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### **Matthew 3:13–17, English Standard Version.**

*<sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> 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; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.”*

### **Why does God approve?**

There is something subtle in the quote for today that most people totally miss. I’m going to get to this point in a bit, but first, note that this is the scene where Jesus, before he begins his ministry, goes to the river Jordan and is baptized by John. Because of this scene, we call him John the Baptist. There is a widely held belief that Jesus and John the Baptist were cousins. The truth, though, is that the Bible only calls Mary, Jesus’ mom, and Elizabeth, John’s mom, “kinspersons” of some sort. We can, however, consider Jesus and John to be in some loose sense cousins. In this scene, Jesus wants John to baptize him, but in his very modest fashion, John tells Jesus that it should be the other way around, that Jesus should be baptizing him. Jesus then says: *Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all*

*righteousness*. This can be a bit hard to understand, but it might mean that Jesus knows that God simply wants this to happen, largely in order to identify Jesus as someone who is going to be sacrificed for humanity. Baptism was just a good, poetic way for Jesus to publicly introduce himself to the world. Jesus, of course, had no need to be baptized. He was neither someone who had any sins that would have separated him from God, and he was certainly already as much of a believer as any baptized person every could be. An interesting fact is that Jesus would have had to travel seventy miles on foot from Galilee to the river Jordan in the wilderness just to be unnecessarily baptized. So, clearly, the symbolic importance of this baptism should not be minimized. Next, to further dramatize the beginning of Jesus' three-year ministry, the heavens open up, and God descends like a dove and comes to rest on Jesus' shoulder. God then says: *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* Remember that beginning with the dove bringing back an olive branch to the ark after the flood, the dove had been a symbol of peace to the Israelite and then Jewish people. So, God is telling all of us that the man whose shoulder he sits upon is about to sacrifice himself so that all of us can live in peace. We thus see that on multiple levels, the baptism of Jesus is far more than just one cousin being nice to another cousin by acknowledging his critical role as a baptizer. This scene marks the beginning of Jesus' ministry. It tells us that God supports

Jesus' mission, that this is indeed the savior, and that a huge price will be paid for the gift that Jesus brings to humanity.

I gave a sermon two weeks ago about the need for us to seek approval from God and not from people. This is a key aspect of being a Christian, that we live in a very literal sense for the things of God's world and not the things of the world of humanity. This is true to such a degree that peer approval over what we do with our lives, what we own, how much we earn, etc., has no value to us. However, let's be realistic. What I just described is a goal, and often the most important goals in life are things that we can never fully achieve. We try to live sinless lives. We try to go to church every single Sunday and listen intently to the magical words of Pastor Buzz. We try to raise our kids to be faithful Christians. We try to live completely healthy lives and protect the bodies that God gave us. In truth, none of us, unless we are completely separated from society, live without seeking human approval from time to time. If nothing else, our jobs often demand that we have this as a goal. Bosses and customers must approve of us. More subtly, we naturally want approval from other people because we value human contact, and we don't want to risk losing it. We do not want to be rejected. So, let me tell you a story.

In a legal sense, I have never had a traffic ticket. I realize that after saying this, I'm bound to get one this afternoon. But yes, as of right now, my record is

clean. This is because I am an extraordinarily holy and good person, and certainly, when the End Times come and the book that is written about me is read aloud, God will announce that Buzz has won salvation not by faith, and not by the acts he has performed, but by his total lack of wild and crazy acts. But seriously, in truth, I did manage to get a ticket once, but it was wiped from my record. When I was in grad school as a young man in southern California, I was driving home from USC, which is in downtown L.A., to my apartment out near the ocean, a distance of about fifteen miles, and I was doing this at about 3 in the morning, when I rolled through a red light. The officer who pulled me over was polite, told me he understood that I was very tired, but that I had to be careful or I could kill someone. At the time, if it was your first ticket, you could have it removed from your record if you went to traffic school. I signed up, not so much to clear my record, but to avoid having to pay the fine that I could not afford. It was an all-day class. We started the class by going around the room and having everybody declare their traffic sins. Mine was very pedestrian. One guy had driven ninety miles an hour in a thirty-five mile an hour zone and caused a major accident. There was one guy who had actually been busted for drunk driving and had managed to simply be sent to traffic school. When it came to my turn to describe what I had done wrong, I somewhat sheepishly said that I had run a red light at 3 A.M. Very boring, no one was impressed.

But here is why I am talking about my experience in traffic school. You couldn't get your ticket removed from your record unless the instructor signed off on you – and the instructor wasn't going to do this unless he or she felt that you were genuinely determined to clean up your act, that you took the class seriously and you admitted your faults, and you were motivated to be a very different kind of driver. In other words, I had to get this person's approval. Not God's, but rather the approval of an off-duty deputy sheriff who was easily old enough to be my dad. I could see everyone putting on their best act. The guy who had raced through a neighborhood and then taken out another half dozen cars actually sobbed. The drunk driver shook his head and hung it low and proclaimed himself a changed man. I made a good show of saying that I knew that running a red light was no joking matter. Traffic laws are there to protect all of us. I could have T-boned a pregnant woman in a Honda Civic – a car that at the time was about the size of a phone booth. I could have caused someone to spend the rest of their life in wheelchair or on life support. I did so well with the whole "I'm a sinner" thing that I started to half believe it myself. Mind you, I was twenty-five and just trying to get my graduate degree so I could go live a good life. Traffic school was no more than a way to avoid what at the time was a fine that would have zeroed out my check book. But I am proud to say, I did a good job. The deputy, who had probably

witnessed all kinds of insincere declarations of spiritual transformation, bought all of it. At the end of the day, he signed my form, shook my hand, and wished me the best. I was free. I had human approval.

I want to discuss two subtle things. The first has to do with the aspect of Jesus' baptism to which I earlier alluded. But let's start with the second subtle thing. It is perfectly fine to periodically or even frequently seek human approval. God made us to be social creatures. God also wants us to live in harmony in society. But what God does not want us to do is live only for that raw approval itself. If I was simply trying to get a human to approve of me as a person and not because I was trying to get along with the rest of humanity, then it would have been a good sign that I wasn't living the way God wants. It's when we lift other people up to a position that is God-like that we are wandering off the path God wants us on. Sure, in a sense, that deputy sheriff, who was very respectful and supportive, by the way, was in a sense in a God-like position as the instructor of this class. But I wasn't after his personal approval because my highest goal in life was to have other people approve of me. The next time you realize that you need or want someone's approval, just ask yourself if you are fully satisfied with that. You shouldn't be. If God's approval is more important, then you are fine. We have to resist letting

society break us down morally and spiritually. One of the biggest way that society damages our faith is by causing us to replace God with earthly recognition.

Let me get to the second subtle point. Notice that God says of Jesus *This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased*. God said this before Jesus had done much of anything in his ministry. He was a young man who was about to start out on the mission that God had planned for him. But Jesus had not yet performed any miracles, preached on a hillside, rode into Jerusalem, or offered himself up in sacrifice. He had not yet shown by example how we are to live. He hadn't really done anything yet. But God still approved of him. I've already talked about a couple of the important symbolic elements in the Jesus baptism story. Here's another one, a very big one: God was making it clear to all of us that God judges us not by the things we do, but by our faith. God was proud of Jesus just for being Jesus. Jesus is the essence of complete faith. I had to earn my way into the approval of that deputy sheriff. I had to do something, namely put on a good act. It was hard work. It was an earthly task. Other than the fact that I was being disingenuous in pretending to be so remorseful, I was just trying to come into compliance with the legal system, and save some money. God does want that.

I have one last little story about traffic school. After the class was over and we were dismissed, a few of us hung around and talked to the deputy. I found him

to be an interesting guy. People started asking him about the arrests he had made in his career. He told a story about having taught the traffic class a couple years before and having a student who had been ticketed for driving barefoot. His foot had slipped off the brake and he had hit the car in front of him at a traffic light. The deputy said that a key reason the law requires shoes when you drive is so that this does not happen. This guy acted very remorseful. He said that he would never, ever drive without shoes again. He realized how dangerous it had been to break the law, and he was thankful that he hadn't hurt anyone. Then about a month later, this same deputy pulled someone over for rolling through a stop sign. Then he recognized the guy from the traffic class. Then he noticed that the guy was not wearing shoes! You can guess that the deputy did not cut this guy any breaks.

You see, God doesn't have to catch us red handed. God knows what is in our hearts and minds. And the depth and strength of our faith is under our control. We can learn to put God's approval above the approval of humans. We can work at our faith and our trust in God. We can incrementally train ourselves. If you catch yourself being vain, being superficial, wanting to impress others with your wealth, your smarts, your influence, if you catch yourself living mainly for the approval of humans, then stop. Ask yourself why you are doing this. It's usually rooted in insecurity - and God wants us to be secure. Ask yourself how you can avoid it in



the future. We can indeed work on our faith, on our dependence on God. Praying helps. Stop and ask God to maintain a high profile in your mind. Ask God to help you focus on living for the reasons God wants you to be on this planet. Please pray with me.

*God, after giving this sermon today, please don't let me get a traffic ticket this afternoon. Okay, I understand. I'll have Wendy drive home. But more importantly, God, help me always put your approval above the approval of people. Let me never get lazy and start treating people like they are God. It can be a lot easier to please people than to do the hard work of building my faith. Give me the strength to work on my relationship with you – and to work on it every day of my life. God, let this prayer right now be the start. Let this be the moment when I start fresh – and God, I do thank you for always letting me start over at any time and to start over as many times as I need. May you fill my mind every day. Whenever I am anxious or frightened or angry, may my thoughts immediately turn to you. Let me develop an instinctive reaction to always seek you at every major decision point, whenever I am under stress, and whenever I am frustrated with human life. I know that this is the best way to become a person of deeper faith – by keeping you in mind. This is how I earn your approval, not by what I do, but by my closeness to you. Amen.*