

## GROWING IN WISDOM AND STATURE

### Luke 2:41-52 (see pg. 5)

This is a great text for ending the old year and ushering in the new. It's a story about growth in wisdom and stature and favor with God and men. It's also a somewhat difficult text: Jesus treads on the edge of disobedience to his earthly parents. He was "born under the law," Paul tells us, and the law includes the Fourth Commandment, which is: "*You shall honor your father and mother.*" His remaining in Jerusalem without telling them and causing them a great deal of worry could be considered disobedience. But Jesus was "without sin," so that's impossible. It seems like a conundrum, but over the years I've found that Scriptural problems like this one are treasures to be mined, because often in the Bible it's precisely where our human powers of understanding fall short that God's wisdom breaks through and teaches us something we never could have figured out for ourselves.

The first difficulty with the text that needs to be resolved is one of translation. The original Greek words in verse forty-nine (εν τοις του πατρος μου) can be translated "*in the house of my Father*" or "*in the things (the business) of my Father.*" Some translators take it one way and some the other. The NIV opts for translating it "house": "*Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house.*" This translation has certain advantages. First it answers the question of where Jesus was. Second, it makes the important point that whoever is involved in the Lord's work must honor and regularly inhabit the Lord's house. If Jesus, at the age of twelve, felt it necessary to be in God's house, then we should be there too—along with our children!

On the other hand, "*Did you not know that I must be about my Father's business?*" is probably a better translation and generates even richer applications for us. First of all, the expression "*my father's business*" was an Aramaic idiom for "*a man's work.*" At age twelve, a boy was considered to be ready to enter the adult world of work and responsibility, so he began working side by side with his father.

Therefore in using this expression Jesus is asserting his manhood, identifying God as his true Father, and describing the work to which he had been called. *Jewish male at His BARMISVAH: "Today I Am A Man."*

Now just stop and think of how that contrasts with our contemporary society! In first-century Palestine, the object of life was to grow up. In twenty-first century America, the object of life for many is to stay young! Their society respected maturity; ours worships youthfulness. In their society a twelve-year old boy aspired to take on adult responsibilities. In our society, 30-year old men still live with their parents. Sixty year old men and women try to recapture their youth by buying sports cars and wrinkle-removing creams and getting facelifts and hair transplants. The pursuit of eternal adolescence has become the goal of life for many Americans.

This vain pursuit of youthfulness proceeds from the assumption that the main goal of life is to be happy, and that all of our activities should be coordinated to bring that about. But that's not Christianity; that's hedonism, pure and simple—the continual pursuit of pleasure. True, the *Declaration of Independence* states that all men have a right to happiness and calls that right "God-given" and "inalienable"—and who wants to argue with the *Declaration of Independence*? Well, nobody's suggesting that the right to pursue happiness doesn't exist, right along with the right to liberty and the right to life. But having the right to life doesn't necessarily guarantee that we'll have a good life. And having the right to liberty doesn't guarantee that we will use our liberty wisely. And the fact that we have a right to happiness doesn't necessarily mean that happiness should be the main goal of our lives. The whole thing was put very well by a rabbi I once heard discussing parenting on a TV talk show. He had asserted that he demanded hard work and strict adherence to the rules from his own children. When the host asked if that didn't make his children unhappy, he responded like this: "*Our job as parents is not to raise happy children, but to raise responsible adults. Happiness,*" he said, "*is the icing on the cake. If you make a child industrious and responsible, he'll experience happiness along the way. But if you make the whole cake icing, it will collapse. Only a child will want to eat it—and it will make him sick if he does. There's a good Yiddish word that describes what we should raise a child to be: a mensch, a responsible adult.*"

The wisdom the rabbi was expressing was absolutely Scriptural. The purpose of life, from a Biblical point of view—Old Testament or New—is not to bask in happiness but to be productive in the work which the Lord has called us to do. If we dedicate ourselves to doing that, happiness may come as a byproduct. But if we put the pursuit of happiness and pleasure ahead of the work the Lord has called us to do, our joys will be fleeting and our pursuit will be in vain.

That, I believe, is what today's text is all about. The point of this story, and the point of Jesus' reply to his earthly parents, is that there is a time for us all to grow up. Just as we are designed by God to grow physically, emotionally and intellectually into adults, we are intended to grow spiritually into adults as well. As C. S. Lewis once said, "*God isn't as interested in keeping us happy as He is in our growing up.*" And the way we grow is by being "*...about our Father's business.*" Paul says that when we were spiritual infants, we were fed on spiritual milk, but there is a time for us to move on to solid food. The problem is that growing spiritually—like all other forms of growing—means experiencing growing pains. We don't grow by pursuing happiness; we grow by dealing with adversity. Luther once said that a Christian grows through three activities: prayer, study and struggle. Prayer, study and struggle in a life based on faith in Jesus Christ are enterprises that are empowered and blessed by God. That means, among other things, that we should never construe the presence of adversity in our lives as evidence that God is absent. God not only allows us to experience adversity, sometimes *he even sends it* so that we can grow in our faith. He leads us through the valley of the shadow just as he leads us beside still waters. He prods us forward with his rod just as he holds us back us with His staff.

How does this all play out in our Christian lives? Well, first of all, being about the Lord's business usually cuts into our secular activities, and our secular activities usually seem more pressing to us than being about the Lord's business. How many days have there been when you simply haven't found the time to pray? To avail yourself of the greatest power that you can possibly bring into your life? How often have you been too tired for an evening devotion with your family—or just given up having them at all? More often than not, "being about the Lord's business" forces us to make a choice—a choice we have the opportunity to make on almost a daily basis.

Being about the Lord's business never seems to integrate conveniently with our priorities. Have you ever failed to attend Sunday worship or Bible study because you had more important things to do? What might those have been? Were they really more important than growing in faith and wisdom and stature?

Third, the way things are going in the world—and in our own society as well—the time may come when you will be faced with a choice between remaining obedient to earthly authorities like government, employers or parents—or being obedient to God. For the most part we've been spared having to make this choice so far in our country, but times are changing. Increasingly the courts are restricting the free exercise of religion. Somehow they keep managing to find that while all kinds of blasphemous art and vulgar language are protected under the first amendment and therefore allowable in the public arena, religious expression is not. Employees in both the public and private sectors have been fired for displaying Christian messages in their work spaces. Hopefully this will not happen to you, but it could. When the law of man conflicts with the law of God, we must obey God rather than man. Easier said than done.

In order to mature in your faith, and to grow in wisdom and stature under God's tutelage, you will find yourself repeatedly faced with various forms of the same basic choice: the choice between picking up your cross and climbing the hill of prayer and study and struggle, or picking up your bottle and languishing in a milk-fed faith which is always looking for the next mountaintop experience, the next "spiritual high." Neither the choice nor the struggle that follows the right choice is easy.

Still, we can make the right choice if we consider the path our Savior marked out for us. As today's Gospel lesson states, Jesus was able to remain in subjection to all earthly authority, including his parents, yet be about the work, the business of his Father. He also continued to grow throughout his life in wisdom, in stature, and in favor before God and men. And so can we if we avail ourselves of the forms of nourishment that God has provided—worship, prayer, the study of His Word, Christian fellowship, the sacraments and daily devotions. If we

put ourselves on a diet of adult spiritual food, it will supply us with all the nourishment we need to grow.

So as we enter another year in the Kingdom of God, let's continue to tread the path laid out for us by our Dayspring from on high, our bright morning star, the author and perfecter of our faith. Like Jesus, let us be about our Father's business. And as we begin, we can take heart from the words of the song we sang on Christmas Day"

All you, beneath your heavy load, by care and guilt bent low,  
Who toil along a dreary way with painful steps and slow,  
Look up! For golden is the hour, come swiftly on the wing; The Prince  
was born to bring you peace—of Him the angels sing.

Amen.

### **Luke 2:41-52 The Boy Jesus at the Temple**

<sup>41</sup> Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. <sup>42</sup> When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. <sup>43</sup> After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. <sup>44</sup> Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. <sup>45</sup> When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you."

<sup>49</sup> "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" <sup>50</sup> But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

<sup>51</sup> Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. <sup>52</sup> And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.