

“You are the Beloved”

Matthew 3:13-17

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J. I. Packer, in his seminal work of Christian theology, *Knowing God*, writes this:

*“If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God’s child, and having God as his Father.*

*If this is not the thought that prompts and controls his worship and prayers and his whole outlook on life, it means that he does not understand Christianity very well at all.*

*For everything that Christ taught, everything that makes the New Testament new, and better than the Old, everything that is distinctively Christian as opposed to merely Jewish, is summed up in the knowledge of the Fatherhood of God.*

*‘Father’ is the Christian name for God. Our understanding of Christianity cannot be better than our grasp of adoption.”*

Friends, I believe Packer is right.

If you want to judge how well you understand Christianity, then you must not measure it by the vastness of your intellectual apprehension of theology or your comprehensive grasp of the Scriptures, or your sacrificial acts of piety for others.

Rather, you must ask yourself this very very simple question: Do I know that God is my Father? I mean, do I really know that?

And do I know that my Heavenly Father loves me absolutely and completely, indeed, with the same love that he has for his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ?

This sermon that I preach every year is the least complicated sermon I'll ever preach.

This sermon is not fancy. It's not going to dazzle your intellect. And that's a feature, not a bug.

Because in the end, there is only one thing that is absolutely necessary for you to know.

And that is, that you, friend, through your union with Jesus Christ, are the adopted and beloved child of God.

That is who you are, from before the foundations of the world.

And it is enough. It is absolutely enough.

Listen now to God's holy word, from Matthew 3.

Matthew 3:13-17

*Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given you because your father in heaven loves you. Prayer...

Two of my favorite questions in the Westminster Larger Catechism are questions 66 and 83.

Question 66 reads like this:

*“The union which the elect have with Christ is the work of God’s grace, whereby they are spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably, joined to Christ as their head and husband.”*

And Question 83 reads like this:

*“The members of the invisible church have communicated to them in this life the firstfruits of glory with Christ, as they are members of him their head, and in him have been given interest in that glory which he is fully possessed of; and as an earnest thereof, enjoy the sense of God’s love, peace of conscience, joy in the Holy Ghost, and hope of glory.”*

What these two questions taken together are basically saying is this – if you belong to Jesus – if you have been baptized in his name and have trusted in him – then you have been united to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit.

What that means, simply put, is that whatever is true for Jesus is also true for you.

You have a full share in that glory that Jesus has even now, in heaven at his Father’s right hand.

Jesus has peace in his conscience because he has been declared fully righteous in his resurrection from the dead by his Father, and you enjoy the same peace of conscience that Jesus has.

Jesus lives in the fullness of joy in the Holy Spirit, and that same fullness of joy is given to you.

Jesus knows that he is the eternally beloved Son of God, and in Jesus, you are given the power to know and believe that you are God's beloved too.

Whatever is true for Jesus is true also for us. That's what it means to be united to Jesus.

All of our life is played out in union with him.

In our sufferings, we don't suffer alone. We suffer in union with Jesus. In our triumphs, we don't triumph alone – we triumph in union with Jesus.

When we work, when we eat, when we laugh, when we sleep – all of it is in union and communion with our husband and our head, the one to whom we have been joined spiritually and mystically, yet really and inseparably – Jesus Christ, our incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord.

And that means that in our text this this morning when God the Father says to Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit in his baptism: *"You are my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"* he is saying those words to you as well.

God the Father declares Jesus to be his beloved Son in Matthew 3 because he wants you to know and hear and believe that you also, in Christ, are the beloved of God.

You are the beloved.

If you are in Christ, then these words are for you.

You see, in our baptisms, when the name of Christ is placed on us, we are bound up with the life of Jesus. Whatever is true for Jesus also becomes true for us.

This is how Paul puts it in Romans 6. He writes, *“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”*

The reason we who follow Christ are baptized is because he was baptized, and in our baptism, our life is bound up in his.

There’s no verse in the Scriptures that says Josh Anderson is the beloved Son of God.

But here in this passage, it says that about Jesus. And when it says this about Jesus, it also says it about me. And it says about you.

So at least part of the reason God says these words to Jesus, part of reason why he calls him his beloved son, with whom he is well pleased, is that so when you are tempted to doubt the reality of those words in your own life, you can turn to this passage and remember that you also are the beloved of God.

In John 17, Jesus prays these remarkable words to his father in the presence of his disciples: *“The glory you have given me I have given to them [my followers], that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”*

Did you hear that?

What Jesus is saying is that God loves you with the same love that he loves Jesus.

God loved his Son before the foundation of the world, but guess what?

The mystery of the faith we confess is that he loves each of us in just the same way.

What I am trying to say is this. Listen to me: *You are the beloved.*

You.

Not just the church as a whole, not just the person sitting somewhere else in the sanctuary who seems like they've got their act together, and not just anyone else who you're tempted to think is more spiritual or good or lovable than you are.

No, I'm talking about you. You, in all your raggedness, in all your anxiety, in all your frailty and failure. You.

You are the beloved.

Your heavenly Father, the one who knows everything you've ever done, every sin, every thought, every imperfection, every fear, every doubt, looks at you and says simply this: You are my beloved.

There are so many words that are true about us. So many names, so many descriptions we might give to ourselves.

We are weak. We are anxious. We are dirty. We are fearful. We are sinners. And yet, beneath all of those descriptors, beneath all of those labels, there is a name that is more true than all of those other names, and that is that we are the beloved of God.

The weight of this reality, that we are the beloved of God is almost more than we can bear.

The glory of name, Beloved, spoken to us by God, is almost too much. It's overwhelming.

C. S. Lewis puts it this way: *"To please God...to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness...to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son — it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is."*

Yes, indeed. So it is.

And reality of his love means simply that you are the beloved.

You are the beloved.

And, listen, friend. That means that when God created the world, he did it for you.

Because you are the beloved.

When he hung the stars in the sky, he hung them for you.

Of course he did it for his own glory and of course he did because of his love for all humanity, but he also did it for you, as an individual, unique person, because you are his beloved.

God's passionate love for the human race is not only wide enough to encompass the whole world, it is also particular enough to isolate each one of us from the billions and billions of members of the human race and bring us, as unique individuals, as a particular man, a particular woman, before the whole force of his personality and being and love.

The Apostle Paul puts it this way in 1 Corinthians 8: *"If anyone loves God, he is known by God."*

Did you hear that? If you love God, you don't just know God -- you are known *by* God.

You are known by God, not just in an intellectual way – in that he knows that you exist, but you are known by God personally.

Intimately. Individually.

The creator of the universe holds *you* in his gaze.

He knows you as a Father knows his child.

At that means that somehow, in the mystery and power of God's eternal Triune being, long before you existed, he imagined you, he knew the person you would be, and when he hung the stars, he did it because of his love for you.

Because you are the beloved.

And when he gathered the dry land together and called it earth, when he pushed the mountains toward the sky, when he crafted the deep seas and filled all of these places with trees and plants and birds and fish and animals, he did those things for you.

Because somehow, inexplicably, wondrously, mysteriously, you are the beloved.

Think for a moment of the most amazing experience you've had in all of God's creation. The moment, that hour, that day, when you were at a certain place in the natural world and you felt that sense of peace and wonder and rest that comes only from being outdoors in a beautiful spot.

It might be a mountain. Or a lake. Or an ocean. Or a forest. Or a field. It might be a place that is famous. It might be a place that only you know.

In the summer of 2021, when we were on sabbatical, I found a place like that.

We were in Florida and my wife and children were with me, the five people in this world that I love more than anyone else, and we were swimming in the Atlantic ocean, and it was a perfect day.

It was low tide, and we all went out to this sand bar about 150 yards from shore where the waves were breaking, and they were hitting just right, and we just bodysurfed and rode them again and again and again, for hours - laughing and yelling and rushing back to catch the next one. The sky was this amazing blue, and the sun was warm, and the water was cool and salty and wild in the deepest sense of that word.

And I remember one moment, while we were all waiting for the next wave, looking out at the horizon, waist deep in the water, and I looked at my three oldest children out there standing next to me - and they were so beautiful and strong and full of confidence, and I thought - this is it.

This moment is as good as it gets, this side of the resurrection.

And so now that little piece of the Florida coast just south of New Smyrna Beach will always be precious to me. Because of what I saw there, and because of what I felt, and what I carry with me from it even now.

Whatever that place is for you in creation, that place of beauty and peace where you've experienced a moment of something similar either by yourself or with those whom you love - here's the thing.

At least one of the reasons God made that place at the beginning of time is because in his infinite wisdom and providence he knew that one day, far in the distant future, you would be born.

And he knew that you would grow up and that one day, on the right day, on the perfect day, you would go to that place and you would feel what I felt this summer.

In other words, to put it simply, God made that particular piece of his creation because he knew that you would love it and he wanted you know the joy it would give you.

That's why he made it. Not only to give himself pleasure, but to give you pleasure as well.

Whatever that place of peace and beauty is for you, know this. God made it for you. He did it because he wanted you to delight in it.

Because you are the beloved.

And God did not just make the world because of his love for you. He also refused to let his love get off track when sin came into that world, in fact, he worked his entire story of salvation for you, my friend.

Because you are the beloved.

When God kept Noah and his family safe from the waters that covered the earth, he did it for you. Because you are the beloved.

When God called Abraham and took him to a place he did not know and told him he would bless all the families of the earth through him, he did it for you. In fact, you were one of the stars that he showed Abraham in that night sky all those thousands of years ago.

And when God delivered Israel out of their bondage in Egypt, when he went to war with Pharaoh and set his people free, he did it for you.

Because you are the beloved.

When God made the walls of Jericho fall down, he did it for you.

And when God taught David the words of the psalter and told him to write them in a book, he did it because he wanted you to pray them.

Because you are the beloved.

And most importantly, when the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took on flesh to set his bride free from sin and death, when he died naked on a cross and rose again on the third day, and then ascended to his Father's right hand in heaven, he did it all for you.

Because you are the beloved.

And so my application this morning is simply this.

This week, this month, this year, I invite you to abide and rest in this truth - that you are the beloved of God.

In other words, this year, your job, your assignment from your pastor, above all things, is just to *be the beloved*.

Remember the words of Psalm 131:

*O LORD, my heart is not lifted up;  
my eyes are not raised too high;  
I do not occupy myself with things  
too great and too marvelous for me.*

Yes. Do That. Just *be the beloved*.

Just embrace that name and let it sink into your bones and your heart a little deeper — or maybe, just possibly, for the first time.

Just be the beloved. That's enough. It's enough for any of us.

Do you know how the apostle of John referred to himself throughout the gospel that bears his name?

He never called himself John. He always called himself "*the one whom Jesus loved.*"

I think that's fascinating, and I don't think John is just being humble and trying to stay anonymous. I think he's making a profoundly theological point.

John is saying that the name that he bears through his union with Jesus is deeper even than the name that his parents gave him.

And that his real name is this: *Beloved*. The one whom Jesus loved.

*Beloved* is who John really is, even now, even as he waits in his grave for the resurrection.

Beloved is his true name, his hidden name, his real name.

And it's your real name as well.

Friend, your real name is not really Sarah or Jeremy or Audrey or Mike or whatever name is on your birth certificate, whatever name your parents gave you.

No, your real name is *beloved*.

And your full name, if you want to write it all the way out, is this: "The one whom Jesus loves."

Just be the beloved, friend. Be who your Heavenly Father says you are.

I know that some of you are thinking *“that’s crazy, I need to be able to do something.”*

And would say simply, stop.

Stop trying to do things. Stop trying to prove yourself. Just be the beloved of God. It’s enough. It really is.

Be the one whom Jesus loves and see what happens.

And others of you may be thinking:

*“Be the beloved? That’s crazy. Do you have any idea of what my life is really like, how horrible I really am, how fearful and sinful and anxious I am all the time?”*

And to that, I would say simply this. No, friend. I don’t know all of that.

But God does.

God sees all of it, he holds your life in his hands, he knows you fully, and still he says: *“You are my beloved.”*

So listen to him. And be the beloved. And then see what happens when you embrace that name, that reality.

I think part of what will happen is that you will be set free to live in new ways, to live out of the freedom and holiness and security that is only known by those who know that they are the beloved.

You see, all of us are called to be like Jesus. If there’s anything that is central to the Christian life all throughout the New Testament, it is that we need to be like Jesus, we need to live like him and imitate him.

And here’s the thing: Jesus himself is God’s beloved son.

And so if we're going to be like Jesus, we're going to need to learn what it means to be the beloved.

I don't know fully what that means for any of us. But I know that to learn what it means to be the beloved is a great journey of our spiritual lives, because our belovedness in Christ Jesus is the secret that is hidden at the core of our being, it is the truth that is most deeply true about each of us.

Brother. Sister.

You belong to God in Jesus Christ and he will never let you go.

You are his beloved.

So live in his love.

Be the Beloved. Even the Beloved of God.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.