

# “Following the Crowd?”

13 November 2005

Bible passages:

**Exodus 23:2** (*The Message*)

“Don’t go along with the crowd in doing evil and don’t fudge your testimony in a case just to please the crowd...”

**Romans 12:2** (*The Message*)

“Don’t become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed from the inside out. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you...”

**Sermon nugget:** Standing up for what we believe is right, and not going along with the crowd, requires self confidence and personal integrity. How do we find it within ourselves to take the high road?

Have you ever said, or heard someone say, “Everybody’s going!” and insisting that going with the crowd is verification of the rightness of wherever they’re going and whatever they’re doing? I certainly recall using that logic with my parents when I was young, and I know our daughter did the same thing with us. As I recall, I responded to Erin in much the same way that my parents responded to me. It was with, “Oh, does that mean that if ‘everybody’ jumps off the bridge, you’re going to, too?”

I don’t know about you, but I hated hearing that, and I’m sure our daughter did, as well. After all, when we’re kids, it seems especially important to be included and to fit in. We want to be liked and accepted, and often we think that happens best when we just go along with the crowd, regardless of what they’re doing.

That’s what we sometimes refer to as “peer pressure,” and the sense that goes along with that term is that peer pressure is always a negative influence. I’m well aware that peer pressure can also exert a positive influence on others, but I want us to think about what happens when that influence isn’t so positive. How do we resist? How do we stand up for what we believe to be right, even if it means going against the crowd?

For sure, we know that being influenced by the crowd isn’t just something that happens when we’re young. It occurs at all ages and stages of life. I suppose that’s what the phrase “keeping up with the Joneses” could imply. The thought that everybody has a new house, or lives in a certain place or any number of other things can influence us as adults, too.

Sometimes, we even go so far as to compromise our own values and integrity by going along with someone else, rather than standing up and taking the high road. I’m sorry to say that I had just such an incident happen a month or two ago. I was having a

conversation with another person, and she began bad-mouthing some folks for whom I have high regard. In an effort to avoid conflict and engaging in a debate, I just kept silent. When I walked away from that conversation, I felt awful, and I realized that I had not been the person I want to be; I had not taken the high road and countered or stopped the conversation. I wish so much I had handled that situation differently, and I'm determined to do so the next time something like that happens.

Sometimes we experience something like that when a divorce occurs. One party blames or degrades the other, and it becomes a downward spiral, and in the end, becomes a nasty situation. I know of a situation in which that is happening, except that one party is trying hard to take the high road and maintain some dignity and decorum in the situation. But it's tough, and sometimes it's easy to get sucked into the same negativity. In a way, that's like going along with the crowd.

Fortunately, not every situation is like that. Some do, indeed, take the high road and do the right thing. I read an article that points out what I mean. I don't know who is telling the story, but the writer told about an experience that happened when he was in high school. He and a friend were in the school gym interviewing students for the school newspaper. The writer said there was a boy there who had Down Syndrome, and he had a basketball and was shooting some hoops. A group of kids came up to him, and took the basketball away from him. They bounced it and teased him with it, and then made him go get the ball when it bounced out of their reach. The friend became so angry that he stepped in, stopped the teasing and gave the ball back to the boy.

The writer said, **"I have never been so proud of anyone in my entire life as I was of my friend, because he refused always to allow others to control his thoughts."** He went on to say that he wished that kind of behavior were the norm, rather than the exception. He admired his friend for not going along with the crowd, and for showing sensitivity to the young man and doing the right thing, as unpopular as it might have been.

That's part of what our Bible passages are telling us today. They're urging us to avoid the herd mentality, and not go along with the crowd that might be making poor decisions or going in the wrong direction. The passage from Exodus reads this way: **"Don't go along with the crowd in doing evil and don't fudge your testimony in a case just to please the crowd..."** This is telling us not to join in a crowd that's doing anything wrong, and not to make false statements just to please others.

That's pretty straightforward, just like the first part of the passage from Paul's writing in Romans. It says, **"Don't become so well adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking."** In other words, don't compromise yourself just to be liked or to fit in. If we become so enamored with those things, we become a part of the herd, and that means that we have sacrificed our individuality. And if we go along with the crowd, we may find ourselves living with some unpleasant consequences, like experiencing a sense of guilt or regret.

When we go along with the crowd, we're becoming just like everyone else, instead of being our uniquely created selves. Remember that each one of us is unique; there are no two of us who are alike. To follow the crowd and just go along has a way

of diminishing our identity and our uniqueness. When we follow others like sheep, we're saying that our beliefs and our thoughts aren't as important or as right as everyone else's, but I don't believe that is true.

Each of us has a sense of what's right and wrong and what's true deep within us; it's a matter of living in tune with that sense of rightness. I suppose another way we could say all this is for us to be ourselves, to make up our own minds, to do what our hearts tell us is the right thing to do. It's living in a way that our values and beliefs are in synch with our outward actions. It's living with integrity.

Rabbi Harold Kushner talks about integrity in his book *Living a Life that Matters*. He writes, “Integrity means being whole, unbroken, undivided. It describes a person who has united the different parts of his or her personality, so that there is no longer a split in the soul.” He goes on to say that when we aren't experiencing a sense of integrity, we're conflicted; part of us wants to go one way, and another part of us wants to go another.

One example he offers is that of trying to determine if we tell a prospective buyer of our home that there are plumbing problems, or do we keep quiet unless we're asked. When integrity is lacking or fragmented, we experience a war within ourselves, and we struggle. When we have that sense of wholeness, of being clear and undivided, no such struggle exists. It may not be the easiest route to take, but the decision-making is relatively simple, because we see clearly what the right thing is.

There are some marks of living with integrity that we can readily identify. For instance, it has to do with speaking our own truth, even though it might create conflict. It means that we behave in ways that are in harmony with our own personal values. It means that we make choices based on what we believe, and not on what others believe.

That certainly makes it easier to withstand the pressure that inevitably comes in life. At one time or another, we all deal with the pressure that's put on us to conform to the norm, or to act in a certain way. How successfully we handle that pressure depends on us—how we feel about ourselves and the kind of inner strength we develop, how clear we are on what we truly believe. You'll be changed from the inside out. That's what the rest of our Bible passage is telling us. It reads like this: “Instead, fix your attention on God. Readily recognize what God wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you...”

God sees the best in us; God believes in us; God is leading us down the right paths. When we develop a relationship with God, we can experience the truth of what the Bible passage is saying. God made each of us to be unique treasures; We are persons of value and worth, and God has planted seeds of goodness within us. When we focus our lives around the goodness that God implants in us, we will be able to avoid following the crowd when the crowd is going in the wrong direction. We will be able to stand up for what we believe is right. We will be able to take the high road. God always leads us down paths of loving goodness. We just have to follow that lead, instead of following the crowd.

Closing:

Abraham Lincoln talked about personal integrity, that sense of wholeness, of being undivided, with these words: “I desire so to conduct the affairs of this administration that if at the end, when I come to lay down the reins of power, I have lost every other friend on earth, I shall at least have one friend left, and that friend shall be down inside me.”

I'm convinced that when we live attuned to God's goodness, we will have that friend deep inside us.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.