

The importance of losing

By [Daniel Harrell](#)

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So it turns out that losing is good for you after all. According to social scientists who study these things, all those participation trophies kids receive for just showing up are not inspiring them to succeed. Instead, the ceaseless praise only protects kids from failure—so that once it inevitably appears, they are so demoralized that the next time it comes close they choose cheating rather than risk failing again.

The gospel has always understood the critical importance of failure in the path to true life. This should make it good news for kids. (Isn't there something in the New Testament about the faith of children?) Besides, the only one who has ever been able to handle ceaseless praise is Almighty God. We've never been in any position to compete.

In Matthew 11, an unjustly imprisoned John the Baptist worries that his cousin Jesus fails as a Messiah. John has preached about "one more powerful," saying that a "winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the righteous wheat into his barn, but the wicked chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." John has seen the heavens open and the sky tear apart. He has seen the Spirit descend; he has heard the thundering approval of God. John might be in jail, but not for long: the Messiah is near with his fork and fire. Victory is just around the corner.

But then come the reports about Jesus. There is no fire, no threshing fork or burning chaff. Not even a fiery sermon. Just mostly milquetoast stuff about the blessedness of the poor and the meek, and how glad you should be when people insult you. About how you should forgive your enemies and pray for your persecutors—ridiculous stuff like that. Not unquenchable fire; not even *quenchable*

fire.

John calls a couple of his followers and tells them to go ask Jesus: “Are you really the Messiah, or should we wait for somebody else?”

Good question. Most of us would prefer a Messiah a bit more focused on winning. Then again, Jesus proves that victory only comes through defeat. Losing really is good for you. Praise the Lord.