's opinion is infinitely more important than all of theirs combined.

His bigness has two aspects. One is the limitlessness of His thought. He thinks about us literally all the time. Another is the infallibility of His opinions. Paul teaches in verses 4b-5 they're always fully informed and thus, without error. The implication is profound. I am what I am before God, nothing more and nothing less. I am not necessarily what others think I am. I am necessarily what God thinks I am. What is true of me is true of each and every one of you as well.

If we're wise, therefore, we'll make His opinion of us **"a very big thing."** His opinion of us and His opinion alone will matter to us. We'll seek His approval and avoid His disapproval, alone. His praise and criticism and His praise and criticism alone will direct how we think, feel, and act. We will live to impress Him and only Him.

Conclusion

That makes the words of Henri Nouwen a fitting conclusion to what I've preached. **"I am the one who is like, praised, admired, disliked, hated, or despised. Whether I am a pianist, a businessman, or a minister, what matters is how I am perceived by the world."** That's the way it is, but it shouldn't be, Nouwen went on to say. What matters isn't how the world perceives us. It's how God perceives us. He was right. So, be an addict – to God's approval, not people's.