

First Sunday after the Epiphany; January 8, 2023

+ Matthew 3:13-17 +

“He is Well Pleased with You, Too”

Then Jesus came up from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?”

But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John let him. After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

Children want to please their fathers. There are stages in childhood when they would not admit to it. There are ages when children say, “I don’t care what my father thinks of me.” But most often they would admit what is naturally true: they want their father to approve of them. It is so important for children to have their fathers’ approval that I would bet dollars to dimes that those of you long past childhood can still remember a time your father said, “Well done. I’m proud of you.” And those who never heard their father say it probably still feel some pain.

Some don’t ever get to hear it. Maybe because their fathers were gone. Or maybe because their father was just too hard to please. And it’s true: some fathers are much easier to please than others. One child holds up a spelling test to his father with a mark of 77, and the father says: “Well, I’m sure you did your best. And besides, that’s why we have spell-check! I’m proud of you, you little ragamuffin. Should we get some ice cream?” Another child holds up a test with a mark of 99, and the father says: “Well, what happened to that last point?”

Fathers should have standards for their children, of course. But they should also be careful about being too hard to please. Because if they are, they risk alienating their children. Years ago, I bumped into an old friend in the grocery store. It had been a long time since we’d spoken. His dad had impossible standards for his children. But his dad was always kind to me, so to make conversation I asked, “How’s your dad?” He answered, “We don’t talk anymore.” It was a powerful lesson. Of course fathers should discipline and correct their children. But they must also find times to say, “You have done well. I’m happy with you.”

God is our Father. And he definitely has high standards. In fact, he has the highest standard of all: perfection. He tells us: **Be perfect.** Are you perfect? Me neither. So what happens to our relationship with God, who expects perfection? It is shattered from the start. We are already imperfect when we come to life, so God tells us that we are born **slaves** who do not belong to his family. **Alienated. Objects of wrath.** God the Father ejects from his house anyone who doesn’t meet his perfect standard.

But didn’t I just get done saying that good fathers shouldn’t expect perfection from their children? Then why does God expect us to be perfect? If he wants us to be his children, why is he so harsh and unreasonable? Well, sinful human fathers have no right to expect perfection, because they themselves are not perfect. But God is. And for him to expect anything less than perfection from us would be untrue to himself. You see, he doesn’t just tell us to be perfect. He explains further: **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** The Father is perfect, so his children must be, too.

But you ask: where is the mercy in that? Where is the love? We’ll get to that in a minute. But first, we must shake the notion that God will take us into his home and into his family without us being perfect.

This is where the Triune God is different from the invented gods. Invented gods always accept less than perfection. Sometimes they accept imperfection because they are rotten scoundrels themselves. Especially in ancient religions, the gods themselves were often thieving, lying, lecherous drunkards. So of course they should accept some imperfection from people! Other religions, though, imagine a god who is perfect and just, but then, for some inexplicable reason, accepts less than perfection from people! As long as they're good – as long as they keep most of the rules most of the time – this supposedly holy god will have them as their children!

That is how human fathers must operate; but the perfect Father does not. Only perfection pleases him. And this, by the way, is powerful evidence that the Father of the Bible is the true Father. Imperfect minds will always invent gods who are either themselves imperfect, or at least accept less than perfection. Because that is our concept of a good father. But the real heavenly Father remains true to himself: he is perfect, and demands it. That is a Father no human mind would ever invent.

But it is also a Father with whom we have no relationship, because we're not perfect. Yet the Father is more than holy and demanding. He is loving. He is merciful. He does want us to be his children. He wants us in his house forever.

But only perfection will please him. Which is why he sent it down to us. **[Jesus] saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him."** As Jesus emerged from the waters of the Jordan, the Father speaks from heaven and declares the pleasure that he has in him. The Father is pleased with his Son, Jesus, because Jesus is God's Son with a capital "s." He is the eternal Son of God, and God himself. The Father is well pleased with this Son, because this Son is holy. He was conceived and born free from sin. He lived every moment of his childhood, and adolescence, all the way forward to the day of his baptism, in the perfection God demands.

And he carries that divine perfection forward to his cross, about three years out from this day of his baptism. When he dies on that cross, the Father transfers his perfection onto all the sinful people of this world, and washes their sins away in Jesus' holy blood.

God is now well pleased with the world. He has taken its sin away and made all people holy in the work of his Son. He says to the world, "You are my children, whom I love. I am well pleased with you." You see, God does want us – and all people – to be children in his family forever. But he must also be true to his own perfection. So instead of overlooking some amount of imperfection – as imperfect fathers must – he washed it away with his son's blood. And instead of accepting less than perfection – as less than perfect fathers must – he supplied us with perfection in his Son, Jesus.

Even here at Jesus' baptism we see his perfection in action! John the Baptist hesitates to baptize Jesus. We can understand his thinking, right? Why baptize someone holy, the eternal Son of God? And what does Jesus answer? **"Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness."** On this day Jesus does what is right, what is pleasing to God. It's what he always does, every moment of his life in this world, to perfect the people of this world.

And yet Scripture teaches that not all the world will find its way to heaven. In fact, Jesus says this: **"Enter through the narrow gate, for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter through it. How narrow is the gate, and how difficult is the way that leads to life,**

and there are few who find it.” God calls the world perfect in Christ. But in the end, few enter his eternal home. Because from cover to cover the Bible also teaches that only those who believe in Jesus as the saving Son of God receive the gifts of forgiveness and perfection from their Savior.

And this is why Jesus gives baptism to us. When Jesus was baptized, the Father, Son, and Spirit were all there. And they were all there when you were baptized, too. When the water touched you and the words Jesus gave were spoken over you, **“I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,”** the Spirit was there. The Spirit was planting saving faith in Jesus in your heart. He was washing your sins away and covering you in Jesus’ perfection. Jesus was there. He came into your heart with his holiness and loving rule. The Father was there, too. And, thanks to Jesus, you became his child. You became holy in his eyes through faith in Jesus. When you were baptized, for Christ’s sake, the Father said to you, **“You are my child, whom I love. With you I am well pleased.”**

This is what baptism makes you: a holy child of God, a member of his eternal family. A child who will enter and live forever in his heavenly kingdom.

Every year on the First Sunday after the Epiphany, we hear the account of Jesus’ baptism. And we hear what God does for us in our own baptisms. Then we inevitably hear a plea to think about our own baptisms and meditate on them every day. I wonder how well that works out. I know how well it works out for me: not very. I do make it a point to cross myself every morning and night, remembering the sign of the cross that my pastor made over me when Jesus’ perfection became mine. But there is so much for us to think about every day. How easily baptism and its blessings drop from our minds!

So maybe we should try it this way: your life will be better if you meditate on your baptism more often. And your faith will be stronger, too. When you feel worthless and remember your baptism you can no longer feel worthless. You’re a holy child of God. He is well pleased you, a member of his eternal family. You hold infinite worth. When you feel alone and remember your baptism you will know Jesus is not just at your side, he is in your heart. When you feel guilty because you did it again and you remember your baptism you will know that in God’s eyes are still holy in your perfect Savior.

And, when you face that temptation the next time and remember your baptism, you will find power to fight and win. Because you are connected by faith to the one who fulfilled all righteousness. You have the status of God’s perfect child. Your Father’s love for you is power to live the way he wants.

Maybe if we stop thinking of our baptism as just one more thing, we should think about more often but don’t, and start thinking of it as a path to joy, a way to crush feelings of worthlessness and loneliness and guilt and weakness in times of temptation, then meditating on what God did for us in those waters will become unforgettable for us.

Our Father is perfect. His children must be, too. And we are not. But his eternal Son, Jesus Christ, is. Him the Father loves; with him the Father is well pleased. In Jesus, our sins are gone and perfection is ours. It became your own when Father, Son, and Spirit worked in your baptism. Delight in your baptism. Because thanks to what God did for you there, it’s you he loves. It’s you who are his child. It’s with you he’s well pleased. Amen.