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### **Who is your Audience?**

We all know about the incredible power of peer groups. Sociologists and psychologists have studied the phenomenon of peer groups and peer pressure for decades. Of course, teenagers are in the age group that we usually assume faces the greatest challenge in withstanding peer group pressure. They play their lives to their peers, as if to an audience from which they seek applause and approval. But maybe the assessment that this is primarily a teen phenomenon isn't totally accurate.

Samuel Miller, a clergyman, once observed with great wisdom that even among adults, success and failure with one's peers have become in our day what salvation and damnation were in the Middle Ages. Back then, says Miller, what people feared most was displeasing God and falling into the hands of an angry deity. But today, our greatest fears, he says, center on the opinions of our contemporaries. We are most concerned about failing in the eyes of our peers by losing a job, being forced to sell a house, or having a child deviate from an accepted path. These are the terrors that haunt the souls of us modern folk, Miller says.

Do you think he's right? Who are you most concerned about pleasing or displeasing? Whose approval do you seek? From whom do you want applause? In other words, who is your audience?

We must admit that for us it's hard to deny that our peers and our contemporaries exert enormous influence upon us. After all, we want to be responsive to people. We want to please others. We want the approval of everyone. Don't we? But there's a price to pay when the approval of others becomes too crucially important to us. When we place the approval of our peers above all else in determining the course of our lives, we have elevated them to the place of supreme significance – making them function almost like gods in dictating what we will do, think, and believe.

And what is the danger of giving others so much power and influence in our lives? Ralph Waldo Emerson outlined the danger when he said: "The gods we worship write their names upon our faces. Therefore it behooves us to be careful what we worship. For what we worship, we become."

This is extraordinarily perceptive! Emerson is saying that if we make some human group our primary life audience, then we will slowly be shaped over time, by its approval and disapproval, to be more and more in conformity with that group. But the extravagant promise of faith is that if we make God our primary audience, and live as if we care most to achieve God's approval, then over time, we will be shaping ourselves to be more and more in conformity with God and God's purposes.

Now that's not a promise of grandeur and grandiosity, as we see it. Rather, it's a promise that we will grow to be more just, more loving, more honest, and more forgiving. Not a bad result!

Mother Teresa, at the end of her life, had in her possession a poem, penned by her own hand, that beautifully conveyed her conviction that the only proper audience for a life is God. The poem notes that people can be illogical, selfish, distrusting, dishonest, destructive, jealous, and forgetful in response to your best efforts. But, the poem contends, people's response to you does not determine your worth. Because in the final analysis, it is between you and God, it was never really between you and other people, anyway.

Who is your audience?