

Creekside Community Church
"Kingdom or Culture?" The Gospel According to Mark
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The Celebrity Culture

Let me ask you a question. You're driving to work and your all-time favorite song comes on the radio or Pandora and before you know it, you are rocking out, awash in memories and singing at the top of your lungs. But then you glance to your left and the driver next to you is staring at you. Be honest now...how do you feel? Embarrassed? A little stupid? Or does the fact that someone is watching you not bother you at all? Isn't it strange how the opinions of people – even total strangers – affect us? Do you get mad when you feel disrespected or misunderstood or taken for granted? Do you ever second-guess decisions because you worry about what others might think? Do you have a tough time saying no to people or challenging people or correcting people or standing up for yourself? People in every culture of the world care to about what others think and this morning as we continue looking at *Kingdom or Culture* in the Gospel of Mark, we're going to look at why we care so much about what people think and at how differently Jesus approached this fear. According to the Bible we will be disciples of Jesus or disciples of our culture; and so we are looking at how Jesus confronted His own culture, how He confronts our culture and at how He confronts us personally with the values of the kingdom of God. For the next two Sundays, we're going to look at how Jesus confronted His culture and our own with our fear of people. This week we'll look at our need for people's attention and at our fear of being ignored. Next week we'll look at our need for people's approval and at our fear of being rejected.

I entitled today's talk, *The Celebrity Culture* because we live in a culture where so many people crave attention and recognition – where everybody wants to be a celebrity. 38 years ago, Christopher Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism*, and defined an entire age in terms of a personality disorder. Narcissism is an excessive interest in oneself and a craving for attention and admiration. Narcissists believe that the world revolves around them; that they are not only the hero of their own story but of everyone else's story; and therefore have little ability to empathize with others. They have to be the center of attention. Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism* long before Facebook, You Tube, Snapchat, Instagram or Twitter, long before Time Magazine chose you as their Person of the Year in 2006 and long before the web was awash with people calling attention to themselves in every way possible, and so Lasch sounds absolutely prophetic back in 1978. He described an America where everyone wanted to be famous, to be seen, known and admired – which is far truer today than when he wrote it. We live in a celebrity culture where many people believe that if they are not seen, they don't exist.

Jesus' culture was similar to ours in that respect. In a traditional religious culture, the desire to be seen as God-fearing religious folks often outweighed the desire to be God-fearing, religious folks; and Jesus confronted that need for recognition. He said that the religious leaders did all their deeds to be noticed by men; that they loved respectful greetings and the best seats in the synagogue and at parties; that they loved the praise of men rather than the praise that comes from God; that people's opinions meant more than God's to them. Jesus Himself behaved very differently. In fact, one of the most puzzling things about Jesus was how He went out of His way to avoid publicity rather than seeking it. He didn't act like a leader trying to make a name for Himself at all. Look at Mark 1:43-44. Jesus has just healed a leper. "And He sternly warned him and immediately sent him away, and He *said to him, "See that you say nothing to anyone; but go, show yourself to the priest and offer for your cleansing what Moses commanded, as a testimony to them."* This man is the first leper Jesus had healed; and yet Jesus sternly warns him not to tell anyone about it; but instead to show himself to the priest who acted as the local health official so that he could be officially declared free of leprosy and could reenter society. We can understand

why Jesus would tell this man to have his healing verified by a priest because that's what Law of Moses prescribed. But why does Jesus warn him not to tell anyone that Jesus healed him? Later in Mark 3:11-12, Mark writes, *"Whenever the unclean spirits saw Him, they would fall down before Him and shout, 'You are the Son of God!' And He earnestly warned them not to tell who He was."* (Mark 3:11-12) This time it is the demons Jesus is casting out of the people they inhabit whom Jesus warns to keep quiet about His identity. Then in chapter 5, Mark tells the story about a synagogue official whose twelve year old daughter is at the point of death and who finds Jesus and begs him to return home with him before his daughter dies. Jesus agrees but the girl dies before they arrive. Jesus tells the man, "Don't be afraid; only believe," and enters the house where everyone from the neighborhood has gathered by this time and are weeping and wailing. But Jesus asks, "Why are you crying. The child hasn't died. She's just asleep." Everyone in the house begins laughing at Him but He makes everybody leave except for the girl's parents and then he goes into the girl's room where her dead body is lying on her bed. Jesus takes her hand and says, "Little girl, wake up," and she immediately opens her eyes, gets out of bed and walks to her parents. Of course her parents and Jesus' disciples are both amazed and overjoyed but look at Mark 5:43. *"And He gave them strict orders that no one should know about this, and He said that {something} should be given her to eat"* Jesus sternly warns the leper He healed to tell no one about it. Jesus earnestly warns the demons not to reveal who He really is. And He gives strict orders to the girl's parents and to His own disciples to tell no one what they've seen. This is a pattern we see in Jesus. When some people bring a blind man for Him to heal in chapter 8, He takes the blind man off by himself and heals Him in private. When Jesus is transfigured on a mountain and displays His glory as God and talks with Moses and Elijah before God speaks out of heaven saying, "This is My Beloved Son," the only people who witness it are James, John and Peter – and Jesus warns them not tell anybody about what they have seen. Why does Jesus go out of His way to not call attention to Himself? Why does He avoid recognition and fame; something other religious leaders of His day craved and something which drives so many people in our culture today? Jesus' aversion to attention puzzled even His own family. In John 7, Jesus' own brothers give Him a little career counseling. John 7:3-4, *"Therefore His brothers said to Him, 'Leave here and go into Judea (You need to get out of the sticks and go where the people are) so that Your disciples also may see Your works which You are doing. For no one does anything in secret when he himself seeks to be known publically. If You do these things, show Yourself to the world.'" Even though Jesus' brothers didn't believe in Him, they feel free to give Him advice. "You need to go public, Bro. You're too shy, too private. You're never going to get known this way."*

Why did Jesus spend so much of His time under the radar? Why did He avoid publicity and attention? I've thought that possibly Jesus doesn't want the news about Him to spread too quickly; possibly to prevent a premature confrontation with the religious establishment or to prevent attracting even larger crowds from disrupting His mission of training His disciples. That may be, but the Bible doesn't say that. However, Jesus' own words may tell us the real reason Jesus avoided attention. Let's look at Matthew 6:1. *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in such a way that you may be noticed by them. Otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."* Jesus is talking to some morally conservative, religious people here; people committed to God and to living a righteous life. But Jesus says that doing the right thing – practicing righteousness – is not enough. We need to make sure we're doing the right thing for the right reasons. Bad motives invalidate good behavior and the wrong motive Jesus addresses over the next 18 verses is doing things to impress people rather than to please God. You see, we all have two audiences watching us; the human audience and the divine audience, the visible audience and the invisible audience. And each audience has its own way of applauding and rewarding our performance. But Jesus says, you can't play for both houses. You can't please both people and God. You've got to decide which audience you're performing for. One of the most important questions each of us must answer in life is, "Will I live for the applause of people or for the praise that comes from God?" because how I answer that question will determine the true value of all that I do because Jesus says that if I do the right thing to be noticed by people, I have no reward with my Father in heaven. Jesus goes on to apply this lesson to the way we treat the poor, to the

way we pray and to the way we fast which we'll return to in a moment. But I think that's why Jesus did so much good in secret – because He was doing it for His Father and not to be seen by people. He was doing it out of His love for God and for people – not out of His love for attention and notoriety. Every person needs to be seen and to be known: to be noticed and appreciated; to matter to someone. That's why we perform better when someone is watching than we do when someone isn't; why workers who feel ignored and invisible lose their motivation to work; and why it's hard to accomplish anything with little kids around because of their constant demand for attention. Why is that? I think God created each of us for relationships; first for a relationship with Him and then for a relationship with other. That's why we instinctually want to be seen; to be recognized and valued. And that is why Jesus warns us of looking for that recognition and value from people rather than from God. When we have to be seen and known by others to feel significant, we are looking for something from people that we should be looking for from God. That's why Jesus says if we do our good deeds to be noticed by people, we have no reward with our Father who is in heaven, but if we do good to be noticed by God, especially if we do it in secret so that only He will see it, He will reward us.

That's why Jesus didn't pursue celebrity and fame. That's why He said *"I do not receive glory from men,"* (John 5:41) knowing that honor and recognition from people is transitory and ultimately meaningless. Some of the same people who shouted His praises when He entered Jerusalem on a donkey shouted for His crucifixion only four days later. That's why Jesus said, *"I do not seek My glory: there is One who seeks and judges."* (John 8:50) Any glory Jesus was to receive He left in God's hands who alone is capable of giving real glory and honor. That's why Jesus said, *"If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me."* (John 8:54) Over and over Jesus says that fame, recognition and celebrity from people is meaningless and soon over; only the glory which comes from God lasts. Jesus says, "I don't receive glory from people and I don't seek glory from people because the only glory that counts comes from God. That's why Jesus tells the Pharisees in John 5:44, *"How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and you do not seek the glory that is from the {one and} only God?"* Every person must choose whose glory they will live for; God's or people's; because we can't do both. That's why Jesus confronted His own culture's need for attention and recognition by word and example.

So how would Jesus' confront our celebrity culture? In the same way as He confronts His own; by telling us that pursuing people's attention is a poor substitute for pursuing God's attention. Jesus would remind us first that God sees. I want to look at the way some people use social media – nobody here of course, but other people – as an illustration of our culture's worship of celebrity and need for attention. Now there's nothing wrong with social media in itself; in fact, only a Troglodyte would deny that social media has created a lot of benefits. We can connect with people we would never see otherwise; people we've lost touch with for years; or friends and family members who live in another part of the world. Social media makes it many times easier for people to connect, to organize events or to arrange meetings. It creates a culture of collaboration where products, campaigns or movements can be developed through cooperation. And the gospel has gone into many areas of the world over the internet which would be closed to missionaries. But like any technological advance, social media also reflects our fallen human nature. I recently read a short book by British pastor, Tim Chester, entitled *Will You Be My Facebook Friend* about the way our use of social media often reflects the condition of our soul. Chester suggests that it is our need to be seen and admired that fuels many people's obsession with Facebook and other social media platforms. Chester says that social media is popular because it lets me create an image of myself. I use words and photos to create the way I want people to see me. The culture of celebrity is obsessed with the lives of the famous and social media allows everybody to be a celebrity, creating our own world where all our friends come and with us in the center. The incredible popularity of social media is a reflection of our culture's need to be seen and some people will do just about anything to be noticed. People post themselves committing crimes, taking chances, getting wasted; even injuring themselves and others – all to get attention – forgetting that once this is on the web, it is available to parents, spouses, prospective spouses and employers. Why do people need to be noticed? Christopher Lasch said that narcissism is not about vanity, it's about fear – the fear of

meaninglessness; the fear that you don't really matter. It is all about where we find our identity; and how we define ourselves. When we began this series, we talked about how the seeds of our culture's radical individualism were sown during the 17th and 18th centuries and the Enlightenment when the culture of Western Europe and America began to discard both traditional and religious authority as the way to know truth and to rely upon reason alone. The revolutionary idea was that people no longer needed the church or the state to tell us what was true; and that each person has with himself or herself the ability to discover truth through the application of reason without any outside help from ancient wisdom or divine revelation. In the past, people's identity was given to them; either by God or by their family or by their culture. In the 1600's, I knew who I was. I was John the son of Bruce, a blacksmith, a husband and father, a commoner living in England and a member of the Church. Everybody knew who he was and where he fit. But as the culture became increasingly secular and individualistic, we realized that we didn't need an institution to tell us who we were; that we could be whoever we wanted to be; we could define ourselves. But how do I define myself? I naturally look at the people around me to tell me who I am. They are the only point of reference I have. If they think I'm ugly, I must be ugly. If they think I'm funny, I must be funny. If they ignore me, I must be insignificant. If they pay attention to me, I must be important. That's why our secular culture of radical individualism actually enslaves us even more to the opinions of people than would a traditional culture. If I don't define myself by my relationship with God, I'll define myself by my relationship with people. If people notice me, I'm significant and the more people who notice me, the more I matter. If no one sees me, it is like I don't exist.

What would Jesus say about our need for attention and recognition – about our need to be seen? He would say God sees you. Let's look at Matt. 6 again. *"Beware of practicing your righteousness before men in such a way that you may be noticed by them. Otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven."* (Matt. 6:1) Remember, Jesus is warning us about doing the right thing for the wrong reason; to be seen by people rather than by God. We have to choose whose opinion matters more; God or people. For this reason, Jesus continues, *Matt 6:3-4 "But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees {what is done} in secret will reward you."* *Matt 6:5-6, "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees {what is done} in secret will reward you."* *Matt. 6:17-18, "But you, when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face so that your fasting will not be noticed by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees {what is done} in secret will reward you."* Notice how Jesus keeps repeating the phrase, "Your Father who sees in secret." Getting free of our need for human attention begins with a correct view of God, which is Jesus' view of God. Jesus says that God is always watching us. He sees everything we do even when others do not. He is always interested in us. He never ignores us. The reason we want to be seen is because we were created to have a relationship with the God who always sees us; who never turns His gaze away. That's why Jesus says that we don't need human attention or to do things to be seen by people because God sees what others cannot see and understands what others cannot understand. Are you always aware that God is watching you, that He doesn't miss a thing? Others don't see the good things we do but He does. Others aren't aware of the battles we fight or the temptations we endure but He is. Others misunderstand us but He doesn't. God is the God who is always with us and sees us as we really are. And the more we understand and believe that one simple truth, the freer we will become from our need for the recognition and attention of people. That was certainly Jesus' frame of reference. Jesus lived His entire life in God's presence and fully aware of His Father's gaze. In John 8:29 Jesus says, *"And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him."* Just before He was to be crucified, Jesus says in John 16:32, *"Behold, an hour is coming and has already come, for you (His disciples) to be scattered, each to his own home and to leave me alone; and yet I am not alone; because the Father is with Me."* Jesus lived His entire life before God, confident that God saw everything and that God was always with Him. Even in His most difficult hour, when He is arrested and all His disciples desert Him, He knows that God hasn't deserted Him and that He isn't alone. And that, according to Matthew 6, is why Jesus lived to please God

rather than people; because God was the One who wouldn't leave; the One who was never distracted; the One who saw all and knew all. Is the God of Jesus the God you believe in? Many of you know that I was adopted. I was the product of an office romance and my birth mother couldn't afford to take care of me so she put me up for adoption with the Children's Home Society and my parents took me home when I was six months old. I think things that happen to us even when we are very young leave their mark and I have always had an irrational fear of being abandoned; of being left alone. That's why coming to Christ made such a difference in my life. Jesus says, "I will never leave you or forsake you. Lo, I am with you always." Living my life under the gaze of God has changed me. There have been times I have been counseling someone and I know that I need to say some difficult things but everything in me wants to soften the truth so that they will like me and not be offended. But when I remember that God is watching; that He sees my heart and He hears my words and He knows what I'm doing, I find the strength to say what needs to be said so that He will be pleased. Freedom from the fear of people and our need for people's attention begins with the conviction that God is always with us and is always watching. (Josh 1:9: challenge questions)

Second, I think Jesus would remind our culture that God approves. We want to be seen and yet we don't want to be really seen. Tim Chester identifies another thing that our use of social media reveals about us; we only want people to see us in a certain light. We fear people seeing everything about us. So we create an image with photos and words of the person we want people to see; and of the life we want people to think we lead. By the way, that's why Alex Jordan of Stanford discovered that people often feel depressed after spending time on Facebook. People are more likely to post pictures of themselves having a good time than they are of themselves looking bored or miserable and when their friends look at those posts, they get depressed because they think everybody's life is better than their own. The point is, we all want to be seen but we all wear masks and hide certain things about ourselves from others. Few people are free to be honest, transparent and vulnerable about who they really are. Why? Why do we hide from one another? The Bible says that it all goes back to the Garden of Eden and the nature of sin itself. Let's look at Genesis 3:7 which occurs when Adam and Eve disobey the one thing God told them not to do and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. *"Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings."* (Genesis 3:7) Notice that sin's first effect on Adam and Eve was on the way they saw themselves. They are suddenly filled with shame and self-loathing, self-awareness and embarrassment and have to cover themselves up. Before they sinned, they were unconscious of themselves and of their nakedness, blissfully self-forgetful. Now they experience the curse of self-preoccupation; self-concern, self-ambition, self-loathing. Sin results in shame and insecurity. As a result, both Adam and Eve try to hide from each other by covering themselves with leaves. And when God enters the garden, they hide from Him and when God asks them why they're hiding, Adam says because we're naked. Isn't it interesting that Adam justifies his new found fear of God by the fact that he was naked though he now has his leaf dress on. There is obviously more going on here than clothing. The first humans are filled with shame which leads to fear which leads to hiding. They can no longer bear to be seen as they are by God or by each other. That's why we hide from each other and why we hide from God. The idea that God sees me may be comforting but it is also terrifying because I know what God sees and I don't want Him to see it. That's why we fear God and why we fear people; because we are basically insecure and don't want to be naked and exposed. So we want to be seen and to be known yet we fear it as well. What would Jesus say about our fear of being exposed to God and to one another? He would tell us that God approves of us. Why was Jesus able to live so comfortably under the gaze of God? He knew His Father's approval. Look at Mark 1:9-11 which occurs at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. *"In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."* We already read John 8:29, *"And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him."* Jesus delighted in living in His Father's presence and under His Father's gaze because He knew His Father approved of Him; that everything He did pleased God. But that's where Jesus and I are different. I'm like Adam. I don't please God. I disobey Him regularly. How can I be comfortable naked before the eyes of God when I am so shameful? That's the genius of the gospel. Jesus becomes a human to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He lives the life we failed to live; a life of perfect obedience which God credits to us when we put

our trust in Christ as our Savior and Lord. Look at Isaiah 61:10 *“I will rejoice greatly in the LORD, my soul will exult in my God; for He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.”* This is a prophecy about the gospel; about how Christ wraps us in the robe of His righteousness and makes us acceptable to God. God credits me with Christ’s holiness and obedience as if I had been perfectly obedient. My identity is based upon what Christ has done, not upon what I have done and that’s why I have God’s approval. Because of Jesus, I no longer need to hide from God; my relationship with Him is secure because of Christ’s completed work in my behalf. I know I am accepted in the Beloved, that He has clothed me in the robes of righteousness and made me God’s child, holy, blameless and perfect. He has released me from shame and I fear no rejection. And because God approves of me, I don’t have to hide from people either. I have nothing to prove and nothing to protect. I can be transparent and honest about my faults because my Father approves of me. Wouldn’t you love to be free of the masks and the games; of worrying about what people think of you; of pretending to be better than you are? Jesus was the freest of all men because He knew that God approved of Him and He wants the same thing for us.

The third thing I think Jesus would say to our culture is that not only does God see and approve; He also rewards. I’ll have more to say about this next week as we continue to talk about how Jesus confronts our fear of people but let me close with this. For much of my life I have sought recognition. I not only wanted to be a successful pastor, I wanted to be known as a successful pastor. I wanted to be the guy that was invited to speak at the conferences, the guy other pastors came to asked, “How can I be like you?” I didn’t know that was my motive – I just felt sad when I felt overlooked and ignored – but the more time I spent with God, the more He showed me how much of what I was doing was to be seen by people rather than by Him; that I was interested in His glory – as long as I got some glory of my own. Well, for awhile, I just felt guilty whenever I felt a desire to be recognized but what got me over the hump was realizing that it wasn’t my desire to be recognized that was wrong – it was where I was looking for that recognition – from people rather than from God. In 1 Samuel 2:30, God promises that those who honor Me, I will honor and those who despise Me will be lightly esteemed.” I realized that honoring people over God could only lead to my dishonor; that honor came from God and He was the only One I needed to please. And I found that the more I focused on pleasing Him, the less what people thought affected me.

Here are some questions that I ask myself to keep me on track in this area.

Am I defined by peoples’ opinions of me or by God’s?

Does peoples’ approval mean more to me than God’s approval?

Am I more afraid of doing wrong or of looking stupid?

Does it bother me when nobody notices or appreciates what I do - especially when I know that God sees?

Am I more concerned about people being happy with me or about God being happy with me?

How much does the fear of people shape my decisions as opposed to the fear of God?

Am I content to be misunderstood and misjudged because I know that God knows the truth and He’s my judge or do I have to defend myself against every charge?