

Giving an A

By Tom Lazo

Romans 10:1-10

¹ Brothers and sisters, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. ² For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. ³ Since they did not know the righteousness of God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. ⁴ Christ is the culmination of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.

⁵ Moses writes this about the righteousness that is by the law: "The person who does these things will live by them." ⁶ But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" (that is, to bring Christ down) ⁷ "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). ⁸ But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim: ⁹ If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved.

Benjamin Zander has been the conductor of the Boston Philharmonic since its founding in 1979. Born and educated in England, he has an impressive resume of academic and musical accomplishments. Over the past ten years he has also become a sought-after speaker to major organizations for his presentations on leadership and creativity. The best-selling book, *The Art of Possibility*, co-authored with Rosamund Zander, has been translated into sixteen languages. He was awarded the 2002 "Caring Citizen of the Humanities" Award by the International Council for Caring Communities at the United Nations.

The first time I heard him speak I thought he was a bit of a fool.

In January of this year I attended the Bi-District Training Day for the Arlington and Alexandria UMC districts. I had just started serving as Lay Leader, and following in the footsteps of Steve Meserve and other pillars of our church, I thought I could use as much help as I could get. So I signed up for lay leader training sessions

wherever I could find them. The first one that I attended had some really good info on what a lay leader does, and on how the district can give support. One of the things they did was show a short video, more generally on leadership, narrated by Ben Zander.

Now, Mr. Zander has some interesting ideas. In a two- semester class he teaches exploring the Art of Musical Performance he has a group of students, talented instrumentalists and singers, who are in a chronic state of anxiety over the measurement of their performance, very reluctant to take risks and stretch themselves. He wants to change that atmosphere, taking their focus off of competing with each other for grades. He can't abolish grades altogether, even if the University agreed, the students would feel cheated of the chance for stardom, and still focus on their place in the lineup. So he does the only thing that will put them at ease. On the first day of class he gives them all an A.

This is where he lost me. The first thing that came to my mind is the pervasive idea that we can't hurt the tender self esteem of our children, no matter how old they get, by letting them fail at anything. Whether it is not correcting wrong spelling or giving everyone a trophy no matter who wins, I've always thought "What happens when these kids get in the 'real world' and have to compete for jobs and promotions?"

It reminded me of some history I heard when I was in the Engineering School at the University of Virginia. In 1819, when Thomas Jefferson chartered the University of Virginia, he wished it to be a school in which no degrees were given, no attendance taken, people would just come when they pleased, and leave when they felt educated. I just couldn't see how that would work.

Fortunately, even as these thoughts went through my mind during the Leadership Event, I didn't tune out altogether, and Mr. Zander began to explain his approach more fully.

At the University of Southern California, a leadership course was taught each year to fifty of the most outstanding students out of 27 thousand in the school, hand-picked by each department. At the end of the semester, the grader for the course

was instructed to give one-third of the students A's, one-third B's and one-third C's, even though the work of any member of this class was likely to surpass that of any other students in the University.

In many cases such as this, a letter grade says very little about the mastery of the material by the student, it only matches him up against other students. Zander wanted to change the grade from being a measurement tool into an instrument to open the students up to new possibilities.

“Each student in this class will get an A for the course”, he announces. “However, there is one requirement that you must fulfill to earn this grade. Sometime in the next two weeks, you must write me a letter dated next May, which begins with the words ‘Dear Mr. Zander, I got my A because...,’ and in this letter you are to tell, in as much detail as you can, the story of what will have happened to you by next May that is in line with this extraordinary grade”. So everything in the letter must place them in the future, looking back on the insights they acquired and the milestones they attained during the year. Everything in past tense. He tells them that he is especially interested in the person they will become; their attitudes, feelings and world-views. He wants them to fall passionately in love with the person they are describing.

This A he gives them is not an expectation to live up to, but a possibility to live into.

It was at that point in the video that the thought struck me, “Isn't that what Christ did for me?”

When I confessed my sins to him, asked him to be my Lord and Savior and promised to follow him, he gave my life the only grade that a loving, but just and holy God could accept for entrance into heaven. He gave my life an A before I was done living it.

The scripture that was read to us earlier from Romans says:

If you declare with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

Not “you might be”. Not “if you follow all my laws you will be”. Simply “you will be saved”.

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast.

The first time I was taught about this free gift from God, my logically trained mind came up with some questions.

I am the son of two very intelligent parents. My father was a scientist, and nearly a professional student. His High School chemistry teacher gave him a C and told him that he would never be a chemist. Well, we Irish take that sort of talk as a challenge. He went on to get a Chemistry degree from the University of Alberta, a Masters degree from University of British Columbia and a PhD in Nuclear Physics from Notre Dame. There he met my talented mother who was attending St. Mary’s. She was an actress and accomplished singer, performing in Gilbert and Sullivan shows at the Chicago Light Opera Company, and while working for one of my Dad’s professor’s at Notre Dame, she was determined to lighten up one particular stuffy student. After they were married, and not satisfied with his doctorate, my father let Bell Labs pay his way through night law school from Rutgers, eventually becoming a patent attorney (we got to play test all kinds of neat inventions like Legos and Lite-Bright!) and ended up using all his education in his position as a Federal Judge for the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

So, I guess it was the logical engineers mind that I inherited from my dad, as well as the actor influence of my Mom, that made me ask “If Christ died for my sins, and having accepted Him I now have guaranteed salvation, what is my motivation to stop sinning?” I asked this question very early in my Christian walk. Like many, I have my children to thank for bringing me to Christ. Shortly after having our first daughter, Katie, Margie and I decided that what our parents had taught us about attending church and raising children was probably pretty smart, so we started regularly attending Friendswood United Methodist Church, where several of our friends from community theater went. By the time Hayley was born, I was still little more than a regular attendee and choir member, but Margie was getting serious about her faith again, and got us involved in a Sunday school class with

other young couples. She took part in a three-day spiritual renewal program called Walk to Emmaus. She patiently urged me to go (praying for me all the while), and a year or so later I surprised her by saying I had signed up for the next walk, East Texas #7, in the Fall of 1993. It was at the first of these three days that I asked my spell-it-out-logically-for-me question “Can I sin willy-nilly once I am saved?” One of the participants explained it this way: God loves you. Sin hurts God. Why would you want to hurt someone who loves you?

That made sense. But did my sins really hurt God? Ray Boltz had an old song where he sings “Does he still feel the nails every time I fail”? I think that I agree with my wise Disciple Bible Study leader, Linda Powell, who said that we should take Jesus at his word on the cross when he said “It is finished!” In that moment he took on the entire weight of all our sins, and having done so experienced true separation from his Father, who cannot abide sin. Whether that separation lasted until His resurrection, or for only a moment, I can only imagine that having been one with God since the beginning of creation that the pain of that separation must have been just as great as the excruciating human pain of crucifixion. So while I don’t think our sin still hurts Jesus like the human pain of a nail, I know that sin does separates us from God. Isaiah 59:2 says “But your iniquities have separated you from your God”. And I do know it hurts me when I am separated from the ones I love.

I don’t want to keep sinning, because I know it separates me from God. But like Paul I often find that on my own strength *“the good that I strive to do, I do not do; but the evil I strive not to do, that I practice”*.

So if I have my “A”, my salvation, how do I approach my life not as an expectation to live up to, but as a possibility to live into? In order to live into this possibility, I have to do something that is hard for me, for many of us. I have to ask for help.

Mr. Zander says that the practice of giving an A allows a teacher to line up with her students in their efforts to produce the outcome, rather than lining up with the standards against them. In the first instance, the instructor and the student become a team for accomplishing the possible; in the second, the disparity in the

power between them can become a distraction, drawing energy away from the productivity and development.

As I said before, God is holy and just. He cannot reduce His standards, His law. But God is also love, so he sent Jesus and the Holy Spirit to line up with us, becoming that team to accomplish the possible.

In the realm of possibility, the literal or figurative giving of an A aligns the teacher with the student, creator with the creation, and makes striving for a goal an exciting game. Within the game, a standard (the law) becomes a marker that gives the pair direction. If the student hits the marker, the team is on course; if not, they recognize that (Zander likes to have his students say out loud 'how fascinating' when they play or sing a wrong note!) and identify what needs attention. Since the teacher's job is to help the student chip away at the barriers that block their abilities and expression, she aligns herself with the students to whom she has given an A, and lets the standards maintain themselves.

Michelangelo is often credited with saying that inside every block of stone or marble dwells a beautiful statue; one need only remove the excess material to reveal the work of art within.

Mr. Zander says that if we apply this concept to education, it would be pointless to compare one child to another. Instead, all the energy would be focused on chipping away at the stone, getting rid of whatever is in the way of each child's developing skills, mastery and self-expression.

As Bible scholar Ray Vander Laan points out in much of his teaching, Jesus lived in the city of Capernaum during the three and a half years of his active ministry. In Capernaum there was an extremely valuable material that was used for making important food processing equipment, which was in great demand all over Israel. That material was the black basalt stone found only in Capernaum and was a form of volcanic rock. The reason black basalt was so important was because of its ability to be ground together without leaving any resin, such as grit. With most other forms of rock found in Israel, the grit and sand left after grinding flour to make bread was very destructive to the people's teeth.

Jesus earthly father, Joseph, was a “tekton” in Capernaum. The word “tekton” is literally translated “construction worker.” The reason that our Bibles tell us that Joseph was a carpenter has to do with the Western definition of a construction worker.

Early Western translators, like the rest of Western society, called a “construction worker” a “carpenter.” But, more than likely, because of the valuable need for basalt food processing tools in Israel, any “tekton,” in Capernaum, including Jesus if he followed in Josephs footsteps as a young man, would have almost assuredly plied the common trade of a “stone cutter” or “brick mason.”

Another fact that helps to support this theory is the very low volume of wood in Capernaum. If Jesus helped Joseph during his early life may have worked on doors or put up fences made of wood, but according to the geography and history of Capernaum, coupled with Jesus’ common use of bricks and stones in much of his teaching, it is highly probable that Jesus, the tekton, was very much “Jesus, the Stone Cutter.”

So I like to think of Jesus as the stone cutter, chipping away at the block that is me so I can be more like that beautiful statue trapped inside. A statue that looks an awful lot like Jesus. Romans 8:29 says

29 For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

I accept my Salvation as not an expectation to live up to, but a possibility to live into. And I ask Jesus and the Holy Spirit work alongside me in that sometimes painful chipping process. I respect the standard of the law and commandments, and I try not to cheapen them by ranking myself against others, or by thinking of the commandments as unachievable perfection, but rather as a model in the person of Jesus, and that is a person I can fall passionately in love with.

Lastly, how can I turn this idea of the grace that God has shown to me outward? How can I give an A to others? I am not a people-person. I honestly have to work at focusing on listening to what someone is telling me, rather than trying to think ahead, looking for a solution for them based on the first thing they tell me, when maybe all they wanted me to do was listen. But even when I do really listen, I may disagree with someone on one issue, lower their grade, and never quite hear what they have to say again. Each time I alter the grade I give them, the new assessment, like a box, defines the limits of what is possible between us.

Ben Zander says the when we give an A to someone we can be open to a perspective that is different from our own, and I want that perspective to be the one that says we are all children of God, made in His image. No bad behavior of the person to whom we assign an A has to be whitewashed by that grade, and no action is so bad that behind it we can't recognize a human being to whom we can speak the truth. But it is only to a person that we have given an A that we will really listen, and that makes it so much easier for us to love our neighbor as our self. That is a behavior that I want to include in my post-dated letter to God.

Recognize this possibility that Christ has give you to live into.

Recognize that in God's eyes you are an A student, and that His plan is counting on you leading the class forward, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

And recognize what a difference it makes when you emulate that grace of God by giving othes an A.

Amen.