**You are Cherished**

Luke 18:9-17

A culture’s attitude toward children is very revealing.

***In ancient times children were not de-valued***, they were greatly prized - especially boys - to perpetuate the family line, continue the family trade and provide for their parents as they aged. It was essential to have children - ideally a bunch of children. Having children was a sign of blessing; being unable to have children was understood as a curse.

That’s why it’s such a common theme in the Bible about ***women who couldn’t have babies.*** They were considered second class. They felt they were being punished by God. They were failing their husbands. Even then people knew the biology of it - that it wasn’t the woman’s fault. But still, the attitude was there that a barren woman was worthless.

And children were prized. But as this passage in Luke 18 shows, ***they were supposed to keep to themselves***. Children were not publicly celebrated by the grown ups. They were supposed to stay home with mom until they were old enough, then they could come to work with Dad and start contributing to society.

Now consider our **modern American attitude toward children**. Not that different, right? People usually want to have kids, but not right away. They want to enjoy their independence for a while. Maybe wait until you’re 30 to get married and 35 to have kids. But the trend is well documented and notice how the U.S. is following the secular world.



What’s troubling in this graph is that 2 babies per woman is what it takes to maintain a country’s population. Do you see how the U.S. is right around 2 but Europe is well under that? If we keep following the trends of Europe Christianity will decline as will the number of babies we have.

Here’s the point from Jesus:

“Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them. And when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them.But Jesus called them to him, saying, ‘Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God.’” Luke 18:15-16

***Crowds were flocking to Jesus.*** People knew this Rabbbi was teaching powerful new ideas. And he was healing people left and right; performing great signs and wonders that had everyone talking. So the Moms and Dads wanted to get in on the action and bring their babies to get a touch from the Rabbi.

The disciples wanted to keep the ministry focused on what was important. They didn’t want to trouble the Rabbi with secondary things. And ***they wrongly assumed that children and babies were secondary things.*** Jesus openly rebuked them and warmly welcomed the Moms and babies. And, as He always did, Jesus turned it into a teachable moment.

“To such belongs the kingdom of heaven.” Then he went on:

“Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Luke 18:16-17

Whoa. He’s not just saying that kids are important. ***He is talking about SALVATION***. The kingdom of God BELONGS to people like this - the small, the powerless, the apparently unimportant or influential. Does that remind you of some other teaching from Jesus? “Blessed are the poor in spirit… blessed are you who weep now… who are persecuted now… Yours is the kingdom of heaven…”

And I’m sure you didn’t miss the context that Luke gives us. Right before this moment we have the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. Notice how that teaching starts and ends:

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous… For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:9,14

***A tax collector who goes home “justified.”*** A Pharisee who was NOT justified. Let’s not miss this. The wicked sinner who comes crawling into the house of God begging for mercy gets saved. The righteous Bible student who says his prayers and gives his 10% faithfully to the church is not saved. If you aren’t jarred by that parable you haven’t yet understood it.

Our lesson today is that **you are CHERISHED**. God loves us like His own children. He delights in us like a mother with her newborn; like a father with his young son or daughter. But let’s be sure we are understanding this correctly. WHY does God treasure and delight in us? Is it because we are so amazing and impressive and knowledgeable and hard-working? Is that why God loves us so much? Because of what we do for Him?

**What makes you worthy of God’s love?**

* Not your **Effort**

“He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves, that they were righteous.” Luke 18:9

It’s very easy for us church-going folk to fall into ***this trap of trusting in ourselves***. Let’s be honest, we are pretty good people. We are pretty friendly, quite sacrificial. We do the right thing. We are honest, upright citizens. We vote. We pay our taxes. We work 9-5. We teach Sunday School. We read our Bibles. We say our prayers (most days). (We’re thankful nobody keeps close track of these things.) We give to the church. We even support missionaries.

And it’s hard, when you are as good as we are - not to ***start thinking that God OWES it to you***; that you have EARNED a degree of God’s favor. That’s the test: suffering. When something goes wrong - or a bunch of things. Trouble at work; trouble in marriage; health issues; problems with kids; financial stress; job loss.

When something goes wrong, how do you find yourself praying?

Can’t we sound a lot like this Pharisee?

**What makes you worthy of God’s love?**

* Not your **Effort**

“God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” Luke 18:11

Lord, thank you that I’m not a wicked materialist like my neighbor with that new boat that I really want and the shiny car I wish I had. Thank you that I’m not like my co-worker who is cheating on his wife like I wish I was (but I can’t say that in my prayer). Thank you that I’m not like my third cousin four times removed who I just heard through the grapevine is going to jail for embezzlement…

**What makes you worthy of God’s love?**

* Not your **Effort**

“I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.” Luke 18:12

Lord, haven’t I been doing my quiet times? Haven’t I been checking those boxes in my reading plan? Haven’t I been pretty consistent in coming to church and paying my tithe online in that weird app the church obviously wants me to use? I don’t know about fasting - we don’t have to do that one do we? The last time I went on a diet it didn’t work out very well. I’m pretty sure that’s not what fasting is, but I get hungry just thinking about it. And now I’m pretty sure I’m not really praying anymore.

We can all be like this Pharisee - trusting in our goodness, our devotion, our effort. Obviously it’s good to put effort into your spiritual life. But it’s not good to trust in yourself and to believe that YOUR righteousness earns you something from God.

**What makes you worthy of God’s love?**

* Not your **Family**

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.” Luke 18:10

The Pharisee stands off by himself, very upright, feeling very worthy to be there; hoping people are listening in. He is proud of his Jewish heritage; proud of his family line; proud of his great learning; proud of his inclusion in the Pharisee group; proud of his Scripture memory.

Most of us don’t put a lot of stock in our family line anymore - in terms of being Swedish or German or Cuban or Dominican or whatever. ***I certainly never thought my 75% Swedishness made me extra worthy of anything except more sunscreen.*** But I did as a young person often take comfort in the fact that I grew up with a family of believers - I was raised going to church. I vividly remember those worrisome nights as a teenager wrestling with eternity and salvation and explicitly thinking about the guys in my youth group who were a year or two older than me. I was pretty sure they were saved - and I knew I was at least as good as they were, probably a little better. So if they were sure, then by extension I was sure. As you can imagine, it was a flimsy comfort.

In the end, ***your parents’ faith can’t save you***. The fact that your grandparents went to church a lot doesn’t score you points. Those things are blessings - they are gifts - they are privileges. But they don’t save you.

Bottom line:

**What makes you worthy of God’s love?**

* Not **You**

“But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner.’” Luke 18:13

Here is the best example from Jesus about how to be made right with God - this is our exemplary profile… He’s not saying, “Go be a tax collector - sell out to the system, betray your family heritage and commit to the evil empire.” He’s saying, “Admit that you ARE a tax collector - recognize that you HAVE sold out to the system; you have become a servant of the evil empire.”

In modern terms Jesus might well have said - you want to see repentance? **DARTH VADER**. Getting all zapped by the emperor. ZZZZT. The worst villain of all time. Now, Luke’s interpretation was wrong - it’s not that there was good in him. That’s where the gospel analogy breaks down. The point is that the wicked sinner might well be closer to salvation than the righteous church-goer precisely because the sinful person KNOWS he deserves NOTHING from God.

Here’s my little **exercise to teach this principle**. I think it’s been a couple years since we did it. Lean forward so that most of your weight is on your own legs. Think of this as your approach to salvation. The burn in your legs represents your effort, your goodness, your knowledge, your study. If you carry the weight, you get the credit.

Now, in this exercise, you know there is a perfectly good chair right underneath you. You know from a physical standpoint that it makes no sense to strain yourself - which is why the veterans here who think they get the point aren’t even doing it. Some of you are rule followers who think the pastor says it you better do it. Others just like a physical challenge. Don’t sit down yet - the point is to feel the burn.

Now, ***if you trust that chair*** that has been in this room for over 30 years, can’t you trust JESUS who has existed for all of eternity? If you trust those slabs of wood to hold up your physical weight can’t you trust the Lord of heaven and earth to hold up your spiritual weight? If you trust the random, un-named chair engineers can’t you trust the one-time all sufficient sacrifice of Jesus for you on the cross? Can’t you trust in the victory of Jesus who conquered sin and death forever when he walked out of that tomb?

Do you get the point?

***Your efforts don’t add anything to the chair.*** And your efforts don’t add anything to Jesus’ finished work. He did it all; He paid it all. Your knowledge, your devotion, your goodness and affection and devotion - none of that EARNS you anything from God. And if you think it does some part of your faith is resting on you - and THAT will wear you out; that will stress you out.

Now - sit back. Let the chair hold you up. ***Feel the joy of RESTING completely in the finished work of those chair manufacturers.*** Some of you are visibly sweating now. Impressive.

**Don’t trust in Yourself**

* **Humble** yourself

“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” Luke 18:14

Come to Jesus in humble faith that simply says, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.”

That’s it. That’s the starting point of salvation and the doorway into the Christian life. That is a nice, simple version of the sinner’s prayer.

**Don’t trust in Yourself**

* Receive the kingdom of God like a child - in total **Dependence**

“Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.” Luke 18:17

There’s a great scene in the video Bible study Christianity Explored where a child opens a birthday present and it’s a shiny new bike. Her eyes light up and you can tell it’s exactly the purple bike with flowy streamers the little girl wanted. But then she turns to her parents, hangs her head and says, ***“Alright, what do I owe you?”***

What kind of parents would we be if we gave our kids gifts and then forced them to pay them off? Obviously then it’s not a GIFT!

But I wonder if you sometimes feel that way with God. You know in your head that salvation is a free gift and it was all about Jesus and not about you. But then this idea creeps in that you need to pay it back. You need to earn it somehow. That’s the siren song of RELIGION. That’s the call of your human flesh that wants so badly to prove itself.

***Don’t be such a GROWN UP!*** Come back to the simple faith of a child - and just joyfully receive the gift you know you could never have earned. Just celebrate the bike and get out there and start riding it!

Let’s watch this short video about revival that shows how humility and repentance is the doorway to salvation and a fresh experience of God’s grace.

REVIVAL VIDEO - BROKEN AT THE CROSS

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vdOw1JQ6iwJwmsaQqq2RJEZiM0G_Q4r8/view?usp=sharing>

Ok, so we know it’s not about us and it’s all about Jesus. We just need to come to Jesus in simple faith. Now let’s turn to Isaiah 43 to be reminded of the gospel truth of what DOES make us worthy of God’s love: **FOUR GIFTS of God’s amazing grace.**

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Created** you

“But now thus says the LORD, he who created you, O Jacob, he who formed you, O Israel.” Isaiah 43:1

The first gift of God - to all people everywhere - is that He created us. ***All humans are made in the image of God and therefore have dignity and worth.*** ALL HUMANS. From the moment of CONCEPTION. Every single one. There might be a genetic defect - still a creation of God made in His image by His omnipotent hand. Male or female - same intrinsic value - neither is better or worse; more valuable or less. And btw the whole male and female thing is decided by the Creator and assigned at conception. We don’t get to choose our gender identity any more than we get to choose our eye color or skin color.

Hear this - your value is based on ***the fundamental truth that God made you***. The Creator of the heavens and earth looked down through time and designed YOU to be YOU - your family, your body, the details of your genetic code, your childhood experiences, your education and career path, your friends and connections. Every single detail of your life - even the hard things, even the pain and loss - God crafted like an expert potter with clay in His hands.

That’s what makes you valuable. **You are a MASTERPIECE of God**. And He isn’t done yet! He keeps molding and shaping you, chipping off rough edges, chiseling away at imperfections. Hear this from the voice of God, “He who created you, he who formed you.”

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Created** you

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

***Do not be afraid.*** Do not worry about your life. Your Creator has called you. He chose you before the foundation of the earth to belong to Him. Just as God chose Abraham, Moses and David, He chose you. He called you by name. And if you said YES to the Lord Jesus, then you belong to the Lord as His own precious child.

If you think your relationship with God depends even a little on YOU and your effort, your worthiness, you will never feel peace. But when you realize that your salvation is entirely a gift of God to you, you will be able to rest in that wonderful assurance.

That is ***the key difference between Christianity and every other religion*** - **ASSURANCE**. Other religions all demand that YOU do most of the work. You have to pray and work and confess and change and make a pilgrimage and believe hard enough. You-you-you. There is no peace in that.

But seeing the gracious hand of God in every part of your life - seeing that salvation is HIS work from beginning to end - that will fill your heart with peace. Because God not only created you, He redeemed you.

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Saved** you

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

Some of you know that I’m a fan of John Calvin. We all stand in the strong tradition of the Reformation, but some of us lean more heavily into the sovereignty of God while others lean more toward the freedom and responsibility of people. But this is the question that settled that debate for me about 10 years ago: ***“Who gets the credit when someone gets saved?”***

It seems very clear to me in the NT that “no one can boast.” The only thing we bring to the salvation equation is our sin. Yes we are saved by faith but the Reformation creed of “FAITH ALONE,” is very clear to say that this faith that saves is not a work deserving merit. No one will look back on judgment day and say, “See, there! That’s when I chose Jesus, that’s when I saved myself!” No, no. We cannot save ourselves. That’s the false promise of religion.

**Only Jesus can save us** - and He does it by GIVING us the gift of faith.

* ***Did you convict yourself of your sin?*** Did you force yourself to feel guilty? No, the Holy Spirit gave you the gift of conviction and guilt - godly sorrow.
* ***Did you give yourself the light of understanding?*** By force of will and your great learning did you enlighten yourself to discern the truth and comprehend the gospel? No, the Holy Spirit opened your blind eyes.
* ***Did you build up the muscle of faith in your deep internal soul?*** Did you do faith exercises so that when the time came to believe on the Lord Jesus and be saved your faith was super strong? No, the Holy Spirit helped you turn your eyes upon Jesus and very simply call on Him to save you.
* ***Did you raise yourself from death to life, from slavery to freedom, from condemnation to salvation?*** Of course not. Jesus alone made you alive when you were dead, Jesus alone raised you up from the grave, Jesus alone paid the price for your sin, Jesus alone took your condemnation upon Himself, Jesus alone broke the chains of sin from you.

Brother, sister - **embrace the glorious doctrine of Sola Fide - FAITH ALONE**. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It’s all a gift. 100% the work of God - 0% the work of you. Feel the joy of that wonderful truth. Feel the freedom and peace of knowing that God started the work and He will finish the work.

***Does that mean we do nothing?*** NO! It means we can do all things THROUGH CHRIST. Not in our own strength, not in our own wisdom - but with Christ working in us and through us, we have the full power and love and grace and glory of the Godhead!

This is what makes you worthy - not you - nothing about you. What makes you worthy is that the God of all glory and grace REDEEMED YOU. He sent His only Son to pay the price to buy you out of slavery and to set you free from sin and death forever.

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Called** you to belong to Him

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.” Isaiah 43:1

Your Creator, your Redeemer, your God and King - ***He called you into being and He called you into relationship.*** At that single moment that you said, “Yes,” to His call, you became His forever. The old YOU died, nailed to the cross, and a new creation was born. God breathed into your eternal soul the breath of life and filled you with His Spirit. He placed His own NAME upon you, He sealed you with His mark of identity and ownership. Like an ancient king placing his signet ring on the warm wax to seal an important document - God placed His seal on YOU. He marked you as His very own. ***And NOTHING can separate you from Him -ever.***

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Called** you to belong to Him

“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.” Isaiah 43:2

Hear these wonderful words of promise and protection - reminding us of the parting of the Red Sea and God’s powerful deliverance from Egypt. When the people came to the Jordan River it was uncrossable at the flood stage, but when the priests stepped into that raging flood with the ark of the covenant, the waters piled up right there and the people crossed on dry ground. Those were literal events to show God’s people His power and love - but they are also symbols of God’s presence with us every minute of every day.

***Whatever the storm; whatever the obstacle***; whatever the insurmountable problem - the God of all glory and grace is with you. “He who did not spare His own Son - if God is for us, who can be against us?”

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Called** you to belong to Him

“When you walk through the fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you.” Isaiah 43:2

Can you think of a few Jewish boys for whom this promise became especially meaningful? God gave this promise to Isaiah around 700 BC. ***Daniel’s buddies Shadraq, Meschach and Abednego would find themselves in Babylon about 200 years later*** - standing in front of a blazing furnace, with the smell of smoke all around them and the heat of the furnace making them sweat 30 feet away.

I bet they were reciting these verses to each other as they were bound and dragged to those flames. “Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name and you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you, and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you. When you walk through fire you shall not be burned; and the flame shall not consume you.”

But those guys had the good theology and the remarkable faith to speak to King Nebuchadnezzar and say, “Our God is able to save us from the fire, but even if He doesn’t we won’t bow down to the statue you have made.”

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Called** you to belong to Him

“For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.” Isaiah 43:3

HE is the Savior. His gift and His call are irrevocable. “Those he foreknew he also predestined… those he predestined he also CALLED -those he called he also justified and those he justified he also glorified.” I’ve been quoting a lot of Romans 8 if you aren’t familiar.

This is where our worthiness and value comes from - God created us, He saved us, He called us and:

**What makes you worthy is:**

1. God **Delights** in you as His own child

“Because you are precious in my eyes and honored, and I love you…” Isaiah 43:4

In the OT context God talks about giving Egypt, Cush and Seba, peoples and nations in exchange for Israel - His people. Those were stronger, bigger nations. They were godless, pagan nations.

But in the end God’s full and final salvation was not accomplished by leading Israel to conquer a bunch of secular nations. ***God’s ultimate work was accomplished by giving His own SON in exchange for us*** - by giving up Jesus’ life for your life and mine. And that One Life was worth more than all the nations put together.

THAT is how valuable you are to God. He did not spare His own Son - but gave Him up for YOU. The Lord Jesus laid down His life so YOU could become a son or daughter of God.

If you are ever tempted to question your worth and value just remember the cross. That is God’s final determination of your value - the precious blood of Jesus.

So don’t think your salvation has one iota to do with you. It is 100% God and 0% you. Don’t trust in yourself - in your effort, your knowledge, your family line. Don’t trust in YOURSELF at all. Trust fully in Jesus. Lean back and rest in the fullness of His perfect love.

God created you. He saved you. He called you. He delights in you as His very own.

Let’s pray.