

“Defying Gravity: The Illusion of Approval vs. The Call to Truth”

Matthew 6:1-4

In the musical *Wicked*, Glinda, the "Good Witch," seems to have it all: looks, magical abilities, popularity, and the favor of the Wizard. Born into privilege, she was steeped from an early age in a very specific set of expectations. The message she received was clear: her primary goal in life was to be well-liked, and the way to achieve that was through a polished look and a persistent façade of perfection.

This obsession became so foundational to her identity that when she eventually befriended Elphaba—an outcast judged solely by her appearance—Glinda’s immediate instinct was to "bless" her new friend with lessons in fashion, poise, and social grace so that Elphaba, too, could become "popular."

In her signature anthem, "Popular," Glinda sings about the secret to social success: *"It's not about aptitude, it's the way you're viewed."* Here is the song "Popular" which presents this vision for life: <https://youtu.be/iyatVFP7Bfw>

Through theatrical exaggeration, *Wicked* exposes a quiet truth: chasing cultural scripts of image, influence, and surface-level approval leaves us feeling hollow. Worse yet, it creates systems where power is concentrated among those who perform well, while those who cannot—or will not—play the game are pushed to the margins.

While Glinda wrestles with the private anxiety of feeling like a fraud, Elphaba and others like her are shunned or relegated to minor roles. Whether we find ourselves among the celebrated or the sidelined, the trap of public approval harms everyone. It feeds the insatiable demands of the ego—an authority that demands constant validation yet never delivers lasting peace.

The Ancient Economy of Praise

Jesus recognized this human trap and repeatedly named it in his teachings. He saw how the quest for public validation warped both individual hearts and entire communities. In the Sermon on the Mount, he directly addresses this dynamic through the lenses of prayer, fasting, and charitable giving. Let’s listen to Matthew 6:1-4

"Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you."

To grasp the weight of Jesus' instruction, we must understand the social structures of the ancient Roman and Jewish worlds, specifically the system of **patronage and beneficence**.

As scholar Bruce Winter details in *Seek the Welfare of the City*, major public institutions—baths, civic buildings, city festivals, and grand feasts—were funded almost exclusively by wealthy civic benefactors. In return for their financial patronage, the public was expected to respond with lavish praise. Benefactors were honored with statues, public inscriptions, and ceremonial applause. Even the Roman Emperor functioned as the ultimate benefactor, dispersing resources to showcase his power, benevolence, and total control.

This transactional dynamic filtered down to every level of society:

- **Elite Patronage:** Wealthy patrons provided housing or livelihoods to clients, who in turn owed them daily public deference—writing laudatory poems, attending to them in public squares, or greeting them at dawn with songs of praise.
- **Civic Benefaction:** Funding care for widows or public assistance was done with high visibility, ensuring the benefactor's social standing was elevated.
- **Charity to the Poor:** Even relief given to beggars and the unhoused was often performed publicly to secure a reputation for piety and civic virtue.

A Different Kingdom

Against this cultural backdrop, Jesus' words were radical. The prevailing social system rewarded the egos of the wealthy, entrenched class divides, and left the vulnerable dependent on the unpredictable generosity of those seeking applause. If a benefactor felt ignored, the funds dried up. If a beggar lacked the social means to offer honor in return, they remained invisible.

The system made human dignity contingent on transactional praise.

Jesus proclaimed an entirely different vision: **the Kingdom of God**. In God's reign, love and service are freed from the economy of public recognition. The primary motivation for doing good is not to build a reputation, but to align oneself with a God whose very nature is quiet, selfless generosity.

When Jesus tells his followers to let their giving be done "in secret"—so much so that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing—he is not asking us to hide our light. Rather, he is inviting us to dismantle the inner demand for an audience.

God does not operate like the Roman benefactors or modern media algorithms. God works in mystery, in quiet fidelity, and in the unseen corners of human life. Jesus modeled this throughout his ministry: he routinely instructed people not to broadcast his miracles, spent time with the forgotten, and ultimately chose the vulnerability of the cross over the worldly power of coercion and public acclaim.

Defying the Gravity of Approval

The spiritual invitation for us today is to **defy gravity**—to resist the cultural pull that urges us to constantly perform, compare, and compete for the appearance of success, holiness, or relevance.

Consider the people who have left the deepest mark on your life. We may occasionally envy those who enjoy social prominence, but the individuals we truly respect are rarely those who demand a spotlight.

We admire those who show up quietly when no one else is watching.
We are healed by those who offer kindness without keeping score.
We are inspired by those who advocate for justice without needing their name on the building.

They have discovered that public applause is a fleeting reward, but living in truth offers a depth that approval can never supply.

A Spiritual Practice: The Temptation of the Wilderness

To ground this truth in our own lives, let us move into a spiritual practice recalling another moment when Jesus confronted the lure of worldly approval and power: his temptation in the wilderness.

In the Gospel of Luke, the devil takes Jesus to a high place and shows him all the kingdoms of the world in a single instant:

"To you I will give their glory and all this authority... If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." — Luke 4:6-7

The offer of the kingdoms of the world was an offer of ultimate popularity, power, and instant validation. It was the promise that Jesus could bypass the quiet, hidden path of sacrificial love and instead claim immediate, undeniable dominance over all.

Jesus answered: *"It is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only God.'"*

Guided Reflection & Silent Prayer

(You are Invited into a posture of rest. Close your eyes and take a deep breath.)

Step 1: Noticing the Heavy Burden of Performance

Take a slow, deep breath. Allow your shoulders to drop away from your ears. Bring to mind a place in your life where you feel the pressure to perform—a situation where you feel compelled to manage your image, prove your worth, or seek approval.

- Is it at work?
- In your family?
- On social media?

- Even in your spiritual life?ight of that effort. Acknowledge how exhausting it is to hold up a persona, to constantly make sure "pink goes good with green," to ensure others view you in a certain light.

Step 2: Standing on the High Mountain

In your imagination, step into the quiet, dry air of the wilderness. Stand beside Jesus as the tempter lays out the illusion: the promise of instant approval, influence, and the kingdoms of the world.

Listen to the subtle whisper that says: *If you just play the game, if you just perform for the crowd, you will finally be secure. You will finally matter.*

Now, turn and look at Jesus.

Notice his posture. He is unhurried. He is unawed by the spectacle. He does not need the kingdoms of the world to know who he is, because he already knows he is the beloved Child of God.

Step 3: Releasing the Need for an Audience

Imagine taking that heavy mantle of public performance—the need to be liked, the fear of being left out, the drive to impress—and placing it gently on the ground at Jesus' feet. Hear Jesus speak his quiet refusal once more:

"Serve only God. Live for the unseen Father who sees in secret."

Step 4: A Prayer for Hidden Faithfulness

God of the secret places, release us from the gravity of public approval. Forgive us for the times we have traded your quiet truth for the noisy applause of the world. Teach us the freedom of doing good when no one is watching. Anchor our identity so deeply in your love that we no longer need to perform to prove our worth. Give us the courage to defy the pressure to conform, and give us the peace of living simply, truthfully, and quietly in your presence. Amen.

