

## The Power of Peer Pressure

by Hendrik Joubert

What others think of us matters. In this desire for approval lies the power of peer pressure. While it is true that some opinions may not matter at all, the opinions of those who form our peer group may cause us to change our behavior. In the final analyses though, we remain in charge of our actions. Being aware of this subtle pressure will help us combat its influence on our behavior.

This desire for approval is not always bad – if we surround ourselves with the *right* people. Through Paul God issues the following warning: ***Do not be deceived: "Bad company corrupts good morals."*** (1Corinthians 15:33) The statement is in the negative, but implies the positive – if we were to keep company with those who share the values we learn from the Scriptures our morals will not be corrupted.

The statement in the negative highlights another aspect of peer pressure. Our desire for approval makes us susceptible to manipulation. *"Do you think that you are better than us?"* Now you find yourself in a situation where it seems that you cannot win. We must not be manipulated into taking the path of least resistance with the expected snub. The inspired advice here is: ***Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, so that it will give grace to those who hear.*** (Ephesians 4:29)

The challenge is to find the words to help others understand our respect for God and for His word. One approach may be to simply say: "No, not inherently. (***What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;... Romans 3:9***) The only difference between me and you is that I have asked God for forgiveness in the way He describes for us to do so in the Bible. Now I have to work at doing better than I did in the past. The instruction from God is to not be ***conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.***" (Romans 12:2)

The opinion of a single person may be important enough to influence a change in our behavior. We may have great respect for this individual causing us to accept his guidance without ***examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so.*** (Acts 17:11) It may progress one step further, where we will follow one realizing that we are in the wrong. There may be an aspect of manipulation in that we do not have the confidence to stand up to such a person. Our loyalty should be to God, and not to any man.

Another form of peer pressure we are warned against may be described as "sibling" pressure. Through **Matthew (10:35-38)** the Lord warns would-be followers that if they love their siblings more than they do Him, they are not worthy of Him. The tenderest relationship of a mother with her children is mentioned here. Our closest relatives may cause us to compromise our faith in God and our respect for Him.

It is appropriate to discuss traditional religion here. The writings of especially Paul deals with the difficulty with which the Jews would let go of ***the traditions of the elders.*** (Matthew 15; Romans 10:1-3) Our patriotism may be questioned as God is nationalized by so many nations of the world. Opening his mouth, Peter said: ***"I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, <sup>35</sup> but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him.*** (Act 10:34-35)

Our opinion of self (ego) may also cause undesirable behavior, therefore the warning that we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought to. (Romans 12:3) The significance of the opening statement in what we know as the sermon on the mount should not be missed – ***blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*** (Matthew 5:3) Notice that it is not a

list of blessings to be feasted upon *pot-luck* style. State them in the negative to see the consequences: *I guess I am not poor in spirit, so the kingdom of heaven is not mine*. Now take the time to see the progressive discussion of the Christian character, starting with this most fundamental principle. Notice also what such a person may expect, opposition which amounts to another form of pressure to change our behavior. Then follows the explanation of why we should be such, because we are to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth – an illustration of what God desires man to be. Ultimately there is only one opinion that counts, the opinion of God. (**Ecclesiastes 12:13-14**) God instructs us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (**Romans 12:2**) as we engross ourselves in a study of His word. (**1 Peter 2:1-3**)