

LIVING FOR APPROVAL: WHEN COMPARISON DISTRACTS US FROM OUR ASSIGNMENT

A. BACKGROUND

While I was preparing this message, I kept coming back to one thing: how easily the need for approval can quietly run our lives. Very few of us would ever say out loud that we live for what other people think. It sounds a bit weak, and none of us wants to admit it. But if we're honest, most of us are measuring ourselves all the time, by what we've achieved, by who notices us, by how we stack up against the next man. We don't say it, but we feel it. One passed-over effort, one bit of praise that goes to someone else, and the whole day can feel off.

The tricky part is that this need for approval hardly ever shows its face. It hides behind good things, behind ambition, hard work, being responsible, even behind serving God. A man can look driven and disciplined and still be running on the fear that he isn't enough. He can serve faithfully and still be performing for an audience. So the real question isn't whether we have gifts, goals, or responsibilities. It's this: *whose eyes are we really living for while we carry them?*

The Bible is very honest about this, and it doesn't teach us with clever theories; it shows us real people. We're going to look at three of them: Peter, Leah and Judah. Each one gets caught, in their own way, by comparison and the hunger to be approved of. We'll start with Peter, standing on a beach, just moments after one of the most tender second chances in all the Gospels.

B. PETER: WHEN ANOTHER MAN'S LIFE DISTRACTS US FROM OUR OWN CALLING

John 21:20–22 — New International Version

"Peter turned and saw that the disciple whom Jesus loved was following them. (This was the one who had leaned back against Jesus at the supper and had said, 'Lord, who is going to betray you?') When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?' Jesus answered, 'If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me.'"

Picture the scene. It's just after breakfast, by the Sea of Galilee. Peter, the man who had denied Jesus three times, has just been restored three times, as Jesus asks him again and again, *"Do you love me?"* His failure has been dealt with gently, face-to-face, and Jesus has handed his calling back to him. And then, almost straight away, something happens that gives Peter away.

Peter had only just been put back on his feet, and comparison crept in almost immediately. He turns around, sees John following behind, and asks, *"Lord, what about him?"* Think about that. The conversation had been so personal, all about Peter's love for Jesus and Peter's own job of feeding the sheep. But the moment that closeness is there, his eyes wander to another man. Comparison often sneaks in exactly when we're closest to God. The second we're handed something personal, we start wondering how it compares to what the next person got.

Comparison pulls our eyes off our own job and onto guessing about someone else's. Jesus had just given Peter something clear to do, *"Feed my lambs. Take care of my sheep."* That's a real task with Peter's name on it. But *"What about him?"* isn't about Peter's task at all. It's Peter wondering about John's future, John's road, John's outcome, none of which is Peter's business or under his control. Whenever we start guessing about what God is doing in someone else's life, we're usually ignoring what He's actually asked us to do in ours.

Jesus doesn't feed Peter's curiosity; He points him back to his own responsibility. His answer is unsatisfying on purpose: *"If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you?"* He won't explain John's future, because knowing it wouldn't help Peter obey. Instead of answering, He simply says, *"Follow me."* And there's real kindness in that. Jesus won't feed the curiosity that only distracts us. He keeps calling us back to the road He has actually put in front of us.

Growing up in the faith really begins when another man's calling no longer distracts us from our own. As long as Peter is busy watching John, he can't give himself fully to what Jesus has asked of him. The two of them were given very different paths: Peter would honour God by how he died, John by how long he lived, and neither path took anything away from the other. Maturity is being able to let another man's calling be completely different from yours without feeling threatened, jealous or unsettled by it. It's finally being able to say, *"His job is his, mine is mine, and we both answer to the same Lord."*

So, let's bring this home, brothers. Peter's *"What about him?"* is a question we ask all the time, we've just learned to ask it quietly. It's the mate who got the promotion we thought we'd earned. It's the brother whose business took off, whose kids seem to be turning out better, whose marriage looks easier than ours. It's the man at church with the platform, or the bloke online whose life looks like the one we're still waiting for. Every time we look at him, we take our eyes off the sheep Jesus actually put in front of us.

So, here's the question worth sitting with: *whose life are you watching instead of walking your own? Whose road have you been measuring yours against?* And what has Jesus actually put in front of you to feed and take care of- your wife, your children, your work, the men around you – that you've been neglecting while you keep checking on him?

C. LEAH: WHEN APPROVAL BECOMES OUR IDENTITY

Genesis 29:31–35 — New International Version

"When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, 'It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now.' She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too.' So she named him Simeon. Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons.' So he was named Levi. She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, 'This time I will praise the Lord.' So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children."

If Peter shows us how comparison can pull us off our calling, Leah shows us something that cuts even deeper: *how the hunger for approval can take over who we think we are.* Her story is told very tenderly, and mostly through the names she gives her sons. Slow down and read those names, and you're basically reading the diary of a hurting heart.

Leah's real battle wasn't being rejected; it was letting that rejection tell her who she was. The text says it plainly: *"When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved ..."* She was married to a man whose heart clearly belonged to her sister. That's a real wound, and the Bible doesn't pretend otherwise. But the sad part of Leah's early story isn't just that Jacob didn't love her. It's that his coldness became the mirror she looked into to see herself. She let the one relationship that kept withholding love decide her whole worth, handing her identity to a man who was never going to hand it back.

Every name she gives shows a heart still reaching for someone's approval. She calls her first son Reuben, saying, *"Surely my husband will love me now."* The second she names Simeon, *"because the Lord heard that I am not loved."* The third is Levi, with the hope, *"Now at last my*

husband will become attached to me.” Each name is a little window into what she’s feeling, and they all say the same thing. Even the gifts God is giving her are being used as tools to win Jacob’s love. Her own children have basically become arguments in a case she keeps pleading before a husband who won’t budge.

God’s blessings can’t heal a heart that keeps going to people for approval. Here’s the sobering part: *God was blessing Leah the whole time. He saw her, He heard her, He gave her sons while Rachel had none.* But blessing after blessing never settled her, because she kept taking each one to the wrong place. This is a warning to every man who thinks the next win will finally quiet the ache inside. If we’re looking to people to tell us we matter, no amount of God’s kindness will ever be enough, because we keep handing His gifts to a crowd that was never able to give us what only He can.

You can’t perform your way into knowing who you are. Leah’s whole plan was performance: have more sons, prove her worth, earn a place in Jacob’s heart. But identity isn’t something you can build by effort, no matter how hard you try. A man can perform his way to being admired, to a promotion, even to a bit of respect, and still have no settled sense of who he actually is. Who we are is something we receive, not something we earn. And that’s the big flaw in living for approval: *it asks performance to do a job it was never built to do.*

Living for approval will always wear you out. Just think how tired Leah must have been. Every pregnancy carried not only the normal tiredness of having a baby, but the extra weight of hope lifted up and then let down, over and over. That’s the hidden cost of living for approval: it never lets you rest. There’s always another test to pass, another person to win over, another verdict you’re still waiting on. A heart that lives for approval can never switch off, because the case never closes. It’s a tiredness no achievement can fix, because achievement is the very treadmill it’s running on.

Now be honest with yourself here. Most of us have a Jacob, someone whose approval we’re still quietly trying to earn, and whose coldness still has the power to make us feel we’re not enough. For some of us it’s a father who never quite said he was proud. For others it’s a wife whose admiration we’re still performing for, or a boss who has long forgotten the sacrifice we made last year. And like Leah, we keep handing that person our “sons”, the promotion, the pay rise, the title, even the ministry, as if this next one will finally make them love us.

So ask yourself honestly: *whose approval are you still trying to buy? What do you keep carrying to that person, hoping it will finally settle the question of whether you matter?* And if they never give you the verdict you’re chasing – is God’s “well done” actually enough for you, or have you been living as though it isn’t?

D. JUDAH: WHEN PRAISE REORIENTS OUR GAZE

Genesis 29:35 — New International Version

“She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, ‘This time I will praise the Lord.’ So she named him Judah. Then she stopped having children.”

And then her fourth son is born, and something quietly shifts. The pattern behind the first three names suddenly breaks, and that break is one of the most important turns in the whole story.

Judah shows a change in where she’s looking, before anything in her life has actually changed. Nothing on the outside has improved. Jacob’s heart still hasn’t turned, Rachel is still the favourite, and Leah’s situation is pretty much what it always was. But this time she doesn’t say, *“Now my husband will love me.”* She says, *“This time I will praise the Lord.”* Her circumstances haven’t

moved an inch, but her eyes have lifted. The change starts not in her situation, but in where she's choosing to look.

Praise isn't pretending the pain isn't there, it's turning the heart back towards God. Leah isn't acting like everything is fine now. She never says Jacob loves her or that her longing has finally been met. In the Bible, praise isn't burying your hurt under a fake smile. It's deliberately turning your heart away from the mirror of people's approval and towards the God who has seen you the whole time. For the first time in the story, she looks up instead of sideways.

God often changes the way we see things before He changes the things themselves. We tend to assume peace will only come once everything is finally sorted, once the relationship is fixed, the recognition comes, the longing is met. Leah's story points to a different order. God doesn't fix Jacob's heart first and then give Leah peace. He gives her something new to look at while her circumstances stay exactly the same. Very often the first gift God gives isn't a different life, it's different eyes.

And it's no accident that this fourth son is Judah. It's from Judah's family line that the Messiah would come, the line of David, and in time the Lord Jesus Himself. The son born at the very moment Leah stopped striving and started worshipping becomes the line God uses to bring salvation into the world. There's something beautiful hidden in that. God's biggest purposes so often come not out of our striving, but after we've surrendered, not when we're straining to be noticed, but when we finally lift our eyes to Him. The name Judah means "*praise*" – and it's praise, not performance, that stands right at the start of the promise.

Here's the good news for every man who is tired of the treadmill. Leah's turnaround didn't wait for her circumstances to improve; nothing around her changed. What changed was where she looked. And that same turn is available to you this morning, exactly where you are, before a single thing in your situation shifts.

So the question isn't "*when will my situation finally change?*" It's this: *what would it look like for you to lift your eyes today, before the promotion, before the recognition, before the person you're waiting on ever comes through?* What has God already put in your hands that you've been too busy striving to even thank Him for? Praise is the first move of a man who has stopped living for approval.

E. CONCLUSION

Put these two stories side by side, and the same pattern jumps out. Peter looked at John. Leah looked at Jacob. One man sized up his calling against another disciple; one woman sized up her worth against her husband's love. In both cases their eyes had drifted sideways, fixed on another person to tell them whether they mattered.

And in both cases those eyes had to be turned back. Jesus turned Peter's eyes with a question and a command: "What is that to you? You follow me." Praise turned Leah's eyes when Judah was born and she finally looked up and said, "This time I will praise the Lord." In neither case did the circumstances change, what changed was the direction they were looking: away from the sideways glance of comparison, and up towards worship and obedience.

In the end, this is the difference between two ways of living. Living for approval keeps asking, "How do they see me?" Following Jesus asks, "Am I faithfully following Him?" The first question can never really be answered, because people's opinions keep shifting and were never fully in your hands anyway. The second question was already settled at the cross, and it asks only one thing of us, that we follow.

So before you leave this room, work out which man you are this morning. Some of you are Peter — you love the Lord, but you've got one eye on another man's life, and it's quietly stealing your peace and pulling you off your own road. Some of you are Leah in those first three sons — still performing, still pleading your case before someone who may never give you the verdict you want, and worn out by it. And some of you are standing exactly where Leah stood at Judah — close enough to make the turn, close enough to finally look up and say, "This time I will praise the Lord." Whichever man you are, the way out is the same. It isn't a change in your circumstances; it's a change in the direction of your eyes.

So to every man still looking sideways — still measuring himself, still pleading his case in front of a crowd that can never truly clear him — Jesus says the same thing He said to Peter on that beach: "What is that to you? You follow me."