

Approval: God's Design for Growth

by Stewart Ruch

The sermon emphasizes the importance of receiving and giving God's approval as a foundation for spiritual growth and community life.

Duration: 24:00

Scripture: Luke 3:21

Topics: "Spiritual Growth"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker reflects on a meeting that didn't go well and acknowledges his failure to care for and bless the people involved. He emphasizes the importance of kindness and gentleness towards others, as everyone is engaged in their own battles and seeking approval. The speaker then highlights the image of God as a community of love, with the father loving the son and pouring out His love upon humanity. He compares this love to a spring of water that is always available, but often goes unnoticed due to our own spiritual disorientation.

Transcript

I realize it's hard for you to see this little piece of paper that I have in my hands, but it's a well-worn, very soft scrap. It actually came out of a bulletin here at Rez that someone a few years ago wrote a quick note to me and tore it out of the bulletin and handed it to me, and I still have it several years later. They're words of blessing.

They're words of approval. They were responding specifically to something that I had done, but then the note goes on to just speak to me personally, not about anything that I had done. It's just a word of blessing to me.

And it obviously meant enough to me that I still knew where it was, and I still have it in hand. Do you have any note like this somewhere in your life? Or if not that, do you kind of know that sense of thrill when you see the email subject line and recognize, oh, maybe this is an email that approves of me. This might be an email with some affirmation or blessings coming my way.

Do you ever feel that as opposed to emails that are coming that don't approve of you? Are you aware of that person in your life, your workplace, family, that seem to have a unique capacity to see things in others and bless them and approve them and encourage them? Are you aware that those people seem to stick out? And if you know someone like that, isn't it true that you'd rather have lunch with them than almost

anybody else? Just hoping that they might say something encouraging to you. There is a reality of the human design that we are made to be blessed. We have a craving, a deep human craving for the approval and the blessing of others.

Indeed, many of us will engineer our entire lives, whether consciously or often subconsciously, to somehow receive the approval of others and avoid the disapproval of others. This need is great and it's deep. And I want to just establish that as we begin, because this is a need that if you're not in touch with it, will make it very difficult for you to move forward in freedom as an influential Christian in others' lives.

It'll make it very difficult for you to live a life of freedom. Indeed, what we see in the baptism of Jesus is not only does He identify with us in our need for cleansing, I'll speak about that in just a moment, but He identifies with us in our need for blessing. He not only receives the baptism to be like us, even though He didn't need to be cleansed from sin, He receives words of approval and blessing from His Father.

And His Father, in one of the most public moments of the Father's revelation, of the Father speaking, makes it clear that I am about blessing My Son. And through My Son, I want to bless every human being. This craving that you have is not just some need to feel better.

It's about far more than that. It's to be established in your identity in Jesus. And for those who get their approval from God, and can rightly order the approval that they do understandably need from others, but rightly order it, it is those Christians that are very free to be very influential, for they fear not the disapproval of others, they hunger for the approval of God, and they are free to approve of others.

So this is a matter far greater than simply you feeling good about yourself. As Jesus inaugurated His mission on earth at the age of 30, it was inaugurated with a word of blessing and approval by the Father. So your mission will be profoundly influenced by how you're able to receive the established approval that God wants to minister, the established blessing that God wants to minister.

So very simply, how do we get it? How do we get approval, especially the approval of God? And then how do we give it to others? In your bulletin, it was just read, Luke chapter 3. And would you turn there with me? There's two verses we're going to focus on this morning. How do we get approval first? Look at verse 21. Now, when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened.

What's happening here? Okay, this is a celebration day in the life of the church called the baptism of the Lord. So this is a time when we regularly, every year, look at the baptism of Jesus. Why is Jesus baptized? I've studied this for a couple of decades, and I have to be honest with you, I still have to go back every year and go, now, why again was Jesus baptized? I mean, I know the answer can come out of my mouth, but heart-wise, why was he baptized? Okay, this was, this baptism was a baptism that was known as a baptism for cleansing, a baptism given by a man named John.

It was a kind of preparatory baptism. Jesus would bring a full baptism in the ministry of the Holy Spirit. He would bring the baptism to the church and be called to minister for two millennia, a baptism that we're going to in several minutes today.

So this baptism that Jesus received is a preparatory baptism for cleansing. Why did Jesus need to be cleansed? Did Jesus have sin that needed to be cleansed? We know that teaching the Bible, he did not. So why would he be baptized? And the answer is this, because he wants to identify with humanity in every

single way and yet remain without sin.

He's looking for every single moment, every single display of showing you how much he's with you, that he is truly, fully human. The identification of Jesus with humanity is an application or a kind of extenuated understanding of an even deeper truth, which is that God is incarnate. That means carne, carne is flesh.

He's become flesh in Jesus Christ. God is fully human in Jesus Christ. The incarnation of God is what's being ministered here.

And the reality is being ministered here. Now, when Jesus identifies with us, this is what's amazing. It's not only to identify with our need for cleansing, but something else he identifies with, our need for care, our human need for blessing, our human craving to hear the words, beloved daughter, beloved son, with you I am well pleased.

And to have this highlighted at this momentous occasion tells us something about what it means to be human. See, we learn what it means to be human by looking at Jesus Christ, who is fully human. And we see there's a deep need, an intrinsic need for us to live in a community of love, for us to live in a family, in a church, in a roommate situation.

You have to be married to live this. You don't have to have kids to live this. All he means are to live in a community of love.

For we see a picture of who God is in this moment. You're actually being given a picture. It talks about the heaven opening in 21 verse 21.

What's happening there. The heavens are opening to show you who God is. If you're not sure who God is and your feelings are all over the place about what you feel about God, have an opportunity right here to see who God is, who is God.

God is a community, a communion of love. The father loves the son. He's beloved with him.

I'm well pleased. He hasn't even done his ministry yet. He's not brought the grades home from school yet.

He's just getting started. This is one reason why the church has always embraced infant baptism, because the baby's done nothing to deserve the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the love of God. But in that seemingly helpless state, God is displaying his love in Jesus here before than any public ministry is being told how deeply loved he is by the father.

The Holy Spirit is being poured out upon Jesus. Jesus is showing his love to the father by obeying him. And in another, another book, it says he's fulfilling the way to live, fulfilling all righteousness.

Now what's happening in the father and the Holy Spirit, when you look into the center of who God is, is you can be assured that God is a community of love. You can see it. There is no hidden side to God.

This is who God is. This is what God is like. So the approval, the blessing that the father pours out in the son, is just part of the eternal life that has always been.

God has always been loving the son. The son's always been loving the father. The Holy Spirit's ministering that love one to another.

Full community of love. And Jesus then wants to identify with humanity so that he can bring that love and make that approval real, tangible, embodied, literally. Hudson Taylor is a Christian worker of the 19th century, Englishman, who had a huge heart for the nation of China.

He loved China. So he formed his whole life to get to China at a very difficult time to travel and to do that work. China was in incredible political upheaval in the time when he went.

But Hudson Taylor focused everything he had to get to China. When he got to China, he began to teach about the love of God. He wanted to, by learning the language of the Chinese in the area, he lived his life among the Chinese.

After a few years, he realized this isn't enough. I'm not communicating to them how much I love them and how much God loves them. So Taylor did a radical thing at the time, but then in a few other circumstances, but not by his tradition, and he decides he will no longer wear the clothes of an Englishman.

He wore the clothes that a Chinese man would wear. He would no longer wear his hair as an Englishman would, but he would wear what would be for him a radical hairstyle, where the top of the head was shaved forward, the back of the head was done into a long pigtail, and the husband Taylor would actually wear his hair that way as well. And the Chinese were blown away that an Englishman who could speak the language with a significant accent did everything he could to identify with them.

So Jesus has done everything to identify with us, to bring us this word that the Father desires to pour his blessing, to call you his beloved out on you. But Jesus identifies with us in our need, and yet the fact of the matter is while God does deeply approve of us, he's created us, we're made in his image, we're made like him, we're told. He does, of course, approve of everything we do.

I love my children, and I approve of who they are, but I can actually because I approve of who they are, I don't approve of everything that my children do. Any part of my job as a father is to help train them to live by who they've been made to be in Christ, for their behavior to be aligned with their identity in Christ. So the Father doesn't approve of everything we do, but that doesn't mean he doesn't foundationally approve of us.

He foundationally sets an approval in place that has to be in place. Any parent knows with good discipline, you foundationally teach that you're connected and that you approve of your child, and then through their years you discipline them. So with the Father all the more.

So the Father establishes this deep approval in and through Jesus. So much sin actually occurs in our lives, not because we think we're overly approved of by the Father, but because we don't understand the approval of the Father. So much sin emanates from our minds and our hearts and our tongues, because we don't believe that we are cared for.

So we engage in financial fraud, not because we want to do something bad, but because we're terrified that we won't financially be provided for, that our Father in Heaven won't care for us. We engage in pornography, not because we want to live on the edge, or even ultimately be titillated by that. We engage in pornography because we're convinced that God, our Father, is not going to care for our physical, sexual, emotional, relational needs, and it drives us actually into sin.

We're driven into sin because of a lack of approval, not because too much approval from the Father. Why do we get obsessed around social media and who's responding to what we've posted and what we've

said? Because we're convinced that we are not approved of fundamentally, and so we're seeking it wherever we can find it. What's God wanting to minister? He wants to minister His blessing.

How do we access that? Well, first and foremost, we've been given the gift of baptism. When you were baptized, and my first step would be, believe in your baptism. When you were baptized, you were given the love of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

When you were baptized, baptism simply means immersion. You were soaked, and we're going to see some soaking right here, and water splashing. It's all part of this, so you can have ministered to you the tangibility of God's beloved care for you, that you've been immersed in God, in your baptism.

So part of accessing this blessing of God the Father is believing in your baptism. It's understanding what was given to you in your baptism. It's right there.

You have the fullness of God pouring out His love upon you. I did a backpacking trip before I started college. It was called High Road then.

We were orienteering, so we had to find our way to a campsite, and there was a spring at that campsite, according to the map. It took us nine hours to find that campsite. We had three hours of water.

We spent six hours without water. We were dying of thirst, almost. We felt like we were dying of thirst.

All we could think about was water. The fact of the matter was, our orienteering was so poor, we were lost feet away from the spring for hours. The spring was right there.

We finally got it sorted out and realized, wait a second, it's literally over that ridge, but we had no idea how close we were, and so it is with God's love for you. It's right there, but we're so lost, and we don't know where we're going, and we don't realize that the fact of the matter is, He's poured out His love upon you in Jesus Christ. It's all there.

It just needs to be accessed. It's right there. You don't need to go to someone else, first and foremost, to get your approval.

People do need to approve one another. I'll get into that in just a moment, but it will always be inconsistent, and it will never be enough, because you're designed for the approval of the Father, and no human being, no matter how wonderful your father and mother were, no matter how wonderful your supervisor is, no matter how great your mentor is, it will never be enough, and you will live a sense of disappointment with them for the rest of your life if you don't understand that the design that God has created, that is part of His design for you, is receive the Father's approval first. When that's set in, then you can forgive the Father who never approved you enough.

You're freer from the mother who didn't know how to speak a word of blessing, or you can give thanks for what you did receive, and you can be free from craving the approval of others, and managing your gospel life to always make sure that that's there, as opposed to the freedom that Jesus is calling us to. So in baptism, we see the outpouring of this. The Father speaks these words over you in your baptism, as He did over Jesus' baptism, and in prayer, we access the of the Father.

Prayer is asking, but before you're asking, you're accessing the words of the Father. I really want you to learn this about prayer. I'm concerned that so many of you are going to prayer thinking it's asking God for

things, and it is asking God for things.

That's a biblical teaching of Jesus. But before you're asking, you're accessing the love of God. You're accessing the word of the Father.

At the heart of prayer is sitting before the Lord, letting Him show you where you have sought to care for yourself or receive the care of the Father, where you have gone away from the calling and the approval of God to the approval of others, letting God display your heart to you, repenting of that, being cleansed of that, and then hearing the word of the Father to you. If you can't hear it spiritually, which might take time or more prayer of others for you, you can just read right from the Bible, Luke chapter 3. You can just trust and hear the words, You are my beloved daughter. With you I am well pleased.

Prayer accesses the blessing of the Father. So if you're in a dry prayer season, which I know many of you are in, hard prayer season, thin prayer season, yellow light here, okay, break, break, break, break, slow down. You don't want to keep going.

You can't manufacture a glorious prayer season, but what you can do is set aside a time, set time aside. Don't act like this is just how it is. You need access to the Father's love and approval.

You need time to receive these words from Luke chapter 3. It's really important. It's important because not only are we called to receive the approval of the Father, we're then called to turn and give approval. This is one of the great callings of the Christians.

It's actually called a spiritual gift, the gift of encouragement, which again is more than just being an affirming person. That's nice. That's good.

This is way deeper than that. It's actually being a Christian who's aligned with the Father's approval, who's received the Father's approval in through Jesus and has the courage and the stability and the security to see in others great things and call them out, to see in others beautiful things and call them out, to see in other things that God says, this is my beloved son. With you I am well pleased and have the capacity to minister that to others.

Oh how the church needs Christians established in the approval of God that can administer the approval to others and bless others with that approval. How does that happen? The first thing we do is we have to identify with others who also need the blessing of God. The fact of the matter is, no matter what everyone looks like to you right here, here's one thing you can be guaranteed as a part of the constituent nature of every person in this room is that they need the blessing of God and the blessing of others.

There's a lot of differences here, okay, we have personality tests, etc., etc., you'd be all over the map. That gets complicated because with simple, you're all craving approval. Me too.

That's why I had that note in my pocket. So identify yourself with others in that way. I was just in a church meeting situation, it was very humbling.

Another church that I serve in the diocese, they're going through a conflict, I went into a very difficult meeting with the board of that church. I viewed them as an obstruction to getting where I wanted to go, they viewed me as an obstruction to getting where they wanted to go. I rationalized, six of them, there's only one of me, and they're very, very smart, they're very articulate, and I went in defended.

I went in sort of walls up. I went in ready to try to win a dynamic in a situation. Well they also wanted to win, and so we both tried to win.

It didn't go well. The meeting did not go well. We had another meeting about a month later, and one of the people there had the courage and honesty to say to me, that meeting didn't go well, here's why it didn't go well for us.

You made some good points, we can work through the details, you're actually right about some stuff, we're right about some stuff, but here's the deal. We needed you to care for us, and you didn't care for us. We needed you to identify that we needed your blessing and connection, and we didn't get blessing from you, and it was true.

And I was so sorry I missed that opportunity, and so glad they gave me another opportunity. 19th century English pastor, different than the one I mentioned earlier on, said this, be kind for everyone you know is engaged in a great battle. Be kind for everyone you know is engaged in a great battle.

Maybe one of the constant exhortations of the New Testament is to be gentle to one another. For everyone you know is engaged in getting approval somehow or some way, so we identify. And finally, in a phrase we use with our toddlers as they're moving from grunting to some level of sentence construction, we're always saying, use your words, use your words.

Say juice, say juice. So I say to us, we do a lot of metaphorical grunting with one another, and I'd say use your words, use your words carefully. We need to be clear, the Bible says it will be judged for our careless words, so we use our words carefully, but we use our words.

How often do we hear the voice of the Father speak in the New Testament? One of the places that we're aware of. You hardly ever hear the explicit voice of the Father speak. He doesn't speak often, but when the Father speaks, what does He speak? He speaks words of blessing.

He speaks words of life. He speaks words of care to His beloved Son. So we who seek to imitate our Father in heaven, as the Bible teaches, seek to use our words, use them carefully, but when you're using them for approval, when you're using them for blessing, use them with strength, use them with courage, use them intentionally.

I would say over the next week, you've got seven days. Start today, go till Saturday. Set a goal that every day you will speak at least one word of blessing to another, one word of courage to another, one word of kind of fundamental approval to another.

Set that goal. It will reset your call to speak to others as the Father has spoken to us. How do you get it? The approval of God.

It's been given you already in Jesus, in your baptism. You access it through prayer and the scriptures. How do you give it? Identify with those who have great need as well and use the words of courage and blessing.

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

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