

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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The Praise Test

Proverbs 27:1-2, 17-22

If you're nearing the end of the school year, or have recently graduated, the last thing you may want to see is a sermon title with the word "test" in it. You've already taken enough of them. In fact, entire school systems, especially the students and teachers, struggle with what often feels like a culture of overtesting, a relentless cycle of standardized assessment and evaluation. The last thing we need is for the house of God to become another testing site, in this case for religious curriculum.

And yet, the Christian life is a life lived under God's assessment. The psalmist invites God's evaluation: "Test me, O Lord, and try me, examine my heart and mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth" (26:2-3). "Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing; I have resolved that my mouth will not sin" (17:3). These verses recognize God's ongoing assessment of who we are and what we're doing, a process that culminates in God's final exam on the day of Christ's coming in judgment and deliverance.

On the way to our end of time evaluation, we face a whole range of situations and circumstances where our mettle gets tested. One of them comes up in today's Scripture passage from Proverbs. I'm speaking of verse 21: "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but people are tested by their praise." This verse forms an envelope with verses 1 and 2, which also speak about "praise" or "boasting." Actually, in Hebrew "praise" and "boast" are the same word." In this case, the advice has to do with self-praise or an inflated opinion of oneself. Thus Proverbs 27 opens, "Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth." This is similar to the old piece of advice, "Don't count your chickens before they hatch," or other wisdom along those lines. In other words, there are limits to human life and knowledge. Only God is master of the future, so we should be realistic and modest about the extent of our human understanding and power.

No wonder verse 2 picks up on the boasting theme, saying, "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips." If you're to receive praise, better that it come from another person rather than you tooting your own horn or patting yourself on the back. Now jump from there over to verse 21, which says that we're tested by the praise we receive. That is, our strength of character, our moral fiber, is put to the test by how we handle praise. Just as silver and gold are placed in conditions of extreme heat in order to remove the impurities, so we human beings can be refined by properly managing the affirmation and adulation we experience.

Built into this advice is the assumption that there's a proper place for praise and encouragement. We need to affirm others. We need to commend them. We need to offer them support. We need to give praise and they need to receive it. From a Christian standpoint, this is particularly true of our life together as the church. There's nothing wrong with sharing mutual praise and building one another up in the love and life of Christ. When we do, we strengthen each other. We help one another persevere in faith. We bring vitality

into our fellowship. So today's text doesn't aim to prohibit praise. It aims to promote realistic self-assessment, so that praise won't go to our heads and lead us away from a proper relationship with God.

As I indicated at the beginning of my sermon, we're well into graduation season. And what graduation ceremony would be complete without the regularly stated, and normally violated, request to "Please hold your applause until all the graduates' names have been called." Applause can be a hard thing to contain. And words too, especially in a graduation setting. Everyone from school administrators to commencement speakers to proud parents knows that this is an occasion to heap praise onto the graduates, verbally and nonverbally. And rightfully so. Completing that step in your formal education is a huge accomplishment. But soon the tassel is moved, "Pomp and Circumstance" ends, the stage is taken down, and the chairs are folded and put away. Each graduate must begin thinking even more concretely about how he or she is going to live into all the praise and affirmation and congratulations they've received, knowing that much of the rest of life will take place without an audience applauding.

On September 28, 1882, the Worcester Ruby Legs and the Troy Trojans played a pro baseball game that was famous for having the smallest number of fans in the stands. Six people attended. That record stood until April 29, 2015 when the Baltimore Orioles and the Chicago White Sox played their game in front of empty seats. The bizarre situation was mandated by Major League Baseball and team executives in the wake of protests and outbursts of violence in the city of Baltimore. Here's how an Associated Press article reported one scene from the fan-less game:

Chris Davis might have hit the quietest home run for the home team in Orioles history. As the slugger pounded the ball deep onto Eutaw Street, just a few feet from where fans normally would have sprinted after a chance to catch a souvenir, there was almost nothing to hear. The only muffled cheers came from a pocket of die-hards locked out of Camden Yards yelling "Let's Go O's!"

On this day, 30,000 Orioles fans had been muted. The wild applause had been silenced. There were no fans to stand for a standing ovation. Just Davis' teammates in the dugout coming over for high-fives. "When you're rounding the bases, and the only cheers you hear were from outside the stadium," he said, "it's a weird feeling."¹

A lot of life is a very fan-less experience. True, there will be those times when someone offers a kind compliment, speaks a word of encouragement, expresses gratitude, or formally commends you for a job well done. Your name gets printed in the local paper because you made the honor roll. Your employer gives you a plaque for years of dedicated service. Your Facebook page gets plenty of "Likes." You receive an unexpected thank you card from someone who has noticed your faithfulness and commitment to the congregation. From time to time, praise will come, in one form or another.

But most of the time, there won't be anyone standing nearby announcing your name publicly and applauding you enthusiastically. And sadly, there are many people, young and old, who rarely, if ever, experience affirmation, support, and blessing from others. They wonder if anyone notices them or cares about being involved in their life and their future. In many cases, their spirit lags and their potential withers because they have no one in their life who gives positive reinforcement and encourages their progress and development. They hunger for praise, in a positive sense.

And all this is happening in a day and time when evaluation proliferates. We live in an atmosphere of assessment. It seems like everywhere you turn, somebody wants you to tell

them how they're doing. The company truck in front of you bears a sign that says, "How is my driving? Call 1-800- . . ." Your inbox backs up with messages from stores where you recently did business, asking you to complete their online surveys. A voicemail arrives from a friendly representative wanting to know if he can ask you a few questions about your recent visit to their office, so they can improve their level of client care. Everyone from your hair salon to your car repair shop wants you to rate them. Maybe we should put a sign here on the front of the pulpit that asks, "How's my preaching? Call 240-377-8023, or leave a comment on the church's website." It's hard to go through a single day without encountering someone who wants you to give them a grade.

Maybe, beneath all the organizational assessment and evaluation, is our enduring human desire to know how others think we're doing, and with that our need for praise. But when the praise comes, in whatever form, how will we handle it? "The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but people are tested by their praise." There's nothing wrong with getting some applause in life. But how we process it and what we do with it can be a good way of refining our character and our vision of life. Rather than letting praise go to our head or fill us with excessive pride, we can receive it with humility and gratitude, and let it point us toward our need for others, and most of all our need for God. In other words, whenever praise comes your way, you need to handle it with realistic self-assessment, a sense of your vulnerability, and an abiding awareness of your reliance on God and his faithfulness.

The seventh century was period of decline for the Roman empire. During that time, one of the emperors, Heraclius, made plans to meet with a barbarian king. The meeting would be an opportunity for Heraclius to intimidate his opponent, especially at a time when the Roman army itself wasn't very intimidating. So the emperor hired a group of men to help make up for his military vulnerabilities. But they wouldn't be equipped with traditional weapons. Instead, Heraclius hired the men to applaud during the meeting in front of the opposing king.² Here was a ruler who treated applause as a way of concealing weakness. But what if, when you're applauded, you welcome it as a reminder of your weaknesses, your mortality, your brokenness, your dependence on others, and most of all your dependence on God's love and mercy. In this way, you're able to pass the praise test and develop your character. And as you cultivate your character, at every step along the way, you'll make progress in a life that points more to God than to yourself.

In his book, *Who Switched the Price Tags?*, Tony Campolo tells the story of a church that was having its annual student recognition day. Young people in the church who were students at colleges and universities were giving reports on how their educational experience was going.

After several students had given their reports, the pastor got up and delivered some closing words. "Children," he said, "you are going to die! You may not think you're going to die. But you're going to die. One of these days they're going to take you out to the cemetery, drop you in a hole, throw some dirt on your face, and go back to the church and eat potato salad."

"When you were born," he said, "you alone were crying and everybody else was happy. The important question I want to ask you is this: When you die are you going to be happy, leaving everybody else crying? The answer depends on whether you live to get titles or you live to get testimonies. When they lay you in the grave, are people going to stand around reciting the fancy titles you earned, or are they going to stand around giving testimonies of the good things you did for them? Will they list your degrees and awards, or will they tell about what a blessing you were to them? Will you leave behind just a newspaper column telling people how important you were, or will you leave crying people who give testimonies

of how they've lost the best friend they ever had? There's nothing wrong with titles. Titles are good things to have. But if it ever comes down to a choice between a title or a testimony—go for the testimony."

"The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but people are tested by their praise." The way you handle praise says a lot about whether you're living to get titles or living to get testimonies. After all, being praised during your life is one thing, but being praised after your life is over is even more important. It shows that your greatest desire is to please God. It shows that during the time you're given, you're living your life in the presence of God, the audience of One, the one whose applause matters most, now and forever.

¹ Dan Gelston, "Orioles-White Sox Game with No Fans Believed to Be the First," *San Jose Mercury News* (April 29, 2015).

² Megan Garber, A Brief History of Applause, the 'Big Data' of the Ancient World.' *The Atlantic* website. March 15, 2013. Accessed May 24, 2017 <<https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/03/a-brief-history-of-applause-the-big-data-of-the-ancient-world/274014/>>.