

The Lord Doesn't Grade on a Curve

JANET G. LEE

Eighteen days ago our daughter-in-law Sharon gave birth to twin boys, James and John. As you can imagine, there was much rejoicing the morning they were born. Excited and loving grandparents, aunts, uncles, and friends all lined up in front of the hospital nursery window, marveling at the beautiful little faces and perfect little bodies.

"Are they identical?" we all asked. The preliminary tests were inconclusive, which of course only made us more curious. We stared at them, placed side by side, and compared them from their ears down to their toes. Was one lighter, darker, fatter, thinner, smaller, or bigger than his brother? This led to other questions in our minds: Would one be more athletically or musically inclined? Would one have an easier time in school? Would one have more friends?

Watching from outside the nursery window, we could see the new father, our son Michael, busily going from one baby to the other, speaking softly and gently touching them. When we were finally able to talk with him in the hallway, he was full of excitement and pride about how each one was doing, noting their individual characteristics. In our curiosity we had been drawing comparisons,

but Michael, as the loving father, had focused on each boy separately.

As I left the hospital, I continued to think about these new little members of our family and whether it would be hard to be compared constantly with someone else. I hoped that our family would be able to value each child individually.

Then I began to think about life and how we often tend to compare ourselves to others. We compete with brothers, sisters, roommates, friends, or people with whom we work and go to school. Sometimes we even seem to be in competition with our husbands or wives. A few days later, still reflecting on this thought, I remarked to a friend, "Life is like being in school. We are continually grading ourselves on some imagined scorecard, trying to see who gets the A.

"You must remember," my wise friend answered, "the Lord does not grade on a curve."

This remarkable phrase caught my attention. Whatever we are doing, wherever

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we see ourselves on the scale of life, we need to put aside the world's preconceived notions of what we should be and remember, "The Lord doesn't grade on a curve."

We all want to do our best as we go through life. Sometimes, however, the most visible measuring stick we use to examine how we are doing is the one devised by the world. We naturally recognize people who are "at the top." We applaud them, we see their names on honor rolls, we read about them in newspapers and magazines, and we try to emulate them. There is nothing wrong with that except when we try to determine our intrinsic worth or the value of those around us by our comparative grades, social status, acclaim, appearance, salaries, degrees, or possessions.

It is an inevitable fact of life that we compare ourselves to others. Yet it can be a very dangerous practice. If we give ourselves a superior rating, we fall into the trap of pride. President Ezra Taft Benson has warned us that "the proud depend upon the world to tell them whether they have value or not. Their self-esteem is determined by where they are judged to be on the ladders of worldly success" ("Beware of Pride," *Ensign*, May 1989, p. 6).

If we see ourselves at the top of the ladder, we diminish the significance of others, sometimes overlooking important qualities that our grading scale ignores. We may not even be aware that we are doing this.

Not long ago, Rex and I visited a small ward in another part of the world. There was no organ or piano present. The bishop didn't own a suit jacket or even a tie. The Relief Society president didn't use a day planner. But the spirit in those meetings filled our hearts with love for our Savior and for our fellow beings. We went there thinking that because of our vast Church experience here on the Wasatch Front, there might be some way we could help lift or teach this little ward. Instead, they taught and lifted us with their pure testimonies of Christ.

An equally dangerous practice is giving ourselves an inferior rating. In this instance we often compare our weakest points with everybody else's strongest ones. If we believe we are at the bottom of the ladder of success, we feel defeated. I remember one afternoon sitting as a family in a sacrament meeting where a talented family performed a beautiful musical number. Each instrument was perfectly tuned and exquisitely played, creating an atmosphere of truly celestial music. At first I listened attentively, but soon a part of me became distracted as my thoughts broke through the Spirit. What kind of mother am I? I should have made our children practice more. Then, glancing at my row of children, I thought: Don't kid yourself—our gene pool just didn't produce great musicians. I supposed we could polish the piano keys, carry the instrument cases, or even wheel in the harp. But at that moment, in my very narrow perception, I felt we were among the lowly, and this musical family was surely several rungs up the celestial staircase.

Why do we do that to ourselves? When someone else does something well or owns something we do not have, why do we immediately knock ourselves down a rung or two? Appreciating the abilities and resources of others should lift us, not diminish us in any way. Every time we see or hear something of merit, we should be better because of it. The Lord must have intended it to be that way, because each of us has been given different gifts, unique abilities, and varying insights.

We cannot have every talent and every virtue. The only way we can experience all that is virtuous, lovely, or of good report, or praiseworthy is to enjoy at least some of it vicariously. We may never play tennis like Chris Evert, sing like Ariel Bybee, or throw a football like Steve Young, but we can come closer to appreciating those talents if we spend our time in joyful observation rather than in degrading envy. If we are troubled by the inadequacies of our home when we visit our neighbor, then we have

rejected their gift of hospitality. If we belittle ourselves when we study with a brilliant friend, we close our minds to at least part of what we could be taught. If we berate ourselves as we observe the gentle nature of President Hunter, we miss the magic of his example. Being able to appreciate and encourage the gifts of others may well be the greatest gift of all.

The third danger is viewing ourselves in a dead heat with those around us. We need to be reminded that life is not a horse race. This past semester a student returned from the testing center with a lower grade than expected. She was discouraged, knowing she could have studied harder. Then one of her roommates suggested that she should wait to be depressed until she found out how everyone else in the class had done. Maybe the curve would be in her favor after all.

Sometimes this is how we view life. We justify our actions, feeling that those around us are doing no better than we are. In this situation we choose to make comparisons only with those who make us feel good about ourselves when we are not doing our best. When we do that, we are forgetting once again that the Lord does not grade on a curve.

The story of Enoch helps us to realize the Lord's ability to measure our individual potential and worth. At the time the Lord called Enoch to prophesy to the people, Enoch basically responded, "Why have you chosen me?" He explained all the reasons he feels incapable: "I . . . am but a lad, and all the people hate me; for I am slow of speech" (Moses 6:31). But the Lord knew Enoch's heart and blessed him to become a mighty prophet who was respected and loved by the people.

As Elder Marvin J. Ashton explained:

When the Lord measures an individual, He does not take a tape measure around the person's head to determine his mental capacity, nor his chest to determine his manliness, but He measures the heart as an indicator of the person's capacity and potential to bless others. ["The Measure of Our Hearts," Ensign, November 1988, p. 15]

Never will our eternal value be measured in comparison with another's performance. The Lord doesn't think in terms of quotas—only qualities. He does not accept just the top ten percent. He wants all of us. He sees our worth from where we are today and what we can become tomorrow. Each of us stands on equal footing as we work to develop Christlike qualities such as love, humility, patience, and charity. He will attend to our individual needs and assess our progress because it is "his work and his glory" to help us succeed.

When our measuring stick is Christ's life and teachings, we need no other comparison. As President Hunter says, the Savior

set a perfect example of right living, of kindness and mercy and compassion, in order that all of the rest of mankind might know how to live, know how to improve, and know how to become more godlike. . . .

. . . We should try to be like him, even as the Primary children sing, "Try, try, try." (Children's Songbook, p. 55). ["What Manner of Men Ought Ye to Be?" Ensign, May 1994, p. 64]

I testify to you that each of us is loved and valued beyond any earthly means of measuring. Because the Lord knows our hearts and sees our individual worth, he does not grade us on a curve. That we may see ourselves and others in this light as we strive to emulate the teachings of our Savior is my prayer in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.