

“Suppose God Posted Your Grades?”

Matthew 11:2-11

December 16th, 2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

There was a time when parents were only asked to visit school when there was a problem – perhaps an accident such as a child falling off the parallel bars. The call home might be if there was trouble from childhood mischief. These were also the days, before the 1980’s, when there was usually a parent in the home during the day.

Today, though, our circumstances are different. Teachers are working into the evenings to enable meetings with parents to involve them in regular conferences. Parents are now encouraged to enter into a more active partnership with the teachers so that they can get to know those who are shaping the minds and motivations of their children.

Sophisticated teachers, in amply supported school districts, are even able to post class homework on a website as well as email busy parents to keep them informed of their child’s progress. Whatever level the communication between teacher and parents, student progress reports are recorded and traditionally they take the form of printed report cards.

One evaluation we might hear of our child is, “Sharon relates well to peers during recreational activities.” But that might simply mean that hanging out with and relating to her friends is far more important to her than actually playing kickball during recess.

We might hear, “Billy exhibits a resentment toward obligations which would appear to stem from environmental influences.” In plain English, it might mean ‘Why don’t you teach your kid to hang up his coat and brush his teeth?’

Say you’re told, “Your child is stimulated by art but seems to be lacking in reading readiness.” When translated, it could indicate that your child would rather look at the pictures in the book than read the words.

Report cards at least *begin* the conversation between the teacher and parents but in the case of parents who are in a supportive partnership with the teacher, that report card is only an after-the-fact summary of what the parents already know

from their ongoing high involvement in their child’s educational process. Ironically, teachers have always seen that it is the kids who are doing the worst in school who have parents with the least contact with the teacher and the least involvement in helping in their children’s education. Kids from impoverished homes usually tend to grow up and live out their lives with many impoverished areas of their lives.



In our text for this morning, we kind of see two report cards being presented – one for Jesus and one for John, who was known as “the Baptizer.”

From prison, John had instructed his followers to go to Jesus in order to find out for themselves whether or not Jesus was the true Messiah. They came to Jesus to get a report – to have a conference – to determine whether or not Jesus was making the grade (as far as what John had predicted for the Jewish Messiah.) Notice how Jesus answers their question.

He didn’t say, “Of course I’m the Messiah. Who do you think I am, some kind of itinerant religious lawyer, a preaching Pharisee or a Sadducee on a political campaign?” Instead, Jesus merely summarized what He had been doing and left His accomplishments speak for themselves. So Jesus said, “Tell John that these are the things that have been happening: blind people are now seeing and lame folks are walking. You see that man over there with the blue cloak? He had leprosy and is now clean. In fact, many formerly deaf people can hear and some who had actually died, are now alive and as well as ever. Good news is being announced to the poor.”¹

Remember, John the Baptist was a priest’s kid who certainly knew his scriptures. And John was especially familiar with the prophets. What was expected, even back in the ancient writings, had come true. The ancient prophecies were coming

¹ Obviously a paraphrase of the text

about in Jesus' life. So the report card on the life of Jesus was there about which John could hear – shortly before he would be killed in that prison.

It's interesting that Jesus immediately turned and issued a report card on John. John was sitting in a dark, damp prison cell about to die. What sort of assessment did Jesus give for John?

First, Jesus knew these people had to have their expectations adjusted. Most Jews wanted their politicians ousted and the power shifted away from the Romans. The popular expectation was for a leader, who was a politician and military leader, to make the changes. Most people expected a Messiah or colleague of the Messiah to be a well-dressed and wealthy leader, living in a palace or large mansion with a lot of war trophies hanging over the bar.

What they saw in John was a rebellious uncouth priest's kid who dressed modestly and was a vegetarian health-food-fanatic whose words were a nuisance to every law-abiding upstanding religious person in the status quo. John was a gutsy person who dared to expose the inconsistencies of organized religion. He also dared to point out that Herod Antipas had slipped around a lot of corners to end up marrying his sister-in-law. You remember Luke's story in Acts of how Herod drunkenly offered his dancing step-daughter "anything" and her mother immediately asked for John's head on a platter because of his previous criticism of her marital irregularities.

Jesus full well knew that John didn't fit the expectations of what the average person was expecting in a Messianic revolt. John was a troublemaker, poor, not-at-all politically correct and anything but someone who would be popular or powerful enough to bring about change.

Jesus' final evaluation of John? "John is greater than anyone who ever lived." But not to let people get into hero worship, Jesus quickly pointed out that "even the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than John." What does that mean?

I'm not sure but two possibilities come to mind. We could understand Jesus to be saying that 'no matter how great John's life turns out to be, it still isn't as glorious as what it is like for

someone to be in the very presence of God.' In other words, 'Yea, John's life is tremendous but wait until you go to be with God – then you won't have words to describe how amazing it all is.'

Another way to look at these words is to realize that John the Baptist, and all the other prophets before, were only looking ahead to the coming of the Christ to save the people of God. All these forerunners never saw God's gift in Christ so that what they were about pales in comparison to the things and the One to come.



The scriptures, in themselves, are somewhat like a larger overview or report card of the life of Christ. In a way, we could think that when we read the Bible, it is like we're having a conference with God about Jesus – how and what He did and the effect of His behavior on others. But imagine during this conference, the report book is closed and God turns to us and asks *us* what we are doing in response. Imagine God turning to us and asking about our daily involvement in the life of Jesus Christ. What if God posted our grades for the practice of our faith?

In the Protestant expression of Christianity, there is a history of getting away from 'a faith of being good enough.' In the Protestant Reformation of the Christian Church, there was a strong departure away from a tendency in religion to place purity and perfection of piety as a requirement we must meet before God loves and accepts us. In other words, there was a conscious movement back to Paul's teaching in Romans that we are justified by our faith in God's absolutely unconditional love for us in Christ. And since Paul was a religious lawyer, the best metaphor he could come up with, at the time, was to say it's like Christ took any punishment we deserved so we don't have to (and certainly can't) be "good enough" to fulfill some ideal and perfectionist set of religious laws. I found Jesus' metaphor more helpful – that we are unconditionally loved by God, Who is our heavenly Parent, and that's the end of it.

What this means, if we are staying with the analogy of report cards, is that how we are doing with our faith and life does have accountability to

it. We are accountable to God and one another in our relationships. There are always report cards on our life circulating about but in our reformed faith and thinking, we approach evaluations of our lives the same way intelligent and involved parents approach their children's report cards.

We look at our own lives (as does God) with an eyes-wide-open clarity and realism and objectivity. As with our children, there are no real surprises because we are continually mindful of what we are doing, saying, thinking and feeling in terms of ourselves, others and how seriously we take God in our lives. When we get feedback, we are usually already mindful that we've done well or made mistakes.

Say, we lost our temper with someone. We know we were impatient, probably harsh and unkind with that other person, so we know we've got to fix that. We also know that when we did that, we did it with God standing right next to us. We've got to fix that. But in all of our crude and slow struggles of upgrading our mindfulness of what we are doing with ourselves, we do it with the same sense of grace and unwavering acceptance of ourselves that God has with us and that we have with our own children.

It is, as you know, a continual balancing. The report card, the assessment of how we are doing, as we are *doing* life, takes place within the context of the ongoing presence of God beside us and the people with whom we are in relationship. Our spiritual life is not such that the grades for our lives are posted on the bulletin board in some hallway – there in a static and unchanging way. Our life is a continual process of action, reflection, decision to change, and then continuing change and reflection on the new action. It is a flow of life from our birth to our transition into the more fully realized presence of God in eternity.

In many ways, we've got to stop putting ourselves in detention. We've got to stop putting ourselves on spiritual probation. Instead, we've got to get back into class, back out on the sports field and we ought to get dressed for the prom.

Our life and self-worth are not our spiritual grades. The input we receive along the way from

many sources is only educational feedback to prod us on to make those adjustments along the way. At any given portion of the day, we ought to have a couple of items in our mental "to-do" list that we are trying to improve in our lives.

✠

All that is to say: You are what you are learning. You are what you do. You are what you think. You are what you feel about other people and God. You are what you change in yourself. What you are is how you affect the people around you at home and at work.

The most wonderful thing about life is that everywhere you go, you're always in class (but sometimes you forget that). Every second you breathe, whether you sit still or move about, you have that miraculous God-given ability to learn from that very moment you are in. So don't spend more than a second on being mindful of the past, what you've done well and that in which you've done poorly. Be briefly mindful of your past performance but spend most all your energy, time, focus and commitment on living in the moment now. *Now* you are talking with someone to whom you may have been cruel but *now* is your only chance to be the person whom God has taught You to be.

There is no time like this very moment to be learning by making those modifications in thinking, feeling and action. But forget the honor roll. Forget the scholarships because you'll always be in school. Forget how your school picture is going to come out.

Instead, get more school spirit because this faith community is right behind you and is rooting for you and Jesus is leading the cheer. You can do it because you already are God's person placed where you are to serve God's purposes. You *are* the varsity team and you're on your own honor roll. 🙌