

NEVER BELIEVE YOU CAN PLEASE EVERYONE

A man and his son were leading their donkey to market. As they walked along the road, a countryman passed them and said: “You fools – why isn’t one of you riding that donkey?”

So the man put the boy on the donkey. But soon they passed a group of men, one of whom said: “See that lazy youngster; he lets his father walk while he rides.”

So the man ordered his son to get off, and got on himself. But they hadn’t gone far when they passed two women, one of whom said to the other: “Shame on that lazy lout to let his poor little son trudge along.”

Well, the only answer was for both people to ride the donkey. Just as they reached town, passers-by began to jeer and point at them. “Aren’t you ashamed of yourself for overloading that poor donkey of yours – you and your son?” they said.

The man and boy got off. They thought for awhile, then they cut down a pole, tied the donkey’s feet to it, and raised it so as to carry the donkey on their shoulders.

When they came to Market Bridge, the donkey, getting one of his feet loose, kicked out and caused the boy to drop his end of the pole. In the struggle the donkey fell over the bridge, and his fore-feet being tied together he was drowned.

The moral of this tale from Aesop is, “Please all, and you will please none.”

This fable was one recorded more than 500 years before Jesus was born. And yet the truth is still one that we need to hear: Never believe we can please everyone.

For this season of Lent, our theme is to never go back to old ways of doing things.

We have talked about never accepting the short-term comfort over the long-term goal, and never trying to change another person. Our lessons are based on part on Dr. Henry Cloud's book *Never Go Back*, which celebrates that once we awaken to a truth, we cannot go back to doing things the old way again.

Trying to please everyone is a lesson for all Christians, but especially pastors. We may be appointed to a church, but the truth is we are appointed to minister to people. And where two or more are gathered, there are going to be at least three different opinions on every subject.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't be conscious of new ideas or criticisms. But as Dr. Cloud notes, the difference is how we respond upon those opinions.

Dr. Cloud knew of two pastors with entirely different reactions to criticism. The one pastor, when made aware of criticism, would go into full-blown defense, calling a lot of people, challenging the opinions, trying to persuade others he was a really good guy, and so anxious about people's impressions of him that he worked hard to change that opinion. He had to have them like him.

The other pastor paid no heed to opinions of what he should be doing. That's not to say he didn't ask for feedback – positive and negative. He would research and evaluate his ministry in light of how effective his ministry was, but he was not swayed by opinions about what his ministry should be. The difference was two-fold: he worked on the offense, not the defense, and he realized not everyone would like him for the decisions he made.

As Dr. Cloud notes, “One man believed he had to please people – all people; while the other focused only on pleasing God.”¹

This is why I chose the Luke passage for this morning, which begins with a question from the people and ends with a parable from Jesus.

The question raised by the people in verses 1-5 have to do with suffering. Although the Jewish authorities will work with Pilate to get Jesus crucified, the Roman governor did not have a very good reputation for working with the Jews. At one point, he became so indignant, he had his soldiers dress in the garb of the Jews, mingle among them as they prepared for sacrifices, and then surprise them ambush-style, killing a number of faithful people.

The question posed to Jesus was, did God allow these Galileans to be killed because in fact they were not as faithful as they seemed? Their rationale is that God was surely displeased with these men to have allowed Pilate to kill them.

This is one of those times when Jesus doesn’t really answer the question posed. In doing so, he is making it clear they are asking the wrong question. Instead of looking at other persons’ circumstances and trying to decide what they did right or wrong, Jesus says each of us needs to evaluate where we stand with God, so that when our time comes to die, we can be assured we will be received in God’s mercy.

The Galileans surely could have pleased Pilate and lived; but the point Jesus is making is, are we pleasing God? Are our words and actions please to God even if they

¹ Dr. Henry Cloud, *Never Go Back: 10 Things You’ll Never Do Again* (Howard Books: New York, NY, 2014), pp. 62-64.

cause problems with people?

This actually should be a relief to us. It is impossible to please everyone. As Dr. Cloud notes, people around us have different tastes, interests, beliefs and experiences. To please everyone, we would have to be multiple people.

Even worse, if we try to make everyone happy, we could make the wrong people happy. There are people who are judgmental, controlling and arrogant who will demand we do everything their way – otherwise, they will never give us their approval. So if we please this person, we may quickly learn he or she chose what was best for self without considering what was best for the whole. And even worse, we may do absolutely everything we can to please someone who refuses to be pleased. When we do, we have wasted a lot of energy.²

The first commandment from God was that we shall have no other Gods before Him. Anytime we try to please a person without regard to what God would have us to do, we have broken this commandment. This is the awakening we need: that we will never please everyone, and instead need to concentrate on pleasing God.

Otherwise we face the wrath of God as demonstrated in the parable Jesus tells. A man has a vineyard, which was most likely the source of his income. To have this vineyard, he had to do an extraordinary amount of work. He had to clear the stones from the land; he had to build up a wall to protect the vineyard from thieves; he had to fertilize and aerate the soil so it would be able to produce the best fruits.

But in the middle of this vineyard was a fig tree. The implication is the tree was

² Ibid., pp. 69-70.

planted, not to produce income for the master, but simply for the master's enjoyment.

Yet after three years, the master comes out to find no fruit on the tree.

Generally if a fig tree doesn't bear fruit after three years, it never will. The master certainly is in the right to declare the tree should be cut down, to make room for fruit-producing plants.

However, the gardener intervenes on behalf of the tree, asking that it be allowed one more year of life. This will be a year of toil by the gardener. He will have to dig around the roots. He will have to haul fertilizer and water to the tree to give it the very best opportunity to bloom and bear fruit. If it doesn't, then the tree will be chopped down – but not until it has every chance to grow.

The gardener is Jesus. He intervenes on our behalf, getting a second – and sometimes third or fourth – chance for each one of us to bear fruit for the master.

Living to please God will bring us to the best version of ourselves, being the ones God created us to be. As Dr. Cloud says, "It is not about being 'judged' or condemned by God, but about choosing the best possible master in all the universe."³

This week, may we put aside all desire or belief that we can please everyone, and choose to please the only one who matters.

³ Ibid., p. 80