

BEING RECOGNIZED PUBLICLY

I have been a football fan at least since I was in high school. For me it began with my high school football team, but then I went to Auburn during the height of the Pat Dye years, and I got hooked. However, I never really watched basketball until recently. Perhaps a little bit, while Charles Barkley was there, but never really seriously until after Bruce Pearl got there.

Perhaps, that's why I can't remember the source of the story I'm about to tell you. I once heard that one of the great basketball coaches told a reporter that he could turn anyone into an All-American. I want to say that coach was one of the great coaches of the last fifty years or so. Someone like Bobby Knight or Dean Smith, but I don't remember who it was for sure.

Anyway, the way I heard the story the reporter took the bet, picking one of the freshman 3rd stringers on the bench. This kid was not someone that came to the program with a lot of acclaim. None, of the recruiting pundits expected much of him. He may even have been a walk-on; I'm not sure. It's not really important. What matters is that the coach took the bet.

The story goes that, the coach took the opportunity to talk publicly about his new All-American every chance he had. Over time the media began to pay attention to this kid. At the same time, the coach was sending the same message to the kid. The kid began to believe it too and began to play better. Eventually, the kid's play improved so much that he did become an All-American.

I don't remember the name of the coach or the kid or even the school. I'm not even sure if there's any truth to this story. It may be just another of those urban legends that has grown up around the sport. But the beauty of a story is that it doesn't have to be true to carry a powerful message. In this case, I would submit that is true.

The story begins with Mary and Joseph bringing their Son for his circumcision, eight days after his birth. We learn some things about Mary and Joseph in this story. First, the fact that they are bringing their son for circumcision and for purification shows that they are devoted to the Torah. Secondly, they bring two turtledoves to make the required sacrifice. This tells me that they are poor, because the Torah says that a person should sacrifice a lamb- either from the sheep or the goats. Two turtledoves are an acceptable sacrifice if the person is too poor to afford a lamb.

Then the scene shifts. They have arrived at the Temple for the ceremony, and we see two people, their stories sort of crammed together to give their testimony. First, we have Simeon. The scripture tells us that he was devout and righteous. That suggests that he observed the Torah. It also says that the Holy Spirit rested on him. The bible also says that the Holy Spirit had revealed that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah.

Simeon gives his testimony. Remember two weeks ago when I talked about ascribed honor. Here we have a man who is model of Torah observance, a man on whom the Holy Spirit rests, a man who we are told who has had a revelation that he would see the Messiah before his death. This is as honorable a person as could be found, and he testifies to the honor of the child

publicly. He also honors Mary. He tells her that her Son is going to be something special, someone who will be the rising and falling of many in Israel.

Then comes our second witness. Then comes Anna. The scripture said that she was of great age and a Widow. Now, I need to explain here. There is no getting around that the Ancient Near East was a patriarchal society. Women were not treated well, generally speaking. I'm glad our society is *not* that way. But I'm also not going to sugar coat the reality for you. I would rather point out had bad it was, than pretend it didn't happen. I'm saying that because I want to explain what it means when this woman is identified as a widow.

For us, a widow is simply a woman whose husband has died. In that society, a woman whose husband had died would be expected to remarry when possible. Or if she were older, she would fall under the care of her eldest Son, assuming he was of proper age. In this case, being identified as a widow, plus the fact that she is prophesying publicly, suggests that neither of those things is possible. It suggests that she had no adult male children, and so she was the head of her household. This gave her a more honorable status than most other women in that society. Again, I'm not saying that I think that's a good state of affairs. I think it's horribly chauvinistic and patriarchal. I'm simply saying that's the way it was.

Anna is further identified as a Prophet, which means she receives messages from the Holy Spirit to give to the rest of us. We're also told that she worships regularly in the Temple. She is as honorable a witness as can be found, and, like Simeon, she uses some of that honor to ascribe honor to the child. Two witnesses, full of honor, who use their renown to testify to the honor of the child in front of them. They recognize him publicly.

So, where does that leave us? What does this have to say to us today? Well, I know all of you. Every one of you. You're all good people. By the standards of our society, you're all honorable people. You're hard workers, morally upright people. You do your jobs, or in some cases *did* your jobs- you may be retired- , but you chose honorable trades. You abided by the law, raised your children, and paid your taxes. By the standards of our world, nobody can fault you. Nobody. I certainly do not.

So, what honor are you ascribing to our Lord Jesus? How does your testimony sound? Jesus is born! We ought to be out having a party! We ought to be cheering, letting everyone know that Christ is born, and we are here to proclaim the reign of the newborn King.

All too often what you hear from us is crickets. Unfortunately, talking about our faith publicly has a stigma attached to it. Our society has decided that faith is a private matter. That's something with which we have to contend. I understand that. What I want you to understand is that we have such a great story to tell, that it would be selfish for us to keep it to ourselves. We don't have to be heavy-handed about it. We don't have to be aggressive about it. We could just talk about what God has done for us. We don't have to insult people or scare the heck out of them. We just need to be open to talking about our faith, and willing to live out our faith in ways that make it obvious who we are.

We don't recognize our savior nearly enough. I don't recognize him nearly enough. My prayer for all of us is that the Holy Spirit will help us to recognize those opportunities that we all have to give honor and glory to our Lord and Savior. I also pray that God will give us the courage in that moment to speak up- to tell the world about the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! Because I want people to know that God loves them enough to give everything for them- even to die for them. I want them to know that their salvation lies in the baby that I'm recognizing publicly this morning. If I can do that, I will risk a little scorn. How about you?