

"The Power of the Crowd"

(PEER PRESSURE)

INTRODUCTION

THE TRUTH ABOUT PEER PRESSURE

(1) It impacts everyone.

Proverbs 13:20

(2) It's both good and bad.

I Corinthians 15:33 Hebrews 10:24-25

(3) Like attracts like.

Amos 3:3

(4) Different levels of friendship create different levels of impact.

Matthew 11:18-19 & I Corinthians 5:9-13 Mark 3:13-19

Mark 15:1-15

The crowd doesn't always ask for the right thing - v. 8

The crowd doesn't always listen to the right people - v. 11

The crowd doesn't always inspire the right decision - v. 15

INTRODUCTION

In more than twenty-five years as a pastor, I've done my share of counseling. Occasionally, I have to deal with a family situation in which a teenager has rebelled against the spiritual training which the parents have tried to give. Yet, in spite of a parent's best efforts and fervent prayers, the young man or woman decides to take a different path. One of the first questions I ask mom and dad is: "Do you have any idea what brought this on?" The answer is almost always the same in every case: "It all started when he (or she) began hanging out with the wrong crowd." "The wrong crowd" is every Christian parent's nightmare. With some kids, "the wrong crowd" can undo in one weekend a parent's best efforts over fourteen or fifteen years.

"The power of the crowd" - it's real; it's widespread; and it's scary.

"The crowd" has power in the most prominent areas of our society: morality, politics, and religion.

Take *morality* for instance. The "crowd" of today has many brainwashed into thinking that the "gay"; lifestyle is acceptable rather than deplorable and wicked as God says.

The "crowd" also influences *politics*. How many politicians vote their consciences anymore? How many sacrifice their convictions on the altar of the popular vote? How many espouse positions, not because these positions are right and good, but because it's *what the electorate wants*?

The fact is that neither a Republican nor a Democrat with an unashamed "pro-life" stance can get elected in many parts of the country today - certainly not to a national office - because "the crowd" is *not pro-life*. Maybe there used to be *the silent majority* or *the moral majority*, but not anymore. America is not only a *post-Christian* nation, it is a *post-moral* nation.

"The crowd" also has an influence on *religion*. I'm sure that "the crowd" agrees with 15 year-old Kate Vierhus of San Jose, CA. *Parade* magazine asked teenagers this question: "Do you believe in God?" Kate answered: "I was absolutely terrified when I read, 'There is...only ONE GOD, and if you aren't right with my God, then you'll burn in hell.'" She went on to say that it didn't matter if you believe in one God, 100 gods or no God. All that mattered was that whatever you believe should bring you personal peace and an openness in appreciating others. The average person in Montgomery County wouldn't argue

with her. It's those of us who stand on the truth of God's Word that take the heat as "narrow-minded bigots" who are mindless pawns of "the religious right."

"The crowd" has mind-boggling power to influence how we think and act.

Pontius Pilate found that out when he wanted to release Jesus, who he knew was innocent of the charges against him.

But three times in the text, we are told that "the crowd" raised their voice in opposition.

I have heard preachers say for years (and I used to say it myself) that the same people who shouted "Hosanna" to Jesus on Palm Sunday hollered for his crucifixion in the early morning hours of Friday. I have changed my mind. I don't think it was the same crowd at all.

It was well known that Pilate released any prisoner they wanted as a goodwill gesture at Passover. I think that those gathered here were friends of Barabbas, or at least sympathetic with what Barabbas stood for. This was a well-orchestrated demonstration with one thing in mind: *free Barabbas*. Jesus was a minor character, a bit-player in the drama as far as they were concerned. They didn't have anything against Jesus, per se, but they did have a passionate allegiance to Barabbas and his cause.

Pilate "caved-in" to popular opinion. He succumbed to public pressure.

I read a definition of "peer pressure" last week that went like this:

"Peer pressure" is:

When we make a decision based on someone else's values.

That's exactly what Pilate did. He didn't believe for a second that Jesus was guilty. But he had Jesus flogged and handed him over for crucifixion because *other people urged and even threatened him to do it*. Pilate was a wimp, a coward, a spineless and shameful a leader. Yet, lest I let myself off the hook, I must ask: "Have I ever made a decision based on someone else's values?" "Have I ever violated my own conscience because *I was too weak* to take a stand?" With Pilate, I must plead "guilty." *That's* the "power of the crowd." It is an almost supernatural power. And it takes the supernatural power of Almighty God to resist it.

For the remainder of our time together, let's look at three things about "the crowd" that threaten our spiritual well-being.

THE CROWD DOESN'T ALWAYS ASK FOR THE RIGHT THING - v. 8

The crowd came to Pilate to ask him to release Barabbas. They could have asked for Jesus to be set free - the one who spoke truth, the one who healed the sick, the one who set people free from demonic bondage, the one who showed kindness and compassion. But instead they asked for Barabbas, a murderer.

All we know about Barabbas we know from this one incident in his life - when he was released instead of Jesus. But we can surmise a great deal from the brief background information contained in the seventh verse: "Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising."

Insurrection was a common problem that Rome had with Judea. There were continual uprisings against Roman occupation.

One anti-Roman and fanatically nationalistic group was called the *Sicarii* or "dagger-bearers." They were pledged to murder and assassination. They carried daggers beneath their cloaks and used them whenever it suited their purpose, which was to keep Roman forces forever on the defensive. Some have suggested that Barabbas was a member of the *Sicarii*.

At any rate, Barabbas was a folk-hero, the Che Guevara of his day. He had done what countless Jews had wanted to do but hadn't had the courage to do: kill a Roman. Thus, it should come as no surprise that the common people clamored for his release.

William Barclay was right, however, when he said that in asking for Barabbas over Jesus, they wanted lawlessness over law, war over peace and hatred over love.

Almost twenty centuries later, here on the other side of the globe, it's not much different. Many people would still rather have Barabbas over Jesus.

Who are the American heroes today? Bruce Willis, Mel Gibson, Steven Seagal, Jean Claude Van Damme, Arnold Schwarzenegger. These are the men who play the "Barabbas" part - the ones with the guns or the knives or the fists, the ones who fight back against the "corrupt establishment," the ones who take the law in

their own hands and dish out their own brand of justice. The mantle of Charles Bronson has fallen onto the shoulders of a new generation of "tough guys."

Jesus: the man of peace, forgiveness, compassion seems quaint and old-fashioned to a generation used to paying \$7.75 to see a high body count at the hands of their action hero.

But this is nothing new. The crowd has been asking for the wrong things for thousands of years.

In Exodus 32, the crowd demanded a golden calf to worship, and Aaron, Israel's high priest, willingly, even eagerly, complied.

Paul predicted that the time would come when the crowd would want to hear a certain kind of message. We are seeing its fulfillment in our day.

2 Tim 4:3-4 – "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables."

The crowd doesn't want to hear about sin, so there are preachers who never mention it. The crowd doesn't want to hear about total commitment to Christ; so many preachers avoid saying anything about it.

The crowd wants to hear how to be successful, so there are preachers who outline the steps. The crowd wants to hear about a God of love who knows nothing of justice and wrath and there is no shortage of clergymen and women willing to comply.

But the crowd doesn't always ask for the right thing. As a matter of fact, the crowd - conditioned by the Bible-despising, God-hating, Christ-rejecting, sin-embracing media - more often than not *asks for the wrong thing.*

THE CROWD DOESN'T ALWAYS LISTEN TO THE RIGHT PEOPLE - v. 11

Mark tells us in verse 11 that "the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate released instead of Barabbas."

The crowd listened to those who had no use for Christ; no reverence for him; no loyalty toward him. As a matter of fact, *they hated him*. They hated him for his holiness. They hated him for his standards. They hated him for his claim to exclusivity. *Because the crowd listened to the enemies of Jesus*, because they allowed their choice to be conditioned by those who hated Jesus, they chose poorly. They settled for a bargain-basement, second-rate, dime-store substitute. They could have had Jesus. They chose Barabbas.

Are there "chief priests" today who hate Christ and work against him, attempting to turn the minds of their hearers against the historic Christian faith and the teachings of the Bible? There are. I have time to cite only two examples.

I heard on the radio last week that the pastor of the United Church of Christ church in Naugatuck, CT asked his congregation to give up "prejudice" for Lent. Not a bad idea until he said that "prejudice" included judging "other religions" and "other sexual orientations" as wrong.

Then there is the notorious Episcopal Bishop John Spong, who seems to get his theological pronouncements in the national press on a regular basis.

It is a sign of the perilous spiritual times in which we live that a leader in *any denomination* can say the things that John Spong says without being drummed out of the ministry.

In his book *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, Bishop Spong said: "There is no God external to life....The Bible is not the word of God in any literal or verbal sense....The Gospels are not inerrant works, divinely authored....All evangelical and missionary activities designed to convert the heathen are expressions of our sense of superiority and our hostility toward those who are different....I would choose to loathe rather than worship a deity who would require the sacrifice of his son."

The above quote was not taken from the works of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, but by a bishop in the Episcopal Church! A man of spiritual influence, an "expert" in theology, a "chief priest" if you will in his denomination!

If anyone's listening to Bishop Spong and I fear that many are, they are listening to the wrong voice.

Is the crowd today listening to those who love Jesus or those who hate him?

What are the other anti-God voices that people listen to in America today? I want to mention just one other: television.

I have come to one inescapable conclusion: if you watch prime-time network TV more than just on a rare occasion, you had better confess it and repent of it.

A survey was conducted among 100 of the most influential movers and shakers in the TV industry. These are the people at the network level who decide what kinds of programs America will watch. Who are these people? 93% do not go to church. Over half do not believe that adultery is wrong. 97% favor abortion on demand.

The results of a study of prime-time network TV released last week by the Kaiser Family Foundation revealed that *more than two thirds of all network prime-time shows contained sexual content*, averaging more than five sex scenes per hour? Jonah Blank, writing in the February 22nd issue of *U.S. News and World Report* declared: "It's a rate that would make some porn stars jealous."

A study conducted by *USA Today* of one week of prime time network TV revealed that of the 45 implied or explicit sex scenes, 40 involved unmarried heterosexuals or adulterous situations, 1 involved a homosexual couple, and *only 4 were between heterosexuals married to each other?*

The master of the outrageous sound-bite, perhaps the most influential person in the television industry, Ted Turner, was quoted in last Friday's *Washington Post* as saying that "the pope should get with it and remove adultery from the Ten Commandments."

The June 1995 issue of *The Wesleyan Advocate* reported that in one year of prime time TV there were 8,333 acts of violence, 14,313 sexual situations and 23,566 instances of profanity?

David Frost put it well when he said that, "Television is an invention that permits you to be entertained in your living room by people you wouldn't have in your home."

The story is told in Daniel 3 of the time when King Nebuchadnezzar constructed a nine-story image of gold. The assembled multitude were then ordered to fall down and worship the idol. Most people in the crowd listened to Nebuchadnezzar and did as he commanded. But there were three in the throng who remained standing. They chose to listen to God instead of the dominant voice of their pagan culture. We remember Shadrach, Meshech, and Abednego as heroes -

three young men who realized that every voice must be tested by the Word of God.

There are voices coming at us from every direction - the TV and movie screens, the radio, the CD player, the Internet. We need to make absolutely sure that we are listening to the *right voices*. Don't think that you can listen to a philosophy which espouses explicit or tacit rebellion against God and his laws and that it won't affect your life. Don't think that you can watch explicit material, listen to explicit lyrics, or read books and magazines that promote immorality and that somehow your mind and your soul will remain pure for God's sacred use. Paul counseled the Corinthians in strong and unmistakable speech: "'Therefore come out from them and be separate', says the Lord. 'Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.'"

Corinth was ancient Greece's most important trade city. Situated on the Isthmus of Corinth between the Ionian Sea and the Aegean Sea, Corinth was the connecting link between Rome, the capital of the world, and the East. Corinth was comprised of a cross section of people who had flocked there to participate in the gambling, legalized temple prostitution, business adventures, and amusements available in a first-century navy town.

There were many opportunities for Christians to listen to wrong voices. Paul said, "Leave sin alone. Don't mess with it. Separate yourself from it. If you don't, it will destroy you."

THE CROWD DOESN'T ALWAYS INSPIRE THE RIGHT DECISION - v. 15

The fifteenth verse records Pilate's tragic and cowardly response, recorded to his everlasting shame: "*Wanting to satisfy the crowd*, Pilate released Barabbas to them. He had Jesus flogged, and handed him over to be crucified."

Pilate's *conscience* didn't inspire his decision. His conscience said "Release Jesus. He's an innocent man."

Common sense didn't inspire Pilate's decision. Common sense said that the serene, peaceful, dignified man standing before him could not be the traitor and the terrorist that the chief priests claimed him to be.

The *evidence* didn't inspire Pilate's decision, for there was not a scrap of proof to convict Jesus *of any civil crime*, much less a capital offense.

Here's where Pilate made his fateful and fatal error: *he allowed someone else to make a life-or-death decision for him*. Remember the definition of peer pressure that I recited earlier:

"Peer pressure" is when *we make a decision based on someone else's values*."

There are times when we can surrender to peer pressure and it's no big deal. Sometimes when I go to a restaurant with friends, I'll wait to see what everyone else orders before I order. I may be in the mood for prime rib, but if the others order soup and salad, then I'll make my choice for lunch based on someone else's values.

When we have out-of-town guests, I may want to take them to the Inner Harbor. *I really don't need to see the monuments one more time!* But if my company wants to see the monuments, then inevitably I follow the crowd down Constitution Avenue.

But when it comes to moral choices, I dare not permit anyone else to make these for me. I must not be pressured to conform to the standards of those who are in rebellion against God and his Word.

I was talking with a high school kid a few weeks ago who told me that he has lost most of his friends at school because of his refusal to "follow the crowd" to the parties. Praise God for teenagers like that!

Pilate made the "easy decision," and it cost him dearly. But we need to understand something about "easy decisions." There's a "catch." Decisions motivated by peer-pressure, or fear, or a desire to take the easy way out, always come back to haunt us. We may get "short-term relief," but as sure as God, we'll get "long-term pain." There is a price to pay for compromise, and the bill eventually comes due.

Those familiar with American history know about Aaron Burr. Aaron Burr had a great spiritual heritage. He was the grandson of the great preacher and revivalist, Jonathan Edwards. Burr eventually became the Vice-President of the United States under Thomas Jefferson. But hatred overtook him and he eventually killed his long-time political rival, the first Secretary of the United States Treasury, Alexander Hamilton, in a duel. Burr later turned against his country in an attempt to start his own independent nation in the southwest with New Orleans as the capital. Aaron Burr lay on Staten Island at the age of eighty - a lonely, forsaken, bitter old man. Such promise: the grandson of Jonathan Edwards, the son of Rev. Aaron Burr, the President of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), Yale-

educated. Aaron Burr could have gone down in history as a great man, but we remember him as a murderer and a traitor.

What many historians don't tell us is that earlier in life, he attended an evangelistic meeting at Yale University. When the invitation was given to receive Christ as Savior and Lord, Burr was deeply moved to give his life to Christ. As he started forward to make public his profession of faith, someone whispered loud enough to be heard, "Look at Aaron Burr. He's going to get religion!" Embarrassed by these words, Burr turned around and returned to his seat. He said to the student who made the comment, "Don't get excited! I was only fooling." In that one defining moment, Aaron Burr determined his destiny for time and eternity. *The crowd doesn't always inspire the right decision.*

CONCLUSION

"The power of the crowd" is formidable and frightening. Without a rock-solid relationship with Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, we don't have a chance of resisting its lure.

Are there Christians here this morning who will say, "I will turn my back on the crowd's standards, values, practices and priorities." Don't turn your back on the crowd. They need us more than ever, but reject what "drives" them, what motivates them. Are there Christians here this morning who will take a stand and say, "I will not let the values of others determine my decisions. I rededicate myself to living God's way, by God's book, no matter the cost."

Are there those here today who have never yielded to Christ because of fear of what family, co-workers, or friends will think? Perhaps today the Spirit of God has convinced you that your eternal soul is too precious to embrace the values of those who neither know nor care about what God expects. Today you want to declare your faith and trust in Jesus Christ. You want to do what Pilate wouldn't do - cast your vote with Christ no matter what the consequences.