Admirers Need not Apply

*John 3:14-15, “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

I’ve done Facebook now for around 8 years, I think. I’m not really a computer guy. I’m not a social media person either. But I do appreciate some of the things Facebook lets you do. But I’m also aware of how dangerous it can be. My seminary class formed a group on Facebook. We bounce ideas off one another, share our joys, our woes. It’s a way to keep those relationships going.

But I have to admit that I’ve fallen for one of the many Facebook pitfalls. I “like watch”. I’ll post a comment for my classmates to see, either something I’ve thought of or maybe a quote from a theologian. And I watch to see how many likes or comments it gets. If it gets a lot, I feel pretty good about myself! I’ll think I’m pretty clever. If no one really says anything or posts a derogatory remark, it bothers me. Either I feel like my classmates are smarter than I am, or else I think they’re not *nearly* as smart as me and obviously just didn’t understand how brilliant the comment really was! It’s pathetic, really.

But there’s an even worse creation than Facebook – Twitter. I don’t use Twitter, but according to Randy Kleckner and Alyssa Ugo, it’s kind of like Facebook, only faster. I think that means I could have the ability to be pathetic at much higher speeds. But celebrities are all over it. All the famous people have Twitter accounts. Their fans and critics “follow” them. They watch to see what the celebrity is thinking about or cares deeply about or ate for supper last night.

According to recent count, pop star Katy Perry is the most popular celebrity with 96 million followers. She’s followed by Justin Bieber at 94 million, Barak Obama at 85 million, and Taylor Swift at around 83 million. That says a whole lot about our culture . . . and probably not in a good way! But apparently, millions of people really admire Katy Perry. They’re interested in what she has to say.

I sometimes wonder how many followers Jesus would have on Twitter. Actually, I think you might be surprised. In 2011, a poll came out asking Americans to rate famous individuals, historical or imaginary. Jesus’ approval rating was *incredibly* high – around 90%. That’s less than Abe Lincoln, but it’s more than Santa Claus – not bad!

Every couple of months a new report comes out telling us how un-Christian America is becoming. Fewer people are going to church. Fewer think church is important. Very few young folks are even willing to identify with a specific denomination, etc.. But in spite of that, Jesus’ approval rating is still stunningly high. Lots of people are interested in what He had to say. Many are amazed by His wit, His guts in a struggle against the establishment. Others admire His way of life and others the miracles He did.

That’s pretty much where Nicodemus is. He’s an admirer. Well, that’s not bad considering he’s a Pharisee. They *really* hated Jesus. So Nicodemus was kind of sticking his head out . . . at least a bit. It was at night so no one would know about it. Jesus is a marked man, after all. It’s dangerous to be seen with Him. But Nicodemus still wants to hear what Jesus has to say. He’s interested. He thinks it’s kind of fun to mull over some of Jesus’ ideas. He kind of admired Jesus.

It’s a great thing to be an admirer. As an admirer, you can appreciate something from a safe distance. Also, you don’t have to accept it *in toto*. You can take bits and pieces of it and leave bits and pieces of it. As an admirer, you can be interested without being committed.

Lutheran pastor and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once commented on this very thing. He wrote that “[the] admirer never makes any true sacrifices. He always plays it safe. Though in words, phrases, songs, he is inexhaustible about how highly he prizes Christ, he renounces nothing, gives up nothing, will not reconstruct his life, will not be what he admires, and will not let his life express what it is he supposedly admires.”

And I wonder . . . are there admirers of Jesus in our midst? It is easier being an admirer after all. Do we take only the bits of what Jesus says that suit us, that fit into *our* concept of life and the universe? Do we treat Jesus like a buffet, taking the parts we like, but leaving the parts we don’t? Surely we don’t take to heart only those parts that seem to confirm the way we already live. Surely we don’t simply *admire* Jesus.

“Rabbi,” Nicodemus said. “We know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him. You’re really something special, Jesus. You’re one in a million. You’re super cool, Jesus!” Nicodemus is an admirer! And he wants Jesus to know it! He wants Jesus to know that he can appreciate some of His positions on things.

Someone once said that you shouldn’t meet your heroes. Chances are they won’t be able to live up to the ideal of them you’ve constructed in your head. Nicodemus figured out why people say that. Jesus didn’t respond with humble thanks. He didn’t make a self-deprecating comment to take the attention off of Himself. In fact, Jesus seems to ignore Nicodemus’ praises altogether!

It’s not that Jesus didn’t hear him. It’s not that Jesus is eccentric or arrogant. He’s not like stuck up Hollywood celebrities. It’s just that Jesus had no interest in Nicodemus’ admiration. He didn’t come to boost His approval rating. He didn’t come to get more followers on Twitter. Oh, it was fine and good for Nicodemus to be an admirer. But Jesus isn’t interested in admirers. He wasn’t then and He isn’t now. Jesus is interested in disciples.

Jesus wanted disciples. But He wasn’t finding any. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night, and at this point, even the twelve disciples are basically in the dark about what He was all about. Perhaps that was largely due to the miracles Jesus performed. That’s what inspired Nicodemus to meet with Jesus in the first place – the “signs”. But throughout the Gospel, the people gathered around Jesus continued to miss the point. They see Jesus feed thousands and they admire Him. They see Him turn water into wine and they admire Him. They see Him raise Lazarus from the dead and they admire Him.

But they miss the point! Every time Jesus performed a sign, He tried to turn it into a teaching moment. He wanted to use them to show people what He was really about. Jesus feeds the people and says, “I am the Bread of Life!” But they see only the crumbs of bread in their hands. Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd!” But the disciples notice that the blind man can see again. Jesus used these signs to show people who He really was! But they only succeeded in getting Him some more likes on Facebook.

That is not what Jesus wanted. Those signs weren’t supposed to be the focal point. They weren’t supposed to be the center of Jesus’ ministry. Jesus intended them to point beyond themselves to the greatest sign of all. They were supposed to point to the one sign that would draw all people to Himself. “And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.” That’s where Jesus pointed Nicodemus. That’s where He tries to point you – to the cross.

It was on the cross that Jesus was lifted up. There Jesus did something infinitely greater than His other miracles – greater than restoring sight, than curing a disease, even than restarting a heart. Jesus wasn’t satisfied to deal only with the consequences of sin. That’s what the other signs accomplished. On the cross, Jesus dealt with sin itself. Jesus dealt with *your* sin. Jesus was lifted up. And on that cross He showed everyone what He was really all about.

But this is where His admirers stopped. This is where the Nicodemuses drew the line. Discussing thoughts, exchanging ideas, contemplating some new concepts was good enough. That’s as far as admirers are willing to go. Shooting the breeze with Jesus in the dead of night is one thing. The cross is quite another. It’s here at Golgotha that even the 12 apostles learn that they were nothing more than admirers after all.

And how about you? Is this where you leave too? Is this more than you bargained for? Are you content with simply liking Jesus on Facebook? Do you prefer following Him on Twitter to following Him in real life? This truly is the crucible. This is the place where admirers are separated from disciples. This is where admiration is separated from faith. Admiration ends where suffering begins. But faith clings to the cross, because it knows no other way to salvation.

How was this cross a sign? How on earth was this instrument of death supposed to make disciples? We don’t see power here. We don’t see beauty here. We don’t see glory here. The cross is nothing to admire! We see only suffering and death here! But here is also where we see *His* commitment. Here is where we see *His* faithfulness toward us.

Paul wrote, “That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring . . . in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.” The cross is where God does this. The cross is where God brings into existence things that do not exist. Here God creates faith where once there was only admiration. Here God takes admirers, and turns them into disciples. Here God shows us *His* faithfulness and extends us His salvation.

Jesus doesn’t want you to be an admirer. He has no use for fans and flatterers. He wants you to follow Him, not to the supernatural healings, not to the miraculous supplying of bread. Jesus wants you to follow Him all the way to the cross because that is where you see the greatest sign of all. That is where you see His love for you. That is where you see His mercy and grace and forgiveness. That is where He turns your admiration into faith. That is where He turns you, the admirer, into His disciple. Amen.