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Exodus 23:1-2, 24, 32-33            “The Problem of Peer Pressure”

Intro. According to a recent (9/10/2007) Barna report, when asked to identify the most significant or challenging issues facing their teenagers, the #1 answer given by parents was peer pressure (42%). This far exceeded any other answer, including performance in school (16%) & substance abuse (16%).

At Maryland's Loyola College, an ethics professor [Vigen Guroian] was lecturing on Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Students were comparing the novel with life in their own freewheeling dorms. The professor pointed out the difference: Promiscuity on campus is voluntary, whereas in *Brave New World*, it's mandatory. After class, a young woman came up to the professor and told him he was wrong. Peer pressure and living arrangements on campus make promiscuity “practically obligatory,” she said. “When it seems like everyone else is ‘doing it,’ it is hard to say no,” she added. “It is more like *Brave New World* here than you think.” Indeed, back in the late 1960s secular colleges gave up separate dorms for men and women, along with stringent rules regarding visitors of the opposite sex. Until then, the separate dorms & rules made it possible for a female student to say “no” and make it stick. While the rules were not always followed, they established the boundaries and norms of acceptable behavior. Today, these boundaries no longer exist, & the peer pressure is incredible.<sup>1</sup>

Peer pressure is nothing new. Even in the time of Moses, God warned of the problem of the negative peer pressure that the Israelites would face as they entered the Promised Land. He forbids giving into peer pressure, and He tells of some steps they should take to minimize peer pressure.

This morning I want to deal with the subject of peer pressure. This problem was bad when I was in High School, but it is worse today. Even kids in grammar school are subjected to negative peer pressure. So I will give some biblical guidelines and solutions to the problem of peer pressure.

Now the first main point I want to share with you is this:

## I. WATCH OUT FOR OUR INCLINATION TO FOLLOW OTHERS

In v.2 God says, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil...” God has created human beings to be social creatures. We want to be a part of a group. We need a family, we need friends, we need to be a part of a larger group like a church family. We also long to identify with a community, a nation. You may consider your college team part of your community. Those who lack a good family network or more likely to go so far as to join a gang.

Now there is nothing wrong with following along with a crowd when they are doing what is good and right. The problem comes when we “follow a crowd to do evil.” That is the main issue we are dealing with today.

Why do we follow the crowd, even if it means doing something wrong? Why do we have a clear tendency to follow the majority? We fear looking foolish, incorrect, odd, or out of step by

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<sup>1</sup> “Dorm Brothels: Is Promiscuity Obligatory?”, *Pulpit Helps*, Nov. 2006, p.15.

taking a position different from that taken by virtually everyone else. We fear facing a tidal wave of ridicule. We don't want to be ostracized, intimidated, or made to feel like the "fifth wheel." The influence of a group can be so powerful that we can be swept along like the rush of waters. And as more people rush along with a crowd, it makes its impulse more difficult to resist.

Of course, this creates the problem of peer pressure. When we're with a group, we tend to follow what others in the group are doing. We tend to talk like the group, dress like the group, and act like the group. Those who join a gang face even stronger pressure to participate in what the gang is doing, even if that means committing a crime. Today we face the pressure to be politically correct, even when it is morally wrong. The House of Representatives just passed legislation that prohibits most employers from discriminating in hiring or firing based on "sexual preference." Christian bookstores could be forced to hire homosexuals if this law is passed.

Another problem is when you have different groups you associate with. Most of us here today associate with a church group. Here you have positive peer pressure to live the way a Christian is to live. But when you go to school or work, you may associate with a different group that is not necessarily Christian. Do you talk, dress, and act differently with that group?

So watch out for our inclination to follow others. That inclination to follow, to fit in, to go with the flow, can lead you down the wrong path. And the greater the numbers that are going a certain direction, the harder it is to resist the flow, and take a different path. So this leads to my next point. We must recognize the fact that:

## II. THE MAJORITY IS OFTEN WRONG

It is clear from v.2 that God warns that the crowd may do wrong. Several Bible translations use the word "majority" here (NRSV, ESV, GNV, NIV, REV). Just because a crowd of people, or even the majority of people, believe or act a certain way, that does not make it right. Likewise, Jesus said in Matthew 7:13, "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it." The old Romans used to say: "The voice of the people is the voice of God." This maxim is far from true. Often the voice of the multitude, the voice of the people, is not the voice of God but the voice of sin, the voice of Satan.<sup>2</sup> Just because the majority say something is right, does not make it so. Why is it that we allow the majority to mold, shape, and influence our lives — whether directly or indirectly?

Especially when it comes to spiritual truth, the majority of the world will be wrong. One reason has to do with the universal sin problem that we have. Our sin nature affects our thinking. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way which seems right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death."

I want to give several examples of the fact that the majority may be very wrong.

A. The Ten Spies – In Numbers 13 we read that 10 of the 12 spies reported their opinion that the cities were too fortified, and the armies of the land too strong, to take the land of the Canaanites. This was in spite of the fact that God promised that He would be with them. Had they so soon forgotten that God had given a mighty victory over Pharaoh & the Egyptian Army? Only Caleb & Joshua had enough faith to report that they should go in and take the land. Well, the people sided with the majority, and they bore the terrible consequences of their decision.

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<sup>2</sup> *Encyclopedia of Sermon Illustrations.*

Even so, when God gives an order, the majority may discourage any action, and point out how “it cannot be done.” What He is asking is simply too hard for any man to accomplish. Are we going to give heed to God, or to the majority?

Another example of the fact that the majority can be very wrong is:

B. The People of the Land – Once Israel finally entered the land of Promise, they would come in contact with the pagan people who worshipped other gods. Idolatry was universally practiced. Everybody was doing it. So God warned them in v.24, “You shall not bow down to their gods, nor serve them, nor do according to their work....” I believe this explains the strange command found in v.19, “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” Canaanite literature from that time people has been discovered that shows that boiling a young goat in its mother’s milk was a pagan ritual (Honeycutt, 412). The essence of pagan worship was providing food for the gods in the form of sacrifices. Just about everyone in that day believed that sacrifices and other pagan rituals would secure the favor of the gods. But we know that the majority were dead wrong. Idols, and the gods they represent, are nothing but the result of demonic influence, and the imagination of men’s hearts.

Another example of the fact that the majority can be very wrong is:

C. The Crowd that Condemned Jesus – The vast majority of the ruling council of the Elders of Israel voted to condemn Jesus to death. The next morning, the enemies of Jesus no doubt called upon their supporters to come out early that morning to pressure Pilate to crucify Jesus. And even among the pilgrims that happened to be present, they stirred them up as well. In fact, Matthew 27:20 says, “But the chief priests and elders persuaded the multitude that they should ask Barabbas, and destroy Jesus.” As a result, they cried out in John 19:15 concerning Jesus, “Away with Him, away with Him, crucify Him...” Then Pilate, who knew that Jesus was innocent, chose to follow the crowd and condemn an innocent man to death.

Look around you today. What is “the voice of the people” saying? It is not in line with the Word of God! In a Barna poll a majority of Americans believed that gambling (61%), cohabitation (60%), and sexual fantasies (59%) were “morally acceptable.”<sup>3</sup> In another recent (Dec. ’03) Barna poll of 18-19 year olds, 54% said that sex outside of marriage was morally acceptable behavior. 55% said that abortion was morally acceptable. 75% said that cohabitation was morally acceptable. 60% said profanity was morally acceptable. 50% said that pornography & drunkenness was morally acceptable. Never in the history of our country has it been so easy to do evil and still be respected. If you want to smoke some dope, cheat or use God’s name in vain, you will not be made to feel guilty by many of your peers because many of them will be doing the same thing! We need to be careful about being influenced by public opinion polls. The majority is often very wrong when it comes to morality and spiritual truth.

Since the crowd is often wrong, my third main point is this:

### III. FOLLOW GOD, NOT THE CROWD

God is the One we should follow. He is the One who determines what is right and wrong. The majority often rules in politics, but God is the One who rules the Universe. He is the One who determines what is evil. If He says in His Word that something is evil, then we should not follow after evil, even if everyone else is doing so.

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<sup>3</sup> From <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=152&Reference=A>

This means that we all need to be spiritually prepared to stand alone if need be and give voice to what is right (Acts 7). For some of you, you may be the only person in the company willing to confront the evil of an abusive boss, or challenge the ethics of your company. In fact, Lev. 19:17 says, “You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him.”

In our everyday lives, do we adhere to what the crowds are declaring, or are we truly following Jesus wherever He leads? Many times Jesus said, “Follow Me” (Mt. 4:19; 8:22; 19:21; etc.). He said in Matthew 10:38, “And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me.” Are you following Jesus, or the worldly crowd? Have we been listening to what the world has to say rather than what God says?

Now the specific application of this principle that is given in the context has to do with carrying out justice properly & honestly. In v.1 God says, “You shall not circulate a false report. Do not put your hand with the wicked to be an unrighteous witness.” Because the law so strictly honored the testimony of two witnesses (Deut 17:6; 19:5; Num 35:30) against anyone accused of a crime, absolute honesty in giving testimony was essential to the correct functioning of the legal system. Yet if two people could agree to falsify their testimony against someone whom they wished to harm, it would be highly probable that an innocent person would be punished for something he or she did not in fact do. We have already seen an example of this in the trial and condemnation of Jesus. The problem is especially serious when a whole crowd<sup>4</sup> is behind a miscarriage of justice, as v.2 may be saying. Who wants to be the odd man out and look foolish holding up the wheels of justice by taking a fresh and impartial look at the evidence? It can be extremely difficult to take a stance in an emotionally charged situation or legal case against the majority in favor of a person or cause that has few advocates. During the French Revolution mob rule led to quite a few unjust executions. On the other hand, sometimes people falsify their testimony to get a wicked man released. Indeed, in this context the “wicked” person refers to a person who is guilty of a crime. And v.3 warns against failing to carry out justice because a man is poor. Justice can never be served if witnesses give in to social pressure and simply sides with the majority. God's people are called upon to do what is right, not what *feels* right.

How many of you have seen the 1957 Henry Fonda Film, *12 Angry Men*? It is the gripping, penetrating, and engrossing examination of a diverse group of twelve white men who are uncomfortably brought together to deliberate in a seemingly open-and-shut murder trial case. They retire to a jury room to do their civic duty and serve up a just verdict for the teenaged Puerto Rican defendant with a criminal record, who was accused killing his father with a switchblade knife. His life is in the balance. The jury was locked into a small, claustrophobic rectangular room on a stifling hot summer day until they come up with a unanimous decision - either guilty or not guilty. After the first vote was taken, it was 11 to 1. The others put great pressure on him to vote guilty, and go along with the others, but the one juror had what he considered reasonable doubt. So persistently and persuasively, he forces the other men to slowly reconsider and review the shaky case (and eyewitness testimony) against the endangered defendant. Heated discussions, the formation of alliances, the frequent re-evaluation and changing of opinions, and angry outbursts fill the jury room. The story illustrates our responsibility not to be swayed by the majority, especially in matter of justice, and right and wrong.

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<sup>4</sup> The word translated “crowd” (*rabbim*, plural of *rab*) can refer to the great ones of society. It is translated “captain” 24 times, & “mighty” 5 times (out of over 450 total occurrences). In this case, the sense would be, “Do not join with great men in condemning an innocent person, or by excusing a guilty person.” The mighty ones of v.2 may be in contrast with the “poor” in v.3.

Another example of the context calling upon Israel to follow God, rather than the majority, is found in vv.24, and 32-33. As I have mentioned, all the Canaanites worshipped idols. So the Israelites would be tempted to worship local Canaanite deities as well. The Canaanites believed that their gods caused the crops to grow and the flocks and herds to multiply. Thus, they wanted to worship them. When Israel would arrive in the Promised Land, the temptation to worship as the Canaanites worshiped would be almost irresistible since farming & worship of the local deities were thought to go together. But that must resist that temptation, and be faithful to worship only the one true God.

Even so, we need to resist peer pressure, and choose to follow God, regardless of how few there are who follow God with you.

#### IV. PRACTICE BIBLICAL SEPARATION

In v.28 God said, “And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivite, the Canaanite, and the Hittite from before you.” In vv.31-32 God said, “And I will set your bounds from the Red Sea to the sea, Philistia, and from the desert to the River. For I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against Me. For if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.” God had ordered that the ungodly Canaanite people be driven out or destroyed for at least two purposes. First, to execute judgment on a people who were very evil and depraved (Gen. 15:16). They were incurable idolaters, and the cup of their iniquity was full. Second, the pagan peoples were to be destroyed or driven away to eliminate their influence, to keep them from being a source of temptation. He knew that if the Israelites mixed with the people of the land they would tend to follow their pagan practices. In the last of v.24 we see that they were even to destroy any remaining images and reminders of pagan worship, including the sacred stones. However, this task would be difficult, so God said in vv.29-30 that He would help Israel drive them out “little by little.” Furthermore, because of the difficulty, the Israelites would be tempted to compromise, and make treaties with the native peoples. So God said in v.31, “You shall make no covenant with them, nor with their gods.” Had the Israelites contracted any alliance with them, either sacred or civil, they would have enticed them into their idolatries.

The Bible teaches separation elsewhere. Back in Exodus 19:6 God said, “And you shall be ... a holy nation.” They were to separate themselves from sin, and unto God. Psalm 1:1 says, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful.” In 2 Cor. 6:17 Paul quoted the Old Testament saying, “Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you” (from Isa. 52:11).

When someone has a contagious illness, we practice separation, don't we, especially if our immune system is weak? Even so, we need to separate ourselves from those who are spiritually sick, unless we are seeking to reach the lost.

Sadly, Israel did not heed God's warnings and eliminate idolatry from their land (Judges 2:10-23). They were influenced by the practices of the pagan peoples. They followed their example and became idolaters themselves. And they suffered for their sin.

Let's learn from Israel's mistake, and take steps to separate ourselves from the sinful influences of the world. One way we keep ourselves morally clean is by separating ourselves from closely associating with unbelievers. Young people, if you date an unbeliever, you are setting yourself up for pressure and temptation to sin. We need to be prepared to separate

ourselves from associating with unbelievers when we know in advance that we will be faced with temptation in a social setting, such as going to a party where alcohol, drugs, & immorality will be practiced. And we need to stop allowing the world's ungodly influence to come right into our homes through television and other media. If your children watch TV without supervision & control, they will be much more likely to pick up a bad, disrespectful attitude. They will be much more likely to use profanity, take drugs, drink alcohol, and engage in immorality.

Folks, I believe the day has come when Christian parents should consider pulling your children out of public schools. The established religion of secular schools is atheism and tolerance. We can't even acknowledge God through prayer at graduations and football games anymore. We have cast aside any reasonable basis for making moral decisions. And the result of this 40+ year social experiment is terrible. The majority of public school H.S. students use vile profanity, drink alcohol, and engage in sexual immorality, fueled by frequent access to pornography on the Internet. And if you need any more evidence, just compare the typical home schooled child with the typical public school child. The difference is obvious.

So if you want to please God and resist the temptations of this world, you need to put some distance between you and temptation.

I remember the story of a little boy who wanted to buy a baseball bat really badly. He had been saving his pennies, nickels, and dimes. One night his mother was walking by his room and she heard him praying, "Lord, please help me save my money for a baseball bat. And, God, don't let the ice cream truck come by on my street any more!"<sup>5</sup>

However, we do need to make sure we are practicing *biblical* separation. In other words, we are not to take that to an extreme, especially for spiritually mature youth & adults. We have no New Testament authority to do what the Israelites did, and drive unbelievers out of our land by force! However, one reason we put criminals in jail is to eliminate their bad influence on society. Furthermore, biblical separation does not mean to totally isolate ourselves from unbelievers. Jesus said in John 17:15, "I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one." He said that we are to be the "salt of the earth" and the "light of the world" (Mt. 5). We must have enough contact with unbelievers to be a positive influence on them. Jesus even went so far as to interact socially with people who had a reputation for being sinners. So I do not believe that Christian adults need to pull out of the public school. I even believe that spiritually mature Christian youth can have a positive witness in the public school. In fact, students have more free speech rights to share their faith than Christian employees. So don't take the doctrine of separation to an extreme. Don't isolate ourselves from having contact with unbelievers. Be salt & light in this world.

Though we need to separate ourselves from the world's influences, we need to join ourselves to the positive influences of God's people. Against the dangerous influence of the world, Christ has established His Church as a refuge of positive influence. We all need a social network. We need friends. It's hard to stand alone. So I call upon every believer to join a church, and get involved with a network of likeminded believers. Get involved in a small group Bible study, church as Sunday School.

Conclusion: Don't let yourself or your children be the next victims of peer pressure. Recognize our natural tendency to follow others. Don't be swayed by what the majority of people are doing. I call upon you to follow Christ, even if it means standing alone at times. Separate yourselves

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<sup>5</sup> Paul Lee Tan, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: #6523* (Rockville, Maryland: Assurance Publishers, 1979) [Illus.#C-1604].

from the ungodly practices & influences of unbelievers, and be highly involved in a group of believers.

If you are not yet a Christian, I call upon you to choose Christ over sin and the world. Turn from your sin. Trust in Christ as your Savior. Follow him in baptism. And if you are already a baptized believer, but not a member here, this is a good Sunday for you to make a commitment to unite with this church family. You need the positive influence of a church family.

Sources: Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Bible Commentary* (accessed from *Online Bible*), completed by 1832; Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Roy L. Honeycutt, Jr., *The Broadman Bible Commentary: Genesis-Exodus*, Vol. 1 (Nashville: Broadman, 1969); C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Brian Morgan (notes from his sermon on Exodus 23:1-9 from [pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/1497.pdf](http://pbcc.org/sermons/morgan/1497.pdf)); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Douglas K. Stuart, *New American Commentary: Exodus* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).