

Dying for Attention

Proverbs 22 and James 2 | Dan McCoig | 6 September 2009

1.

I am not making this up.

Evidently, if one was feeling unattended to, neglected let's say, he could hire someone to watch his every move.

The service is a sort of paparazzi for hire.

Imagine walking out your front door in bathrobe and slippers to grab the morning paper.

CLICK! Someone snaps your picture.

Stopped at a streetlight in your car. CLICK!

Walking into the Daily Grind for a meeting. CLICK!

Shopping for shoes with a friend. CLICK!

Writing the sermon for Sunday's service while watching the William and Mary defeat UVA in Charlottesville by TWO touchdowns. CLICK!

As best as I can tell, there are people who envy the attention afforded the richest and the most famous in our society to the point where they will hire their own paparazzi.

By the way, I have heard and used the word paparazzi countless times without fully understanding its meaning.

A little sleuth work in the Oxford English Dictionary revealed that the word originates from an Italian word – paparazzo – which describes the annoying buzzing noise that a mosquito makes in one's ear.

That's about right, what a metaphor for the photojournalistic assault tabloid news services unleash upon celebrities.

Now, incredibly enough, the celebrity paparazzi experience can become our own experience — for about \$500 an hour.

For that price, you can experience some of the trappings of fame.

You can hire your own paparazzi to stalk you and capture unplanned moments of your life.

For me, I believe it would be more than a bit unnerving to be watched so closely.

However, for the truly narcissistic person with money to spare, I imagine that this comes across as a pretty cool idea.

You can hire a full tabloid entourage to follow you, including photographers and faux reporters, along with a publicist and bodyguards to keep them at bay.

It's an expensive way to look important, but it might get you VIP treatment at most events in town — no questions asked.

Ten years ago, there would have been no money in faux paparazzi services.

But in a world that includes MySpace, Facebook and Twitter, according to Yale University sociologist Josh Gamson, an expert in culture and mass media, "We live in a culture where if it's not documented, it doesn't exist."

Wired magazine editor Sonia Zjawinski hired her own paparazzi for a day, just to chronicle the voyeuristic experiment.

As the paparazzi caught her every move, Zjawinski's thoughts became obsessively self-aware.

She began to wonder,

Do I look authentic?

Am I being spontaneous enough?

Will my friends warn me if I have a latte-foam mustache?

Do I make funny faces when I talk?

Do Lindsay and Britney spend every waking moment worrying about this stuff?

Is it any wonder celebrities go off the deep end now and again

/

Evidently, in our media-saturated culture, the lens is always watching and people seem to like and want it that way.

2.

Our lesson from the Book of Proverbs offers advice for people who want to look good. Proverbs is a collection of wisdom thoughts.

It contains sage advice for those who would listen and respond.

But throughout the book, there is an assumed lens upon our life,

an eye that watches every human move, a camera documenting an album of our life.

The perspective of Proverbs is this: as the author of wisdom, God watches over the decisions of women and men.

God has designed us to live one way — according to wisdom — and warns us against living outside of that design.

In the divine chronicling of our lives, Proverbs implores us to be people whose personal photo album can go on public display.

Specifically, in our morning's lesson, three images emerge that should shape what we look like.

The first is our reputation.

I believe it was Mae West, the flamboyant and scandalous actress of the 1930s, reportedly said, "It's a story I wrote myself, about a girl who lost her reputation and didn't miss it."

In stark contrast, the writer of Proverbs says that a good reputation is something we should miss if we lose it.

We are to be concerned about maintaining "a good name" and "favor" in the public eye.

People should easily be able to speak well of us.

Our character and reputation should precede us.

We've all been to funerals and heard friends and loved ones eulogized.

While the best funerals are a time of grief and mourning, they're paradoxically joyous celebrations as well.

When a person has lived a long life of faith — one that honored God and honored people — you cannot stop people from gushing in memorial.

The question of our name is a eulogy question.

If we were to pass, what would our funeral feel like: merely a somber sense of loss or a celebratory recognition of a life lived?

What would mark our life?

What would be said in our memory?

Would our name be a good one?

Sports headlines provide a picture of what happens when a person's name becomes tainted.

You don't have to be a baseball fan to know something about the MLB steroids scandal. Bonds. Clemens. A-Rod.

These pro players spent years basking in the glory of their astronomical success.

But steroid use smeared not only their accomplishments; it fouled the entire sport.

Juiced athletes made baseball feel as faked as WWE wrestling.

The most poignant example is Barry Bonds.

A power hitter with a gorgeous swing, Bonds broke Hank Aaron's long-standing career record of 755 home runs.

But when steroid evidence came out on Bonds, his name was smeared and his record was all but disregarded.

As commentary, fashion mogul Mark Ecko bought Bonds' record-breaking home run ball, scrawled a giant asterisk on it with a Sharpie and donated it to the Baseball Hall of Fame in Cooperstown for all to see.

A record and a reputation with a giant asterisk on them prove the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin, who wrote: "It takes many good deeds to build a good reputation, and only one bad one to lose it."

3.

The concern of Proverbs is that we remain people without asterisks.

But why all the hype about our standing with others?

Who cares?

Why does someone else's opinion of us matter, especially when Christian ethical standards are usually higher than cultural ones?

It has to do not with our standards and our image but with God's standards and God's image.

God is intimately concerned with his own reputation.

God's name.

God's glory.

God's fame.

They are called holy, worthy and exalted.

God is perfectly good and wants to be seen as such.

Because God's reputation among people is so important, he is concerned about our reputation as well.

God has chosen to connect the two, welcoming public evaluation of his followers as a means for outsiders to know what God is like.

We are to be salt and light (Matthew 5).

We are God's ambassadors because God is making his appeal through us (2 Corinthians 5:20).

Ephesians 3 demands that elders be above reproach — an assumption of public assessment.

Our name and standing are important, but not for our own esteem.

It's important for God's esteem.

Our reputation is God's mission.

4.

One, our reputation is important to God.

Two, our riches are important to God as well.

Our text envisions financial modesty.

Riches — silver and gold — are literally set in *contrast* to a good name.

According to Proverbs, both rich and poor are subject to God's sovereignty (v. 2), but God's sovereignty is expressed throughout the canon in commandments regarding money.

Summarizing a biblical theology of wealth and possessions, New Testament scholar Craig Blomberg says neither excessive poverty nor excessive wealth is tolerable among the people of God.

The latter should always cover the former so that neither extreme exists.

The snapshot in this text is incredibly countercultural for several reasons.

Wealth often bolsters one's reputation, but the text sets them in contention.

Possessing wealth is usually equated with being blessed, but the text says giving wealth away is blessed.

The rich and poor rarely intermingle, but the text exhorts not only shared possessions but shared meals.

And thirdly, our regard is important to God.

God is a God of the marginalized who cares for the widow and orphan, the stranger and the alien, the poor and the infirm.

These are the people who are often overlooked or forgotten.

Researching cognitive development in kids, Jean Piaget coined the term “object permanence.”

It describes the awareness that objects continue to exist even when they are no longer visible.

It usually shows up in kids at around eight months.

That means if you hide a rattle from a three-month-old, he or she literally thinks there isn't a rattle at all.

Out of sight, out of mind ... out of existence.

If we're honest, most of us lack object permanence in issues of social justice.

I know I do.

If the poor and sick and widowed and disadvantaged aren't in our sight, they aren't really an issue.

Because of this, God reminds us of his justice on behalf of those who are often ignored.

God will ensure that injustice reaps calamity.

The rod, or authority, connected with oppression lasts only for a short time.

Deuteronomy 10 exhorts Israel to maintain issues of social justice because God does.

Isaiah 61 connects the coming of the Messiah to the advent of mercy for the marginalized.

Micah 6:8 calls believers to live justly and to love mercy.

One thing we can do in response to God's call to share his concern for the marginalized is to take steps to eliminate our object permanence toward social justice.

The Next Level Church in Denver suggests four very useful steps we can take in that direction:

- **Be Aware:** Educate ourselves regarding issues of poverty, oppression and human rights.
- **Care:** Begin praying for our hearts to be changed by what we're learning.
- **Share:** Financially support Christian movements that are engaging in justice issues.
- **Go There:** Personally enter into situations where you can be used by Jesus to bring redemption into injustice.

Princeton professor, philosopher, critic and civil-rights activist Cornel West said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.”

In a passage about public perception of the follower of God, we are to be pictured as those who love in public.

Because God regards the cause of the overlooked, we are to share his regard.

5.

Like celebrities under the constant eye of the camera lens, the Christ-follower is always being watched.

Our God sees all that we have done and all that we have left undone. And our culture has an eye turned toward us as well, wondering if our lives will match our words.

What images will they see?

When we're captured at our most natural and authentic moments, are we a picture that makes Jesus famous?

Amen.