

“Applause Break: The Value of Godly Parents” – Luke 2:22-24

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

Take your Bible (or the one in the pew) and meet me in Luke 2...

Yesterday David Platt, the former president of the International Mission Board that your Lottie Moon dollars go to, preached a sermon at the CROSS Conference. It was from the book of Revelation and it was 50 points long. When I first read that online, I thought I was reading satire. But, sure enough, it was true. People were even live tweeted all fifty points. The gauntlet has been thrown down for the new year. Challenge accepted. I feel a 51 point sermon brewing somewhere inside me. But not today. You're welcome.

Today we have much more modest agenda. This holiday season we have been working through a series exploring the biblical songs that surrounded the first Christmas. There are four of them, each found in the Gospel of Luke. The final two occur after the birth of Jesus, so we saved them for after our celebration of Christmas, hence the reason this series has carried into the new year. We have examined the first three songs, which means there is one remaining. We actually won't get to the final song until next week.

Think of this series as a concert and Luke as our skilled conductor. At just the right moment, the lights dim and the first song begins. We hear the beautiful voice of a young girl. It's Mary. And her song is "The Magnificat." Next comes a much deeper voice. It's almost operatic. "The Benedictus" is the song and the old Zechariah carries the tune. Then comes the third song. It starts as a voice, an angelic voice, that eventually swells to a chorus of "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." The curtains draw. The crowd erupts in applause, "*glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen*" (Luke 2:20). But just when they thought the evening could not have been any more delightful, the curtains part, and Luke and his musicians take the stage again. It's an encore. "The Nunc Dimittis." That's Luke 1 and 2. And that's this sermons series.

Song 1: *The Magnificat* (Mary's Song)

Song 2: *The Benedictus* (Zechariah's Song)

Song 3: *Gloria in Excelsis Deo* (The Angels' Song)

Applause Break: The Value of Godly Parents

Song 4: *The Nunc Dimittis* (Simeon's Song)

Today, then, we find ourselves in the applause break. The text we will consider is what sets the stage for the final song. It's tempting for most readers to skip over these four verses in haste, but if we linger we will see something applause worthy. We see a glimpse of the righteousness of Jesus' earthly parents, Mary and Joseph. We are encouraged to celebrate the influence of righteous parents. And that's what I want to talk to you about today—the value of godly parents.

To that end, let's read the text. In the first verse Jesus is a week old. In the following verses, He is a one-month old. Beginning in Luke 2:21, I invite you to follow along. This is God's Word...

“And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by

the angel before he was conceived in the womb. ²² *And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord* ²³ *(as it is written in the Law of the Lord, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’)* ²⁴ *and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.”*” (Luke 2:21-24)

There are certain things that accompany the birth of a baby. We just read of several tasks that were connected to the birth of every firstborn male child in a first century Jewish household. In a twenty-first century American household there are things that must be set in order when a child is born as well. Maybe someone throws the expecting family a shower. The car seat has to be installed. The house childproofed. The hospital bag packed and at the ready. The initial visit to the pediatrician. The list goes on and on it seems.

One of the more pleasant preparations we made when my wife was pregnant with Asher was planning out the decorations for his room. We considered several options. All the sport themes were vetoed. Eventually we settled on a hot-air balloon theme. With the help of Allison’s parents, a line was painted across the room. The bottom half was an earthy tone and the top half a shade of blue to signify the divide between earth and sky. Then with some clear wire we hung up all of these beautiful hot-air balloon replicas. They were fancy (and way too expensive). When the fan would blow, they would sway above the skyline. We even had different sizes to create the appearance of distance. It was really quite amazing.

The decorating of a nursery can be quite enjoyable. We do it as an act of love for a child. But in the end it’s rather inconsequential. The child doesn’t really need that, let alone the attention to detail we invest over to the task. The most important things a parent can do for a child are spiritual. I was reminded of this truth a couple times in recent weeks. On one occasion, I was talking to my son about his first room when it occurred to me that he might not remember it. So I described it in even greater detail than I have for you. Did he remember? Nope! He spent his first years in that room, but couldn’t tell you a thing about it. All the hours and money and sweat equity put into that room and it might as well have been an unpainted drywall and a cot.

Another reminder came through the word of a child from a different family. We were reminiscing together about when this child first started to understand some of the truths of the Gospel. After all the hours spent in church, the moments that came to this child’s mind were not really church related. Instead they were the spiritual conversations with mom. The specificity of detail for those memories were the most accessible because those memories were the most impactful on this child. The spiritual conversations with mom were still reverberating all these years later. Why? Because the most important things we can do for our children are spiritual. They won’t remember the cute onesies, the wall of decorations in the nursery, how much bling was on their car seat, whether or not they had new toys or hand-me-downs...But there is a high likelihood that they are going to remember those spiritual conversations with mom growing up. They will remember more of those moments than we would expect. They will not soon forget those nights sitting on dad’s lap asking questions about God after a Bible reading as a God-consciousness begins to emerge in their little hearts. These are important moments that can shape the trajectories of the spiritual lives of our children for a very long time, even a lifetime.

Pretty much everything we know about Jesus’ childhood we learn from the opening chapters of Luke. Yet most of these chapters describe what the parents were doing on the child’s behalf. A couple of times along the way Luke interrupts to tell us that it is impacting the child Jesus. In 2:40, for example, we read,

“And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.” (Luke 2:40)

Similarly, Luke chapter 2 ends with these words,

“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” (Luke 2:52)

What was it that cultivated in this young Jesus wisdom and stature before God and man? There were, no doubt, many contributing factors. But unmistakably one of them was His righteous (earthly) parents—Mary and Joseph. The righteousness of these two people entrusted with nurturing the Son of God is seen primarily in their obedience to the commands of God. Several examples can be detected. Let’s consider them under two headings. First...

They Obeyed God’s Special Revelation (The Instruction of the Angel)

Back in chapter 1, an angel by the name of Gabriel appears to Mary and announces that despite her virginity she would conceive a child. This was disconcerting to her, but she believed God (1:29-38). Not surprisingly, Joseph initially believed that his pregnant betrothed had been unfaithful, so he planned to divorce her quietly so she would not be exposed to greater shame because, the Bible says, Joseph was “*a righteous man*” (Matthew 1:18-25). Eventually an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, informing him that the child was conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit (1:20). But that dream didn’t come immediately. I remember reading an imaginative retelling of the scene by Jon Bloom that introduced some new questions I hadn’t really considered.

“Have you ever wondered why God sent the angel to inform Mary that she would conceive the Messiah by the Holy Spirit, yet forced Joseph to agonize over what to do about Mary’s pregnancy before sending the angel to him? Imagine what those throbbing, awkward hours [or weeks] must have been like for him...God chose Joseph for his role just as he chose Mary for hers. But he dealt with them differently. He could have told them both in advance about Jesus, but he didn’t. He informed Mary but not Joseph. Then God allowed what must have been a horribly awkward conversation to happen. At that point, Joseph faced a very painful decision. And God did not rescue him from it immediately. He allowed Joseph to struggle in grief and bewilderment for a time.”¹

Perhaps there is a lesson in this for us, as Bloom explains,

“God will not spare us from all awkward and painful decisions. Neither will he spare us from all wrong decisions resulting from our fallen finiteness, even if they are made in integrity of our hearts. God has his purposes in all of these. But what we can trust him to do is faithfully give us correction and guidance we need at the time he deems right.”²

That’s what happened with Joseph. He weighed his options, chose a course of action, and was redirected in a dream. Yet despite the varying experiences of Mary and Joseph, their respective encounters shared at least one thing in common—they both conveyed the name of the child. Both Mary and Joseph were told independently that the child was to be named “*Jesus*.” Why Jesus? Because the name “*Jesus*” means “The Lord Saves” and, as Matthew 1:21 explains, “*he will save his people from their sins.*” What Luke tells us is that the young couple obeys God’s instruction and names the baby “*Jesus*” (Luke 2:21). This obedience is characteristic of the righteous. They do what God instructs. And that obedience had enduring consequences, not only on the child, but also on them as the parents. As one commentator explains,

“Could you imagine Mary and Joseph naming the baby with some other name? How would they teach Jesus to honor the Lord if they refused to honor God themselves? But because they obeyed God in naming Jesus, every time they called their son’s name, the name itself was a reminder of their following the Lord and a reminder of Jesus’s calling to save. Each time they called Jesus’s name, Mary and Joseph remembered the angel’s visit and God’s plan. Calling their son ‘Jesus’ reminds them God had visited his people.”³

What a blessing for them. What a blessing for Jesus. Godly parents are so valuable for a child and Jesus grew up under the tender influence of righteous parents. Not perfect parents, but those who made righteousness their chief pursuit. But their faithfulness is not merely seen in their obedience to the special revelation of God’s angel. It’s also evidence in that, second...

They Obeyed God’s Objective Revelation (The Law of God)

When we read through Luke 2 we ought to be struck by how often we are told that Mary and Joseph did something for their son in accordance with the Law of God. Five times, in fact, their obedience to God’s Law is explicitly referenced (2:22, 23, 24, 27, 39). What that shows us is that they were godly parents who sought to raise their child in a God-honoring way, which is to say their parenting was shaped by God’s written Word.⁴ We see a few examples of this in our verses today.

First, verse 21, tells us that “*at the end of eight days*” Jesus was circumcised. In other words, He received the sign of God’s covenant people, something that the Law of God prescribed. “This was the first shedding of his blood, in anticipation of the cross.”⁵ There are some beautiful lines in a poem called, “Upon the Circumcision,” by John Milton, that read:

He who with all Heav’ns hearaldry whileare⁶
Enter’d the world, now bleeds to give us ease;
Alas, how soon our sin
Sore doth begin
His Infancy to sease!⁷

The rite of circumcision within Judaism dates back to the days of Abraham. God promised to bless the children of Abraham to the ends of the earth. Abraham was commanded to circumcise his sons. “This was the sign of the covenant, sealed in blood”, explains Phil Ryken. “The fact that this sign was given to Jesus showed that as a true son of Abraham, he was one with his covenant people.”⁸

But Mary and Joseph’s obedience is also seen in the fact that they brought Jesus to the temple weeks later. This was done for two reasons, each connected their obedience to God’s Law. The first reason had to do with purification. Verse 22 tells us “*the time for their purification according to the Law of Moses*” had come. Leviticus 12 explains that when a child was born the mother would be considered ceremonially unclean for forty days (Leviticus 12:1-4). It doesn’t explain why, but the presumption seems to be that every child is born a sinner and thus the mother’s close contact with the child renders her unclean as well for a time.

Of course, this then raises a question: why must Mary go through these rites of purification when they child she bore was no sinner? He inherited none of the sin of Adam. He would commit no sin in His life. So why would the only guiltless human—with no original or actual sin—render His mother unclean? Well, the text never says that He did. What we do know is that the Law of God required for Mary to act in this way, so that is what she did. She obeyed. Perhaps this “association between Jesus and the need

for cleansing was an early clue that one day he would be the bearer of our sin, as God made him ‘to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God’ (2 Cor. 5:21).”⁹

Notice though that verses 22 and 23 mention a second reason they brought Jesus to Jerusalem, namely, “to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the Law, ‘Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord’)...” Many of you in the Sunday school hour were learning about the Passover Lamb and the final plague—the death of the firstborn—that God brought upon Egypt to deliver His people. That historical event of the Exodus was actually the reason that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to the Lord in Jerusalem on that day. When God spared the firstborn of Israel, He laid claim on the firstborn as His own. God gave clear instructions for the Israelites to consecrate to Him every firstborn that breaches the womb, “both of man and of beast,” because, as the Lord says, they are “mine” (Exodus 13:1-2).

“With these words, God laid his rightful claim to the life of every firstborn son in Israel. Yet parents were still allowed to raise their own children. All they had to do was acknowledge God’s sovereignty by redeeming their sons with a sacrifice (Ex. 13:13–15), which was offered not long after they were born. When parents presented their children to God, they were setting them apart for his service.... Jesus already belonged to God as the Son to the Father in the Trinity. When he came to earth, however, he also belonged to God in obedience. From the very beginning of his life, he fulfilled all righteousness by keeping God’s law. The Bible says, ‘When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law’ (Gal. 4:4–5). In his circumcision, Jesus received the lawful sign of the covenant. In his presentation, Jesus was consecrated to God, as the law required. Then all through the rest of his life, he lived in perfect obedience to the whole will of God.”¹⁰

And why did He do all of this? For our sakes and on our behalf. We are saved because He died on the cross for our sins and rose from the dead in victory, but all of that would have been for naught were it not for His perfect conformity to the Law of God. His active obedience was needed for our salvation. He fulfilled all the righteousness that we owe to God. And His earthly parents had a hand in encouraging that righteousness as they modeled it to Jesus, even now when Jesus was barely over a month old. They took seriously their obedience to God’s Word. God expects every parent to do likewise.

But I want you to notice one other thing we learn about Jesus’ parents in Luke 2—they were poor. It’s easy for us to miss, but verse 24 indicates that Mary brought with her an offering of two turtledoves or two pigeons (no partridge in a pair tree though). Ordinarily the law required a lamb and a dove or pigeon to be offered. But God made exception for the poor, allowing for the two birds to be offered up instead (Lev. 12:6-8). That Mary’s offering was heavy on the birds and light on the lamb suggests that she and Joseph were poor. Jesus was born into poverty, yet another reminder of the humility of His incarnation.

Let’s linger there for a moment and meditate. What does it mean that the Savior, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born into a poor family and grew up (at least for a while) in relative poverty and obscurity? Thabiti Anyabwile outlines in his commentary seven things that this fact may imply. I think his list is quite helpful, so let me share it with you. Christ’s poverty implies:

1. Poverty is not sin.
2. Poverty is not God’s disapproval.
3. Poverty does not prevent a person from worshiping God.
4. Poverty does not necessarily doom a person to poverty forever.
5. Poverty does not excuse unrighteousness.
6. Poverty is not shameful in and of itself.
7. Poverty is a cross that God entrusts to some people for a time.¹¹

In a different sermon, we could explore these in greater detail. Today, I can only relay a few insights. First, I believe Thabiti is correct,

“If some teacher or preacher tries to convince you that poverty is a sin, that poverty is God’s condemnation of you, that you have to give a certain amount of money to worship God, or that poverty excuses your sin, then do not listen to that teacher. Remember Jesus. Jesus and his family were poor, and none of those things were true of him. Jesus was not in sin. God the Father was well pleased with Him.”¹²

Now I’m not saying that poverty is easy. It’s not. Some of us grew up in poverty. It can be absolutely brutal. And it can introduce certain unique temptations into our lives, if it is our cross to bear. “But for many of us, that God shall place us in poverty is a grace that saves us when riches would destroy us.” Have you ever considered that? “We tend to think poverty is only a curse, but it may be God spares us things worse than poverty.”¹³ Listen to this biblical proverb:

“Better is a poor man who walks in his integrity than a rich man who is crooked in his ways.”
(Proverbs 28:6)

Similarly, Ecclesiastes 4:13 reads,

“Better was a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who no longer knew how to take advice.” (Ecclesiastes 4:13)

The Bible says things like this to us and yet we are so prone to despise or look down on the poor sometimes. Maybe not intentionally. But our prejudices assert themselves when we encounter poverty and we do our best to look the other way or imagine justifications for the poverty we see so as to excuse our own inaction. “If we despise the poor, we show we would have likely despised the boy Jesus himself. Our Lord was poor and has infused righteous poverty with dignity and holiness.”¹⁴

We also see our misplaced priorities in the amount of time we invest in acquiring physical wealth and the comparative little time spent in the pursuit of spiritual growth. How easy it is to acquire material riches at the expense of our impoverished soul. If we are not careful, our parenting may encourage the same outcome in our children. Do we spend more time investing in things that will lead to the “success” of our kids in the things the world deems “successful” or in sowing seeds that reap a spiritual harvest? Is it more important for our children to get the best grades in school or make the varsity squad than it is that we see them reading the Word and praying on their own initiative more this year than we did the last? What priorities characterize our hopes and prayers for our children? Are we teaching our children that while there is nothing intrinsically wicked about wealth, it may still be a person’s greatest trial in life? Do we teach them to pray the prayer of Agur—“*give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God*” (Proverbs 30:8-9)? If both poverty and riches have such temptations, we should beware of them both. But neither, in and of itself, need indicate God’s pleasure or displeasure with us.

In case this is not sinking in yet, listen to these penetrating words of J. C. Ryle:

“This is the portion that we ought to seek for our children. It is the best portion, the happiest portion, the only portion that can never be lost, and will endure beyond the grave. It is good to have over them ‘the hand’ of teachers and instructors: but it is better still to have ‘the hand of the Lord.’ We may be thankful if they obtain the patronage of the great and the rich. But we ought to

care far more for their obtaining the favour of God. The hand of the Lord is a thousand times better than the hand of Herod. The one is weak, foolish, and uncertain; caressing today, and beheading to-morrow. The other is almighty, all-wise, and unchangeable. Where it holds it holds for evermore. Let us bless God that the Lord never changes. What he was in John the Baptist's days, he is now. What he did for the son of Zacharias, he can do for our boys and girls. But he waits to be entreated. If we would have the hand of the Lord with our children, we must diligently seek it.”¹⁵

Are you willing, parents, to seek it all the more in the New Year? Are you willing to pray and pray and pray for the spiritual wellbeing of your children? Are you willing to pursue holiness in your own life with increasing vigor in the days ahead for the sake of your kids? This is your lot in life, parents. This is your calling. Don't waste it. Don't neglect it. Don't trade it away for some lesser pursuit. You have tremendous influence on your children. Don't squander it. Again Anyabwile has some wise words:

“Parents, righteousness—even in poverty—makes a huge difference in the lives of children. It's not about what we can give our children in material things but how we model for them faithful obedience in service to the Lord...If we give our children the treasure of the Scriptures, then we give them spiritual wealth for a lifetime and eternity. You may be thinking, *I'm a parent and I'm not righteous like Mary and Joseph*. I have more good news for you. While you yet breathe, you have opportunity to confess and repent of unrighteousness. You have opportunity to recognize your failings and sins. There's nothing like parenting to make us insecure about our inability. We all stumble in many ways in our parenting. Yet it is the nature of God to deal graciously with us—even parents who sin. There is no failing in our parenting life that Christ has not overcome if we will confess and repent of those sins and seek righteousness in Christ alone.”¹⁶

I also appreciate these words of Harriet Connor along the same lines:

“But the good news of the Bible is that there *is* one perfect parent: God. He invites us to stop being ‘grown-ups’ for a moment and to run to him like little kids. When we humbly confess our failings, God forgives us through the death of his perfect child, Jesus, and fills us with his Spirit to try again tomorrow. We aren't in control of our children's world, but our Father is. And he is working all things—good and bad—for the good of his children.”¹⁷

That's really good news, isn't it parents?

Jesus grew in wisdom and favor with God and man, in part, because he had godly parents. Not perfect parents. But parents who pursued the Lord. Parents who strived to obey the Lord and live consistent with His Word. May the same be said of us in the year ahead. Whatever kids God can put in our lives, even if they are not our own (even if we are not parents), let us leverage our influence to encourage them to seek first the Kingdom of God and God's righteousness. Let us remember that...

“we weren't meant to do this alone. Jesus invites all people—young or old, married or single—to become children of God through faith and to join his spiritual family. When we bring our nuclear family into God's big family of faith, we find spiritual brothers and sisters of all ages who can encourage and support us in the task of raising our children to know and live out their God-given purpose...We gradually [find our] confusion giving way to clarity, [our] guilt and fear to freedom, and [our] uncertainty to the confidence that comes from knowing our place in God's big picture. And that is good news indeed.”¹⁸

Let's pray...

¹ Jon Bloom, *Not By Sight: A Fresh Look at Old Stories of Walking by Faith* (Wheaton:

² *Ibid.*, 72.

³ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (CCE; Nashville: Holman Reference, 2018), 47-48.

⁴ “Sometimes Christians feel certain God has ‘told them’ something, but then they cannot square that personal ‘word’ with the Bible. In such cases we can be sure God has not told them such a thing. Mary and Joseph had the unusual revelation from the angel but also the ‘regular’ revelation of the Scriptures. They believe and obey God’s Word.” *Ibid.*, 48.

⁵ Philip Graham Ryken, “Nunc Dimittis” in *The Incarnation in the Gospels*, ed. Daniel M. Doriani, Philip Graham Ryken, and Richard D. Phillips (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 120-121.

⁶ “Whileare” means “Once, a while ago.”

⁷ Meaning “seize.” The full poem can be accessed as of the date of preaching at the following website: https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/upon_the_circumcision/text.shtml.

⁸ Ryken, 120-121.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

¹¹ Anyabwile, 49.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁵ J. C. Ryle, *Luke*, 1:33 (Anyabwile, 39).

¹⁶ Anyabwile, 50.

¹⁷ Harriet Connor, “Good News for Modern Parents,” accessed online as of the date of preaching at the following address: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/good-news-for-modern-parents/>.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*