

Tired of being evaluated

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Does it seem like people are always evaluating you, like people are always judging whether you're a failure or a success? I think a lot of what the way I act day to day, is because I know people are constantly evaluating me. I hate be evaluated as a failure. But I don't really like being judged a success either all the time. For one thing, if you're a success it just means that people start expecting you to be successful. Take Jesus for example. For all we know, he didn't do anything remarkable for the first 30 years of his life, other than being an exceptional Bible student. (I'm not counting being born of a virgin as something Jesus "did"). Then at about age 30 he starts having some big successes, and life gets a lot harder on him, as we will explore in these Bible episodes from the Gospel of Luke. We all know that failure can be hard. And Jesus's experience reminds us that success can be hard too. Evaluation is a pain no matter which way it comes out. No wonder I'm tired of being evaluated.

I'm bringing this to your attention because I'm guessing that by now you've experienced either failure or success, or both. Part of being powered by God for life should be having God's power to help you handle failure, and to handle success. And I want to walk carefully with Jesus through these episodes to see if that can help you and me get God's power for success and failure.

The first episode today is when Jesus gave his first sermon in the synagogue. It was immediately after he sensed God's call to become a preacher, teacher, and healer, got baptized, and faced Satan's temptation to misuse his abilities. In other words, this was Jesus's inaugural address. He was in his own home synagogue. He chose to read from the book of Isaiah the prophet, the part about "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach good news to the poor...." And it was a big success. "All who were there spoke well of him and were amazed by the gracious words that fell from his lips." Trust me, when you give your first sermon, and you choose a good Bible passage everyone loves, and your mom and cousins, and the neighbors are all there, and your Sunday school teachers, they're going to love it. You should try it some time, if you haven't already.



Or maybe you've had your own first success. High school play. Hockey team. First in your family to graduate from college or get a Ph. D. Good first job. IPO. When you have your first success among your own family, your own friends, it feels great.

Except.

Except that people start expecting you to be successful. Soon success becomes more of a problem than an opportunity. Do not make the dean's list this semester if you're not sure you can make it next semester! Worse still, even if you keep succeeding, some of your friends and family don't actually want you to succeed too much. Makes them look bad. New Englanders are highly skilled at demanding you be successful, but disdaining you if you appear too successful. That's why the old Boston Brahmins were famous for driving around in patched up 1973 Diesel Rabbits. And Nazarenes were just the same, it appears. Jesus can't even sit down before some of his friends and family start turning against him. "Great sermon," they say, "but how come you didn't do miracles like you did over in Capernaum?" These people are never satisfied. One success, and they're on his case for what he *hasn't* accomplished., and the next minute they're trying to push him off a cliff. (Remember that just prior to this, the devil tried tempting Jesus to jump off a cliff, which he refused, and now his own friends are trying to do it for him. If your temptations are aren't hard enough on their own, you can always count on your friends to make them even harder. Am I right? But that's another talk)

OK, so if Jesus does succeed, his friends say "who does he think he is?" And if he doesn't succeed his friends try to push him off a cliff. Maybe the problem is that Jesus needs better friends. I mean *your* friends wouldn't treat you like that, right? If you are successful, your friends are really happy for you, right, especially your work friends, when you're successful at work? And your romantic friends are happy for you when you're successful in romance. If you totally embarrass yourself, your friends stay by your side and absorb some of the shame for you. If your friends buy a mansion in Weston, and you still live in an apartment in Allston, they will still invite you to parties with their Weston friends, and they'll still come to your Allston parties.

I suppose it's hard to know how true your friends are until the chips are down. Probably your friends are better than Jesus's friends, relatives and neighbors in the synagogue. But if you're counting on your friends' evaluation of you to get you through the tough times, I hope you have incredibly good friends. Here's how to tell: would you tell your friends the deepest, darkest secrets about yourself? *Have* you told them their your deepest darkest secrets? Why or why not? How would they react if you did?

This is probably a good time to acknowledge that one reason a lot of people stay away from church, is that they feel judged by church people. People outside of church, don't think people in church are very friendly. It broke my heart last week when Tara told us that her Christian friends made things worse for her after her husband and her first baby died. Her Christian friends were full of judgments: God had a good reason for letting your husband die; God took your baby because God knows how hard it is for a single mother to find a new husband; God is using this to bring you to Jesus, etc., etc.. They weren't trying to condemn Tara, but they sure were judging things. Ugh, who would want friends like that? Thank God for Tara's non-Christian friends, who had the sense to just weep with her and keep their judgments to themselves.



Anyway, part of Jesus's problem in this episode is that all his friends are religious friends. It's no accident that they turn against him in the synagogue, the religious house. And he runs into even more religious people in the next two episodes we read. First he heals someone of leprosy, and tells him to go to the religious leaders and give thanks to God.

I guess this brings up the question of whether Jesus really had the power to miraculously cure people. I don't have enough time today to talk about that AND talk about being tired of being evaluated, so I'm going to stick with being evaluated. But I acknowledge the healing question is a good one, and if you want me to talk about that some time, please write that down on a comment card, and put it in the offering basket during communion later, and I'll use that to help choose future talk series.

Anyway, for now, Jesus must have done something for the man with leprosy, and he must have gone to the religious leaders like Jesus told him to, because in the next episode the religious leaders come to see these healings for themselves, and they don't like what they see. Jesus is healing someone they don't think is worthy of God's healing. (That's what all the stuff about sin and healing is about.) Seems like religious people want to define — judge — who's in God's good graces and who's out. Can I get an amen if I say we beg God that before we at Charles River Church judge anyone about anything, we will first welcome them, love them, serve them, respect them? Can I get an amen? God help us if we ever forget that. Jesus said, "Judge not, and you will not be judged" (Luke 6:37).

Well, let's assume that *we* are perfect, that *we* don't judge other people. It's our friends evaluating us that this talk is about. How do you avoid being evaluated by your friends, not to mention your relatives, neighbors, co-workers, bosses, professors, IRS auditors, and churchy people? You can't. You can't avoid being evaluated, no matter how tired of it you are. If you have good friends, competent professors, compassionate bosses, church friends who actually live by Jesus's words, then you might have gentler judgments, fairer evaluations, but you can't avoid being evaluated.

Now instead of paying attention to other people's evaluations, you could chose to be evaluated by yourself. But that's a bad idea. Other people can make you feel bad about yourself. But nobody except you can drive you into deep despair about yourself. And even if you judge yourself as good, do you really get any pleasure from that? No! The Apostle Paul — he was an early follower of Jesus who started lots of churches, and then got in arguments with most of them — got it right when he said, "I'm not going to be evaluated by you, and I'm certainly not going to be evaluated by myself." Self help is no help.



As for me, it matters very little how I might be evaluated by you or by any human authority. I don't even trust my own judgment on this point. My conscience is clear, but that doesn't prove I'm right.

1 Corinthians 4:3-4

OK, how about choosing not to be evaluated at all? You could just say, I'm going to do what I'm going to do, and I don't care what anyone thinks. Bad idea. There is a good reason for evaluation. Evaluation gives you the information you need to get from where you are to where you want to be. So unless you are already where you want to be, you need to be evaluated. Yet if you are already where you want to be, how do you *know* that? Because you have already evaluated yourself, and your satisfied with your grade. You can't escape being evaluated. It's just a question of who you want to be evaluated by.

You could always choose to be evaluated by God. That's what I'm going to recommend (of course). What if you made God's evaluation the only evaluation you really pay attention to?

First, I'd better give the downside. The downside of being evaluated by God is that God is the mother of all strict graders. You think you're tired of being evaluated by people? You have not been flunked until you have been flunked by God. And you will flunk. God does not grade on a curve. God does not care if the dog ate your homework.

God does not lower God's standards because you are a nice guy. You cannot pull the wool over God's eyes the way you can pull the wool over your own eyes. If you are graded by God, you will receive an F.

Why? Because God hates bad stuff. God hates lies. Have you ever told one? God hates it when someone uses their power to grab something from someone else. Ever done that? God hates gossip (that's when you say anything about someone behind their back, that you wouldn't say to their face). God hates it when bad things happen to anyone. Hates it, hates it, hates it. And if God didn't hate all that stuff, I wouldn't want anything to do with that god. Who would want to follow a God who was *sternly disappointed* by death, lies, cheating, hurting people? I want a God who *hates* that guano. A God who wants to make it stop.

That means me. I've done that stuff. Not all of it. Not as bad some people I could think of. But enough that I wouldn't want heaven to be run by people like me. When God is in charge of making the world be like it ought to be, I want God to do better than me. If you want to be evaluated by God, you're going to flunk. Otherwise why bother?

But here's where God is different from your friends. Your friends give you an A, but treat you like an F. God gives you an F, but treats you like an A. God gives you an F, but treats you like an A. God gives you an F, but invites you into God's kingdom like an A, anyway. God loves you like an A, anyway. And the reason God treats you like an A is that God made you, and God knows you are capable of being an A. God made you. God made you good. God knows you are capable of getting an A even in God's toughest course.

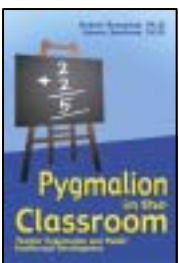
Nobody else really knows you. Your friends give you an A because they don't really believe you're capable of more than what they see, and they don't want to hurt your feelings. Or maybe your friends give you an A because they don't think *they* are capable of more than what *you* see, and they don't want *you* to hurt *their* feelings.

When I say God gives you an F but treats you like an A, I'm talking about Jesus. When God writes your report card, instead of putting in the F that you earned, God puts in the A Jesus earned. It's like hiring a stand-in for the SAT, but legal! Now, since Jesus was God in human form, it's no surprise he got everything right. But the point is, Jesus was God *in human form*, and if Jesus got an A, that means it's possible for humans to get an A. Jesus could live as God intended, and by God's grace, and training, and discipline, you can live as God intended too. You can be what God created you to be. Hey, that's why this is called Good News. And God is so confident of that, that while you're not yet perfect, God just substitutes Jesus' grade for yours on your report card., IF you ask him to. You have to ask God to let Jesus stand for you. You have the right to get your own grade on your report card, if you want, and God is not going to substitute Jesus's grade if you don't want him to.



Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye.
1 Corinthians 15:51-52

Now there's one other crucial difference between your friends' evaluation and God's. Your friends' evaluation keeps you from improving, but God's evaluation helps you improve. If your friends are giving you "gentlemen's A's" how does that help you get better? How can you tell where you need to improve? But if God evaluates you by the standard of perfection, you can see precisely where your shortcomings are. That's how you grow. But you don't have to take my religious word on this, you can take the research of Robert Rosenthal, a Harvard University professor, and Lenore Jacobson, a San Francisco elementary school principal. Their research showed that when teachers have high expectations of students, students have high achievement, and when teacher have low expectations, students have low achievement. God has the highest expectations of you! Praise God. God believes in you. And that is so much more important than whether you believe in God.



So what can you do about this in real life? Simple. Choose wisely whose expectations to pay attention to, and whose to ignore. This can actually change your life.

If you're a student, lots of people have expectations of you. Your parents, your friends, your classmates, your professors, your advisor. The worst thing would be to try to meet everyone's expectations. That would drive you insane. Yet that's what lots of people try to do, try to meet everyone's expectations. When I was an undergraduate, my fraternity always tried to have the highest GPA on campus. We didn't always make it, but we always tried. One year we had a problem. There were six guys in the fraternity that year whose main goal was to get high every day. They were actually growing their own marijuana plants so they had a steady supply. I hated those guys, or at least I hated what they were doing to our GPA. But I'll give them this, they knew whose expectations they were trying to meet

and whose they weren't. They weren't trying to meet mine. The people I really feel sorry for were the ones who tried to get good grades and party every night. They were trying to look smart and cool, but they just ended up looking desperate and stupid. If you're a student, I advise you to pay attention to the expectation that you will use what you are learning to make the world a better place. That's better than paying attention to expectations about how good your grades are. And it's much better than paying attention to how much partying you can get in. But whatever you do, make a choice!

If you work, lots of people have expectations of you. Your boss may expect you to work long hours. Your spouse may expect you to be home for dinner. Your friends may expect you to earn enough to drive the right kind of car, or you may think they do. You can't meet all those expectations. My advice is to meet only the expectations that help you accomplish whatever you got into this job for in the first place. If you got into this job because you love the work, don't start loving the status so much that you become afraid to enjoy the work itself. If it was because you need the money in order to live outside, don't let trying to earn more money keep you away from really living for outside. If it was because you want to be the boss, then spend some time every day practicing being the kind of boss you want to be when you make it to the corner office. If you want to see a great play about changing whose expectations to meet so that you can do the kind of job that's really important to you, go see Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Or how about family? Everyone in your family has expectations about you, and they're not all mutually compatible. Choose wisely whose expectations to meet. If your mother and your boyfriend or girlfriend have different expectations of you, choose whose you're going to meet. Whoever loses might even respect you for telling them that straight out. My father-in-law used to give me very detailed advice about fixing my car, and he'd stand around watching me to make sure I took his advice. One day I decided to do it my own way, and I said to him, "It's not that I don't hear what you're saying, it's just that I'm ignoring you." After that, we became great friends.

In the Bible episodes today, I found specific expectations of Jesus from six sources: his friends and neighbors in the synagogue, the man who had leprosy, the religious leaders, the crowds who came to hear him preach, the men who brought their paralyzed friend to Jesus, and God. Take a look at these episodes at home, and wonder about whose expectations Jesus chose to meet, and whose he didn't.

Now here's why you need Jesus: because you can't trust yourself to decide whose expectations to meet and whose to ignore. If you're anything like me, you're already so tangled up in the web of expectations that you can't get free to choose wisely which ones to pay attention to and which ones to forget about. But following Jesus puts you on a firm path. It gives you a direction so you can know which other directions to ignore. I'll give you one example. Jesus said "Simply let your "yes" be yes, and your "no", no; anything beyond this comes from the evil one" (Matthew 5:37). In other words, simply say things the way they are, anything else is wrong. If Bernard Ebbers, former CEO of WorldCom, who is a Christian, had chosen to issue financial statements that met Jesus's expectations, statements that simply showed the company's financial condition the way it really was, he would not have been reporting to prison last Tuesday for a 25-year sentence for securities fraud.



Following Jesus is the way to have confidence in the choices you make about whose expectations to meet and whose to ignore. A lot of the art of following Jesus comes from learning what's in the Bible, and learning how to apply to your life. I hope the talks here help you do that, and even more, I hope that soon we will have enough people to create groups that apply the Christian faith to specific kinds of work, such as students, parents, business people, teachers, all the occupations people engage in day to day. Prayer is another way to follow Jesus with confidence. If you have any question you'd like to ask God for help with, come to me and I will pray to God with you. Or pray on your own or with someone else. It's not a one shot deal, but staying in communication with God helps you go where God is leading you. Or here's one really simple idea: whenever you feel stressed this week, pause just long enough to ask, whose expectations am I trying to meet, and why? Why?

Questions

1. Would you rather be evaluated by God or by your friends? Write down pros and cons for each.
2. Pick one area of life to think about. List everyone whose expectations you are trying to meet.
3. Can following Jesus give you confidence about which specific expectations to meet or ignore?