

Today we're going to tackle a really practical issue confronting serious Christians in their neighborhoods and their workplaces. Here's the question: as a Christian, are you supposed to care what others think? Or are you *not* supposed to care what others think? Amazingly, the simple answer has determined and will continue to determine how much the Kingdom and its citizens thrive! Most importantly, this issue about caring what other people think goes to the core of what their priorities are supposed to be. So, let's take a look...first by backing up a bit to set up some important context—specifically crafted for Americans.

Look, the past several decades, the social fabric in America has been steadily shredding—especially more recently. And it's tempting to think that's "new" news because many folks believe a clear-as-a-bell "Christian" foundation has been in place in America for centuries. But history shows that Christians often are at odds with other Christians, even unto killing one another! Here are a few snapshots of that...

Early American Puritans were intent on building "a city on a hill" (Matthew 5:14), yet they literally hanged four Quakers for evangelizing their beliefs...at America's founding, Christian Patriots and Christian Tories loyal to England were at odds unto death...in the Civil War, tens of thousands of serious Christians on opposite sides killed each other. And *that's* history dominated by mostly self-professing Christians! Really? Killing? So, how about nowadays, when very belligerent opposing views *of all stripes* rock the nation? For sure, our topic today—"do you care what others think"—is often a point of real pain and open hostility.

So, what counsel does the Bible reveal about caring what others think? Well, how about Paul writing to the believers at Galatia? "For 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." (Galatians 1:10 ESV) Hey, notice how Paul inserted the word "still" there, saying, "if I were *still* trying to please man..." So, then, "*pleasing man*" was something Paul *used* to do, whether that was trying to please fellow Pharisees before his turning to Christ or fellow Christians after! And *this* is really clear: Paul was called to serve Christ!

Proverbs 29:25 says this: "The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe." Yeah, when you fear mere men, it's a snare...a trap...with very real consequences. Paul echoes that in 1 Corinthians 4:3: "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court." And while we're on the very topic of *what others think*, what did Paul say he "thinks" in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 2:2)? "For I decided to know nothing among you except Christ and Him crucified." Yes, Paul's overwhelming understanding is that he simply *knew nothing*...except Jesus Christ and Him crucified!

The powerful pattern in these verses reveals that God expects our positioning to be in Him and also that what God thinks takes overwhelming precedence over what other humans might think of us. To that end, here's the "approval by God" that Paul related to believers: "But just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts." (1 Thessalonians 2:4) Again, *pleasing God is preeminent, not pleasing man!* So—in answering the key question of "do you care what others think?"—we know that...from all these Scriptures and more...God and what He thinks definitely takes precedence!

Now that we know definitively that God and what He thinks takes precedence, then here's the next question: *do we care what others besides God think?* And the answer to that is just a bit more tangled—but still very necessary. So, here's the first, really important point: if someone thinks less of us because we serve God and that we do what He thinks—well, then we simply don't care what they think *about that!*

But here's the rub. Our amazing, obedient-to-God response beyond that basic tenet is this: *yes, to care what others think!* Yeah, we love on 'em, yeah, we are to even love our enemies—we care what they think of how an ambassador for Christ functions! And we love on our neighbors even if and when they're jerks—yes, we care what they think of how an ambassador for Christ functions! And we're great stewards for our difficult bosses—yeah, we care what they think of how an ambassador for Christ functions! And we are great stewards for our complaining customers—yes, we care what customers think of how an ambassador for Christ functions! And we love our cranky relatives—yeah, we care what our relatives think of how an

ambassador for Christ functions! ...And, of course, we are to actually love *every Christian* we know, *even if many are rather unlovable*—working to show them how a true ambassador for Christ functions!

You see, Jesus taught the two greatest commandments that our loving others is to be both vertical and horizontal. First, we love God...and then we love our neighbors as ourselves. So it's fully apparent that God wants His ambassadors (us!) to genuinely love on people, caring what they think, meeting their needs. And if our neighbors are wrong in their thinking—even wrong as to eternal consequences—well, then, in due time, we can winsomely speak that God's very character is love and Jesus died on the Cross for all!

After all, that's what Paul noted in the Bible verse we quoted earlier: every believer has been entrusted with the good-news Gospel in order to make disciples worldwide...from locally to globally.

In Mark's Gospel, 1:14-15, Mark reports this: "Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.'" Wow, that report is truly amazing! *Jesus Himself* spent His time here on earth truly evangelizing, proclaiming the Good News, the Gospel of His Kingdom. Yes, many rejected His message. ...But some did not reject His message!

No matter, Jesus asked all who heard Him to "repent"...a word which literally means to "change your mind." So. *Did Jesus care what people thought? Yes! He wanted them to change their thinking!* In short, Jesus cared and continues to care what everyone is thinking! And that's a very key task and privilege for us as ambassadors for Christ: *to care what others think!* To be sure and to be very clear, our task is not to conform to the thinking of unbelievers...but rather to care enough about people and what they think to get their thinking focused on Jesus Christ the King and Him crucified!

So here's the question we started with in this episode: as Christians, are we supposed to care what others think? Or are you *not* supposed to care what others think? And the answer is a resounding "yes" to both! We are *not* here to please man but to please God! But God wants all to think rightly about Christ—and we are appointed as ambassadors in that grand endeavor! Nevertheless, when Jesus's first disciples returned with a report that people didn't listen to their message, He simply told them to move on from those folks, to "shake the dust from their feet." That's precedence, in action! So...are you a God-pleaser? Fantastic! Then, are you an ambassador for God and His love enough to help precipitate an unbeliever's repentance with the message of the Gospel...yes, a changed-mind for Jesus? *Well, then, you got it right, friend!*

So, that clears it all up, right? But here's a very key aspect of all this. I've often heard one particular Scripture citation above all others when it comes to social mores, often used with particular, targeted intent to "*put unbelieving sinners in their proper place.*" Surely, you've heard it, too: when talking about engaging the culture and behavior patterns in widely perceived moral decline, a phrase found at Ephesians 4:15 comes tumbling out to supposedly confront the unbeliever: "Yeah," the offended Christian says, quoting a verse in the context of confronting societal or personal immorality, "*we speak the truth in love.*"

Of course, what they almost always mean is that they are rather valiantly condemning folks for behavior that displeases God! You know, sexual immorality and the like. *But this verse is smack in the middle of how the body of Christ is to grow properly*—it's not for confronting unbelievers! Here's the fullness of Ephesians 4:15-16: "...speaking the truth in love, *we are to grow up in every way into him* who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."

Wow, this is how to handle "caring what others think"...but in this case, *it's handling what other believers think...we are to help grow them up in Christ!* So, now we have a working framework. Far and away most important, we are to care what God thinks. Then we are to speak the truth in love to help grow up Christians. Then we are to fulfill our roles as Christ's ambassadors to help unbelievers repent—to simply change what they think! ...*So, hey there, brothers and sisters in Christ—do you care what others think?*

A&A: Application & Action

1. Do you observe Christians truly giving “what God thinks” precedence and placing routine “people-pleasing” as secondary? How about you personally? Discuss.

2. Do you observe Christians having the proper balance and event-discernment of not caring what man thinks (that is, giving God precedence as per Paul in Galatians 1:10)—even while caring deeply about what people think regarding their need for the Gospel and the necessary repentance (“changing their thinking”)? How about you personally? Discuss.

3. Do you more often observe Christians humbly “speaking the truth in love” in order to “grow up” the body of Christ...or speaking condemningly to non-Christian neighbors not living up to higher moral standards? Discuss.