

January 4, 2009

Growing in Favor

Luke 2:39-52

Happy New Year! Today we begin a short series from the early life of Jesus. The children in their classes will discover how God prepares his people as they study the life of John the Baptist and his interaction with Jesus. For the next three weeks Bruce plans to share with us on the temptations of Jesus. My text today is Luke 2 the 52nd verse; ^{Lk 2:52} ***And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.*** It seemed fortuitous that this verse was my granddaughter's memory verse for Kindergarten when I was helping out with them in Florida. Helping her learn it I re-memorized it. Thank you so much for allowing Sharon and I that time away. What would it mean for you to *grow in favor with God and men*? Maybe we have here a good verse for a new year's resolution. I would like to still be growing in favor with God and men. This is a familiar phrase in Scripture. It was said of Samuel; ^{1Sa 2:26} ***And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the LORD and with men.*** Here Samuel's behavior is being contrasted with the rebellion of Eli's sons. The proverbs instruct; ^{Pr 3:3,4} ***Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them around your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favor and a good name in the sight of God and man.*** Mary was told she had found favor with God and the greeting caused her fear. Is being in favor with God a fearful thing? It can be. The majesty and power of God, his all encompassing call on our lives requires serious commitment from us.

Our word 'favorite' comes from 'favor' but favorite is not a very positive word in relation to family. Too many of us have either experienced not being the favorite, or of being the favorite and being resented by the rest of the family. This family problem is as old as the biblical story of Jacob and Esau. Yet here we are reminded that God is different. We are all called to grow in favor with God. He is big enough to have all of us as his favorite! Do you feel like one of God's favorites? When we think of being a favorite we often think of performance and good deeds. But amazing as it may seem, being God's favorite is not so much about us as it is about what he has accomplished for us. He loves you so much he became one of us, going even to the cross, that he might be the way for us to know him personally. We are his favorites! Our part is simply to accept or reject the grace Christ provides. What a loss to walk away from the love of God.

Knowing God as Father

This text covers all of Jesus' childhood in a few paragraphs. Obviously there is much we do not know about Jesus' growing up years. For instance this is the last mention of Joseph we have. Did Joseph die quite early, leaving Jesus' to take over more of the responsibilities for his mother and younger brothers and sisters? We are not sure. With so little information it is interesting what the scripture does mention about Jesus' early life. There were other books, 'gospels,' circulating that attributed rather flippant miracles to the child Jesus. One scholar notes about our text; "The focal point is not his precocious wisdom, noteworthy as that was." "Rather, Luke's focus is on Jesus' reference to God as "my Father" (v.49). This is the first recorded instance of Jesus' awareness that in a unique way he was the Son of God."

In the Old Testament there are rare references to God as Father. One of the most noteworthy is; ^{Psa 103:13, 14} ***As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.*** But it was primarily the teachings of Jesus that opened the way for us to see God as our heavenly Father. His intimate, trusting relationship with the Father undergirds all of Jesus' teachings. We can think of the Lord's Prayer which begins, *Our Father which art in heaven*, and of the story of the Prodigal son. Some call this wonderful story the story of the Prodigal Father because of the

extravagant love the father shows for his children. In today's passage we see that Jesus had this conviction of being God's Son very early in his life. Perhaps this is a witness to the example of Joseph as a good earthly father. He certainly seemed to know what a good father was like.

Understanding God as a "Father" may seem to indicate maleness. A few years ago in India while studying the creation stories we had quite a discussion about the **gender of God** with the Pastors and spouses. In the NIV it is clearly stated that in the beginning ^{Ge 1:27} *God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.* I made the point strongly that to be in the image of God is to be both male and female. Some disputed loudly. In the Hebrew it says, '*Adam*' *he created them.* So in their Telugu Bible it is simply translated, "man." Male and female comes in the next sentence about replenishing the earth. Our colleague Babu Rao pointed out that the true meaning of 'Adam' is mankind, inclusive of both male and female. Also it would be difficult for man alone to replenish, to; "*Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth!*" The gender of God is a problem for us in Canada today for different reasons. Modern English is losing the sense of the term 'man' being able to refer to 'mankind,' of 'he' being able to be inclusive language including 'she.' Women can feel left out by the use of the male pronoun. We need to rediscover a personal pronoun that is not gender specific, as 'man' was able to be used in the past. To merely make God an 'it' is not at all adequate. In the Scripture God has both male and female traits; is complete, is not simply a great power but is personal. We still lack a better pronoun than 'he.' Sometimes 'people' or 'person' is a helpful translation for mankind, as in our text today we could translate *Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people.* If that is a help use people.

There are many today who struggle with the concept of God as a father not only because they see it is a male picture of God, but because of the poor experience they had with their earthly father. In the novel, "The Shack," How does God first appear to the grieving father? As a black woman! This is because of his abusive father and the guilt and anger surrounding the concept of father for this man. Only after those feelings are resolved can God appear as a father to this man. Some of you may have had this experience, maybe your earthly father was someone you could never measure up to. If this is the case God as Father may not be a helpful concept for you to understand the nature of God. Yet for many God pictured as a woman may be revolting to others. They may not be able to get beyond that page. This is probably the most controversial part of the book. Does it suggest that some of us may have restricted God to simply a white bearded mighty yet benevolent father in heaven or a mother figure? Even if you had a good father to pattern your life after, we should realize Jesus was not limiting God to the limits of us human 'Fathers.'" He knew the transcendent power of God better than that. Yet, Jesus clearly used the concept of father in a very positive way. He had a special relationship to God that could be best expressed in human terms by reference to our relationship with a good father. I think it is likely that Joseph was such a father to Jesus, and it calls us to aspire to such fatherhood.

Knowing Jesus was truly one of us!

It may not be important to you that Joseph may have had a part in helping Jesus understand God as his father. This little nugget of wisdom coming so early in Jesus' life says to many that Jesus simply had special divine memory of his time with God in heaven before coming to the earth. We are challenged to understand what Paul meant when he wrote; ^{Phil 2:5,-7} *Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing....* The Greek word there means emptied, in becoming man Jesus was emptied of his divine nature. The ancient confessions affirm Jesus as truly God and man. Of course we humans have trouble holding this together. The carol "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," says of Christ; "veiled in flesh the Godhead see; hail the incarnate Deity, pleased as man with man to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel..." The question for us today is how empty did Jesus empty himself of his Divinity when he became man? Sometimes I think we are tempted to see him as having some kind of a Divine trump card

in his back pocket that he can whip out and use when human wisdom or strength is not enough. I want to challenge that attitude. Scripture clearly suggests that Jesus truly became one of us. In today's passage we have; that he *grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people*. This suggests that he learned and grew like you and I have to learn and grow. I think he knew what it was to fail at school, to not be the first chosen on the sports field, to hit his finger with the hammer as he learned carpentry with Joseph.

In the next few weeks Bruce will be leading us through Jesus' struggles with temptation. Clearly scripture tells us Jesus was *tempted in all ways as we are*, (Heb. 4:15), and ^{Heb 5:8} *Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered*. Jesus knew what it was to unjustly be blamed, to take the punishment for others, in fact he took the punishment we deserved! As the Prophet Isaiah foretold; ^{Isa 53:5} *... he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed*. He could win our salvation because he really did become one of us and in our flesh defeated sin and Satan. When we see Jesus in these human terms he inspires us of what God can accomplish through a man or woman who loves him with *all his heart soul mind and strength*.

In my December service at Pemmanic Lodge, Islay Arnold came along to visit her friends at Pemmanic. We shared what made Christmas special for us and what we found hard about Christmas. We talked about how the first Christmas was not perfect either. Islay mentioned how difficult it was for her to experience the dependency that comes with age, Islay is 95 years young, and losing her sight! When Islay mentioned her struggle with dependency we were reminded how God had come as a child, dependant as a baby, vulnerable in a dangerous world. How amazing the God of all Creation would willingly place himself in such jeopardy because he loves us so. Scripture says it best; ^{Jn 3:16} *For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life*. So often we feel that hard things ruin Christmas, but in another way grief, loneliness, sickness, and even fear can point us to the true meaning of Christmas. They remind us we need a Savior. Christ came precisely because he knew we would need grace, forgiveness and the hope of a life of eternal joy in his presence. Sandra Ricketts, a past CBM missionary to India sent us a wonderful quote from the book "He loves Me," by Wayne Jacobsen. Wayne wrote that the disciples were in the physical presence of God, but were completely unaware of it. They were expecting the Messiah to be empowered by God as was Moses, but not that God would really take on human flesh. "So God disguised himself first as a baby, and finally as a young man walking the hills of Galilee. For the first time since he walked the garden with Adam and Eve, God was among people the way he had always wanted to be. People with broken lives were drawn to him, not repelled. Now God could experience the relationship he had always wanted with his people."

So we are called to live each day in close relationship to the Spirit of Jesus in us, sharing life with him and letting him reassure us in the hard times, that we are one of his favorites! ^{Nu 6:24-26} *"The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace. May the smile of the heavenly Father inspire you to joyful service this year! May you grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people.*