

# Seeking God, Not Likes: Breaking Free from the Approval Trap

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I've been a pleaser for as long as I can remember. In elementary school, I couldn't figure out what to pack for lunch until I saw what other people were bringing. In my first job, I kept wearing the clothes that people complimented me on, discarding the more comfortable ones that I preferred. Even now in my writing, I pay attention to shares and likes, hoping my next article will be one everyone praises.

***All too often, I want to be liked more than I want to honor God.***

I first recognized this tendency on the day I came to Christ. I'd just been astonished by the truths God revealed to me in John 9, floored that he answered the very question I'd asked him about my disability. I read several chapters in John after that, looking for what else God might show me. I wanted to learn everything I could take in.

As I read, I underlined several passages but I stopped and double-starred John 12:43, Jesus words to the Pharisees: "They loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." In an instant, I recognized myself in those words. I reflected on all the ways I had sought the approval of people, making decisions on what would be most popular. But I hadn't seen it as a problem, or even recognized what I'd been doing. But the God who knew me before the foundation of the world, knew even this about me.

*I was amazed that God knew my heart better than I did.* Even before a thought is in my mind or a word is on my tongue, God knows it completely. He knows how I instinctively frame my thoughts and actions in the most favorable light. He knows my weaknesses, and he bids me to come to him with my fears, insecurities, and sin. And as I bring them all to him, he not only forgives me, but he also changes me. **I am God's beloved and I have his unconditional love and approval with no condemnation.**

I wish change was instant, overnight, so that by now I wouldn't still struggle with wanting approval. But I see myself slowly changing, finding more delight in doing God's will than in wanting my own glory. It always starts with intentionally listen to God.

***Throughout Scripture, the Lord reinforces the importance of listening to his voice above all else, resisting the temptation to prioritize the opinions and expectations of others.*** Jesus would not entrust himself to people, for he knew what was in them (John 2:25). He knew they were fickle, and their praise was fleeting. Jesus didn't want glory from people, but only wanted the glory that came from God (John 4:41,44). His goal was to do the will of God and he didn't seek his own will or do anything on his own (John 5:30).

As I write this, I'm convicted that I need to ask God about every choice I make. And ask him to search my heart and my desires, showing me what I cannot see.

In Galatians 2, Paul chastised Peter for refusing to eat with the Gentiles, arguing that Peter had sinned by acting hypocritically just to avoid criticism by certain Jews. Similarly, the Pharisees appeared to have a godward focus, but they were primarily concerned with what other people thought of them. But many times our actions are subtle, and we think we are listening to God's voice. **How do we drown out the competing voices and discern what God wants us to do?**

For me, it begins with laying my decisions and actions before God. Recognizing that the influences of the world and my own ego can be contrary to the voice of God. ***I often ask God to help me be indifferent to the outcome, meaning that I can hear and accept anything God wants me to do. When I'm clinging to one outcome, which usually involves my glory and my comfort, I twist what I think God is saying and justify what I want to do.*** The key for me is being aware that I can be misled by the voices of other people's expectations, both real and imagined.

Ted Wueste says in his book *Trusting God in the Wilderness*, "God desires so deeply for us to hear his tender voice... to listen to his heart more closely than the other voices that we believe will give us clarity... voices of the past, the voices of expectation, the voices of other people... But God never stops speaking. He is always present and communicating."

### **God is always speaking to us, but are we listening?**

***For me to hear God, I must intentionally stop and ask God what to do. To say, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:9) and then wait expectantly for him to answer.*** I look around to see what he's showing me by reading Scripture, listening to the Holy Spirit's still small voice, talking to trusted friends, and paying attention to the circumstances around me. Sometimes what I need to do is evident, but many times I'm still unsure. Then I ask myself: What reveals the character of God most clearly? My focus needs to be godward, not inward and me-centered. I need to determine first what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:10).

If I'm still uncertain, I ask myself: ***What is my motivation? Am I trying to look good to other people? Is my goal to win their approval or praise? Am I afraid of being criticized by others?***

Those questions have exposed sin that I'd previously tried to justify in countless creative ways. They have forced me to stop rationalizing choices that feed my ego. They have clarified my thinking and helped me make more God-honoring decisions.

*While I still relate to the words "they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God," I've learned that true peace comes from wanting to please God. It involves pausing and asking for guidance in the moment, seeking God's will in the mundane and the monumental.*

***It's here, in this sacred space of choosing God's quiet "well done" over the fickle applause I've often craved, that I've found the courage to live authentically, to want God's glory more than my own, and to rest in my worth as God's beloved.***