

## 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 is not the same as 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 the immediate situation of two thousand years ago. Jesus was about to leave them, as He was 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, 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.

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## CHOOSING YOUR AUDIENCE

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Shakespeare said, “*All of life’s a stage, and we but players on it.*” Well, actually, in a play called *As You Like It* (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 tried to tell you from time to time that this world – this place we find ourselves in – is boot camp, or at least a classroom. Shakespeare said, more colorfully, that it is a stage and we are all actors playing our parts. He 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?*

(They say his grandsire was a Congregationalist.)

## CHOOSING YOUR AUDIENCE

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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, everybody's favorite, *Macbeth* (Act V, Scene V):

*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 all predetermined? Strange, don't you think, that so many people hate theories of predestination yet at the same time love theories of "universal salvation"? Are they not 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.) Well, perhaps we have not known each other long enough to be talking about such personal things.

Some people think the quality of the play going on here is excellent, while others suspect it is 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: 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* more control. Nevertheless, the meaning and the content of the drama for each of us seem to be pretty much according to what we make of them. Or as Shakespeare said, "As you like it."

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The emphasis has shifted dramatically in our own time from a communal perspective to an individual perspective. Western culture and Christianity itself have always placed extreme importance on the worth and value of every individual. Self-awareness and self-development have always been a high priority. No matter how many actors we get on stage, the claim is that everyone's role is crucial – that each person's act has eternal significance. In our day of over-population, that is a part of the Christian creed we find most difficult to believe. Can God really care deeply and personally for every single person in this vast human anthill that has taken over the globe?

Nevertheless, at present our society is proclaiming and exploring new extremes in the emphasis on individuality. In the name of Christ, believing in a God of love – if we take the message of love and the ministry of Jesus Christ to heart – we end up agreeing with the direction, even if often from a different perspective and for different reasons. But there does seem to be something lacking or potentially dangerous in the attitudes we discover, both in and around us. It is as if the freer we become, the more aware we become of the extent of our bondage.

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? The network of social control, manipulation, 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 and 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 does not always feel like *we* made them. In too many ways, it feels like our choices were made *for* us. Do we have any values of our own?

On the one hand, this all seems perfectly natural and appropriate. On the other hand, for some people it is not sufficient. 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 of us when that's not enough. The good choice must be made from a genuine love of goodness within us, even if it brings disapproval. More and more we want to choose because of inner vision: because we ourselves “see” or believe or understand or care. What makes it

so scary is that none of us are sure whether there is sufficient “goodness” within us, or within the human race in general, to support such a radical emphasis on individual worth and individual freedom.

In short, we would like to believe that we were all made by God and in God’s image, but we do not trust it very far. There is plenty of evidence to support our doubts. The new individuality is causing mayhem in all the old concepts, expectations, institutions, and sacred precepts. The question is: Will the image of God within develop in enough people quickly enough to prevent an approaching disaster? The new revolution in individual freedom is tearing away all the old reasons for choices and behavior. But a new and higher ethic, one welling up from within – while it is certainly clear in many places and active in many individuals – still seems small indeed compared to the vacuum being created by the destruction of all the old ways.

So we begin to wonder if there is enough goodness within us to ever 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. It is most troublesome, and it interrupts everything we have been doing. 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.

It does not always sound religious at first. Some folk begin to talk about “freedom” as if they could claim it apart from any consideration of community; as if what they do is nobody else’s business; as if there is a personal freedom, a self-fulfillment, a coming to “be themselves” which does not have to consider the effect on virtually everyone else in the world. That is not being “free.” That is just being willfully blind. It is possible to forget, at times, that we are all interconnected – that our situation here is just the composite result of what we *all* DO.

A family is as much or as little according to how the individuals within it live: the attitudes they have; the way they treat each other; the quality of time and energy and forgiveness they give to each other. Is it not the same with a church? Or a company? Or a nation?

It's not really such a mystery. What is a mystery is that we keep forgetting one side or the other. Community is enhanced or hurt according to what individuals bring to it. Individuals are enhanced or hurt according to how much the community values them. It is never one or the other. It is always both.

The concept of individual freedom itself comes straight from faith in God's personal love and caring for every person. Pure "communism" sees no value in the individual except for service to the state. Anarchy sees no value to the community except for what an individual can take from it. There is no in-between – unless there is some Higher Authority, some God who cares, some God to whom both individuals and the community are responsible. All personal freedom must be based on a concept of love or it turns into mere anarchy that will destroy both individuals and society. The choice for LIFE is between law and love, and any freedom not steeped in love is a turning from Life toward death.

As more and more of us turn toward personal awareness and personal development, and as more and more we each seek our own destiny under God and claim responsibility for our own growth and our own pilgrimage, the only hope is that as we turn toward this freedom, we are also turning toward love. The very reason Christ came to set us free – free from the law, free from the authority of society over our souls – was so we could go on to a higher love, not back down to self-centered anarchy. Freedom in Christ calls us toward our true identity and potential so that we may contribute more, be more, enhance each other's lives far more, not less. Only true individuals can create true community. That is why many of us suspect that the revolution we find ourselves in is really God's idea, regardless of how many groups or individuals try to claim some of the credit. If that's the case, there is cause for real hope, despite all the present and growing mayhem.

In the larger picture, there is no great cause for alarm. If enough of us claim freedom for our own self-centered interests, God will simply take the Kingdom from us and turn the stage over to others who want to put on a more interesting and meaningful play. Some students of history believe this is already happening. Most of us, however, do not think it has to come to that. The revolution toward individual freedom is opening up great new possibilities. Despite the mayhem, many people really are coming alive, using their gifts, getting more involved, learning to care more for themselves and then more for others too. The last few decades have seen remarkable changes. God did design us better than we think. The chances of our going totally self-centered and staying

there are not very great. We may often experience less consideration from others than we would like, but the chances of our going totally “individual” are remote. The concept of “community” is not something we have to create from scratch. It is built into our genes and into our brain waves. We cannot escape our need for community. We can diminish and corrupt it, but we cannot escape being social, communal creatures except for short periods of extreme concentration. *Individuality* is the challenge and the spiritual mandate.

As mentioned above, the concept of individual freedom itself comes straight from faith in God’s personal love and caring for every person. 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, and individuality comes, if it comes at all, as we become more and more 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. The great theologian Kris Kristofferson used to sing: “Freedom’s just another word for nothin’ left to lose.” Our forebears, however, 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.

As also mentioned above, 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 equals *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. Then we live and act, or at least we *want* to live and act, out of love for God and for God’s other children *because* it is 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. I happen also to believe that everything we do, we do for ourselves.

It's a lucky thing that God gave us souls to satisfy, not just minds and bodies. But that's a topic for another time.

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Sometimes I like to think of myself as a free and independent person – a person who thinks for himself and tries to do what is right and believe what is true, regardless of who likes it or what comes from 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 the impact it has on other people. If all of life's a stage, then what about the audience? Think about that with me for a bit, will you?

Almost nothing we ever do is done strictly for ourselves. Of course, we care about the effect or the impact it will have on us, yet with minor exceptions, everything we do is done for an audience. A real audience may not always be present, but we are always playing to some audience, real or imagined. If imagined, we are nevertheless practicing for the time when we will do this same thing before a real audience, whether it be one other person or thousands of people. So we do not train or discipline our bodies or our minds or our lives for ourselves alone. We are always imagining some audience watching us, either now or later. And that audience affects the way we do everything we ever do.

Now, I am not talking about the egomaniacs in some other churches. I am not talking about the extroverts or Leo-types or gregarious performers we all know. I am talking about every single one of us playing to an audience of some kind, in nearly every waking moment of our lives. This phenomenon is so familiar and habitual and automatic that we forget 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 does not see anyone for weeks at a time, and then only to get more food and go back into hiding. But why is he studying the ancient documents and writing down all he is finding? 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, distantly, or subconsciously, this researcher is still working for an audience.



Someday, when I get time, I am going to write a story about pro football (something I know nothing about). The story will tell of a time when our world is invaded by vastly superior 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 one calling card: They fix it so that no one can ever again watch a pro football game. 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 a 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 play, only the players, coaches, and 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.

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

All of life'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? It's done for the expected 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.

Most of us have many audiences we play for. They range from a single hero-figure we admire to parents, friends, children, bosses, peers, and a nebulous conglomerate we think of as "the society around us" or simply as "they." 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, it is discovered that the actual people are no longer around or could not care less.

All of us have a few imaginary audiences to whom or for whom we play a special role over and over again. Sometimes we cannot seem to “get our act together” the way we long to, so we create daydreams. That way we are able to imagine both ourselves as we would like to be and the audience cheering the way we wish it would. But in all of 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, through all our days, is determined by the audience in our minds before whom we are playing.

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 or truth or sense of beauty. Perhaps we would be wiser, more consistent, or more effective if we could respond and decide out of some inner center that was totally unaffected by concern for any audience. It would be interesting to know what it would feel like to live for one whole day making choices and directing our lives according to the pure influence of our own inner light. But we shall not have that experience. The question is not relevant. However mature or warped, we live for the approval or the applause – for the recognition or the thankfulness – of some audience, real or imagined.

I do not like it very much when I realize that I am always playing to an audience. That does not seem very noble or sound like very good news. But there *is* good news to it: WE HAVE THE POWER TO CHOOSE OUR AUDIENCE. All of life’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.

We usually get that turned around, don’t we? We concentrate on improving performance, practice, technique, methods. When parents get concerned if their children start running around with the wrong crowd, they frequently make the mistake of trying to help by talking to them about their performance. But the real problem is more often with the audience. And there are a lot of audiences not worth playing for. There is no way we can expect ourselves or anyone else to raise behavior above the level of those who will be watching – those we have chosen to be the evaluators we care about.

So if we want to improve our performance, we must improve the audience for which we perform. There are some audiences that we have to decide we will never play for ever 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. His biological father was the audience, always approving and applauding him for not letting anyone “push him around.” He had not seen this man since he was eight years old, and that’s probably how the pattern got locked in. Eventually he realized he had to take his father off the list of audiences for whom he would perform. He had to decide never to play for his father ever again. All of us have to cancel certain performances and strike some audiences off our lists 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, they say. 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.

Regardless, the name does not make the difference. 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 would not make such a big deal about idolatry if it were not such a tough customer. “Idol worship” is just another term for playing to the wrong audience.

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

## CHOOSING YOUR AUDIENCE

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until we choose God for our audience *on purpose* and start trying to play before God *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 God whatsoever – unless we know Jesus the Christ.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THIS DOCUMENT AND ANY RECORDING  
ARE DUE TO COMBINING REWORKED VERSIONS OF THIS SERMON  
INTO ONE DEFINITIVE TEXT VERSION.

SUPPLEMENT TO SERMON

Children's Sermon

WHEN NOBODY IS WATCHING

Do you ever act in a different way or do things differently when you think nobody is watching?

When I was a little boy, I used to get excited when everybody would go away for a little while. In our garage, there were two rows of cardboard boxes on shelves my father had built high up, almost to the ceiling. My parents kept lots of junk in those boxes, as well as Christmas tree decorations, cloth my mother might someday use, canning jars, and other stuff.

One day my father "inherited" a revolver that a relative of his in the Secret Service had carried. He stuck it up in one of those boxes, not realizing that I was watching and memorizing which box it was in. Of course, Dad occasionally moved the box to a different position, just to be sure. But I knew which box it was, and he had lots of things to think about and I didn't, so I could always find it again. So when my parents were both away, I would get out the ladder, climb up and take down that box, and get the revolver out to look at and play with.

That was interesting. I did not do anything "wrong" exactly. Nobody ever told me *not* to play with the revolver. I was very careful with it. No harm ever came from my playing with it. But I would never have dreamed of getting it down if anybody else had been around. And somehow I knew I would be in very big trouble if I ever got caught.

Do you ever do things differently or act in different ways when you think nobody is watching?

Of course, I grew up, became a man, went to school for a lot of years, had many fascinating experiences, even gained a little wisdom in some areas. And you know what? I still sometimes catch myself starting to act in different ways when nobody is watching! It is really strange how much we want to think that sometimes we are alone.

There are (at least) two Beings who always see us, even when we think we are alone. One of them is ourselves: No matter what I do, I am always there. But that does not change much of anything. I can usually talk myself into circles until I don't really know what's happening – at least not until later.

The other Being who always sees us is God. And we can never talk God into any circles at all. We can only try to ignore God's presence. But we are never alone – never ever. That is why whenever we do something bad on purpose, we always hear thoughts in our minds trying to talk about it, trying to argue with us, trying to wake us up. We can refuse to listen, but they are there just the same.

What is really wonderful is that when we try to do good, God is always watching that too. And even if nobody else ever figures out how hard we were trying, how much it hurt, or what it cost us – God always knows. And if we listen quietly, we can hear God saying how pleased he is, and trying to encourage and help and comfort us.

Do you ever do things differently when you think nobody is watching?

We are never alone. God is always watching. Hard to understand why God would care that much, but whether we understand it or not, God *does* care that much. The truth is, when we remember that God is there, we tend to like ourselves better and be pretty good people. And when we forget that God is there (some call it intentional amnesia), we tend to do some pretty stupid, even ugly, things. And the odd thing is, it is really hard to remember God's presence all the time. You would think it would not be, but it is. We have to practice remembering all the time or we forget.

Try it. Try as hard as you can to remember God's presence all the rest of today.