How much time and energy do we spend worrying about what others think of us? How many times do we obsess over whether what we are wearing that day will pass muster as folks check us out? How much focus do we place trying to keep up with the latest opinion poll about us, (measured by the number of “likes” by our Facebook friends, the number of parties to which we are invited, or the number of people who remark on our latest accomplishment?) It can be all-consuming—this continual chasing of public favor, and avoiding the judgments of our peers, can’t it? Worrying about who might be gossiping about us, or what are they saying now, or whether we are good enough in the eyes of the harsh and fickle judges all around us—it’s just exhausting emotional work, and it exhausts our spirit too. The hard truth is that… in this highly connected, networked, LinkedIn world of ours, given how quickly communication spreads around, and how quickly our popularity can rise or fall in the social media world, it
is very difficult to break free of the grip of this monster. So, is there an antidote to this poisonous obsession with public approval? If so, what is it? Saint Paul’s letter to the Church at Corinth, offers us a cure.

First, Paul was writing to a church he established some years earlier. It was his custom, after planting the church and training their leaders, Paul moved on to the next city. But after Paul left Corinth, there began to be dissension in the community, … thus his letter. We just hear one side of a conversation, but we can tell what was happening in the church. There was moral failure by some leaders, there was theological confusion due to false teaching, and he addresses these problems directly in his letters to the church.

But before addressing the moral and theological issues in the Corinthian church, Paul addresses a bigger problem that has come to his attention. Within the Corinthian church there was division
over which church leader the people wanted to follow, and the
popularity contest had become so intense that folks were lining up
behind their candidate, forming cliques and factions at odds with
each other. Of course, all of this internal dissension was causing
the church to lose sight of the big picture… they were all in the
same church, no matter which leader they personally favored.

Some in the church, perhaps original members dating back to
Paul’s establishment of the congregation, were loyalty to Paul.

Others preferred the eloquent new teacher, Apollos. Others
thought they should be loyal to Saint Peter, since he was the leader
of the original Apostles in Jerusalem. And others, (trying to sound
more spiritual than everybody else!) said they would not follow
any human leader, and would follow Christ only. Paul argues
persuasively that Christ and His Church are not divided, and must
not be. Leaders come and go, each with their own unique gifts and
contribution. The point of each, (and collectively all), is to build
up the body of Christ. We are to accept each leader God calls, and
support each one, and not punish them by unfair comparisons to some former, or longed for, pastor.

But then Paul moves to a more personal level. Obviously some of the dissension in the Corinthian Church had involved some personal attacks on his own character and reputation. Like a dirty political campaign in this country, advocates for another leader in the church often made their points by trying to cast doubt, or throw dirt, at the competition. **Now**… we begin to relate to Paul’s predicament, and his feelings. How did Paul deal with the emotional toll of these personal verbal attacks from within a church he had founded, and for whom he had poured himself out? Did it sting him? It must have, otherwise he would not have taken this much time to address the problem. But his response is a valuable lesson for us, especially when we have been criticized, ridiculed, bullied, or judged by others.
Paul observes that there are three levels of judgment we all face, three courts before which we will all appear at one time or another in our lives. The **first level of judgment we must face is from other people**, whether it is the court of public opinion, or the official court of the state—it is the judgment others render upon us. We cannot avoid or control the judgment of others, but we can decide how much **power** to grant that judgment. Paul has certainly been harshly accused by some members of the Corinthian church, but his reply is to remind them, (as he reminds himself!), that his ultimate loyalty and identity is tied to his calling **from God**, and his life mission **for God**. He will not accept the lure of getting drawn into the obsession of public approval, no matter how much that popularity is attractive, and equally so, he will not get drawn into the obsession of public disapproval either. He realizes that this obsession usually twirls around petty details anyway, and he has much more important things to accomplish in life.
The second level of judgment we all face is self-judgment.

Just as with the court of public opinion, a wise person does not totally discount the insight that only another can give, or the insight that can arise from within our minds when we honestly look at ourselves in the mirror. Paul discounts the power of self-judgment too, knowing that we are all tempted to twist reality to suit our own interest, editing facts through the screen of our emotions and needs. When we are the judge, jury, and defendant, it is easy to pass a judgment giving us a false sense of innocence when in fact we do have some guilt, or a false sense of guilt, as we wallow in exaggerated and prolonged self-condemnation when others also share the blame.

The third level of judgment we will all face is the judgment before God Himself. Paul reminds his readers, and himself, that it is this Divine court that holds the final say over us all. Only God knows the secrets of the heart, the intent behind the actions, and the total evidence about each of us. No human judge,
and no personal self-assessment, is as thorough...as searching in its knowledge, and as wise in its judgments, as God. So, because only God’s judgment is truly accurate, and truly lasting, Paul keeps his focus on pleasing God, and when he does the power of popular judgment, and self-judgment, fall away. It is as if Paul is saying to us, “Do not waste all your energy arguing in a lower court battle, when the higher court is all that really matters in the end anyway.”

Abraham Lincoln once remarked,

“If the end brings me out all right, what is said against me won't amount to anything.

If the end brings me out wrong, then ten angels, swearing I was right would make no difference.”

To that I simply say: Amen.