

The Son of God at 12 Years Old

by John Piper

The sermon explores Jesus' early recognition of his divine identity and mission as he engages with teachers in the temple at the age of 12.

Topics: "Jesus' Divinity", "Christian Maturity"

Description

John Piper delves into the story of Jesus at the age of twelve in the temple, emphasizing its authenticity amidst other legendary accounts of Jesus' childhood. He highlights the reserved nature of the biblical narrative, focusing on Jesus' wisdom and unique sonship to God. Piper explores the implications of Jesus' divinity and humanity, showcasing his example of seeking wisdom and understanding from teachers. The passage ultimately reveals Jesus' unwavering commitment to God's purposes, even at the expense of familial expectations and comfort.

Transcript

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Luke 2:41-52

"Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up according to custom; and when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey, and they sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they 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 looking for you anxiously.' And he said to them, 'How is it that you sought me? Did you now know that I must be in my Father's house?' And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them. And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them; and his mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature, and grew in favor with God and man."

This is the only story in the gospels about Jesus between His infancy and His public ministry as a man. Some have argued that the story is a legend created by the early church to fill in some of the gaps in their knowledge of Jesus' life. What shall we say to this claim?

First of all we should be aware that in the second and third centuries many legends arose about the boy Jesus and were put into numerous apocryphal gospels --accounts of Jesus which the early church rejected as not having the authority of the four earliest gospels which we have in the New Testament. Two things speak for the wisdom of the church in recognizing the authority of only Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. One is that there are so few stories about Jesus' childhood in them it is clear that the writers were not interested in feeding the pious curiosity of the church with legends about Jesus' childhood. They are content to leave almost 30 years of blank space in Jesus' life because their interest was on the heart of the gospel not peripheral matters. The other thing is that the one story which Luke does include there in 2:41-52 is so reserved that it is very unlike most of the legends of Jesus' childhood. It does not portray Him as doing any supernatural deed or speaking in an unduly authoritative way. The story reaches its climax and main point not in a supernatural feat but in the sentence: "I must be about my Father's business (or in my Father's house)" (v.49). Contrast this with some of the legends which grew up later on.

From the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (2nd century):

"When this boy Jesus was five years old he was playing at the ford of a brook, and he gathered together into pools the water that flowed by, and made it at once clean, and commanded it by his word alone. But the son of Annas the scribe was standing there with Joseph; and he took a branch of a willow and (with it) dispersed the water which Jesus had gathered together. When Jesus saw what he had done he was enraged and said to him: 'You insolent godless dunderhead, what harm did the pools and the water do to you? See, now you also shall wither like a tree and shall bear neither leaves nor root nor fruit.' And immediately that lad withered up completely; and Jesus departed and went into Joseph's house. But the parents of him that was withered took him away, bewailing his youth, and brought him to Joseph and reproached him: 'What a child you have who does such things.' After this again he went through the village, and a lad ran and knocked against his shoulder. Jesus was exasperated and said to him: 'You shall not go further on your way,' and the child immediately fell down and died. But some, who saw what took place, said: "From where does this child spring, since every word is an accomplished deed?"

Here is one more example from the Arabic Infancy Gospel:

"One day, when Jesus was running about and playing with some children, he passed by the workshop of a dyer called Salem. They had in the workshop many cloths which he had to dye. The Lord Jesus went into the dyer's workshop, took all these cloths and put them into a cauldron full of indigo. When Salem came and saw that the cloths were spoiled, he began to cry aloud and asked the Lord Jesus, saying: 'What have you done to me, son of Mary? You have ruined my reputation in the eyes of all the people of the city; for everyone orders a suitable colour for himself, but you have come and spoiled everything.' And the Lord Jesus replied: 'I will change for you the colour of any cloth which you wish to be changed; and he immediately began to take the cloths out of the cauldron, each of them dyed as the dyer wished, until he had taken them all out. When the Jews saw this miracle and wonder, they praised God."

After such stories the account in Luke 2:41-52 seems a bit drab--and that is precisely what speaks in favor of its authenticity. It does not appear to be motivated by a desire to overplay Jesus' uniqueness. The claim to uniqueness is much more subtle and that accords with the way Jesus acted most of the time. In addition the Greek language of the story is almost certainly a translation of the Semitic language of Palestine which means that it was not created, like many of the legends, in Greek-speaking areas far removed from the land of the eyewitnesses. On the contrary, it is Jewish in content and language and therefore probably originated in Palestine; and the most likely source for the story is Mary.

We know from 1:2 that Luke puts a high premium on eyewitness confirmation. We also know from Acts that while Paul was imprisoned for two years in Jerusalem and in Caesarea, his sidekick Luke was probably roaming around Jerusalem interviewing old-timers and collecting information for his gospel. And finally we have seen three times so far in Luke's gospel that he mentioned people keeping experiences in their hearts, that is, remembering them. In 1:66 he said that all who heard how John the Baptist was born "laid it up in their hearts, saying, "What then will this child be?" In 2:19 after the shepherds had come to Bethlehem Luke says, "But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." And then here at the end of our text in 2:51 it says, "And His mother kept all these things in her heart." Isn't the most likely reason for mentioning this storing up of memories to give Theophilus and us a clue as to how he, a gentle foreigner, was able to write as much as he did about Jesus' childhood.

Therefore, in view of how few are the gospel narratives of the child Jesus, and how much more reserved they are than the apocryphal legends, and how great Luke's concern is to trace things out carefully and confirm it with eyewitnesses, and how Jewish the setting and language is, and how easily available Mary probably was, it seems to me that the claim that this story in Luke 2:41-52 is legendary is wrong and probably stems from an unwillingness to own up to the main point of the story, namely, that Jesus is uniquely the Son of God.

Now let's read through the narrative making some comments as we go to see if we can hit on the main point and any lessons there are for our lives. Verse 41: "Now his parents went up to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover." Here Luke stresses again how devout and law-abiding Jesus' parents were. We saw in 2:22, 23, 24, 39 how Mary and Joseph did all that the Mosaic law required. By stressing this Luke tries to help Theophilus accept the fact that, although Jesus was killed by Jewish teachers, it was not really because he was outside the Jewish faith. Jesus' parents, and now we will see Jesus himself, were devoted to the law of Moses. They loved it, studied it, obeyed it. Luke will show very soon (in chapter 4) the real reason why he, a devout Jew, could be rejected and killed by his own people.

Verse 42: "And when he was 12 years old they went up according to the custom." The fact that this incident happened when Jesus was 12 is probably significant. The 12th year was the final year of preparation for a lad before he entered full participation in the religious life of the synagogue. Up until that time his parents, especially his father, were teaching him the commandments of the law, but at the end of the 12th year the child goes through a ceremony by which he formally takes on the yoke of the law and becomes a bar mitzvah or "son of the commandment." This was the year Jesus chose to stay behind in the temple. Perhaps, at this crucial turning point in every Jewish boy's life, Jesus wanted to demonstrate subtlety for those who had eyes to see that he would be more than an ordinary Jewish bar mitzvah; his insight into the commandment was more profound than ordinary men and his relation to God was unique. Both of these will be evident in a moment.

Verses 43, 44: "And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, but supposing him to be in the company they went a day's journey." That's like driving from Minneapolis to Chicago and realizing you left your child and having to drive back again. Only it's worse: they were probably walking. Two things stand out here and they seem inconsistent. First, there is Jesus' apparent disregard for his parents' time and feelings. Second, there is implicit faith Mary and Joseph have in their 12 year old son. If he had been an irresponsible child his parents would never have gone a whole day without knowing his whereabouts. They trusted him and knew he had good judgment. This suggests that Jesus' motive in staying behind was not carelessness or disrespect. Evidently he intentionally let them go in order to demonstrate something more forcefully.

Verse 43-46: They sought him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances; and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem seeking him. After three days they found him in the temple." There is no way to know whether this means three days since leaving Jerusalem (one out, one back and one in search) or whether it means three days searching in Jerusalem. It's hard to imagine three days searching in Jerusalem because probably Jesus and his parents would have gone to the same place to spend the night. How Mary and Joseph and Jesus feel about this search comes out later in verses 48 and 49.

Verses 46-47: "They found him in the temple sitting among the teachers listening to them and asking them questions; and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers." This sentence sets my mind to thinking about all sorts of things I'd love to talk about for hours. One is the relationship between teachers and students and the role of listening, querying and answering. Another is the mystery of how the divine and human natures unite in the one person, Jesus. If he is God how can he increase in wisdom as verse 52 says he does? Finally this sentence sparks in my mind a scene 18 years later when perhaps some of these very same teachers would gnash their teeth at this boy's wisdom and want to kill him. Let me make just a few observations about each of these three topics.

First, Theophilus should understand that Jesus knew and loved the law from an early age and that in the very city where he was lynched 20 years later, he was approved at the age of 12. Or perhaps he wasn't approved. You can be astonished at something you don't like. Maybe the teachers of the law did not care for the implications of Jesus' answers; but then a 12 year old is no threat. They can pat him on the head and say, "Smart kid," and return to their hair splitting and their hypocrisy.

There's an analogy of that in our experience. A young lad gets saved, say at camp, and he returns to his unbelieving home and tells dad about Jesus. The dad smiles condescendingly as if to say that's nice for kids. But then the boy grows into a man and is aflame with the Spirit and the issues sharpen and the different destinies come into focus and the dad can't be indifferent any more. And the crisis comes: conversion or alienation. "He who is not with me is against me" (Matthew 12:30).

Second, our text has important implications for understanding the divinity of Christ. It helps us understand what Paul meant when he said, "Though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:6,7). One of the things Christ emptied himself of was omniscience. He said concerning the time of his return (Matthew 24:36), "Of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven nor the Son, but the Father only." Similarly, here in our text Jesus is not just playing games with the scribes. His questions aim to gain insight for verse 52 says "He increased in wisdom."

But it is not easy to imagine how Christ can be God and not be omniscient. Evidently the incarnate Christ was able somehow to bracket or limit the actual exercise of his divine powers so that he had the personality of God (basically, the motives and will of God) but the powers of knowing all and the infinite strength of God he somehow restrained. They were his potentially and thus he was God; but he surrendered their use absolutely and so he was man.

Therefore the child standing before us here in the temple is not so different that he can't serve as an example for us and our children.

This brings us to the third topic triggered by verses 46 and 47: I think we can learn something here from the way Jesus related with these teachers. There are four things to see:

- 1) he sought out teachers and sat in their midst;
- 2) he listened;
- 3) he asked questions; and
- 4) he gave answers.

I infer from this that if the Son of God sought out teachers, listened, asked questions and gave answers about the things of God, therefore so ought his people to seek understanding, especially those preparing for the ministry.

If I learned one thing from my 6 years of theological education and 6 years of teaching at Bethel it is that most people are not eager to understand more about God than they already understand. I would say less than a tenth of all the students I ever taught were hungry to see how reality fits together and eager to drink at history's great wells of wisdom. This is bad enough in our churches and colleges but the tragedy reaches its crescendo when we see it so prevalent in our divinity schools where the pastor-teachers are being trained. How little zeal there is to tackle the glorious revelation of God in the Bible and understand it from cover to cover --- how it all fits together into a grand unity!

Richard Baxter, the 17th century English pastor who wrote the great classic *The Reformed Pastor* said (p.68):

"Take heed to yourselves that you want not the qualifications necessary to your work. He must not be himself a babe in knowledge, that will teach men all those mysterious things which must be known in order to salvation. O what qualifications are necessary for a man who hath such a charge upon him as we have! How many difficulties in divinity to be solved! And these too about the fundamental principles of religion! How many obscure texts of scripture to be expounded!

I feel tremendously challenged by the example of Jesus and the admonition of Baxter to strive for increased wisdom and understanding of Scripture. And I urge all of you, especially those in or on their way to seminary: find yourself a wise teacher who loves the whole counsel of God, listen to him, ask him questions and keep asking until it all begins to fit together and have him ask you questions and give him your answers. If Jesus did it we should do it.

Verses 48-50:

"And when they (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 looking for you anxiously (literally: in pain). And he said to them: 'Why is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house (or about his business). And they did not understand the saying which he spoke to them.'"

The last statement --- that they did not understand Jesus---is Luke's way of saying to us the reader: "there's more here than meets the eye. This is the point, don't miss it" (cf. Luke 18:34). They were searching and searching and finally they turn him up at the temple. Where did they search? In the playground, the local swimming hole, in the shops, at the bakery? Jesus answers: you shouldn't have had to seek at all. For you know, don't you, that there is laid on me an inner necessity to be in my Father's house (or about his business--either translation is possible)? The main point of the whole passage probably lies in the contrast between "your father" and "my father." Mary says, "Your father and I have

been searching for you." Jesus answers, "You should have known I would be at the house of my Father." In other words, Jesus has chosen this crucial stage in His life on the brink of manhood to tell his parents in an unforgettable way that he now knows who his real Father is and what it will mean for his mission. It will mean, as Simeon said in Luke 2:35, "a sword will pierce through your own soul also, Mary." The time will come when Jesus will be killed at Jerusalem and after 3 days rise from the dead and that will be a great pain to Mary. And is not this 3-day vigil of Mary and Joseph a foreshadowing of that experience? She said, "Your father and I have been seeking you in pain."

So it seems to me that the main teaching of the passage is that Jesus now recognizes his unique sonship to God and that his mission will require of him a devotion to God's purposes so great that it takes precedence over the closest family ties. He must follow his calling even if it brings pain and misunderstanding. In this way Luke sets the stage for the adult ministry of the Son of God. And to that we'll turn in chapter three about 18 years later.

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