



---

# “A” Students

---



A Sermon By  
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

May 29, 2016

Grace Episcopal Church  
Silver Spring, Maryland

*An audio version of this sermon can be found on the Grace Church website at:*  
<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/2016-05-29-AWW.mp3>.

## **“A” Students**

Galatians 1:1-12

Luke 7:1-10

The Rev. Andrew W. Walter  
Grace Episcopal Church  
The Second Sunday After Pentecost  
May 29, 2016

*Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still pleasing people, I would not be a servant of Christ.*

Galatians 1:10

*A centurion there had a slave whom he valued highly, and who was ill and close to death.*

Luke 7:2

In our *Year of the Bible* discussions earlier this month, we spent time talking about Saint Paul, and as we went around the room, with each person offering reflections on Paul, there were clearly a lot of mixed feelings about him. Several people really liked Paul, noting his work in spreading the Gospel and the power of his writing, while others were turned off by him, finding some of his statements to be unsettling.

These kinds of varying responses are not unusual when it comes to Paul, because Paul was a complicated individual.

On the one hand, he was a powerful apostle for Jesus. In the decades following the resurrection, Paul travelled all around the eastern Mediterranean, establishing Christ-centered communities in places like Turkey, Macedonia and Greece. These communities were not very large, maybe only 20, 30 or 40 people, but they were the foundation of the Church, as we know it.

And, Paul was also a prolific writer. As he journeyed from place to place, he often sent letters to the different communities he founded, and these epistles comprise a large portion of the New Testament. Together, they help document the life of the early Christians, and they have influenced every major theologian of the last 2,000 years, everyone from Augustine and Martin Luther to Karl Barth and Soren Kierkegaard.

All of this makes Paul one of the most important people of our faith, perhaps second only to Jesus himself, and yet, on the other hand, Paul was not a very likeable person.

Paul was insecure and self-conscious. He was never fully accepted by the Christian leaders in Jerusalem, and even some of the people whom Paul brought into the faith left him to follow other preachers who were more dynamic and better speakers. So, Paul always had a big chip on his shoulder for which he compensated by being incessantly self-righteous and prideful and even a bit of a martyr.

We catch a glimpse of this side of Paul in his letter to the Galatians, as he asks: *Am I now seeking human approval, or God's approval? Or am I trying to please people?*

In his heart, what Paul wanted out of life is what we all really want, and that is to be accepted for who we are. We all need to fit in and belong. We hunger for connection and relationship. We long for a place we can call home, and we all want to know we are worthy of respect and friendship and love.

Unfortunately, the world often sends us a completely different message, letting us know when we are unacceptable, unwelcome, and unworthy of all those things for which we hope.

Four weeks ago today, we celebrated Youth Sunday here at Grace, and during the Adult Forum, several of our youth shared their perspectives on life and faith. One of the questions posed to the youth was: what do you find difficult, challenging and hard to deal with? And, the two girls spoke about the pressure they feel to look a certain way, by having the right hair and the right clothes, and all of the stress they are under to earn good grades.

As I listened to them speak, I thought back to a Parent-Teacher conference I had when I was teaching high school mathematics. I was meeting with the mother of a student in my Algebra II class, which was a difficult course for students because the curriculum moved quickly through different topics. This student, though, was very bright, consistently earning B+ grades, and so, as I sat down with the mother, I expected the conference to go smoothly.

I started off by saying how well the student was doing and how hard he worked – he consistently came to see me for extra help – when the mother interrupted me: “But, what does he have to do to get an A?” The mother’s question caught me off guard, the anxiety in her voice, her tone and body language was intense.

I tried explaining the difference between a B+ and an A was not very much, a few points here and a few points there, eliminating careless mistakes. “But, what does he have to do to get an A?”

The conference was not going the way I thought it would, and I started to feel a little sorry for my student, realizing how much pressure his parents placed on him. “Just eliminating those little mistakes,” I said, trying to be as calm and reassuring as possible, “Being a little more careful on the quizzes and tests.”

“And, that will get him an A? Because it is important he gets an A. He really needs an A.”

By that point, I started to wonder if the mother would love her son, if he only received a B+ in second year algebra.

It is not just students who are always being graded. We all are. We are appraised and judged and criticized for the way we look, what we do, where we come from, the way we worship and the way we vote. Over the last year, individuals seeking the highest office in the land have made comments about immigrants, Mexicans, Muslims, the poor, less educated and the leaders of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Most of us just scoff when we hear their comments. We shake our heads in disbelief. Yet, we all do the very same things ourselves, maybe not to the same degree, but we constantly critique and comment on family members, co-workers, people we bump into around town, even people at church.

While I have been speaking this morning, most of you have been evaluating me, and after the service is over, when you go downstairs for coffee hour, or you get home and people ask you, “How was church?” You’re going to say, “Andrew gave a great sermon today. He really hit it out of the park. Jesus himself could not have given a better sermon...” Or, maybe not. Maybe you don’t think this is a “good” sermon.

When we grade other people like that, when we judge those around us, it does not define who they are. It defines who we are.

Jesus looked at people in another light. While the Jewish leaders of the time looked down upon those who were different, chastising those who lived outside the Law, Jesus saw them with eyes of compassion and understanding. He believed everyone was a child of God, created in the image of goodness itself, and therefore, was deserving of respect and acceptance and love. So, Jesus ate with outcasts and sinners; he spoke to women and foreigners; he healed the sick and the lame. “Do not judge,” he said, “So that you may not be judged.”

We see Jesus living his life this way in our Gospel story this morning. Jesus and the disciples were in Capernaum, a small fishing village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, and while they were there, Jesus received a message from a Roman centurion, asking Jesus to come and heal the centurion’s slave. When Jesus was not far from the house, though, the centurion sent Jesus another message: *Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof.*

And, in many ways, the centurion was right. The Romans were enemies of the Jews. They occupied the Promised Land and oppressed the Jewish people. The only thing the Jews wanted with the Romans was to have them overthrown and run out of town. So, Jesus should have avoided the centurion, should have had nothing to do with him. To any Jew, the centurion was not worthy. But, Jesus was not just any Jew.

To Jesus, everyone was and is worthy.

Henry David Thoreau said, “It's not what you look at that matters. It's what you see.”

This coming week, when you look at other people, see them the way Jesus does, as a child of God, loved by God, worthy of respect, acceptance and love. In the eyes of God, we are all “A” students.

Amen.