

Faye Bryner. Does that name ring a bell with you?

Well, it's highly unlikely that you've ever heard of Faye Bryner—that's because the vast majority of people, say, way, way over 99%, are not famous.

Let's do some simple math on that. If there are roughly 7 billion people on earth, then 1% of that 7 billion is 70 million people. Do you believe that even 70 million people alive today are famous, easily identified by large numbers of people? Of course not! Even 7 million people are not widely known, and that's just 1/10 of 1% of 7 billion. Even so, a large number of people work very hard to become famous, whatever that means to them.

Here's an interesting person. Baruch Spinoza was a European philosopher about five centuries ago—and he is studied seriously even unto the current day. And we see some interesting perspectives with regard to his life and his fame.

Spinoza was what we might call a “freethinker”—generally meaning that he thought for himself, independent of conventions of his time—this, in the 1600s when one pretty much was totally expected to fold under and submit to different human authorities or schools of thought...or else risk consequences that were often severe, sometimes even the loss of life at the hands of religious and political authorities.

Being Jewish, Spinoza was essentially excommunicated for his thinking—basically he was banned from his Jewish community as a young man. He then pursued a very independent life as a private scholar, living very humbly, and is considered a bit of a hybrid of many ways of thinking: a pantheist, an atheist, a rationalist thinker. Spinoza never really identified with any particular dominant school of thinking, including those of his Jewish heritage and the Christians in the Netherlands.

Spinoza apparently was very wary of established ideology and ideological communities. And here's a key Spinoza quote for us that stems from his mindset: “Fame has also this great drawback, that if we pursue it, we must direct our lives so as to please the fancy of men.” Indeed, Spinoza really did chart his own course, living a frugal life without garnering any huge measure of fame or large following during his lifetime.

But a funny thing happened since that time. There are really very few people truly remembered worldwide from Spinoza's entire century—just a very small handful of people among the kings, theologians, thinkers, merchants, and commoners are remembered—but Spinoza is one of them. His influence, acknowledged in lofty academia but most often implicit, has steadily impacted Europe and America, all the way to Star Trek TV episodes and college course studies and the unparalleled Albert Einstein who memorably stated this: “I believe in Spinoza's God who reveals himself in the orderly harmony of what exists, not in a God who concerns himself with the fates and actions of human beings.” Indeed, Spinoza's type of thinking fosters a rather broadly-embraced atheist or agnostic approach to life—no surprise, then, that Spinoza was required reading in my graduate school courses. So, well over 400 years later, Spinoza and his thinking are very much still influencing people in Europe and America.

But, remember the quote from a few moments ago; Spinoza personally counseled for us “not to pursue fame because that required pleasing the fancy of men.” Unfortunately for Spinoza, here's his foundational problem: if he was indeed an atheist or pantheist or deist believer in an unconcerned God *and* he was a rejector of Jewish teachings and Christian revelation, then his thoughts were in fact written to please the fancy of men, not the God of Abraham and Jacob. So, in his de facto writing for the “fancy of men,” it appears the great philosopher falls on his own sword...you see, why bother writing down or even

disseminating his thoughts at all if, first, God is uncaring about humanity's affairs and, second, one should not pursue the fancy of men!

But still, Spinoza himself didn't really pursue fame per se. All the same, his ideas gained centuries-long traction—today, there's enough foundational influence of Spinoza to make a solid short-list of European influencers. That's staying power. That's real impact on people, for better or worse.

Of course, you and I know that Spinoza's view of God isn't what Jesus has revealed to us. God is not distant—He is near! God is not emotionally detached—He is caring! And this is the message Jesus has commanded us to spread. So, one of the premier privileges of believers is to make Jesus, the Son of God, proclaimed and famous around the world. And that all started very early in the ministry of Jesus—Matthew 4:4 (ESV) reports: "The news about [Jesus] spread throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all who were ill, those suffering with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, paralytics; and He healed them." At the very earliest time of Jesus' ministry, He was already being made famous by disciples!

Of course, that is exactly what the Great Commission is about, when Jesus commanded His disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." That's in Matthew 28 in the ESV Bible. Obviously, our privilege as disciples of Jesus—even unto this very day as you hear my words—is nothing less than making the name of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—known around the world.

So, here's a simple, direct piece of advice. Don't ever work specifically to make yourself become famous. In that sense, Spinoza was surely right: do not strive after the fancy of humanity. And certainly don't pursue fame even among Christians, because the Christians who pursue following famous people substantially just because they are famous are themselves often prone to pursue theological fads and shiny new objects and detours. So, any personal fame we pursue for its own sake is literally a fool's errand.

Instead, simply work to please God, in genuine gratitude for His grace and love and many blessings. Period. How? Work to have impact in the specific spheres God has appointed you to. Work on those appointed spheres, no matter how small or local—or how big or international.

So, sphere-focus means to work to be fruitful on your personal God-appointed tasks. Your role in your family. Your role in your workplace enterprise. Your role in the Kingdom of God. Be a great steward of your gifting in each of these spheres. That will be more than enough. Faithful sphere-focus stewardship across believers' multiple God-appointed roles? Sadly, that is more than many Christians ever accomplish.

But when you do well, good and faithful servant, you will be rewarded for building on the foundation of Christ. You! I say it again: you! *You* will be rewarded for your simple obedience. That's in 1 Corinthians 3. Expect to be rightly rewarded for your stewardship...that is promised in the Word of God! And, during your journey, if God chooses to amplify you such that you might become very well-known to many thousands, perhaps millions, well, so be it. Enjoy the favor and blessing. But always remember that your work is to glorify God, not yourself.

Remember Faye Bryner, the person I mentioned at the start of the podcast? She was my 4<sup>th</sup> grade elementary school teacher. She rescued me from an abusive 3<sup>rd</sup> grade teacher and inoculated me from a really poor 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Mrs. Bryner was never famous—but for decades, she strongly impacted 30 children at a time, every weekday, from September to May. Great at sphere-focus, redeeming 10-year-olds from mediocrity and nonsense. Never pursuing fame, just staying right there in small-town America.

So, here's the navigation: avoid fame for its own sake. Instead, give the glory to Jesus. For God's sake!

