

## God's Pleasure

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*Psalm 149:1-4 — Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song. Sing God's praise in the assembly of the faithful. Let Israel be glad in its Maker; let the children of Zion rejoice in their ruler. Let them praise God's name with dancing, making melody to the LORD with tambourine and lyre. For God takes pleasure in God's people; the LORD adorns the humble with victory.*

“O God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be life-giving for us, your people, and thereby bring you pleasure. Amen.” Most of you have heard that prayer many times by now. It's one of just a few prayers that I often pray right before beginning a sermon. You may have noticed that it's an adaptation of a more common prayer: “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.” Now, I don't think there's anything *wrong* with that second prayer; it's just that, for me, that phrase at the end—“be acceptable in your sight”—it conjures up an image in my mind that, well, I don't really want to be a part of my spiritual life.

When I hear that phrase, I imagine a certain kind of father figure—stern, distant, distinguished, perhaps prudish. I imagine this father looking over my shoulder, with his brow furrowed and his eyes squinting, to see if I am indeed acceptable in his exacting sight. You probably know what I'm talking about here. Most of us are well familiar with this image of a foreboding father God. We know what it's like to have this image loom in our minds and create an underlying anxiety in our faith. We know what it's like to be afraid that God will look at us, shake his head in disapproval, and judge us to be lacking, not good enough.

Personally, I don't believe that's what God is like, and I think those kinds of images hurt our walk with God much more than they help it. So, as a way of saying “No” to that image, I took the liberty of revising this common prayer (and by the way, you have this same liberty, too). There are two parts to my revision: “May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts 1) be life-giving for us, your people, and 2) thereby bring you pleasure.” The first part of that revision, “be life-giving for us, God's people,” it expresses the desire that my words and our meditations would help us to live life to the fullest, as God intends for us. As Jesus proclaims in the Gospel of John, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I have come that you may have life, and have it in abundance.” And the second part of the revision, “and thereby bring you pleasure,” it expresses the belief that when we have this abundant life, when we embrace and embody the fullness of life that God in Christ offers, God finds pleasure. As the psalmist puts it in our second reading this morning, “God takes pleasure in God's people.”

How does that sound to you? It's one thing to say that God is *pleased*—to me, that sounds a bit more like the austere father we were just talking about. He stares you down for a while, and if he decides that you've done well enough, he lets out a grunt and says, “Okay, I'm pleased.” But that

word *pleasure*—what about that? What happens when we start thinking about, start talking about God's *pleasure*?

For some Christians, that language sounds too physical, even too sensual. Turns out, Christians have a history of finding *lots* of things too physical and too sensual, a history of starkly separating their spiritual lives from their bodily desires, a history of regarding the spirit as holy and the body as dirty. If the word “pleasure” reminds us of our body's desires, and if we think of those desires not as gifts from God, but as problems, then I suppose it would make sense to keep language of pleasure away from God. For other Christians, it's not that talking about God's pleasure sounds too physical; it's that it sounds so personal, so emotional. Some Christians think of God only as a universal force or impersonal spirit—not as a divine being who *feels* things, things like pleasure and anger and much more. For these Christians, it can be hard to believe that God is deeply affected by and invested in what they do and what happens to them. How many of us believe, *really* believe, that when we are hurting, the God of the universe is troubled, and when we flourish, the God of the universe is happy?

Well, here in this morning's passage, we read that “God takes pleasure in God's people.” We, you and I, make God happy. But what specifically about us? What is it that we do that God takes pleasure in? What do we have to do to make God happy with us?

I know a professor in Tennessee named Dr. Curtis, who teaches Christian spirituality and who is about 80 years old. For many years now, Dr. Curtis has taken his dog Ambrose on a walk every morning as the sun comes up. They live near a golf course, and no one is on it at that hour, so Dr. Curtis and Ambrose are able to roam the grounds without bothering anyone. Often, Dr. Curtis lets Ambrose off his leash. And whenever he does this, Ambrose gets into this pattern: at first, he runs off, leaping and bounding like any happy, healthy dog would. He sniffs some stuff, chases a sound—but then, after 10 or 20 seconds, he stops, turns around, and looks right at Dr. Curtis, who is following him, slowly. Ambrose then trots back towards Dr. Curtis, and the dog's big smile fades a bit as he stares expectantly at his owner. It's as if Ambrose is asking him, “Am I doing this right?” Dr. Curtis will look back at him, smile, and nod, and then Ambrose will take off again, playing, panting, being a happy, healthy dog...until 10 or 20 seconds later, when he goes back to Dr. Curtis, looks up, and asks, “Are—are you sure everything's alright? It's just—I don't wanna mess this up.” Reflecting on this pattern, Dr. Curtis says, “On one hand, it's nice that Ambrose is checking in with me, but really, what I want is just to watch Ambrose play, watch him run, watch him be a happy, healthy dog.”

Perhaps this is a window into our walk with God. We've all been let off the leash, and there's all sorts of trouble that we could get in to, but for the most part, we are pretty tame. We work, we play, we love. We try to be happy and healthy. We check in with God, which is good for us to do, but whenever we look at God nervously and ask, “Am I doing this right?”, perhaps God says to us, “You don't understand. I just want to watch you be happy and healthy; to watch you work and play and love; to watch you just be who you are, be who I made you to be. And when you do

get into trouble, when you are hurting, when you're in need of comfort, come check in with me, because I'll always be following you, slowly."

Friends, our God is *not* a stern, short-tempered father. Our God is not like those parents who get a rise out of punishing their children, not like those parents who will not be pleased with their children unless they are performing well. Friends, our God takes pleasure in us, simply because God made us, and made us to be God's people, God's children. May our hearts find rest in this truth, may this truth prepare our hearts to come to this table today, and may this table, which proclaims God's perfect love for the world and for us, may it energize us to love the world as Jesus did. Amen.