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God's Radical Grace

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TEXT: Mark 1:9-11 (NASB)

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Immediately coming up out of the water, He saw the heavens opening, and the Spirit like a dove descending upon Him; and a voice came out of the heavens: "You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased."

Dear Friends:

Where does the whole story of salvation begin, and where does the journey of discipleship as a follower of Jesus begin? The answer to both questions is: with God's radical grace initiative in sending His son Jesus to the world and to us. So when we confess faith in Jesus Christ, is it more like taking out an insurance policy that covers it and settles it and we don't even think about it? Or is it more like the day that we were married, our wedding day where we signed a marriage covenant and made a promise to our beloved that we would, from now on, share the intimacy of life always with this individual? The journey of discipleship is a shared life with the living God, Jesus Christ, who lives within us by faith and guides our whole journey. It's like a track star climbing into the blocks, the starting blocks, right before a big race. And when the gun goes off, the coiled muscles spring into action and we're running the race. But a faith believer knows that we run the race of life with the person of Jesus Christ beside us and within us, we are never alone.

So the whole of the journey of salvation begins with God's radical grace in Jesus Christ. And as we read the story of Jesus' baptism in Mark 1, the promises that God the Father

makes to Jesus are important promises for us to realize about Jesus, but also for ourselves as well. Jesus, the perfect son of God, on His baptism day, wades into the muddy waters of the Jordan, and the Son of God is immersed in the oneness with the dirty brokenness and even rebellion of the world that Jesus created. And while He's being baptized, the heavens split open and the dove descends upon Jesus in the water as He comes up out of the water, and the Father says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." So God the Father promises Jesus that He is the object of His love. The Father loves Him wholly, completely, unconditionally, in a way that the love unifies them together. But it also declares with clear revelation and proclamation that Jesus is the son of God. Later in Jesus' life, when He had given His life dying on the cross and shedding His blood, God raised Him from the dead to confirm the truth that He is greater than death and Jesus is the son of God. But it also tells us that the Father says of Jesus that He is well-pleased with Him. This language comes out of the Old Testament prophets called the Servant Songs, which affirm the Jesus in the best tradition of a servant of God, has sacrificed His life totally to fulfill the will and purposes of God for His life and for God's salvation.

I remember recently watching a television episode of a Netflix program called *Call the Midwife*. The story of that episode depicted the doctor of the program, who is widowed, marrying a woman who had been a sister. Now the two of them, who share a son from a previous marriage before the doctor's wife died, are longing to have a child together, but they are unable. And so we see the very moment where this doctor and his new bride come in to a baby nursery and pick up for the first time a beautiful baby girl that they will adopt to be their very own. And the story depicts joy, and they're beaming with happiness to take this child, this girl, into their lives as their very own. The day you and I were baptized into the love of God, immersed into the life and grace made possible by Jesus Christ, God has that kind of joy over us. And God says to us, "You're my beloved. I love you without merit. I love you unconditionally. And nothing will separate you from my love." He declares to you and I, "You're the son of God. You're the daughter of God. And nothing will change that." He also declares that He is proud of us, that He is well-pleased with us. And the more that we embrace our identity to, in fact, pursue the purpose that God has for us in our lives, the more God's chest swells with pride as He says it again: "Child, I'm well pleased with you. I love you."

When I was at seminary, I worked at a hospital in downtown Minneapolis in a ward (or a wing) of the hospital that cared for chronically depressed people. And because of their

depression, I had to often reorient the patient to their name, to the date, and to where they were in life. When we forget our identity as the loved children of God and that God has a plan and a purpose for our life, we can become bewildered, we can become lost. We can feel as if we're journeying through life in the darkness. And so again today, I want you to know that God looks at you and promises that your life is full of His love and that you are His child – His son, His daughter – and that He is proud to claim you as His own and has a plan and a purpose for your life.

In Isaiah 42 it says, of our identity as God's people, that we are His chosen servants. When I was a boy in elementary school, when we were released from class for recess, we would play pickup games with softball out on the ball diamond, and they would have two captains who would choose their teams. I always hoped that I would be the first person chosen by one of them. And then if I wasn't the first person chosen, I hope that I at least would not be the last person chosen. There was something about being chosen, desired, that affirmed something of my self-worth inside. So I want you to hear in God's radical grace initiative in Jesus Christ, that He has chosen you to be His very own. He has chosen you, in fact, to be His servant; and that that's not a lowly position, but that that resonates in your heart with God's heart, to serve His purposes in the world. That same chapter of Isaiah 42 goes on to say that God wants to use us to be a light to the nations.

The third major part of this promise from Jesus' baptism and the promises of God to us as His people is that the story of Jesus' baptism and ours reveals that God has anointed us with His Holy Spirit, and that we are dripping with the Spirit's presence as we go through the journey of life. There are three things that I want you to know, because you are anointed with the spirit and filled with the spirit. One is that you have peace in life. Many times in the journey of life, or in situations going on in our country and culture, we can feel robbed of our peace. We can feel anxious. But God says, "I am with you, child. Be at peace." There may be sins or guilt that feel as if they're separating us from God, but Jesus has cleared the obstacles away and we are at peace with God. In Romans 5, it says we're justified by Jesus Christ with faith, and we have peace with God. We're at peace with God.

Second, because we're anointed in the Holy Spirit, we have the power of the living God at work for us and within us. In Ephesians 3:20, it says that God is able to do exceeding

abundantly beyond all we think or dream because of the Holy Spirit that is within us. The power of God is that work for you and through you and within you.

Third, because you're anointed with the Holy Spirit in your journey of discipleship, we are possessed by the Holy Spirit. That means that we're set apart for the unique and special purposes of God in this life. We're close to Halloween, and so we think of the word "possession" in negative terms of unwelcome spirits. But this is the Spirit of the living God, the Lord of life. And He comes to possess us, to control our life and guide our life and determine our decisions and the direction of our understanding of what life is for. What a blessing to know that we are anointed by the Holy Spirit! You've maybe heard the phrase before: "Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you everything." The moment Jesus said to each disciple in the New Testament, "Follow me," it says they dropped their nets, they left everything, and followed Jesus. So in our life, when in faith we hear the voice of Jesus call us to follow Him as His disciples, we also understand that there's a moment where we let go of everything that would hinder us from following. We leave it all behind and we devote our lives in love to this new Master of life named Jesus Christ. That we live conscious of a desire every day to learn from Christ, to learn from His word, to have the whole perception of life permeated by this perception that we're trusting Jesus Christ and following Him in the journey.

So that means that in our discipleship journey, if life is hard, instead of drifting into disillusionment, we are going to reaffirm our devotion and our dependence on Jesus. And when we fall, when we fail, instead of running away from the cross of Jesus Christ in guilt and shame, we run to Jesus Christ to beg His forgiveness and to worship Him again as the One who is the source of our mercy. Because we've heard the voice of Jesus call us to follow as devoted disciples, we sing a new song. The melody line of our whole life's song is the gospel message of Jesus, who loves us, and His grace is greater than our sin and gives us new beginnings every day. And in hearing the voice of Jesus to follow as devoted disciples, we're called to shine like stars in the dark night. We are the keepers of hope. Our world is in darkness. Our world has many elements that are unsettling, and we are called to be the keepers of hope, like a candle that gets lit and even the flicker of one flame dispels the darkness. Jesus lights our life to be His light in this dark world.

So by God's radical initiative of grace, He comes to the world to save the world, and Jesus comes to us, to proclaim the promise of God to us and we're immersed into that

life and grace of Jesus Christ. I've always defined faith as living in the conscious awareness of what is true, walking in those promises. But it also is true that the journey of faith is to be immersed into the person of Jesus Christ, and to spend our lives with our hands holding Christ's hand and reveling in the truth that the Lord of Life, the Savior of the world, the source of all grace and hope, lives within our hearts.

So in the name of Jesus, I want you to again today celebrate the truth that you are the beloved child of God, that God is well-pleased with you, that He calls you to not only follow Christ, but to serve His purposes as His chosen ones. You have been anointed with the Holy Spirit so that you live at peace with God, have His power at work in you, and the God by possessing you, determined your life. And every day, you and I are pledged to follow Jesus wherever He leads, to shine for Him, and to love the people that we meet.

Amen.