

Fame

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For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted (Luke 14:11).

Maybe you heard what happened to Bob Dylan last month. If by some chance you don't know who Bob Dylan is – well, that's actually the point of the story. Dylan has been one of the most famous folk singers in America since the 1960s, with hits like "Blowin' in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," and a host of others.

Apparently, Dylan was in New Jersey to perform a concert with Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp. He had some time to kill before the concert in a nearby town, so he went for a walk in the neighborhood. Being a folk singer, he was dressed casually, and he had a hood over his head because it was raining a little. A 24-year-old police officer saw him walking slowly and looking in the window of a house for sale, so she stopped to question him. "What's your name?" the officer asked. "I'm Bob Dylan," he said politely. There is some question whether the officer recognized the name at first, but she was evidently not enough of a folk music fan to recognize the face, so she asked for some identification. "I left my wallet in the room," Dylan said. Now the officer was getting suspicious, so when another young officer came along and didn't recognize him either, they took him in the police car to where he was staying and he eventually produced some ID.

When one of the best-known singers in America gets picked up just for walking down some roads and peering in a window, there's a parable of how fleeting fame can be. And yet, how many people clamor for fame, in one way or another?

The movie version of the television series *Fame* is coming soon to a theater near you. It's about a high school for the performing arts, and how young people compete to get in, and then to get the best parts on stage so they can go on to careers that will make them famous. Nowadays of course, anyone with a computer can set up a website or a blog or even a Facebook page and claim a

little fame in cyberspace. Most of that is pretty harmless, though there are people who vent their spleen and rant in ways that can be destructive – and once in a while some sociopath airs his frustrations about planning to hurt somebody, if only to get attention, a fleeting moment of fame.

All this clamoring for fame is an exaggerated form of something everybody wants – which is to be recognized, to be valued, to mean something to somebody else. People do all sorts of things to be noticed, to convince ourselves that we really do matter.

Little children do it unabashedly. “Mom, look at me!” they say, when they master some new skill and want someone to be proud of them. Older children look for ways to stand out too. A girl I knew once said to me, “I need a *thing*.” “What do you mean, ‘a thing’?” I asked. “You know, a thing I can do,” she said. “Some kids are really good at soccer, some are in the band, some can sing and dance. I need a thing I can be good at!” What she meant was that unless there was an activity she could be known for, she might not be known at all. She might not matter to the other kids.

Teenagers and college students spend a lot of time thinking about how to be recognized, how they want to be known. So students sort themselves into groups in the high school cafeteria. The preps, the punks, the jocks, the cheerleaders ... whatever the categories, young people want to belong somewhere, and the sorting can feel cruel if you don't fit in anywhere. In college lots of people join fraternities or sororities, or get involved in clubs or sports or other activities, partly just for fun, but partly because we all need some signs to tell us who we are.

And it isn't just kids. Adults care about these things too. Lots of people's identity is wrapped around their job, which is one reason why it's so hard to be laid off, and hard for some to retire. For many people, where they live, the cars they drive, the clothes they wear, the people they associate with are markers of identity, the subtle or not-so-subtle claims to fame, if only on a small scale.

There's nothing wrong with needing to belong. Aristotle said centuries ago that human beings are social animals. We're made to live in community. One of the ironies of American life is that we like to think of ourselves as rugged individuals, while we spend so much time and money and effort in the quest for status – for the admiration and approval of other people.

Not surprisingly, then, because the quest for status, for some kind of fame, is a perennial part of human nature, the Bible has a lot to say about it.

In the Old Testament, one of the great examples is Solomon, the son of David, king of Israel. Solomon built a great temple, and expanded his kingdom. He was fabulously rich, he had a myriad of wives and concubines, and he was supposed to be the wisest man in the world. The queen of Sheba heard of his fame, and came to see for herself. She was so impressed, she said, "Not even half of the greatness of your wisdom had been told to me...!" She gave Solomon huge amounts of gold and spices and precious stones – which, as the Israelites told the story, was by way of saying that their king was so great that even the monarchs of other lands were dazzled. Then as now, people drew glory for themselves from the glory of their nation.

In the New Testament though, the quest for fame gets turned on its head, like so many other things we think we want.

The gospel claims that Jesus of Nazareth was the greatest human being who ever lived – so great, in fact, that he was not only human, but the very Word of God made flesh, and therefore the most powerful person who ever lived. Now you might think that the greatest human being would live in the biggest mansion, and have the biggest fortune, and be featured in *Forbes* magazine and *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. But no, this Jesus, this God-Man, was a carpenter, a blue collar man, who, when he went about preaching and teaching and healing, had not even a regular place to lay his head. He died like a common criminal, and there's no evidence that he left behind an estate, or any possessions at all.

Jesus did not seek fame in ordinary ways. Even when Peter cried out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" Jesus told him to keep that to himself for the time being. But Jesus also taught that what impresses people on earth may not be impressive in heaven. Some of the things that make people famous on earth might even keep them out of heaven.

"So when you get invited to a banquet," Jesus says, "don't sit at the best place, but sit at the lowest place; otherwise you might be embarrassed when the host asks you to make way for someone more distinguished." This is not Miss Manners talking about etiquette – it's a metaphor for life, and for what God likes.

The disciples come and ask Jesus who will be greatest in the kingdom of heaven, and the answer is: not people who want the answer to be themselves. Jesus pulls up a child and says,

Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:1-4).

Jesus also says,

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation (Luke 20:46-47).

Whatever is pretentious and self-aggrandizing – much of what people do for status on earth – looks vulgar and ugly from the perspective of heaven. And people who are considered unworthy on earth may turn out to be the most precious in heaven. “So when you give a luncheon or a dinner, don't just invite your friends or your rich neighbors,” Jesus says. “Invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. They can't repay you, but you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Again, the point is not just who's coming to dinner. The point is what we value, and what we do, and with whom, and why. Whom we sit with in the cafeteria becomes a symbol for the rest of life. We all need to be loved and accepted. But if our quest for these things makes us neglect the same need in others, if our desire to be somebody lets us treat others as nobody, then God is not pleased. Our clamoring to win the approval of other people may cause us to lose the approval of the only one who matters in the end.

As usual, C. S. Lewis says it well. In *The Great Divorce* – which is not about divorce in the ordinary sense, but about the great divorce between heaven and hell – Lewis describes a scene in heaven. There's a huge parade, the kind we have for conquering heroes home from the war, or even for Penguins who win the Stanley Cup. For all the pomp and circumstance and the dignitaries who turn out, you might think it was some president or Nobel Prize winner being honored. But the honoree is an ordinary woman from a small town in England. What makes her great in heaven, worthy of a parade, is the way she cared so

long and faithfully for everyone around her, including her irascible husband, who was rather a bear to live with. She did all that caring and giving because that's what love does. Lewis's point is Jesus' point: heaven and earth do not always celebrate the same things, and where they differ, we should do what they celebrate in heaven.

Now all this might seem self-evident, but it isn't. Of course we ought to do what heaven wants, but do we?

Do we define ourselves by some exclusive circle, or do we reach out beyond our circle to invite others in? Do we value ourselves according to what we have, or do we use what we have to value other people? Are we impressed by what the world finds impressive – wealth and status and power – or by what pleases God: love and compassion and generosity? If we learn to see ourselves and everyone else the way God sees us – as imperfect human beings but precious anyway, made in God's own image – then we won't worry so much about our social image. We'll be free to do our best with what God gives us, and our best will include what's best for other people too.

Even the most famous people on earth will be forgotten soon enough. Most of them already are. What will be remembered are those who value the things God values. They won't be thinking much about fame or status. They'll be thinking about what God wants, and how to live like that, and asking God to help. Their lives will be rich with purpose and meaning, and in the end they will find – and probably be surprised to find – that they are the kinds of souls God fits for heaven, and wants to keep around forever.