

To Be Pleasing *to* God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Luke 15:11–32, Zeph. 3:17, Eph. 5:25–28, Isa. 43:4, Rom. 8:1, Rom. 5:8, Mark 9:17–29.*

Memory Text: “The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing” (*Zephaniah 3:17, NKJV*).

Imagine the following scenario: a five-year-old child comes to his father with a poorly wrapped gift on Father's Day. Excitedly, he hands the gift to his father.

Imagine that the father says, “Son, I do not care about your gift. After all, there is nothing you could give me that would please me. Anything you could give me, I could get for myself, and anything you give to me was either bought with my money or made from materials that I paid for. So, keep your gift. I do not need it or want it. But I love you, anyway.”

Ouch!

What do you think of this father's reaction? Such words as *heartless*, *cold*, and *unfeeling* come to mind. Is this the way God responds to us? Can we actually be pleasing to God? Hard as it is to imagine, even we as fallen beings, corrupted by sin, and prone to evil—yes, we can be pleasing to God! In other words, God does not look upon us, or the gifts that we bring Him, with the attitude of that father. On the contrary, we can be pleasing to God, but only through Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 18.

More Valuable Than You Can Imagine

As we saw in an earlier lesson, there is no one—even the worst sinner or worst evildoer—whom God does not love. And because God values people more than we could possibly imagine, He is displeased by sin because He loves us and knows what sin does to us, as well.

Read Luke 15:11–32. What does the parable of the prodigal son reveal about God’s compassion and love? What warning does it provide for those who, like the other son, remained home?

In this story that Jesus tells, the man’s son requested his inheritance early, effectively rejecting his father and his father’s household. The prodigal son then goes on to squander his inheritance and is reduced to poverty and hunger, envying pigs that eat from a trough. Realizing that the servants in his father’s house have more than enough food, he decides to return home in hopes of becoming a servant.

What follows is powerful. Some fathers would turn such a son away upon his return. “You took your inheritance and cut yourself off from my house. You no longer have a home here.” That would be a logical, even reasonable, attitude, would it not? In the eyes of some human parents, the son had gone too far to be accepted back home, especially as a son.

But, in the parable, the father (representing God Himself) does not respond in any of these ways. Rather, “ ‘when [the prodigal son] was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him’ ” (*Luke 15:20, NKJV*). Even though it was considered less than dignified in such times for the master of the house to run out to meet someone, the father in his great compassion ran out to meet his son and, more astonishingly, restored him to his household, even throwing a celebration in his behalf, signifying the great compassion of God for each wayward person and the delight He takes in even a single person returning home. What a picture of God!

Interesting is the reaction of the other son. Why was this reaction such a human reaction, based at least in part on fairness, and so understandable, as well? What, however, does his part of the story teach us about how human concepts of fairness don’t capture the depth of the gospel or of God’s love for us?

Rejoicing With Gladness

Hard as it is for us to imagine, God considers each person of incalculable value, which is why He rejoices over the salvation of even one soul.

Read Zephaniah 3:17. How does this verse shed light on the parable of the prodigal son?

Zephaniah 3:17 emphatically displays the delight of God over His redeemed people. Just about every word for joy and delight in the Hebrew language is packed into this single verse, descriptive of God's delight over His redeemed people. It's almost as if no one of the terms by itself is sufficient to describe the magnitude of God's delight on that day.

Notice, too, where God is according to this verse—in the “midst” of His people. The reconciliation that arises from the relationship of love comes with the immediate presence of God. Just like the father—when he sees the son afar off, he comes running—here God is in the midst of His people.

In Isaiah 62:4, similar imagery is couched with a marriage analogy. According to Isaiah 62:4 (*NKJV*), God's people will “be called Hephzibah,” which means “My delight is in her,” and the land will be called “Beulah,” which means “married.” Why? Because, the text says, “The LORD delights in you, and your land shall be married.” The very pinnacle of God's joy is reserved for the day of restoration, when He will receive His people and rejoice over us, even as the father rejoiced over his prodigal son.

Read Ephesians 5:25–28. What does this say about the kind of love we are also called to display?

This passage exhorts husbands to love their wives “just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her,” and to love their wives “as their own bodies” (*Eph. 5:25, 28, NKJV*). These texts not only highlight the kind of unselfish and sacrificial love a husband is to have for his wife but also show that Christ Himself loves His people (the church) *as part of Himself*.

Pleasing God?

How could it be that the God of the universe takes delight in mere humans, fleeting blobs of protoplasm on one tiny planet amid what is probably an infinite universe? How could it be possible that humans could matter so much to the Supreme Being, who is all-powerful and who needs nothing? These questions can be parsed into two aspects. First, how could God Himself be delighted? Second, how could humans bring Him delight, particularly given our sinfulness? The first aspect of these questions is the topic for today and the second for tomorrow.

Read Isaiah 43:4; Psalm 149:4; and Proverbs 15:8, 9. What do they tell us about God taking delight in His people?

As we partially saw yesterday, God can be pleased by humans because God loves people in a way that takes account of their best interests, as would anyone who loved and cared for others.

Conversely, God is displeased by His people when they do evil. Indeed, Proverbs 15:8, 9 teaches that, while the “sacrifice” and the “way” of the wicked are each an “abomination to the LORD,” the “prayer of the upright is His delight” and “He loves [the one] who follows righteousness” (*NKJV*). This passage shows not only that is God displeased by evil but also that He delights in goodness. It also puts divine delight and love in direct relationship with one another, showing the deep connection between God’s love and His delight, which appears throughout Scripture.

According to Psalm 146:8, “The LORD loves the righteous” (*NKJV*). Second Corinthians 9:7 adds, “God loves a cheerful giver” (*NKJV*). Notice, first, what these texts do not say. They do not say that God loves only the righteous or that God loves only the cheerful giver. God loves everyone. Yet, for these texts to convey anything at all, they must mean that God loves the “righteous” and the “cheerful giver” in some special sense. What we have seen in Proverbs 15:8, 9 provides the clue: God loves these and others in the sense of being pleased with them.

Think about how closely tied heaven and earth must be that God, the Creator of the universe, can be so intimately involved, even emotionally, with us. What hope should this amazing idea give you, especially if you are going through a hard time?

Living Stones

How is it that we, as fallen, sinful beings, can be pleasing to a holy God?

Read Romans 8:1 and Romans 5:8. What do these texts teach about our standing before God?

God bestows grace on people prior to any human response. Before anything we say or do, God reaches out to us and gives us the opportunity to accept or reject His love. As Romans 5:8 puts it, “God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (*NKJV*; compare with *Jer. 31:3*). And we can be reconciled to God and even pleasing in His sight, by faith through the work of our Redeemer.

Read 1 Peter 2:4–6 and compare it with Hebrews 11:6. What does this tell us about how we can be pleasing to God?

Without God’s intervention, fallen people are incapable of bringing anything valuable to God. Yet God, in His grace and mercy, has made a way, through the work of Christ. Specifically, “through Jesus Christ” we may “offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God” (*1 Pet. 2:5, NKJV*). Although “without faith it is impossible to please Him” (*Heb. 11:6, NKJV*), by the mediating work of Christ, God will “make” believers “complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (*Heb. 13:21, NKJV*). Those who respond to God by faith are accounted righteous in His sight through the mediation of Christ, whose righteousness alone is acceptable. And those who respond to God’s loving overtures are accounted worthy through Christ’s mediation (*Luke 20:35*), and He transforms them into His likeness (*1 Cor. 15:51–57, 1 John 3:2*). God’s redeeming work is not only *for* us but *in* us, as well.

Why is the idea of Christ mediating for you in heaven so encouraging?

A Worthy Goal

Under the umbrella of God's mercy and mediation, God takes pleasure in even the smallest positive response to His love. Through the One who alone is worthy of love and is Himself perfectly righteous, each one of us can be counted righteous and counted among God's beloved who will live with Him in perfect love for eternity. This is the great hope of the redemption, which involves Christ's work for us in heaven.

But, you might wonder, can this include even me? *What if I am not good enough? What if I am afraid that I do not have enough faith?*

Read Mark 9:17–29. How does God respond to the man in the story? How much faith is enough faith?

The disciples could not cast out the demon; all hope seemed lost. But Jesus came and told the father, “ ‘If you can believe, all things are possible to him who believes’ ” (*Mark 9:23, NKJV*). And the father tearfully replied, “ ‘Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!’ ” (*Mark 9:24, NKJV*).

Notice, Jesus did not say to the man, “Come back to me when you have more faith.” Instead his cry, “ ‘Help my unbelief,’ ” was enough.

Without faith, it is impossible to please God (*Heb. 11:6*), and yet Jesus accepts even the smallest faith. And by faith (through the mediation of Christ), we can be pleasing to Him. Through faith and because of Christ's work on our behalf, we can respond in ways that please God, similar to the way that a human father is pleased when a child brings him a gift that is otherwise worthless.

Thus, we should follow Paul's counsel to make it our goal to “be well pleasing to” God (*2 Cor. 5:9, 10, NKJV; compare with Col. 1:10, 1 Thess. 4:1, Heb. 11:5*). And we should ask God to transform our interests to include the best interests of those whom we love, and to expand our love so that it reaches out to others. “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality” (*Rom. 12:10–13, NKJV*).

If God accepts us through Christ, how much more should we accept others? What light does the command to love your neighbor as yourself (*Lev. 19:18, Matt. 22:39*) and the golden rule to treat people the way you want to be treated shed on this idea?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “ ‘Let Not Your Heart Be Troubled,’ ” pp. 662–680, in *The Desire of Ages*.

“The Lord is disappointed when His people place a low estimate upon themselves. He desires His chosen heritage to value themselves according to the price He has placed upon them. God wanted them, else He would not have sent His Son on such an expensive errand to redeem them. He has a use for them, and He is well pleased when they make the very highest demands upon Him, that they may glorify His name. They may expect large things if they have faith in His promises.

“But to pray in Christ’s name means much. It means that we are to accept His character, manifest His spirit, and work His works. The Saviour’s promise is given on condition. ‘If ye love Me,’ He says, ‘keep My commandments.’ He saves men, not in sin, but from sin; and those who love Him will show their love by obedience.

“All true obedience comes from the heart. It was heart work with Christ. And if we consent, He will so identify Himself with our thoughts and aims, so blend our hearts and minds into conformity to His will, that when obeying Him we shall be but carrying out our own impulses. The will, refined and sanctified, will find its highest delight in doing His service. When we know God as it is our privilege to know Him, our life will be a life of continual obedience. Through an appreciation of the character of Christ, through communion with God, sin will become hateful to us.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 668.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What might it mean to “unselfishly receive”? What do you think the relationship of giving and receiving will be like in heaven and in the new earth?
- 2 Coming from a distant part of the cosmos—farther perhaps than the James Webb Space Telescope’s most squinting eyes can reach—heavenly messengers referred to the prophet Daniel as *chamudot*, “beloved, desirable, precious.” And they did so three times. In Daniel 9:23, Gabriel says *ki chamudot attah*, “for you are greatly beloved.” In Daniel 10:11, a heavenly being (perhaps Gabriel again) calls him *ish chamudot*, a “man greatly beloved,” a phrase repeated to Daniel later (*Dan. 10:19*). Think about what it says about God and how close He is to us. What hope can you draw for yourself from this amazing truth?
- 3 How do the examples of the heroes of faith discussed in Hebrews 11 relate to the content of this week’s lesson? Specifically, what do such examples reveal about how one can be “pleasing to God” by faith? What can you learn and apply to your day-to-day life from such examples of faith and faithfulness?

The Thankful Deacon

By ANDREW MCCHESENEY

Jong-Moon Yoon is known as the thankful deacon. The first words out of his mouth no matter the circumstances is “thank you.” When someone asks for help, he says, “Thank you.” When he faces a conflict, he says, “Thank you.” When hardships and even losses beset him, he says, “Thank you.”

The deacon at a Seventh-day Adventist church in South Korea has taken to heart the words of the apostle Paul, who said in 1 Thessalonians 5:18, “In everything give thanks; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (NKJV). People have noticed.

Jong-Moon is the longtime owner of a café on a beach in Jeongdongjin, one of the most popular places to watch sunrises in South Korea, especially on New Year’s Day. Among his customers was Nanum. As a teenager, she occasionally dropped by the café to enjoy the sunrise over a simple breakfast of tea and a toasted sandwich with a fried egg, lettuce, and cheese. As she grew older, she got married and had a daughter, Azsa. The two became regular breakfast customers, and the mother was amazed at Jong-Moon’s thankfulness. When she placed an order, he said, “Thank you.” When she paid for breakfast, he said, “Thank you.” When she thanked him for the meal, he said, “Thank you.”

During one visit, she struck up a conversation and learned that he goes to church on Saturdays. She had never heard about people worshipping on Saturdays. “Can I come to church with you next Saturday?” she asked.

The next Sabbath, she and her five-year-old daughter accompanied Jong-Moon to his church, located about a 30-minute drive from his café. Church members warmly welcomed the mother and daughter, and they eagerly asked how they had learned about the church. She said she had come because of the thankful deacon.

After the church service, Nanum told Jong-Moon that she wanted to come again. “If this is a church that you attend, I will follow you,” she said.

Even though Nanum never heard the name of Jesus at the café, she saw Jesus through Jong-Moon’s thankful spirit. The gospel is not only spoken but also conveyed through a person’s life. Through Jong-Moon’s example, the young mother and her girl started attending church regularly. Now, she is praying that her husband will join them on Sabbath mornings.



Part of this quarter's Thirteenth Sabbath Offering will help spread the gospel in South Korea. Thank you for planning a generous offering on March 29.