

Rise Up and Act: People Are Watching You!

A sermon based on Acts 14:44-52

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

That project you've been working on...at school, at work, I know the long hours and the blood, sweat, and tears you put into it, so it would be just perfect...I thought you did fantastic work...so awesome! What have you been doing because you look amazing! Did you lose some weight? You must tell me what diet or exercise plan you're on! Did you make that by yourself? I'm really impressed with your skill and craftsmanship! I watched your game the other day, and my goodness, you were making everyone else out there look like amateurs. Great job!

Compliments, do they ever bother you? Do you ever get offended by them? I don't believe I've ever heard someone say, in all seriousness, "Please stop that! I don't want you pointing out my good qualities or congratulating me on my hard work." Compliments are good, right?

But should they ever bother you? I mean, sure, it's nice to receive the recognition, to know people like you or what you do, and what makes it better is when you're not even fishing for those compliments. But what they do is, they put the focus on you, and sometimes, it's easy for those to go straight to your head...over-inflate your ego, which isn't necessarily a good thing.

But, whether they bother you or not, one telling thing about compliments is this: they show people are watching you. Even when you don't necessarily want them to, even when you don't think they are, even if you're not aware of it, people are watching you. They are noticing you. What do they see? Are they witnessing the love of God in you? Are they witnessing the glory of God in you?

People are watching you. That was reality for Paul and Barnabas, at pretty much any place they went. They always drew crowds. They had notoriety; they had a reputation, and it preceded them wherever they went...mostly.

It was a little different in Lystra, though. There they met a man, crippled from birth but still a faith-filled believer, and, for whatever reason, the Holy Spirit led them to heal that man. An amazing miracle. God be praised (I'm sure that's the reaction Paul and Barnabas were expecting from the crowds)! Oh, to be sure, people were there. They noticed the amazing miracle Paul and Barnabas had done. They even shouted words of praise...albeit misguided words of praise.

Do you remember what they shouted? **"The gods have come down to us in human form!"** Wait, what?!?! I'm sure that's how Paul and Barnabas felt...confused. Because, in a matter of moments, Barnabas was being hailed as the Greek god Zeus (possibly because he had a more imposing form), while Paul they branded Hermes (you can probably guess the connection there...Paul being the messenger). In a matter of moments, they went from being God's mouthpieces to supposedly being gods themselves.

To be sure, people were watching them. But, while the crowd recognized divine power at work, their misguided notions of divinity unfortunately lead them to the wrong conclusion. And you can't really blame them. Besides the strong possibility you would've reacted in similar fashion if you saw something like that occurring today, the people there had a pretty logical reason for their seemingly extreme

overreaction. You see, they had this local legend where an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, had once entertained those same two gods without recognizing who they were, whereas the townspeople had rejected them. The people of Lystra were not going to repeat that mistake.

How easy it would have been for Paul and Barnabas to go with the flow and let the praise and potential gifts go to their heads. But troubled by what was happening, Paul and Barnabas seized the opportunity to proclaim the true message of peace through the risen Christ. **“We too are only men, human like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God.”**

And, just like that, Paul and Barnabas diffused a potential soul-threatening situation (it would’ve been idolatry) and pointed the people back to the true God...an awesome witness to the gospel and to God’s love. They pointed the people to the God who **“has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills you with joy.”** They pointed the people to the God who fills you with even greater joy through his Son, who lived, died, and rose to save you.

Have you ever found yourself in that kind of situation before? Could you ever envisioning yourself doing what Paul and Barnabas did here? That’s why we started out talking about compliments. I’m fairly confident you’ve all received compliments before (and if you haven’t, please see me after worship and I’d be happy to give you two or three).

Well, maybe no one’s ever tried treating you like a god/goddess before (and that’s probably a good thing). But compliments usually mean what? That people are watching you. Others notice what you’re doing.

Does that maybe make you feel a bit uncomfortable? And I don’t mean do you feel creeped out, like someone is stalking you, tracking your every move. It’s that people see what you’re doing...or not doing...whether good or bad.

People are watching, and it’s not even just your friends, your co-workers, your classmates, your neighbors, your family, which they are. It’s that person in front of you on the road, who has to deal with the angry honks, the result of your road rage, or who gets the glare from you as you pass by, or who watches your car whiz by them on the expressway because going the speed limit is just too slow for you. People see that.

It’s the person who catches you making a scene in the grocery store, yelling at your kids because they won’t listen when you tell them “no” and keep complaining about how hungry they are...or maybe you’re on the other side, the kid who’s misbehaving and being a big problem for your mom or dad. People see that.

It’s the person who overhears your conversation at the restaurant, one that starts like this: “Oh, did you hear what such and such a person did to her boyfriend,” or “I can’t believe how idiotic our President/government is,” or even just one laced with NSFW language. People see/hear that.

So, are they witnessing God’s love? You know, they don’t even need to know you. They don’t even need to know if you’re a believer or not. What matters is this, are they witnessing God’s love?

It’s not too often we think about that, especially when we’re in the situation. It is easy to just say or think, “Well, I’m never going to see those people again, so who cares if they overhear the conversation?”

Who cares if they don't like what I have to say about our government? Who cares if they see me making a scene with my kids? Who cares if they witnessed some of my road rage? Who cares if they want to make me their god, even though I know the truth?"

God cares. I have this business card in my office. It's from the church I vicared at in Wisconsin. On the back it says this, "If we meet and you forget me, you have lost nothing, but if you meet Jesus Christ and forget him, you have lost everything."

Do you agree with that? The most important thing in this life is that a person knows Jesus. If they remember me or not...not so important. I will not argue with that. But what if the meeting with you or the interaction with you or even just watching you prevents them from meeting or seeing Jesus?

It's difficult to wrap our minds, sometimes, around the notion what I do or do not do could potentially have an eternal impact on someone else. Because if people can't see Jesus when they look at you, a believer, then where are they going to?

And you and I have cause to take moments out of our days to fall to our knees and pray, humbling repenting of our failures to speak or share or show God's love to others and, ultimately, our failure to speak or show God's love back to him. And, with the Psalmist, we can joyfully say, **"Then I acknowledged my sin to you and did not cover up my iniquity. I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the LORD' – and you forgave the guilt of my sin."**

And he forgives the guilt of your sin. Friends, witness the complete and perfect love of God in Jesus. You think Paul and Barnabas healing the crippled man was a great miracle? You've all received even greater healing through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection...the healing of the terminal disease of sin.

Jesus, someone far greater, more powerful than Zeus and Hermes put together, came down to us in human form, and that's not just a local legend. That's reality. Jesus came down to this earth for the sole purpose of you...and me...and every other person throughout the history of the world. He didn't just come to show his love by giving you rain from the heavens to water your crops...not just to provide you with plenty of food. He came to live perfectly, to die as our substitute on the cross, to give us peace of forgiveness and assurance of eternal life through his resurrection. The healing we so desperately need? It's ours through Jesus! We've seen it. We've witnessed it. And it fills our hearts with joy!

Friends, Jesus has completely healed you of your sin so that now you and I can stand up (or rise up) and act for him (because, after all, that's what the book of Acts is all about, the 'acts' of the apostles in response to the love they witnessed in full in Jesus...and the 'acts' of the apostles to give witness to Jesus' love to others).

Now, unfortunately, you can't miraculously heal physical sickness, like Paul and Barnabas, but you have something that can heal the even greater disease. And the best part is, your audience is much wider and even more needful of that healing. So, how can you go about doing that? By giving witness to the glory of God.

Do you notice Paul and Barnabas' immediate reaction to praise and borderline worship they received from the crowd in Lystra? First, they tore their clothes, which was a way to display anguish and displeasure. They didn't want to be treated as gods. In fact, they didn't want the people believing in

those Greek gods at all. **“Men, why are you doing this? We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things (an Old Testament way of referring to false gods) to the living God.”**

Paul and Barnabas had no desire to replace God. Instead, they gave credit – and glory – to God for being able to heal the crippled man. Now, it’s pretty amazing how Paul always had this knack for turning almost any situation into an opportunity to share the gospel (the good news), as he did here, wouldn’t you agree? How can we do the same?

I mean, you can’t do the spectacular like Paul and Barnabas and people aren’t going to be coming to you and wanting to worship you. But you have friends or co-workers or family members coming to you to listen to their problems. You have people whom you don’t even know, who are watching the way you conduct yourself each day. How will you witness?

Perhaps you’re familiar with the song lyrics “Rise and shine and give God the glory.” Falls right in line with the passage from 1 Corinthians, **“Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God.”**

So, whether you eat or drink, when you’re hanging out with your friends and the potential for vulgar language, hate speech, gossip is there, when you’re going to school or to work and you are choosing what to wear for the day, when you are in a conversation with someone and they’re pouring their heart out to you and the temptation to be disinterested and just roll your eyes is there, when you’re out at a sporting event and the people around you are railing against the other team, not having very good sportsmanship...when whatever or wherever...is it giving glory to God? Are you showing the love of God?

Because one, again, whether you know it or not, people are watching, and two, even more importantly, God is watching. And any situation can turn into you being able to share Jesus and his love for them...the simple message of salvation. Will you be ready?

Compliments... do they bother you? They really don’t need to, as long as we understand the work we do (which is our entire lives) is our way to witness to God...his glory...his love. So rise up and act for him because people are watching. God is watching. And when we do that, there will be no greater compliment than God saying to us, **“Well done, good and faithful servant. Come, and take the inheritance prepared for you.”** And we’ll get to joyfully respond, **“We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty.”** ...in thanks to his love...to his glory forever. Amen.