

The Christian's Testimony in the Eyes of His Neighbor

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Does it really matter what my neighbors think of me? If I have a right relationship with God and the church, should I be concerned with the perceptions of someone who I hardly know. What is my responsibility? Christ admonished his disciples to *"Go ye therefore and teach all nations..."* (Matt 28:19a), regardless of where we find ourselves geographically; we are commanded to teach the Good News of the Gospel to a world dwelling in the darkness of sin. The testimony we have in the eyes of our neighbor will certainly have an influence on the effectiveness of our teaching.

Each one of us has a testimony. Our speech, actions, and attitudes all combine to build an understanding of who we are and what we represent in the minds of the community around us. Several aspects should be evaluated when I consider how I might be perceived in the eyes of my neighbor. Romans 12:16-21 can help us to identify several key considerations. If my neighbor detects that I believe that I have superior understanding in all spiritual matters, our testimony can be severely damaged. Romans 12:16 warns that we *"... be not wise in your own conceit."* When associating with your neighbor we should be careful to avoid projecting a "better than thou" attitude. Rather we should give them the assurance that we believe they have many things that they can teach us. Noticing the well kept garden, commenting on the latest backyard project goes a long way in building a functional relationship between neighbors. Acknowledging the gifts and abilities of another person may well prepare a seed bed that can be used as a springboard for spiritual challenges later on.

Verse 17b exhorts us to *"Provide things honest in the sight of all men."* What does it mean to be honest? To be honest is to be free from all falsehood and hypocrisy. Does this require that we are free from falsehood and hypocrisy when stopped for a traffic violation? Does providing things honest in the sight of all men have a bearing on the information I share with my tax accountant? Am I really honest when I tell others that I am "poor" in an attempt to secure a discounted price for services or merchandise? Our speech, our actions, our attitudes all leave a lasting impression in the hearts of our neighbors. That impression is our testimony.

Years ago, as a young man I recall my father hiring a logger to cut some timber from the family property. The wood lot bordered the neighbor's property which was also covered with timber. We thought we knew where the boundary was but our neighbor became very upset because he was sure we cut three veneer trees on his side of the line. The father calmly told the neighbor to come some evening and pick out three trees from the family woods that he thought would be of equal value. He came one evening and we drove through all our wood lots looking for those three trees. It seems he could never find the right three and to this day he has never accepted any reimbursement for them. Because of my father's peaceable attitude he is still a family friend today. Verse 18 contains the instruction that we are to *"Live peaceably with all men."* Living peaceably with all men requires that we sacrifice what might be rightfully ours in order to make peace possible. But, what shall we do with a neighbor who steals from us, lies about us, or damages our property or possessions? How shall we respond to the one who adamantly declares that the property line is twenty five feet in his favor? Often we look at circumstances such as these as problems that must be endured for the sake of peace. God could have us see that it is an opportunity to do more. While living peaceably often

requires that we sacrifice, verse 21 says that we are to *“Overcome evil with good.”* This may call us to respond with kindness when we have been hurt or to give to those who have made it a practice to take from us. Overcoming evil with good makes no sense when viewed in the eyes of the unsaved. That is why it is such a powerful tool in building a Godly testimony before our neighbor.

What does my neighbor know of my business dealings? I do not buy from him or sell to him. but do we sell grain to the same feed mill? Do we buy propane from the same vendor? How would he ever form an opinion of my business ethics? Proverbs 20:14 reflects the thinking of an individual that many would consider a shrewd businessman. *“It is naught, it is naught, saith the buyer: but when he is gone his way, then he boasteth.”* For some, the challenge of negotiating a lower price becomes almost an obsession. The goal is to get as much as possible while paying as little as the seller will accept. Are we willing to pay what our neighbor is asking for his lawn tractor if we think it is a fair price or must we offer less just to see if he will accept a lower price? What do we communicate to those who live around us when the “deal” made at the dealership is labeled a “steal” at the next cattle sale. What will enhance the testimony of Christ and His Church in the eyes of my neighbor?

The Scriptures identify that my neighbor’s livestock can become my responsibility to care for and return if it strays onto my property. Would my effort to promptly return the animal in good condition influence my testimony among my neighbors? Certainly the circumstances surrounding such an event would either build or tarnish a Christian’s testimony.

Must my neighbor own every tool or implement that I do? The Bible states in Matthew 5:42 that we are to *“Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.”* but if I let my neighbor borrow this tool, what if...? Or, no one ever asks to borrow my tools so how can I profit from this verse? Perhaps we should ask to borrow something from our neighbor. It is always easier to ask the neighbor who has loaned us something before. This interaction between a Christian and his neighbor could certainly give ample opportunity to leave a good testimony for Christ.

Sometimes it is well to consider what our neighbors see. Perhaps it is good to try to evaluate our possessions through their eyes. What would a drive past your property reveal? If you were the neighbor up the road what impression would you get? Five junk cars parked against the unpainted garage, an unkempt yard with a garden full of weeds, the house roof missing a section of shingles, and a screen door hanging open on one hinge certainly make an impression. Maybe the drive past would reveal two shiny, late model cars parked on the blacktop driveway, and a large, perfectly landscaped yard complete with a shady gazebo and beautiful three car garage. Does the luxurious house with the gospel sign saying *“Seek Ye First the Kingdom of God”* (Matt 6:33) standing visible by the road serve to clarify or confuse our testimony? Would a sin sick soul feel comfortable knocking on either door? What perceptions do our neighbors gather from the meeting houses we build in the community? Expansive lawns, mowed to perfection combined with newly pointed stone walls? An auditorium fitted with fine oak trim accenting the thickly padded benches. Would we be ashamed if the “town folks” ever knew the price? The church sign says *“Lay not up for yourselves treasures on earth.”* Is that truly our testimony? If you were a sin sick soul looking for Jesus, would you stop here on Sunday morning? *“Abstain from all appearance of evil”* (1Thes 5:22) What

impression do our properties and church buildings leave on our neighbors?

“Go ye therefore and teach all nations” includes those in my own community. What is my testimony in the eyes of my neighbor? Our testimony is something that our neighbors build with the material we supply them. Like erecting any building, a solid testimony in the community requires thoughtful planning, effort and considerable investment of time. God help us to see what our neighbors see as we live the Christian life before them.

-Barnett, MO
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