

## Jesus > Religion

### Grading on the Curve

Frankton – 8/23/15

Scripture: Genesis 4.3-10 Cain slays Abel, God confronts him

Proposition: God doesn't grade on a curve, he grades on a cross.

As a pastor, I get involved in conversations with people outside the church that have to do with church and Jesus and God and my faith story and all that kind of thing. (Aside: I hope you get involved with those kinds of conversations as well.) Inevitably the conversation comes around to me saying something like, "Jesus came to save us from the punishment required for our sins." And a lot of times, I hear back something like, "Maybe Jesus did that for murderers and rapists and child molesters, but I haven't killed anyone or raped anyone or molested a child. I'm not that bad. I don't need saving." I think most people believe something like, "I haven't killed anyone. I pay my taxes. I am nice to people. I'm better than most people around me. So, God must like me, so, I don't need saved." The problem a lot of people have with Jesus isn't that he freely gives grace and life, but that we have to admit our need for it. It's hard to convince people that Jesus is their savior when they don't think they need saving because they compare themselves with others and naturally, come out looking pretty good.

I remember my second year of college at Purdue. I was taking a required Physics class with Professor EE Klontz. Big lecture hall – 350 students. Two lectures per week, plus one smaller class a week with a TA to help digest the lectures and the book and also a lab once a week. I never felt comfortable gradewise. I felt like they could fail me out of that course at any moment. And I was right. For the semester, I average 32% on the tests – and got a B. A friend of mine averaged 17% and passed. Professor Klontz graded on the curve; he took the highest score and made it 100% and adjusted everyone else's score. I'm glad he graded on the curve or I might have had to change my major to history or economics, something where I didn't have to take physics.

So let's be honest: many, many people think that God grades on the curve as well. Many people think that God is some professor with wild and crazy hair looking through his bifocals grading our behavior on a curve. Statistically, when a professor grades on a curve, there are a few really high achievers, most of the class falls in the middle and then some fail. That's the classic bell curve. That's how a lot of us see humanity: MLK Jr and Mother Theresa get the A's, all of us are in the middle, and Idi Amin and Osama Bin Laden fail. We point to the greats of society and say, "Well only a select few can be them." Then we turn to the worst of society and say, "Well, I'm not as bad as them, so I must be going to heaven." But the truth is: [SLIDE] God doesn't grade on the curve, God grades on the cross. You can't earn your way to heaven by passing tests like in school. It's like trying to swim from Houston to Tampa – you can try, but you're never gonna get close.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says what would have been seen as a ridiculously depressing statement. He tells the crowd: [SLIDE] *unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness...of the Pharisees*, [SLIDE] *you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!* [5.20] This statement would have floored the crowds. I can see them looking at each other and whispering to their neighbor, "He can't be serious! Did he really just say that? That can't be true! The Pharisees are the most devout and religious people on earth. How can we be more righteous than them?" You see, the Pharisees

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When we start to read the Bible with adult eyes, many of the Sunday school stories make sense in a different light. We see them less about great heroes that we should aspire to be like, and more about the great failures that Jesus worked through. Think Peter and his three denials of his best friend, Jesus, yet Jesus took him back into the fold after the resurrection. Every character, every story, every genealogy, every measurement is a shadow or a symbol of Jesus. This is the good news because if we aren't heroes then we can stop trying to save the day. Let me give you just one example in which we typically miss Jesus entirely.

Cain and Abel were the first sons of Adam and Eve. These two brothers were charged with bringing an offering to God, and the Bible says Abel brought one that God accepted while Cain brought an offering that God rejected. Usually this is the only part of the story we hear in church. We are told we must bring the sacrifice that God asks for, not the one we think he will like. This is true, but it's not the entire story. Because God didn't accept Cain's sacrifice, Cain got angry and killed Abel out of jealousy. Abel's blood was [SLIDE] *crying out to [God] from the ground.* [4.10] Now contrast Abel's blood with Jesus' blood. Abel's blood called for Cain's guilt and for justice while Jesus' blood calls for our acquittal and mercy. We have all been like Cain, committing hateful sins against God. While the blood is on our hands, Jesus' perfect sacrifice calls out for our innocence. We're free to go. Not Guilty. That's God's verdict. Perfect, spotless, blameless and holy. That's grace.

Jesus died for us. That's good news, because it means that we are free to mess up and be messed up. Be honest about your weakness. Be honest that you're scared. Be honest about the fact that it's Jesus who defeats the sins that trip you, not you. His ways are not our ways, but his ways will save us. Ours will not. That's why it's good news we aren't good enough. There is something so tough about grace though that some people refuse to accept it. Other world religions make ladders people need to climb to get to heaven or nirvana or whatever they call it. Yet, the Christian faith can only be lived by army crawling to get there. We have to get low. We have to humble ourselves. And I promise, joy is on the other side.

The paradox of scripture is that it calls us [SLIDE] more sinful than we think we are, and it calls us more loved than we think we are. Many people can't get their minds around grace, and they try to convince themselves that they are fine, that they can make it on their own, and that they are good enough. I know this line of reasoning pretty well, I lived it for many years and still struggle with it. But really 'good enough' is relative. It's comparative and it keeps whispering our inadequacies. And if that isn't enough, calling out evil can turn on us. Sometimes we will say things like genocide, murder, and adultery are evil. But even in doing that, we are appealing to some form of a standard that could turn on us also. We forget that gossiping, lying and thinking too highly of ourselves are also sins that lead us away from God.

So let's be done with the comparison game. Let's be done with constantly fighting for a higher moral ground to stand on and look down on everyone else. Let's be done with thinking we can actually earn something that is impossible to earn. Let's stop trying to be perfect and righteous because those are not the people God is looking for. God is looking for people who admit their needs and surrender to a Savior, because if the Bible is any indication, it doesn't matter how messed up you are, he can and will love you, and if you love him, he can and will use you for his kingdom.