

A Good Reputation

Psalm 15, Acts 16:1–4

The apostle Paul has begun his second missionary journey, visiting churches he had previously established. When he came to Lystra he met a young man named Timothy, who is called a “disciple”—that is, a learner, a person coming under the discipline of Christ. His name is Greek, meaning *honoring God* or *honored by God*. Paul would later write of his “sincere faith,”¹ a faith that dwelt first in his grandmother Lois and his mother Eunice. He had an especially close relationship with the apostle Paul, who calls him his “son in the faith” (1 Tim. 1:2).

But notice what the author of Acts says about this young man: he was “well spoken of by the brethren who were at Lystra and Iconium.” Here was a man of good character who had a good reputation among those who knew him well. Paul was especially attracted to this young man and became his mentor. This relationship continued over time; Timothy would be the recipient of the very last letter sent by the apostle Paul: 2 Timothy.

So here was a young man “well spoken of by the brethren.” The word translated “well spoken of” means *witnessed* or *attested*. Here was a young man who had such a good reputation that people went out of their way to speak of it.

Human nature hasn’t changed much. The church at Lystra no doubt included strong Christians, along with those of weaker faith. There were doubtless hypocrites as well—people who attended church but didn’t have a heartfelt faith. But in the church at Lystra young Timothy was a standout. He had a good reputation as a sincere follower of Christ. Do you have a good reputation? Let’s consider four points this morning, first,

1. Every Christian should strive to have a good reputation.

The biblical term for *good reputation* is a *good name*. The Bible says, “A good name is rather to be chosen than great riches” (Prov. 22:1). Note that reference well: Proverbs 22:1. It tells us two things: (1) a good reputation is valuable (it is more valuable than great riches); and (2) it is something to be “chosen” (a person should make a conscientious choice to have a good name). The word translated “chosen” is the word for election. It is the word used in Psalm 135:4, “For the LORD hath *chosen* Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure.” Out of all the people in the world—all the fallen daughters and sons of Adam—God chose for himself a people that he would save: his elect. He gave them to Christ before the foundation of the world, and sent his Son into the world to redeem them, to die

¹ 2 Tim. 1:5 NASB, ESV; Gk. τῆς ἐν σοὶ ἀνυποκρίτου πίστεως, the *unhypocritical* faith that is in you

on the cross for their sins. He sent his Spirit into their hearts to give them faith and draw them to himself. The LORD² has *chosen* Jacob for himself.

So a good reputation is more valuable than great riches. It is more valuable than success or fame or worldly honor. And it is something to be chosen. You and I should each of us make a self-conscious choice to have a good reputation. God puts a high value upon a good name, and so should we. Even thoughtful pagans have recognized the value of a good name. The Greek philosopher Socrates said, “Regard your good name as the richest jewel you can possibly be possessed of.”³ That’s a remarkable observation. Will you make a self-conscious choice to have a good reputation? If so, then that is something that you must work on *all* the time—at work, at play, in the home, in public. One little slip and you could ruin it: one outburst of anger, one foolish decision, one indiscretion, one slip of the tongue.

Timothy was well spoken of by the brethren. Are you? Am I?

Some people are out to make a quick buck, and never mind how low they have to stoop to get it. If it involves making false claims about a product, if it involves covering up a product’s flaws, if it involves cheating another person, if it involves not revealing a conflict of interest, never mind; the only thing that counts is making the sale. Other businessmen treat people right, even if it ends up costing them more; they know the long-term success depends upon repeat business. They work hard to build up a good reputation.

There are websites that speak of “the most and least trusted names in news,” “the most and least trusted names in investing,” etc. One news network has a banner claiming to be “the most trusted name in news”—but stating such does not necessarily make it so.

Are you a person that people can trust? The ninth commandment is “thou shalt not bear false witness.” Our Catechism observes, “The ninth commandment requireth the maintaining and promoting of truth between man and man, and of our own and our neighbor’s good *name* . . .” (SC 77). Think of that for a moment. The ninth commandment requires maintaining and promoting our *own* good name; it also requires maintaining and promoting our *neighbor’s* good name. The two are not mutually exclusive. It is not as though only one person at a time can have a good name—no, you and your neighbor can *both* have a good name! Everyone in the church can have good character, make wise choices, treat other people with respect, be a sincere lover of God, etc. To do so would benefit both church and the whole community.

In a sinful world a person must of necessity be on his guard. The Psalmist had to conclude, “All men are liars” (Ps. 116:11). Unless regenerated, unless

² Heb. יהָ Yah, shortened form of יהוה Yahweh

³ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag?utf8=%E2%9C%93&id=reputation>

supernaturally given a love of the truth, men are prone to lie, to exaggerate, to spin the story, to omit inconvenient facts in order to make themselves look better. It takes a long time to develop a good reputation, but it can be lost quite quickly. Thomas Paine—no friend of the Christian faith—wisely observed, “Character is much easier kept than recovered.”⁴ And so it is. In common grace even the reprobate occasionally make a true observation.

But here’s the bottom line: every Christian, including yourself, should strive to have a good reputation. Start today! Second,

2. It is possible to cultivate a good reputation, no matter your family background.

Consider: in the church at Lystra there was a disciple named Timothy, “the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek.” Here was a divided household. Timothy’s mother, Eunice, was a Jew and a believer, but his father was a Greek, a pagan, uncircumcised. Why did Eunice marry a Gentile man? We are not told. We *are* told, “Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor. 6:14). Let it be perfectly clear: a Christian is not to marry an unbeliever. In the very next verse it explicitly says, “what part has a believer with an unbeliever?” When people get married, they ought to have something in common. If they belong to Christ, then a shared faith in Christ ought to be the most important thing. With Spirit-given wisdom the prophet Amos asked, “Can two walk together, unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). This is a rhetorical question. All human beings ought intuitively to know the answer. Sexual attraction is not enough to make a successful marriage; there ought to be agreement on the most fundamental things—and the most fundamental thing of all is, who is your God? Are you committed to the God of heaven, or is your loyalty to the devil?

Our Confession of Faith wisely observes that “it is lawful for all sorts of people to marry, who are able with judgment to give their consent. Yet it is the duty of Christians to marry only in the Lord. And therefore such as profess the true reformed religion should not marry with infidels, papists, or other idolaters: neither should such as are godly be unequally yoked, by marrying with such as are notoriously wicked in their life, or maintain damnable heresies.”⁵

Timothy grew up in a divided home. His father was not a follower of the God of Israel. He allowed his wife to teach their son about God, but he did not permit him to receive the rite of circumcision, the outward mark of belonging to God. So Timothy’s home was less than ideal; it was not a perfect home. A home is to be a nursery, a place where a child is nourished at the breast, a place of safety and security where bonding between mother and child takes place, and where

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith 24.3

important life-lessons are learned from a child's earliest days. In horticulture a nursery is a place where plants are grown for transplanting; in animal husbandry a nursery is a place where young animals grow and are cared for. For a child, a home is supposed to be a training ground for later life. Lessons learned in the home should prepare a person for the challenges that are sure to come in life. Ideally, a father and mother should be on the same page; they ought to be in fundamental agreement on what and how to teach their child. But Timothy did not grow up in that kind of a home. Apparently he was very close to his mother; his grandmother also had a great deal of influence on him. His father also did not stand in the way of his professing faith in Christ.

The fact is that not every home is ideal. In his divine sovereignty God constantly is working out all things according to the purpose of his own will. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1, "the *base* things of the world and the things which are *despised* God has chosen, and the things which are *not*, to bring to nothing the things that are." God is the miracle-worker; he can bring something out of nothing, light out of darkness, good out of evil. He can make all things work together for good.

You may have come from a loving, intact Christian family—or not. Ideally, you came from a home where you heard the gospel from your mother while you nursed at her breast, where you had a Christian father who loved you and was your stronghold, your protector, who brought you up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, who trained you up in the way that you should go. Some children do not have these advantages. But the good news is that God can bring light out of darkness

Norma and I met at Moody Bible Institute of Chicago. A couple days ago the Moody alumni magazine arrived in our mailbox. The cover story was entitled "Survivor." It is the story of a young Moody alumna who survived her mom's abortion. Her mother had six children at home and was pregnant again, having conceived through an extra-marital affair. She had already had two abortions; now, she was having her third. She was 26½ weeks into her pregnancy, and after the procedure she could clearly see that the tiny human form now sharing the room with her was a girl. And the baby was not breathing. The woman cried out to the abortionist to save her child, but he responded that the baby would be "a mental vegetable" who "wouldn't have any kind of a life." The woman didn't give up. "I'll sue you!" she yelled. The threat struck a nerve. The abortionist called for an ambulance. The tiny, struggling child was rushed to the trauma birth ward of a local children's hospital. Her mother named her Sarah. The mother's home was very troubled; she had children living off food stamps and Medicaid, she struggled with mental illness. The children were in and out of foster care. Sarah bounced between her biological family and foster care parents. She was brought to the

foster home with just the clothes she wore and a baby bottle with Coke in it. By God's grace, her foster parents were Christians and told her about Christ. Eventually, they adopted her, and she became a Christian. She graduated from Moody Bible Institute and now serves as the New Orleans director of Louisiana Right to Life.

Yes, our God is able to bring light out of darkness, something out of nothing. Timothy grew up in a divided home; he heard one thing from his mother and another from his dad. He learned about the true God from his godly mother and grandmother, and heard Greek philosophy from his father. But God worked in his heart. He brought Timothy to himself. When he heard the gospel through the preaching of the apostle Paul, he was ready to accept it. His heart had been prepared. And Timothy, like all of us, needed to learn to cast out human imaginations and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and bring his every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. All of us have picked up some false ideas along the way. These we must self-consciously reject. And in their place we must purposely put in their place the truth of God's eternal word. We must let the word of Christ dwell in us richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another with the truth of Scripture, self-consciously rejecting whatever disagrees with Scripture. Paul was so impressed with this young man, Timothy, that he wanted to take him, along with Silas, on his missionary journey. What an opportunity for young Timothy: to be mentored by the greatest theologian in the history of the Christian church.

You might have had a model upbringing, or not. You may have had every conceivable earthly advantage, or not. What matters is not where you came from, but how you are living your life now. All of us should strive to get to the point where we can say with Paul, "For to me to live is Christ; *he* is my all in all." Don't look at the past; rather, "*this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus*" (Phil. 3:13–14).

Timothy's experience proves that it is possible to cultivate a good reputation, no matter your family background. No matter what hurdles you may have to surmount, you can do that through Christ, who strengthens you! Thirdly,

3. Churches should strive to have a good reputation.

We are told that Paul circumcised Timothy. As with baptism under the new covenant, circumcision under the old covenant was a sign and seal of an individual's belonging to God and to the covenant people. In the case of Timothy, Paul thought it best to circumcise him "because of the Jews who were in that region, for they all knew that his father was Greek" (16:3). Timothy's circumcision was not performed by a priest as a religious rite at a synagogue but by Paul, informally, no doubt in a home setting. On the other hand, with Titus we read that

“not even Titus who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised” (Gal. 2:3). Paul resolutely refused to have Titus circumcised, because in his case the cause of gospel liberty was at stake.⁶ As Paul explains in Galatians 2, there were false brethren “who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage.” The cause of the gospel was at stake, so Paul refused to have Titus circumcised. Through these two different cases we can see that circumcision in the new covenant era is optional; it is no longer a religious rite, but it may be performed if circumstances warrant.

But look at verse 4. Luke records that “as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.” This is actually a tremendously important verse. In the last chapter we considered the Jerusalem council. Now, as Paul, Silas and Timothy travel, strengthening the churches and preaching the gospel in new communities, they deliver the decrees of the Jerusalem council: that God’s people “abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality” (Acts 15:29). These were not just pious opinions that individual local churches were free either to implement or ignore at will. No! They were “decrees.” The word for decrees is *dogmas*.⁷ In our language *dogma* means a doctrine or body of doctrines concerning faith or morals formally stated and authoritatively proclaimed by a church.⁸ In a seminary today there might be a course in “church dogmatics”; that is, doctrines formally stated and proclaimed by a council of the church (such as the Nicene Creed). As Paul and his fellow missionaries journeyed, they delivered “decrees *to keep*”; the word translated “keep” is a strong word; it was used of a prison guard guarding a prisoner to prevent him from escaping. Then there is the word “determined.” Again, this is a strong word; it is used of the judgment of a human court, it is also used of the final judgment: “Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be *judged*” (Matt. 7:1–2). Clearly, the churches were not independent, each doing what was right in their own eyes; rather, the churches must all proclaim the same truth—the truth of Scripture. The true church must preach and teach everything that’s in the Bible (the whole counsel of God), and nothing that’s not in the Bible. This is the only way to have true unity of faith. The problem with many churches is that they fail to teach *all* of Scripture, skipping over the parts that find disagreeable, and they substitute manmade doctrine. We have some churches omitting the doctrine of God’s sovereign election, because they find it unpalatable, and other churches teaching that Christ’s physical body is resacrificed in the mass and there is a place called

⁶ Easton’s Bible Dictionary (Logos Bible Software)

⁷ δόγματα (dogmata)

⁸ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/dogma>

Purgatory where people go for a time who have not “satisfied for the punishment due to their sins.”⁹ If a church fails to teach *all* the Bible, then what it teaches is a *distortion* of the Bible. And if a church teaches manmade doctrines, then its teachings are mere human opinions lacking divine authority. Such churches fail to maintain a good reputation; they besmirch the good name of Almighty God! But when there is good order in the church, and when churches teach and preach “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, they maintain their reputation as reputable places where a person can expect to learn God’s truth. Under Paul’s preaching the churches were “established in the faith, and increased in number daily.” Let us pray that this may be realized in *our* day! Fourthly,

4. Christ has the only perfect reputation.

All of us should strive to be well spoken of by the brethren, but sadly we all fall short of the glory of God. God intended that his truth be preached by “vessels of clay.” None of us has a perfect understanding; all of us—even the best intended—are prone to bias. It is a fact that Christ only has a perfect reputation.

Preachers of the gospel, of all people, should “[speak] the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). They represent him who is “truth itself,” him who is “the way, the truth and the life.”¹⁰ When preaching Christ, there is no need for a preacher to exaggerate, or add “spin,” or lie or twist the facts, for Christ is the absolutely perfect subject.

Before the sermon we read Psalm 15, “Lord, who may abide in Your tabernacle? Who may dwell in Your holy hill? He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness, and speaks the truth in his heart.” Ultimately, Psalm 15 is a description of the perfect character of Jesus Christ. Where we fail, he *never* fails. His gospel is perfect. He will never disappoint us.

Yes, (1) every Christian should strive to have a good reputation; (2) it is possible to cultivate a good reputation, no matter your family background; (3) churches should strive to have a good reputation; (4) Christ has the only perfect reputation. He alone will lead you to eternal life. Amen.

⁹ Q. 1381. What is Purgatory? A. Purgatory is the state in which those suffer for a time who die guilty of venial sins, or without having satisfied for the punishment due to their sins. (Baltimore Catechism)

¹⁰ ὑπὸ αὐτῆς τῆς ἀληθείας (hypo autēs tēs alētheias), 3 John 12; John 14:6