

CHOOSING YOUR AUDIENCE

“They loved the praise of other humans more than the praise of God.” What a weird, sad thing that is. Even sadder, I have no trouble at all knowing exactly what that means. This is no obscure theory that may or may not be true. I have spent great gobs of time and energy trying to please other humans, instead of trying to please God.

Certainly my prayers often direct me to concern and love for other humans. It is a wonderful thing when God invites us to share in his love for others. But that’s not the same. That’s not at all like when I try to curry the favor or approval of others without any thought for God, without even thinking about God’s plans or purposes.

This passage is directed to Jesus’ disciples in an immediate situation two thousand years ago. Jesus was about to leave them, as He was being drawn into the politics, cruelty, jealousy, and animosity of this world. He was their light, and He was going away. The story would have ended there and then ... except for Pentecost – except for the return of the Holy Spirit.

So this passage is for me too, and for you as well. The light is with us when we contemplate the New Testament record of His time here. It is with us even more when we encounter His Holy Spirit seeking and guiding us still. But the light gets dimmer and dimmer when we “go away” – when we turn away from Him – neglecting our prayers, our study, our gratitude, our allegiance. *“Do this in remembrance of me.”* We do not always choose to remember; it gets in “our way.” But it is still true: When we walk in darkness, we do not know where we are going, or why. Soon we see only our own problems, passions, desires, mistakes, immediate needs and goals. We walk in darkness until we turn back to Him. He is our light.

Shakespeare said, *“All the world’s a stage, and we but players on it.”* Well, actually, in a play called *As You Like It*, in Act II, Scene VII, Duke Senior comments:

*Thou seest we are not all alone unhappy.
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.*

And Jaques replies:

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts*

I have mentioned from time to time that this world – this place we find ourselves in – is boot camp, or at the very least a classroom. Shakespeare says, more colorfully, that it is a stage, and we are all actors playing our parts. Shakespeare loved this metaphor and used it many times. In *The Merchant of Venice*, for instance (Act I, Scene I), Antonio says:

*I hold the world but as the world, Gratiano;
A stage where every man must play a part,
And mine a sad one.*

Then, in one of Shakespeare's delightful odes to life, Gratiano scolds Antonio for being an old stick-in-the-mud. Gratiano figures that if this is a play, at least he is going to pick his own part:

*Let me play the fool:
With mirth and laughter let old wrinkles come,
And let my liver rather heat with wine
Than my heart cool with mortifying groans.
Why should a man, whose blood is warm within,
Sit like his grandsire cut in alabaster?
Sleep when he wakes and creep into the jaundice
By being peevish?*

(I think they say his grandsire was a Congregationalist.)

And from *King Lear* (Act IV, Scene VI):

*When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.*

And of course, every depressed person's favorite, *Macbeth* (Act V, Scene V):

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*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

In any case, this metaphor has rung with fascination for many people ever since. What is the purpose of the drama? Is God the audience, or the Director, or merely a distant Producer? Who actually writes the script – does God, or do we? Do we have any say in the outcome of the play? Do we get to choose our roles, or is that predetermined? Strange, don't you think, that so many people hate theories of predestination, yet at the same time love theories of "universal salvation"? Aren't those two ends of the same spectrum, two sides of the same coin? (You get damned and there is nothing you can do about it, or you get saved and there is nothing you can do about it.)

Some people think the quality of the play going on here is excellent, while others suspect it's mostly a cheap soap opera. But in some way, we can all identify with Shakespeare's metaphor. Every morning the curtain goes up again, and we each act out another scene in whatever play we find ourselves in. Acting and interacting, we fill the stage with plots and subplots and counterplots – with the drama of life as we understand it. Despite all that we bring and all that we take, and despite all the changes we try to make, none of us feel like we are in total control. Often we think the drama would be fine if we could just get a little *more* control. Nevertheless, the meaning and content of the drama seem to be pretty much according to what we make of it. Or as Shakespeare said, "As you like it."

On a quiet day, sitting alone on a hill somewhere, we can wonder about a culture that has us all thinking we are brave, stubborn, and wonderfully unique individualists, especially when it's so clear that we all follow the herd in mindless ways on so many occasions. What percentage of a normal day are we really awake and being ourselves? How would we know how to shop, if we didn't know what everybody else wants? The network of social control, pressure, and coercion is insidious and intricate. We can each look back and see that our personal histories have been shaped by outside control. We have lived, behaved, and made our choices according to what was expected of us (by parents, teachers, friends, bosses, organizations). We did what made us comfortable and acceptable. And had we not, for the most part we would be far worse off

today. Yet even if they were good choices, it doesn't always feel like *we* made them. They were made for us. Do we have any values of our own?

A good choice made from fear of the displeasure or disapproval of others – is that really a *good* choice? Is it not merely expedient? The day comes for some people when that is no longer enough. The good choice must be made for the genuine love of the goodness itself, even if it brings disapproval. And then we begin to wonder if there is enough goodness within us to motivate us on such a level. Can we ever truly be “individual”? Or is the very definition of “goodness” merely that which pleases most of the people most of the time? In other words, we start to question the whole stage, and the meaning of the play we find ourselves in. That means we are beginning to awaken spiritually. We are starting to ask religious questions. We may even be in danger of becoming religious. How interesting when herd animals – or, more accurately, communal primates – try to become religious. We become religious when we begin to suspect the *presence* of a deity both greater and truer than we are.

The notion of individual freedom comes straight from faith in God's personal caring. Until God starts “calling us out,” we are completely communal. We do whatever the group says or whatever we think will most please whatever group we belong to. We do not start out like Tarzan and then get tamed by encroaching civilization. We start out as part of a tribe, helpless infants dependent on the nurture of “mother” and those who support her. Individuality comes, if it comes at all, as we become aware of God.

Even to this day, the only true freedom is the freedom to choose what or whom we will serve. If we serve nothing, we are not free; we are merely useless. Our culture frequently confuses freedom with being meaningless and aimless. Our forebears, at least in Congregationalism, dreamed of being able to choose what they would spend their time and life and energy to serve. That is what *they* called freedom. There is no such thing as freedom *from*. There is only freedom *for*.

We are, by nature, communal creatures. It is the soul within – the spiritual nature – that seeks individuality and calls us to personal identity. (When God calls us by name, we are no longer able to simply run with the herd.) Sometimes (always for a while) we try to use our new freedom for ourselves alone (pride = playing God instead of worshipping God). But if we keep growing and learn obedience, God leads us into

higher community. We often use the word “love” as the operative principle for that. And then we live, or at least *want* to live, and act out of our love for God and God’s other children because we feel and want the good, not out of fear or because others control us.

Nevertheless, we never escape our human nature easily. Almost everything we ever do is done for the effect it will have on others.

Sometimes I like to think of myself as a free and independent person – a person who thinks for himself, and tries to do what’s right and believe what’s true regardless of who likes it or what comes of it. So it is disturbing to realize that I was created in such a way that, no matter what I do, I cannot escape being primarily concerned about its impact on others. If all the world’s a stage, then what about the audience? Think about that with me for a few minutes, will you? With minor exceptions, everything we do is done for an audience. An audience is not always present, but we are always playing to some audience, real or imagined. If the audience is imagined, we are nevertheless practicing for the time when we will do this same thing before a real audience, whether that audience will be one other person or thousands of people.

Now, I am not talking about the egomaniacs in some other churches. I am not talking about the extroverts, the Leo-types, or the gregarious performers we all know. I am saying that every single one of us is playing to an audience of some kind, in nearly every waking moment of our lives. This phenomenon is so familiar and habitual that most of the time we even forget that it is going on. But the reality is there, and the effect upon us is beyond description.

Picture the most antisocial, ivory-tower researcher you can imagine. This person doesn’t see anyone for weeks at a time, and then only to get more food and go back into hiding. But why is he studying ancient documents and writing down all he finds? No matter what he says, he dreams that someday it will be published, and that many will wonder in amazement at its content and realize the value of his labor. If there were no means of writing it down and no hope whatsoever of the information ever coming to light, the research would stop. No matter how indirectly or subconsciously, this researcher is still working for his audience.

We do not train or discipline our bodies or minds or lives for ourselves alone. We are always imagining some audience. And that audience affects the way we do everything that we ever do.

Someday, when I get time, I'm going to write a story about pro football. The story will tell of a time when our world is invaded by a vastly superior species of sentient beings. Having demonstrated their power, and having tried in vain to gift us with a little of their wisdom, they turn everything back over to us and depart. Only, they leave us with one calling card, one item to remember them by: They fix it so that no one can ever again watch a pro football game. (Now, don't jump the gun on me.) All pro football players continue to receive the same high wages, according to their performance. Profits are guaranteed to team owners, and rise or fall according to their team's performance. Players come up through the ranks in the same way as always. High school and college games are watched and cheered as before. But when the pro teams meet and play, only the players, the coaches, and the officials are present. Nobody else is there. Nobody is ever allowed to watch. Nobody on the outside ever learns the score. The story will be about the effect this has on the players. Despite the high wages, how many would continue to play pro football for very long?

Maybe the dedicated musician practices alone for years, writes music for its own sake, and scorns the idea that she is anything but pure artist. But the audience is still there in her mind somewhere. And if the audience could no longer be imagined, the practice would stop. The artist would cease to function.

All the world's a stage, and inside our minds we are always playing before some audience. Nearly everything we do is according to the imagined impact on the audience. A person dressing in the morning suddenly trades one garment for another. Why? For the imagined audience. A person is shopping and, on the verge of a purchase, suddenly changes their mind and walks out of the store still carrying the money they almost spent. But inside they feel good because they hear the applause of parents who taught them to be frugal. The parents may never know; they may even be long departed from this realm. Still, in this moment, they are the appreciative audience and their applause has shaped the day, for better or for worse.

We might ask if it's good for us to be affected like this. We wonder what it would be like to make choices – to direct our lives – from some

pure source of inner value, truth, or sense of beauty. But the question is not relevant. However mature or warped, we live for the approval and the applause – for the recognition or the thankfulness – of some audience, real or imagined.

Most of us have many audiences to draw on. They range from a single hero-figure to parents, friends, children, bosses, peers, and a nebulous conglomerate that we think of as “the society around us” or simply as “they.”

Moreover, performance depends on who is watching, or on whom we imagine to be watching. Some people spend years trying to “show them” – trying to show some special group of people that they were wrong in their judgments or opinions. Many times, after the showing is accomplished, often at enormous personal expense (time, effort, treasure), it is discovered that the actual people are no longer around or couldn’t care less.

All of us have a few imaginary audiences to whom or for whom we play a special role over and over again. And sometimes we “can’t get our act together” the way we long to, so we create daydreams. Then we are able to imagine ourselves as we would like to be, and the audience cheering the way we wish it would.

But in all our waking moments, there is an audience of some sort watching. It is this audience in our minds that approves or disapproves – cheers or boos – our every act. For the most part, our performance in every situation is determined by the audience before whom we are playing.

I don’t like it much when I realize that I’m always playing to an audience. That doesn’t seem very noble or sound like very good news. But there *is* good news in it: WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHOOSE OUR AUDIENCE. All the world’s a stage, and we cannot keep from playing on it. But we are allowed, if we claim the right, to *choose* our audience. We cannot escape an audience, but we get to choose which audience we will play for and try to please. That makes all the difference! As a matter of fact, if we want to change or improve our *performance*, all we have to do is change or improve the *audience* for which we perform. Why do you think parents get so concerned if their children start running around with the wrong crowd?

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There are some audiences that we have to decide we will never play for again. I had a friend who was always getting into fights. No matter how much he disliked it afterward, how sorry he was for hurting people, or how much trouble he got into because of it, he kept getting into fights. It was his biological father who was the audience, and who always approved and applauded him for not letting anyone “push him around.” After the age of eight, he had not seen this man, and that’s probably how the pattern got locked in. Eventually he figured out what was happening and took his father off the list of audiences for whom he would perform. He had to decide never to play for his father again. All of us have to cancel certain performances and strike some audiences off our list for good.

The real point, of course, is that GOD CAN BECOME OUR AUDIENCE. In time, we can learn to play more and more of our days for God. (And less and less of our days for anyone else, real or imagined.) Some people prefer to make their audience Jesus. That helps to get things more clear and specific. Others think of the Holy Spirit as their audience. They say that makes it easier to bring their desire to please Jesus into the present day. But what makes the difference is learning to play to the highest audience, every scene of every day. If you are a believer, you know that God really is watching. Why is it so hard to stay conscious of that, and so easy to go back to performing for something or someone else? Well, I guess the Bible wouldn’t make such a big deal about idolatry if it weren’t such a tough customer. “Idol worship” is just another term for playing to the wrong audience.

But remember that if you are going to make God your audience, it is imperative to know the Message of Jesus the Christ: God watches as a mentor, as a loving parent – as Savior – not as a bully or an ogre. Some of the saddest people on earth have God as their audience, only their God never smiles or applauds; he only condemns and judges. That cannot be the God who reveals himself through Jesus Christ.

In any case, we become truly religious when we know and remember that we live our lives before God – in God’s presence – and before God’s all-seeing, all-caring eye. God likes to applaud, and even likes to get in and help with the play. But we can never truly know that until we choose God for our audience and start trying to play before him on purpose. Of course, it is nearly impossible to imagine that God would be interested, or that our poor parts would be of any importance to him whatsoever ... unless you know Jesus the Christ.