

## **“Steps that Please the Lord”**

**Matthew 3:13-17**

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By the time Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart turned 22, he was already a world-renown pianist, violinist, composer and arranger. He had stunned audiences and critics alike in Salzburg, Vienna, Paris and beyond. You would think his father would have been pleased with him.

His correspondence with his father, however, indicates otherwise. After writing his father to announce that he had fallen in love with an acclaimed vocalist, Mozart received his father's reply: "now it rests entirely with you to raise yourself by degrees to one of the highest positions ever attained by any musician. This is a duty you owe to a kind Providence in return for the remarkable talents with which He has gifted you; and it depends wholly on your own good sense and good conduct . . . whether, infatuated with some pretty face, you one day breathe your last on a straw sack, your wife and children in a state of starvation, or, after a well-spent Christian life, die peacefully in honor."

Beethoven's father was no less demanding. In fact the world's most well-known classical musician was pushed relentlessly by his father to attain the heights of Mozart. His father held Beethoven's premier concert when the boy was only seven, and yet, because he felt his son was progressing too slowly, he told the audience Beethoven was but six. Although Beethoven committed six to eight hours a day to practice, his father, usually a good bit intoxicated at the time, would drag the boy out in the middle of the night and force him to repeat his lessons until dawn.

The fabulously rich and successful designer Ralph Lauren recently said in an interview that regardless of how famous and wealthy he becomes, he is unable to please his mother. When he was a child, his mother decided that he was to become a rabbi and Lauren says until he does so, he will be a disappointment to her.

On Wednesday nights, we are looking at the prayers of Ranier Maria Rilke, widely considered to be Germany's greatest twentieth century poet. Rilke, however, had no chance of every pleasing his mother, for the simple reason that he was a male. She had wanted a little girl so badly, she named her son Renee' Maria and treated him in every way as if he were a girl, until his father swept him from her misguided influence and sent him off to military school.

Flannery O'Connor was such a brilliant writer that today the Flannery O'Connor award is given every year to the best collection of short stories published in the United States. Yet Ms O'Connor's mother disapproved of her throughout her life. Regina O'Connor wanted her daughter to be a housewife who loved fashion, flowers and southern hospitality. Flannery wanted to be left alone to write and follow the solitary life of the extreme introvert she was. Her biographer commented on Ms. O'Connor's relationship with her mother in the following way: "O'Connor's formidable mother, was the model for a striking number of older, garrulous, smugly self-centered and self-righteous Southern women in O'Connor's fiction, several of whom come to rudely abrupt, violent ends."

Many people strive their entire lives to please their mothers or fathers and encounter nothing but frustration as their parents set impossible standards for earning their approval. Such folks would give almost everything they own to hear their non-nurturing parent say, "you are my beloved child, in whom I am well-pleased."

Jesus heard such words the day of his baptism. Rising out of the water, after being immersed by his own cousin, John the Baptist, the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus like a dove and Christ heard a voice from heaven tenderly say, "This is my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased."

What would you do to hear such words from God? I suspect that some of you would reply, "I don't have to do anything to please God. God loves me with unconditional love. Unlike the petty and cruel parents you just described, God doesn't withhold his approval. We are all pleasing to God."

I would surely agree that God loves us all with an amazing love and bears no resemblance to the parents I have described, but I would disagree with the concept that God is pleased with us all or pleased with any of us all the time.

Last week, Richard McCroskey a twenty-year-old man who describes himself as a rapper specializing in "horror core music", killed a teacher, pastor and two teenage girls as he stayed as a guest in their home. Do you think God was pleased with him?

There is a fairly sizable difference between loving someone and being pleased with him or her. I presume God loves Richard McCroskey as much as he loved Mother Teresa, but he is in no way as pleased with him.

A few weeks ago, my favorite grocery clerk took advantage of the time it took to check my groceries, to ask a question that she knew had pastoral implications. She said her mother was driving her crazy. "Ever since my father died," she explained, "my mother calls me three or four times a day and cries or complains or provokes me into an argument. I don't know why she does that, she never acted that way when my father was living. What should I do?"

"When did your father pass away?" I asked. "Three months ago." she said with some obvious perplexity.

"Sounds to me," I said with a good amount of genuine compassion, "that your mother is grieving. It takes about a year to get through the hardest part of grief."

"She did love that man." my favorite grocery clerk affirmed.

"How long were your parents' married?" I innocently inquired.

"Those two?" She looked at me like I hadn't been paying attention. "My mom and dad were never married. He had a nice wife. He and my mom loved each other forever, but they couldn't stand living with one another."

There, my friends, is the difference between loving someone and being pleased with someone.

As far as I can tell, Jesus and an unnamed servant in the book of Isaiah are the only two people in all of Scripture with whom God is said to have been well-pleased. God is said to be pleased with various acts of praise, compassion and service but only two people received the commendation of being pleasing to the Lord. Yet, the Bible says very clearly that God loves the whole world.

Karen attended a Lutheran gathering last Saturday at which the key note speaker said one of the difficulties the church has in reaching young adults is centered on the their sense of entitlement. Entitlement is the concept that we don't have to do anything at all in life because we are entitled to love, affirmation, support, financial resources, blessing, pleasure, success, a job, family, friends and freedom. The speaker noted that entitlement is the opposite of grace. God can't give us anything we don't deserve if we feel we are entitled to everything.

The only disagreement I have with the presenter at Karen's conference is that I don't think this sense of entitlement is restricted to young adults. I find it in the young and old. Yesterday, we parked cars on our lot for the Maryland football game. Ninety-nine per cent of the motorists parking on our lot followed directions beautifully as they put their car in the next available spot. One guy, about my age, however, refused to follow the direction of our volunteers and put his car up front under a tree. As I approached him, he rolled down his window and asked, "can I leave my car here?" When I told him no, that he would have to do what everyone else had done, he fired some insult at me and drove off. What made that man think that he alone deserved to put his car where it was most convenient to him while everyone else had to fall in line and park in order? Entitlement.

God, in his infinite mercy, has granted us divine love. That does not mean, however, that we are entitled to do whatever we feel like doing and still receive the affirmation of our Creator. God's entire creation is at stake here. The Lord desires that we love one another, forgive one another, keep our promises, tell the truth, share our worldly goods, live faithfully with our husbands, wives and children, resolve our differences peacefully, seek reconciliation with our enemies, be good stewards of the material resources given to us, live with consideration of our impact on this environment, respect our parents, share our faith with those whose faith is gone, visit the sick, feed the hungry, treat people of all races with respect and a host of other actions taught by Jesus Christ himself.

When John the Baptist balked at baptizing Jesus, the Lord replied, "Let it be so for it is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." "Righteousness," according to New Testament scholar W. F. Albright, "must be seen as the whole purpose of God for his people." Jesus, in other words, was baptized in an effort to fulfill God's whole purpose for his life.

By definition, having a purpose of our lives, means God prefers one set of behaviors over another, is pleased when he sees them in our lives and is displeased when they are absent. He loves us always, but his pleasure is connected to the way we live.

This truth can be overwhelming if we fail to remember that Jesus' baptism was simply the next step in a lifelong process of pleasing God. His baptism did not fulfill the whole purpose God had for his life; that would not occur until he died on a cross or rose from the grave depending upon your perspective. Baptism fulfilled God's purpose for Jesus on that day.

Rather than wonder whether we can fulfill God's entire purpose for our lives, we are far better off simply asking God for help to take the next step. What would it mean, in other words, for us to please God with this day. I believe we've taken a step in that direction by coming to church. God draws pleasure from our worship, praise, sincere confession and open hearts. You have pleased the Lord who loves you by coming here today.

Are there other steps to be taken? If you have never asked Christ's spirit to come into your life, forgive you of your sins and empower you to live for God, that might be the next step for you. When this next hymn is sung, come down and say, you want to accept Christ as your Savior and Lord.

Have you already done that? Maybe the Lord is waiting on you to take the step of baptism. We know Jesus pleased God when he was baptized, the same will be true of you. Come forward during this next hymn or stop me in the foyer and let me know you want to follow Christ in baptism.

If you've already been baptized, the next step for you might be to join this church. I believe this church can help you live a life that pleases God. Move out during the next hymn and come tell me you are ready for church membership.

For the rest of us, the steps God wants us to take are as varied as each individual's journey of discipleship. Most of us will heed the call to take communion in a few minutes. To remember the Lord's death through the sharing of the bread and cup is a beautiful step of faith that pleases the Lord.

I've attended about a thousand little league games in my time. In almost every game there is a kid who is trying to earn the love and affirmation of a dysfunctional parent. When he gets up to bat, he's nervous, feeling the pressure, not just to do well but to capture the love of his mom or dad. Usually the kid, because he is so tense, will strike out or make some other mistake and the parent will yell and grumble at the hapless child.

There are also a lot of kids who show up and feel entitled to play in the game. They can't catch, throw or bat but believe that since they are alive, they are entitled to play any position they desire. Oftentimes these kids won't come to practice, they won't play catch in the neighborhood or do anything else to build their skills, they just show up and expect to get whatever they want. If the coach should say, "no you haven't worked hard enough to play that position, I'm going to put Sheila there because she works hard," those kids will yell "mommy" or "daddy" and demand that their parents get them what they want.

At every game, however, there is also a kid whose parents love her immensely and whom she loves in return. She goes to the batters box thrilled to be in the game. She turns to the stands where her parents wave and shout encouragement to her and then she faces the picture with great resolve. She may get a hit or strike out, either way, she will try with all her might, not to earn her parents love but in an attempt to please the parents who already love her more that she can possibly comprehend.

We are to be like that third set of children. Thrilled beyond words to be living this life, assured of God's deep and eternal love and possessed by an immense desire to please the One who loves us more than we can possibly comprehend.

What is the next step in our lives that will be pleasing unto God? Let's pause to ask that question to the Lord who loves us with an unchanging love and then respond with hearts yearning to please our Savior and Lord.