

What's not to be liked about being liked? The perils of excess likability.

By Thanos Karasmanis

We all love to be liked. It appears to be part of our DNA. It gives us a sense of belonging, purpose, and value. On many occasions it is what drives us to do things. On fewer occasions it even becomes the sole source of our self-worth. Not long ago I was meditating on Luke 6:26, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for their fathers used to treat the false prophets in the same way" and, as it is often the case when studying the word of God, my heart was pierced. In a split second my whole life flashed before my eyes pausing persistently on all the moments that I had strived to accomplish just that—to be spoken well of, and be liked by all. It was an unpleasant yet, in a strange way, satisfying moment. The Holy Spirit had once again illuminated God's revealed truth in my life.

But let's start by seeing things in context. This "woe sequence" in Luke 6:24-26 corresponds and forms a direct contrast to the "blessing sequence" in the immediately preceding verses (20-23). This is Luke's version of the Beatitudes found in Matthew 5, however, unlike Matthew, Luke includes the negative type of the Beatitudes in the form of woes—perhaps to further stress the importance of choosing wisely. But what exactly is Jesus saying here? What would the harm be in desiring to be liked by all? Isn't this the Christian thing to do and how are the false prophets involved in this? Perhaps some of the answers lie in the difference in orientations we observe between the false and true prophets.

In v. 26 Jesus is not trying to distort the basic concepts of honour and praise or undermine the above-mentioned legitimate human needs. Instead he is using hyperbole (Woe to you when all men speak well of you) to direct our attention to the importance of our motives. After all, the likelihood of anyone actually being liked by all was, and is, a practical impossibility. If our primary objective is to be liked, we will shape the gospel we preach and teach (consciously or unconsciously) to reflect such objective. When our motive is to boost our self-worth by intensely desiring "everyone" to like us, we will tend to predominately preach a gospel of love and a gospel of what people want to hear. These were precisely the principles the false prophets of the Old Testament (and New) operated on. They never prepared God's people for the future day of accountability. They prophesied peace, no famine, no exile, and blatantly overlooked Israel's sinfulness—everything in direct opposition to the message of the true prophets and to what actually took place (Jer 23:17; 14:15; 27:9-10). The people wanted favourable answers and quick resolutions, and, in response, the false prophets formed a definite understanding of what God would or would not do. The true prophets, on the contrary, opposed any human restriction on his freedom, and instead were overwhelmed by the splendor and freedom of God, who may freely choose to judge and destroy but also to restore and create. The false prophets misled the people of God simply by supplying that which was demanded in exchange for being liked by "all."

Being liked is a Christian virtue only if it is the product of our preaching and teaching the complete and uncompromised word of God. If being liked is the product of an ambition, it

becomes a vice; and simply invalidates our seemingly Christian behaviour. The true gospel is difficult to hear and even more so to practice. The good news of the gospel is that once we understand our sinfulness and depravity, we will begin being saved. The true gospel wants us to understand the faults and inadequacies of our fallen humanity. Unless our hearers (and ourselves) have a deep understanding of their need of reconciliation, they will never fully appreciate their Messiah. Unless they have a deep understanding of what exactly is being saved, they will never fully appreciate their salvation. Unless they have a solid understanding of the magnitude of their personal sin, they will never be able to truly forgive and be forgiven. The true prophets have plenty to teach us. For them, God's truth was such an overwhelming and irrepressible reality that it demanded expression in spite of opposition and personal attack. The agony of opposition may have been great but the agony of not preaching God's truth was even greater (Jer 20:7-13). It is often the case that following God's agenda does not win many popularity contests for those who pursue it.

Here is the challenge I pose to you and myself. Let's us check what drives our likeability and learn to feel comfortable when not liked by "all." We are to communicate not what people want to hear, but what they need to hear. Being spoken well of by all was one of the marks of a false prophet, Jesus reminds us, and, by extending the analogy to our context, it is one of the marks of one who is proclaiming a distorted gospel. If we proclaim a distorted gospel—one that over emphasizes a certain aspect of God and ignores the totality of his character—then we are guilty of not truly knowing God. If we are not liked by all for the sake of Christ, let us rejoice; for we are preaching God's true word and we are living for his glory, not ours. Let the word of God go forth and divide—it was meant to accomplish exactly that.