

# THE PERFECT CHILD

Luke 2:40-52

Second Sunday after Christmas (Series C)

January 5, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 2, verses 40 through 52. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 2, beginning at verse 40, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>40</sup> And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.

<sup>41</sup> Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. <sup>42</sup> And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. <sup>43</sup> And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, <sup>44</sup> but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, <sup>45</sup> and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. <sup>46</sup> After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. <sup>47</sup> And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. <sup>48</sup> And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." <sup>49</sup> And he said to them, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**" <sup>50</sup> And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. <sup>51</sup> And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.

<sup>52</sup> And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

*Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

You may be seated.

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The theme of the day is humility and wisdom. Humility and wisdom are interconnected. No one wants to be humble. Everyone wants to be *considered* humble, but no one wants to actually *be* humble. This is a problem when it comes to wisdom, because everyone wants wisdom, but only the humble will ever receive it. The proud think they have nothing to learn, so they never do. The proud like to be in control and in charge, so they never submit to godly authority. Therefore, their wisdom and knowledge are limited to what they can figure out on their own, which for all of us, even the brightest among us, isn't much. Wisdom begins with humility, especially humbling ourselves before the Lord. "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom" (Ps. 111:10; Prov. 9:10).

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We heard a good example in the psalm (119:97-104), where the author expresses delight in the Word of God. He says,

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Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies,  
for it is ever with me.  
I have more understanding than all my teachers,  
for your testimonies are my meditation.  
I understand more than the aged,  
for I keep your precepts (119:98-100).

It actually sounds a little bit boastful, because he's talking about how he has more wisdom and understanding than his enemies, his teachers, and the aged. But if there's one thing we can boast in, it's the LORD (Ps. 34:2; Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Cor. 1:31; 2 Cor. 10:17; Gal. 6:14). The Word of God gives us greater wisdom than anything in the world can, and we should not be bashful about it. Any Christian two-year-old has more wisdom than a highly educated and experienced unbeliever. It doesn't matter how intelligent a person may seem; if they do not fear the LORD, and if they do not submit to the guidance of the Scriptures, they have not begun the path of wisdom.

Is it arrogant to say this? No. Because we do not claim to have figured out anything for ourselves. We know nothing. We are fools. But the LORD has revealed wisdom in his Word. If you fear the LORD, then you will submit to his Word, and you will have all wisdom. That fear and submission is not arrogance; it is humility. Humility admits that we have no wisdom or understanding of our own, so we must submit to the Word of God, and there we have all wisdom. It is a wisdom that will guide us through life, through death, and into the world to come.

The world fakes humility when they say, "You shouldn't be so certain about your religious convictions." But the alternative is trusting in the wisdom of man. Everyone has confidence in something. So will you have confidence in the wisdom of man or the wisdom of God? To have confidence in the Word of God is true humility and true wisdom.

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We have another good example in the Old Testament lesson. Solomon, the son of David, became king after his father's death, and he knew he needed help. The LORD appeared to Solomon in a dream and offered him a wish. Solomon could have asked for long life, great wealth, or power. But instead he asked for wisdom in order to govern the people of Israel. This took humility.

Have you ever daydreamed about what you would do if you were President of the United States? Most of us probably have. Or we've opined with like-minded friends about what's wrong with this country and how to fix it. And we're pretty sure we figured it out. But if that daydream became a reality, would we have the humility to seek wisdom? Or would we assume that we really do have it figured out and hastily implement our agenda?

Solomon was humble enough to know that he didn't know it all. So when the LORD granted him one wish, he asked for wisdom. God granted him wisdom, along with long life, great wealth, and power over his enemies. But it wasn't as if the LORD instantly zapped all the necessary wisdom into Solomon. He quickly gave Solomon the wisdom he needed to rule the people of Israel. But his entire life was also one of growing in wisdom and the fear of the LORD. It was really toward the end of Solomon's life when his wisdom matured, and he wrote the book of *Ecclesiastes*. After many vain pursuits in his life, including money, power, and even wisdom, he came to learn the simple wisdom God gives. So he wrote, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13). This kind of wisdom does not take an entire lifetime to figure out. Any child can have this

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wisdom. But it may take a lifetime for us to realize that our wisdom will fail us, and the true wisdom is the simple kind that fears God and keeps his commandments.

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We also learn something about humility and wisdom in the epistle lesson from Ephesians 1 (v. 3-14). This is one of the places where the apostle Paul teaches the biblical doctrine of predestination, or what we often call election. Before we existed, and before the world was even created, God knew his children. And, in love, he predestined or chose to adopt us as his children. And so, when the time was right, he sent forth Jesus to redeem us through his blood. All of this means that our salvation has nothing to do with our own wills. But God chose us, redeemed us, and adopted us.

The proud hate this doctrine, because it excludes every last reason for boasting. We cannot claim that we were wise enough to come to our senses and join God's family. He did it all. So the proud hate this.

The intellectual and the curious struggle with this doctrine, and that is not the same thing as hating it. It's okay to struggle with it and try to work it out while also submitting the plain meaning of Scripture. So the intellectual and the curious struggle and speculate about the implications of this doctrine. But if we practice some humility and simply believe what is proclaimed here, we will have great comfort in the gracious and powerful truth that our God loved us and chose us as his own before he even created the world. So we can consider this passage an exercise in humility and wisdom.

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Then in the gospel lesson we see perfect wisdom and humility in Jesus as a twelve-year-old. Jesus submitted himself to the Word of God. Even though he was God, he sought out teachers, and he submitted himself to the authority of Joseph and Mary. He grew and learned, just like any human child. The difference is that he did it without sin (Heb. 4:15), so that he could be the sinless sacrifice for all people, including children and adults.

Christmas is the season of wonder. And this is certainly something we wonder at. Jesus is and always has been the Son of God. Before he was born to the Virgin Mary, and before he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, he was the Son of God. He always has been. And being the Son of God does not mean that he is inferior to the Father. This is a mistake some have made throughout Church history. But Scripture makes Jesus equal to the Father. And if we think it through, it makes a lot of sense. A child always has the same nature as its parent. The son of a bear is always a bear. The son of a human is always a human. And the Son of God is God. For bears, humans, and every other creature, this means that the son is smaller and weaker than his father, at least at first, because it is the nature of bears, humans, and other creatures to grow. But the nature of God is infinite, eternal, all-powerful, and all knowing. So the Son of God must be equal to the Father. He must be infinite, eternal, all-powerful, and all knowing. There can be no inferiority, because then he would not be God. And if he's not God, he cannot be the Son of God.

But the wonder of Christmas is that this perfect and infinite God took on human flesh. He became a real human child. And it is the nature of human children to learn and grow. We read in this passage that Jesus "grew and became strong" (2:40), and he "increased in wisdom" (2:52). That's something to wonder at. He is the eternal Word, through whom all things were created (John 1:1-3). But he had to learn how to speak. He had to learn from Mary and Joseph what words are and what they mean. He is the God who spoke to the prophets in the Old Testament. But he had to sit and learn his own words from the rabbis. That's mind-bending. As a child he learned about all the things he had done in generations past. And perhaps the most mind-bending

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of all is that, at some point, he learned that he is God. In the humility of his incarnation, he laid aside the infinite knowledge of God (Phil. 2:7). So he had to learn who he is. And I'm curious how this happened. Maybe Mary and Joseph told him, because they knew. That seems the most likely. Or maybe he figured it out on his own, listening to the Scriptures, hearing the promises of the Messiah, and realizing that it's him. At the very least, we can see that Jesus knew it by the time he was twelve, because he said to his parents, "**Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**" (2:49).

Those are the first recorded words of Jesus. It's a bold and clear claim to be the Son of God. No good Jew would have ever claimed to be the exclusive Son of God. Occasionally in the Old Testament, God is referred to as the Father of Israel (Is. 64:8), and Israel is called the son of God (Hos. 11:1), so a Jew might say, "We are children of God," or, "God is *our* father." But they never would have dared to call God "**My Father,**" as Jesus did. And this is very significant. Every once in a while some supposed scholar will say that Jesus never claimed to be God or to be the Son of God. They just want him to be a good moral teacher and an example of love. But they don't want him to be God, so they say he never claimed to be. But it's literally the first recorded words from him. He said it when he was twelve. He said it to his parents, but any Jew within earshot would have understood exactly what he meant. He was God. He knew it. And he wasn't afraid to say it.

This is such an intriguing passage. It's the kind that we can just sit and wonder at. And I would encourage you to do that. Later today, sit in your comfy chair, read this passage again, and just sit and think about it for a while. It's the only story we have from Jesus' childhood. From about the age of two until his public appearance around the age of thirty, nothing else is written beside this.

Jesus was the perfect child. He was without sin. He was perfect and obedient to his parents, but that does not mean he always did what they expected. Most of the time, he probably did. Joseph and Mary probably got used to Jesus being exactly where he was supposed to be, doing exactly what he was supposed to. So we can sympathize with them supposing that Jesus was somewhere in their group when they left Jerusalem. But the perfect child did not do what they expected. And every parent has some experience like this. Not that our children are perfect like Jesus, but sometimes our children do something different than we expect, and we scold them, like Mary scolded Jesus, when they haven't actually done anything wrong. And in those moments, we need to take a step back and confess to our children that we have sinned against them. That's part of how we model a pious Christian life to them.

When we think about it, and when we listen to Jesus' explanation, his behavior really makes a lot of sense. Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem. They took him to the temple. It was his Father's house, which means it was also Jesus' house, so he stayed there.

And while he was there, he sat "among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions" (2:46). He was gladly hearing and learning the Word of God. So the teachers also asked him questions. They were quizzing him, like we do with our catechism students. "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers" (2:47). It's not because he is God that he impressed them. He was not using his divine wisdom, because he was continually increasing in wisdom (2:52). But he had this amazing wisdom because he was a sinless human child. So he treasured the Word of God the way a human child should. He was humble in the way every human should be. And so he learned the way that any human would if we didn't have sin.

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And then, when Joseph and Mary found him, he obediently went home with them. Even though he was the Son of God, he submitted himself to their authority. He was their creator, and he knew it, but he set himself under their rule.

The purpose of this is not merely to be an example to us. It is, obviously, an example. We should treasure the Word of God as Jesus did and submit our hearts and minds to it. We should obey our parents and other authorities. But, above all, he did this in our place. It was because we do not learn and obey the way we should. Everything we do is tainted with sin. So we need the Son of God to be much more for us than an example. We need him to be our Savior. And he is. He fulfilled the Law in our place.

This is what we call the “active righteousness” of Jesus. His “passive righteousness” is the suffering he submitted to. But in order for that suffering to have any value, there has to be an active righteousness. That is, he has to actively keep the commandments. He had to go through life without sin. He had to learn the Word of God without sinning in the process, because that is what God requires of us. He had to honor, serve, obey, love, and respect his parents, because that is what God requires of us. He had to keep all of God’s commandments without sin. He had to be tempted in every way, but without sin (Heb. 4:15), because that is what God requires of us. He kept and perfectly fulfilled the Law, because he was predestined to be crucified for the sins of the world. So when he was crucified, your sin was laid upon him, because he had no sin of his own to die for. And by the power of his resurrection, his active righteousness is given to you. This righteousness belongs to all who trust in it. It is for you. Trust in it. And for all who trust in this righteousness, instead of their own, when God looks down upon you, he sees this righteousness. He sees in you the perfect child who gladly heard and learned the Word of God. He sees the perfect child who was always obedient to his mother and father. He sees the sinless righteousness of Jesus, because that righteousness has been given to you through faith. Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.