

How To Take a Test You've Already Passed.

STRATEGY FOR SANITY

Earl Palmer

Sooner or later everything and everyone is measured, weighed, and evaluated. The word in the Bible for this weighing is usually "to judge," which in the Greek (krino) means literally to divide or decide. This testing of our lives and our efforts begins at our birth and lasts up to the very end of our human journey; it's an inevitable accountability.

The Final Everyone Can Pass

The good news is that no measuring of any life takes place apart from the presence of the great second party, Jesus Christ. G. K. Chesterton called Jesus Christ the "Enormous Exception," the second Adam who stands alongside each human being at every decisive moment of measuring is that Jesus Christ is both Judge and Redeemer at the same moment (cf. Romans 8). If He weren't alongside us as our friend and advocate at the crisis of this final measurement, we would stand defeated and alone because of the accumulation of wrong turns we have made and the harm such wrong turns have caused.

We rightly describe this resolution of our final measurement with the word "salvation." From this salvation comes wholeness, and with that wholeness we live our life here and now as those beloved and forgiven.

But There Will Be a Quiz

Yet measurement remains an inevitable part of our daily lives, our final resolution notwithstanding. Jesus told

many parables to illustrate this fact. He spoke of two houses built upon two different foundations upon which storms tested the foundations. He told about an estate lord who gave talents to his workmen and then evaluated the stewardship of each employer. He described four kinds of soil to help us evaluate our own growing patterns. In one way or another, every parable of Jesus can be understood as a story about measurement.

As I see it, five kinds of personal evaluation are portrayed in the Bible, and each of these five testings has a positive role to play in our daily lives. Testing by its very nature has an unsettling effect, but its result is for our good because of the grand purpose of the One who alone has the privilege of ultimate measurement.

The Five Kinds of Testing

First is the testing of our most *basic choices* about God Himself and our trust in His faithfulness. There primary choices set the course of our lives, and each one of these decisions is itself tested by our own experience and also by God: "For God so loved the world that whoever believeth in him shall have eternal life...Light has come into the world and men loved..." (Jn. 3:16, 19). This promise in John's gospel is the world of hope for us, but it is also the description of the profound testing of our choices.

At another level is the testing of our *work*, the things we do and make; "Well done good and faithful servant, you have been faithful in a few things, I will make you ruler..." (Lk. 19)

We are also tested for our *gifts*-how well we have recognized, and used, those special talents and abilities God has bestowed upon us. A fellowship of

brothers and sisters can confirm in our lives a certain giftedness. Their evaluation process is based on their knowledge of who we are and what we do best. Though this evaluation may be formal or informal, it can have life-changing consequences: "Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, we do not want you to be uninformed" (I Cor. 12).

A fourth area of testing concerns our *future potential*. It takes place when those who know us encourage us to go to college, pursue a sport, or try a new career direction, because they recognize in us the possibility of new success. Paul felt this about Timothy: "God did not give us a spirit of fear. . . . Do the work of an evangelist; fulfill your ministry" (II Tim. 1,3).

Finally, as *people in relationship* with ourselves and others, we're tested every day in a hundred ways, both subtle and obvious. Just knowing about these five kinds of evaluation, and recognizing their inevitability, makes it a little easier to take an S.A.T. test, submit to a job performance evaluation, or even to face a physical examination.

Learning, Responding, and Moving on

One common thread throughout all evaluations is that by their very nature they produce stress. "How are we to buy bread so that these people may eat? This he said to test him" (Jn. 6). All testing is uncomfortable because of the uncertainty of the outcome. Nevertheless, the stress produced by these five types of evaluations can be

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good, provided we neither underrate nor overrate the importance of the evaluative process. And the only way to hold the right balance is to learn what needs to be learned from the stress of evaluation, do what needs to be done because of what we've learned, and then to get on with our life.

First of all, what do we need to learn? Learning happens when we're open to discovery and growth. To learn, we must be open toward those critics who in one way or another are evaluating our fundamental value decisions, our personality, our giftedness, our potential, and our work. This openness is not always easy to manage because of a natural defensiveness. We're sensitive because even the most apparently routine evaluation moves in very close to the center of our understanding of who we are and what we're worth.

Because of this vulnerability, then, we can see how important it is that all evaluators of other people try to be wise and skillful. Evaluating a young pastor's work, an adolescent's musical potential, or a friend's physical appearance can either encourage or damage self-confidence. When I was in junior high, one Sunday school teacher exerted an unusual molding influence on my life. He was a superior card player, and he taught my brother and me how to play various card games. One evening, Mr. Birth (that was his name) announced that I had an outstanding ability for remembering which cards had been played and which were still held in the deck. His estimate greatly strengthened the very quality

he noticed, and I believe it's one of the reasons I have such a good memory to this day. At the same time, I've worried too much about my height and weight all of my life because some people during my most impressionable years said I was short and fat.

Once we've identified what we need to learn, the next step is to do what must be done with our new knowledge. We may need the healthy experience of repentance and corrective moves to solve a crisis that is now clear to us as a result of the evaluation. Or we may have discovered a giftedness in our lives about which we were previously unaware, but which was obvious to those who were watching us.

And Don't Forget To Take a Break

Eventually, however, the bell rings, and the exam is over—for now at least. Testing can't go on forever, and the moment comes when each one of us must know how to relax and trust ourselves to the grace of our advocate Jesus Christ: "I am what I am by the grace of God; henceforth, let no man trouble me." St. Paul fully understood the need for the check and balance of evaluation upon his life (see Gal. 1:2), but he also realized that evaluation must not become a permanent pause in which action continually awaits one more evaluative process or study to be completed and tabulated. I know of churches that have choked their ability to make worthwhile decisions because they have bogged down in study after survey after evaluation—searching for clues they'll never find.

We can make no flawless moves; that's why we need the testing of our lives and our work. But for that same

reason we must never put too much on our evaluation of the life and work of another person or of ourselves. After all, God can cope with our mistakes just as he copes with our successes. We want to be, in the good sense, reactive to the evidence of evaluation so that we learn from evaluation. But we must also be proactive if anything worth evaluation is going to happen.

We should risk being tested in the five areas of accountability. But we must also risk getting on with our lives and feel good about it, because the final accountability is in the hands of the One who knows us best and stands along-side at that moment, just as He has been there at all moments. ♦



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