

One of the most striking things about today's texts is how they set *Samuel* and *Jesus* side by side as those who grow in stature and in favor with God and men. The Bible makes many connections like this: the first Adam and the second Adam, Jesus as a new Moses giving instructions on a mountain, Jesus as David's conquering son. But if that phrase describing Samuel in 1 Sam. 2:26 hadn't reappeared to describe Jesus in Luke 2:52, it might have taken us a bit longer to match up Jesus and Samuel, and we'd be missing out.

We don't know very much about Jesus' childhood after His birth, aside from a few moments like the one in Luke 2:41-51. We have great detail surrounding His birth, long accounts of His ministry, and a major focus on His passion, but we don't know much about Jesus' childhood. Because of this link, though, we do have a point of reference. What was Jesus like growing up? Kinda like Samuel.

Both boys had surprising birth stories: Samuel's mother Hannah was barren, Jesus' mother Mary was a virgin. Humanly speaking, neither birth should've happened! They're both miracle babies. And both Hannah and Mary were singers: Mary's *Magnificat* is in many ways a remake of Hannah's song in 1 Sam. 2.

Both boys had parents who went to the temple each year to offer sacrifices, and so they were shaped by godly examples of faithful worship. Both boys also had a special connection to the temple: Samuel was dedicated to God and went to live and minister at the temple as soon as he was weaned, and as we heard from Luke's gospel, Jesus considered the temple to be His Father's house. It was more important to Him to be seeking God at the temple than to go back home after the Passover feast, much to Mary's dismay! Both boys grew up with a special connection to God and God's house that was even more important than their connection to their biological families.

Both boys also grew up during a time when things at the temple were not going well, and so God raised them up and grafted them into temple leadership to replace the unfaithful priests who were leading at the time. Samuel replaced Eli after his faithless sons refused to listen to their father's rebuke, and Jesus replaced the whole temple system after the Jewish leaders wouldn't listen to Him.

There are differences, of course. Samuel lived at the temple and served as a priest; Jesus returned home to Nazareth to grow up there. Samuel found and anointed Israel's king; Jesus Himself *is* the Anointed One, the King of Kings. Samuel offered many sacrifices; Jesus offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrifice. Samuel was a faithful servant in God's house, Jesus is the faithful Son over God's house. Samuel was a man used by God; Jesus is God become man.

But the similarities are instructive, and so Scripture summarizes their childhoods much the same way: they grew in stature, and in favor with God and man. Luke's addition of "wisdom" doesn't mean that Samuel wasn't wise, or didn't also increase in wisdom, but perhaps the addition highlights the special glory of Jesus. But the heart of the comparison is that as these boys grew up, they lived in ways that were increasingly pleasing to God and man.

The phrase "growing (or increasing) in favor with God" troubles some people. Isn't God's favor like an on/off switch, not a dimmer switch? Doesn't justification by faith alone mean that how I live doesn't affect what God thinks of me? It takes careful thinking to be able to put the pieces together.

But the bottom line is that while *how you live* does *not* determine your justification, your justification is not the only thing that pleases God! Justification is that on/off switch: you are either justified or not! And that declaration of justification is not based on your performance; it is based entirely on what Jesus has done for you. This means that you cannot be more justified than you already are.

Now, you cannot be more justified than you already are, but you can please God more than you already do. And in line with 1 Sam. 2 and Luke 2, I think *childhood* gives us the best illustration. If the theology is tripping you up, just think of it this way: parents love their children not because of what they do, but because of who they are. Your children are your children, and they cannot be more or less your children. Even when they mess up, you still love them!

But we all know what it's like to be pleased or displeased by a child that we love, or to please or displease our parents! Good behavior and evidences of maturity are pleasing. Sinful and immature behavior is displeasing.

But here's the important thing: a parent's pleasure or displeasure in his children flows out of his love for them, not the other way around! We don't say, "I'm so pleased with you that I'll be your Dad today." But we might say, "As your Dad, I'm disappointed in the way you've been behaving, and since I love you, I'm going to discipline you." When God frowns at His disobedient children, He's still a loving Father, and they're still His children!

And don't miss this: when a child responds faithfully to a parent's discipline and instruction, this puts a smile on the father's face! That's what's happening with Samuel and with Jesus – as they grow and mature, their faithfulness is obvious to everyone, and *this pleases God*. And "growing in favor with God" isn't about justification or earning your salvation; it's about bearing spiritual fruit and demonstrating maturity in ways that please God more and more.

But our texts not only include *examples* of growing in favor with God; we also have a passage that *shows us how* to grow in favor with God! The book of Colossians begins with Paul's prayer for them in 1:9-14, where he prays that they "may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him: bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."

In other words, Paul is praying that they will grow in wisdom and in favor with God. And so in Col. 3:12-17, immediately following a section where Paul tells them what sort of attitudes and behaviors to put *off*, or put to death, we have these six verses which describe what growing in favor with God involves.

Verse 12 begins with a word that is normally used with reference to clothing, which is why some translations say "clothe yourselves" with compassion, and so on. And so I want you to think of the robe that Hannah would bring to Samuel each year in the temple, as well as the robe of righteousness that is spoken of in Isaiah and Revelation. Clothing yourself in a robe you have been given is nothing like works righteousness, or earning your salvation!

And so when Paul lists virtues and behaviors in Colossians 3:12-17, he isn't piling up works you have to do in your own strength to make God like you. He's listing your Christmas presents, and reminding you to put them on and not leave them in the closet! That's how you grow in favor with God: when God sees you enjoying His gifts, He is delighted!

And here are some of the gifts that God gives you in Christ: compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Forbearance, forgiveness, and, as the belt that holds everything together in perfect harmony, *love*. When you clothe yourselves in these gifts of God, then the peace of Christ rules in your hearts, and you have so much to be thankful for!

So how do you put on these gifts? V. 16 says, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom.” Consider the example of Jesus Christ, how compassionate He was to the sick, how kind to sinners, how humble and meek in submitting to His parents! Think about His forgiving spirit towards those who crucified Him! Remember God’s forgiveness towards you, His love in sending Jesus for you and in making you His children! Stock the closets of your heart with these things, and put them on at the proper time.

And do you realize what we’re doing when we sing? We are enriching one another with spiritual truths, sewing and tailoring robes of godliness for one another! Singing with one another is hugely important to Paul; maybe it should be more important to you. But not just singing: *whatever* you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him. That’s a life that’s growing in favor with God!

So first, give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, who grew in favor with God until God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name above every name! Glorify Jesus, because He is the one who makes it possible for sinners to become children of God! Sinners cannot please God, but God’s children can! Thank you, Jesus!

Next, realize from the lives of Samuel and Jesus that serving God takes priority even over the claims of the natural family. God wants you to love and bless your family, children, submitting to parents, parents, loving and caring for children, but growing in wisdom and putting on Christ are even more important than that.

One place where this touches our lives might come when we consider the great feasts of God’s people. It’s wonderful to see and enjoy family during Christmas, but Christmas isn’t a family holiday. Jesus considered it more important to be seeking God in the temple than being with His family at the holidays. Is that the case in your home? What might need to change to align your celebration with Jesus’?

Third, an exhortation for young men: Samuel and Jesus show us examples of preteen boys who spent their time seeking and serving God. Our culture doesn't expect much maturity from young men, but these passages teach us that even boys are capable of using their early years to grow in favor with God and man, and not simply "being boys". Young men, how can you be like Samuel? How can you imitate Jesus and His desire to find out more about God and His Word?

Really, that's the challenge for all of us: how is the Word going to dwell in you richly this next year? What's your plan for 2019? I've linked to more than a dozen different Bible reading plans on the Church Facebook page, and many of our ladies are deep into the Bible Reading Challenge. It's not too late to join, and the new year is a great time to reboot or start fresh.

And don't forget that one of the richest ways for the word to dwell in you is through singing. How will you put on Christ and grow in favor with God when it comes to singing this year? How about committing to sing here at church? For some of you, that would be a first step – doing your best not to be silent while others sing. Maybe that means *learning* to sing – what a great goal! God has commanded you to sing, so get better at it, for His sake! Or maybe it means adding singing to your personal or family worship, or learning five or six new songs in 2019, or even writing new songs! Paul wrote to the Colossians so that they would be fully pleasing to God, and to that end, he told them to sing. So sing!

After Christmas, the early years of Jesus' life were spent growing in favor with God. God has called you to follow in His steps, filled you with His Spirit, and has given you instruction from His Word so that you can do just that. Celebrating the birth of Jesus at Christmas leads into a life of growing in favor with God, so receive this Word today with thankfulness in your hearts.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*