

January 8, 2017

Matthew 3:13-17:

“How Can I Please God?”

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And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased (Matthew 3:16-17)."

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A pastor tells a story that I would like to share with you this morning:

During a Sunday morning service in St. Joseph, Missouri, a few years back, I asked the congregation how many of them really want to please God more than anything else. Every hand went up. Then I asked them, "How many of you think God is really pleased with you?" Out of at least 400 people, one 11-year-old boy and one 10-year-old girl raised their hands. That was all.

Now, please don't raise your hands, but consider it: How many of you think God is really pleased with you? Whether you answered "yes" or "no," why do you think that way? After a little thought, it all seems to boil down to one question: **"How Can I Please God?"**

The truth is that if pleasing God is based upon our performance, we are all in big trouble. God's standard is perfection, and no goodness on our part can ever compensate for our sins. When it comes to unbelievers Jesus says, ". . . unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins," and it says in Revelation 21:8 that ". . . their part will be in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone . . ." And every Christian confesses with Paul, ". . . when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand . . . who will deliver me from this body of death? . . . with my flesh I serve the law of sin (Romans 7:21-25)." The apostle Peter writes, ". . . the righteous is scarcely saved (1 Peter 4:18)." And it is written in Leviticus 11:44, "you shall be holy, for I am holy."

Because we want to be holy and do what is right, we Lutheran Christians are inclined to internally beat ourselves up even when we outwardly do what appears to be very fine works because we are acutely aware of the fact that our best works are always touched by self-centered motivations. Our love for neighbor and God is always ruined by our selfishness. Then, there are the downright evil things that are manifested in our lives and are constantly brought to light through God's Word. "Is God pleased with me? How can he be?" we say to ourselves. The danger of this is that we end up in endless despair and terror before God. However, what is good is when the question **"How Can I Please God?"** ceases to be a search for a list of things to do, and turns into a repentant plea and begging for help because we conclude that it is impossible for us to do it.

You might remember that in Matthew 19:25-26 it is recorded that the disciples asked Jesus "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at the disciples and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." There are three thoughts from that statement that really hit home. First, salvation is not something that we can do in any way shape or form. Secondly, there is great news that God can do it. And thirdly, we have a hard time accepting that it is entirely left to God.

When it says in Scripture, “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one (Romans 3:11-12),” every mouth is shut and everyone is held accountable before God. It is here that the impossibility of doing anything to save ourselves is finally realized. If God doesn’t do something for us from start to finish, this is the way we will forever be - “worthless” - even if we are given infinite time to work on our performance and try to become perfect. Again, Jesus says that salvation is impossible if left to us. And if you don’t know and believe that, you will never be able to begin to appreciate what God has really done for us by sending his one and only Son.

And that brings us to the Baptism of Jesus. **“How Can I Please God?”** By now, I hope we know that none of us can. Only when you understand and believe that truth can you appreciate the words of our gospel lesson for this morning. When Jesus, who is without sin, is baptized with a baptism that is designed for sinful humanity, there are two things that hit the heart. First, he is perfect and the only human being who isn’t worthless. Being the Son of God, his worth is of eternal value. Secondly, by being baptized with a baptism for sinful humanity, he is taking the status of worthless even though he is not. Combine these things together and you begin to realize that Jesus is living a perfect life for us, and he is taking our worthlessness from us that we might become valuable. Since he is the eternal Son of God, what he does in his humanity is of eternal value, and it is able to reach us and open heaven itself. All of this and more causes the Father to say, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”

All those who believe in the Son of God made flesh, and everything that he has accomplished, including his Baptism in the Jordan river, will be counted as pleasing in the sight of God. **“How Can I Please God?”** I can’t, but Jesus has pleased him, and God is truly pleased with whoever believes. As it says in Hebrews 11:6, “. . . without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and rewards those who seek him.” Now wait a minute! Does this mean that faith is something that we do to please God? We have already said that “no one seeks for God.” Is it true then to say that even our faith must be given to us? The answer is “yes.”

Do you remember what the people said to Jesus the day after he fed them with the five barely loaves and two fish? They said, “What must we do, to be doing the works of God?” And then the apostle John writes that Jesus answered them saying:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent . . . I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.

Yes! Even believing is a gift from God and his work. “I believe” is the echo of the heart upon the command of God to believe. As it says in another place: “for it is by grace that you have been saved

through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).” And when we become Christians and want to do what is right, even though the flesh is weak, this too is the work of God. As Paul tells us, “we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10).” It is God who equips us “with everything good that you may do his will, working that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever,” it says in Hebrews 13:21.

It all comes down to a little word called “grace,” which we define as “God’s undeserved love.” God owes us nothing, but he gives us everything. He didn’t have to do that, but he does. Why then would anyone wish for a list of things that we must do to please him when it is his good pleasure to be pleased with us through his one and only Son? Why should anyone who is nothing and has nothing apart from God argue with him about the source of faith or its preservation? What works are there to do except for those works that are in keeping with love as he is love? And how can anyone do such works of love apart from him who is the source of all love? Let it be enough for us to trust as Paul trusted (Phil. 1:6): “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott