

The Impact of a Teacher's Sin Upon His Reputation

by Hershel Patton

A sage has said "What you are thunders so loud I cannot hear what you say." It has ever been true that to be an effective teacher one must practice what he or she teaches.

"Reputation is what men and women think of us; character is what God and Angels know of us" (Paine, New Dictionary of Thoughts). What men and women think of us affects our teaching effectiveness. Thus, the Lord said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). He severely censured those "who say and do not" (Matt. 23:3). Our reputation, therefore, has a great impact upon those we seek to teach. It will either cause them to listen attentively and obediently, or turn them away in disgust. Teachers cannot be too careful about their reputation. If people are going to be induced to accept the truth, their teacher must be one who walks in truth. Flaws in the teacher will hamper the effectiveness of teaching, either turning people "off" or lead them to accept the flaws.

Carefulness about reputation is even more important when we realize that just one flaw or slip-up may damage the effectiveness of a teacher with many and for years. "A fair reputation is a plant delicate in its nature, and by no means rapid in its growth. It will not shoot up in a night, like the gourd of the prophet, but like the gourd, it may perish in a night" (Jeremy Taylor, New Dictionary of Thoughts).

Divorcing Reputation and Teaching

We are living in an age when the reputation (life-style, personal habits) of a teacher should, in the minds of many, be divorced from the work of teaching. This is the philosophy of humanism, where emphasis is placed upon self-satisfaction without regard to others. It is argued that homosexuality or any chosen life-style has no effect upon one's work of teaching, or any other work, and should be ignored in all cases. This philosophy is wide-spread and very influential today, even in high places, including the church.

Just recently a high court ruled that a school teacher, unmarried but pregnant, who had been fired by a school board, was to be reinstated to her job and given back pay. The school board argued that the influence of the teacher upon her young students was not good and out of line with the moral concepts of her students and their parents. It is a sad day when the high courts of the land will encourage and promote immorality over morality and decency, which are the fruit of faith.

This thinking in religious circles, especially the church, is particularly absurd and ridiculous in view of the Bible teaching that what the teacher is cannot be separated from the teaching. In fact, it is the impact of what the teacher is and teaches that caused the Holy Spirit to warn, "My brethren, be not many teachers, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (Jas. 3:1).

Impact of Reputation

Besides the sins of adultery, lying, and murder committed by David, God's king and religious leader, the prophet in indicting him said, "Because of this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme" (2 Sam. 12:14).

David repented of his sins, and was forgiven, but the impact of sin on the part of this religious leader upon others (giving them occasion to blaspheme) and his own personal hurt and loss (death of the child), he could do nothing about. This is an example of the impact of a leader's reputation when he sins.

I have known preachers, elders, deacons, song leaders, and class teachers falling into fleshly and doctrinal sin. Some never returned unto the Lord, but become complete apostates. Others repented and worked diligently at rebuilding their reputation.

Enemies of the Lord and "the Faith" like to point with glee to the apostasy of former "pillars" in the church. When those "of reputation" in the church apostatize, it always gives occasion for enemies of the Lord to blaspheme. This is the impact of a teacher's damaged reputation.

Even those who repent and retain their faith cannot take away this impact of their sin, except through time and effort given to regrowing that fragile plant of reputation which was broken. The future work of one whose reputation has been shattered will be hindered and this is part of the impact of a damaged reputation. Another lesson is to be presented in this series of "Putting the Pieces Back Together", which will deal with how soon and to what extent one who has fallen can effectively resume his former leadership position. I do not want to infringe upon that article, but whatever such an individual is deprived of, or made to suffer, as consequences of his fall is a part of the impact of a damaged reputation and, therefore, also a part of my subject.

When one thus sins, even though he genuinely repents and is forgiven by the Lord and brethren, he should not desire or expect brethren to immediately put him back into a leadership role because of the impact of a damaged reputation upon others. Enemies of the Lord will not know of the repentance, or if they have heard, call it superficial and insincere, and will continue to use the sin as an occasion to blaspheme. Too, younger people in the church, when they see one quickly filling a leadership roll after sinning so grievously, may conclude that if they thus fell, the consequences wouldn't be so bad - that the damage done from the standpoint of personal hurt to themselves, others, and giving occasion for enemies to blaspheme can be just as quickly removed and forgotten

as the forgiveness of God. This, of course, just is not so.

Elders who are aware of and greatly concerned about the impact of reputation are wise and right when they, before restoring a penitent fallen one to a teaching or leadership role, require time and diligence for growing again that tender plant of reputation that was so quickly and grievously broken.

Servants of the Lord need to realize that when they fall into sin, fleshly or doctrinally, they not only must have the forgiveness of God and brethren, but must suffer certain consequences of their sin even after being forgiven. David learned this in the loss of the child, the influence for evil on his other children, and the tormenting knowledge that the Lord was being blasphemed because of his sin. Truly, "A reputation once broken may possibly be repaired, but the world will always keep their eye on the spot where the crack was" (Joseph Hall, New Dictionary of Thoughts). This is just part of the impact of a leaders broken reputation.

Other Areas

Reputation is to be highly guarded, not only in regard to fleshly sins, but even in areas of human judgment. The Holy Spirit directs us to "provide things honest in the sight of all men" (Rom. 12:17). "Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time" (Col. 4:5).

Paul, when collecting funds to be taken to Jerusalem for poor saints, required that others "of reputation" among the churches be selected to travel with him "avoiding this, that no man should blame us in this abundance which is administered by us: providing for honest things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men" (2 Cor. 8:20-21).

There have been instances of men, with good reputations, being found guilty of stealing from the Lord's treasury. It is wise for two or three men to count the collection, and the treasurer give an itemized report regularly of income and expenditures. This would not only remove the temptation for one to steal from the treasury, but would keep one from being suspected or accused.

Preachers often lay themselves open for adverse criticism by going to houses to talk with a woman with a problem, or meeting them in the church office where the two are alone together for a period of time. Carefulness on the part of a preacher in taking his wife with him, or having the woman meet him in his home instead of the office, could save one from actual sin or reputation-destroying rumors.

Carelessness on the part of a preacher in his dress, conduct, and speech, not only opens the doors for temptation, but may provoke comments and accusations that taint one's reputation for purity. "He's a ladies' man" and "Just can't keep his hands off the ladies" are comments provoked by the conduct of some.

Too much familiarity with certain ones - much togetherness - where all laugh unblushingly at some shady, suggestive incident or tale, is a sign that one might respond to "a pass" if made. Many have become guilty of sin by traveling this path. Others, though not yielding, have been suspected of yielding by observers of their actions. When preachers have great temptation suddenly thrust upon them, in most cases I'm sure, some look, work, or act on the part of the preacher gave the temptress the idea he might respond. The preacher may have had no thought of conveying such a message, but his careless words or actions did, never the less, leave that impression.

There is never a time or place where God's teacher can be "off-guard" for his reputation as a servant of God is always at stake. And, reputation, as we have observed, has a tremendous impact for good and evil.