

We will not have Bible classes on December 24 so there are no discussion questions this week.

Sermon: "Our Father Is Younger Than We."

Breaking news! Tomorrow is Christmas. It's such a remarkable time. A lot of times we really look forward to it, but we have a hard time experiencing it in the way we want to. We build up these dreams of what it will be like to celebrate Christmas, to be together. We have a collection of unrealistic expectations in our heads and then reality often doesn't match up. The result of that is some folks get kind of moody at Christmas.

Have you ever considered that moods are a really important part of your spiritual life? A good mood is joyful, grateful, generous. A bad mood is negative, irritated, stressed, sad. There's kind of an odd mystery to our moods. When you're in a good mood, the world just looks better to you. Not only are you happy, but the future seems to be brighter. When you wake up in the morning, you're more glad about it. Other people look more attractive and nicer to you. Your job or going to school is more fun to you.

When you're in a good mood, a sermon seems like it's better to you. When you're in a bad mood, that same sermon seems like it's worse to you. By the way are you in a good mood right now? When you think about your baseline mood as you go through your day, for people who know you well, if they were asked on a scale of 1 to 10, what would they say is your default mode? What's your baseline mood, and what would you like it to be? You only get to live one time. You only get to go through days of your life one time. What would you like for your mood to be, and what are you doing to move toward that?

Moody people have fewer friends. They have less intimacy in their family with people who they would want to love. They're less generous. They're more self-absorbed. There's this really important but kind of tricky connection with our spiritual life and our moods. On the one hand, being close to God is not the same thing as being in a good mood. Sometimes we confuse that. If somebody asks, "How are you doing spiritually?" We think, "Well, if I'm happy, then God is close. If I'm not, he is far away." But bad people can be in really good moods, win the lottery or something. It doesn't mean they're close to God. On the other hand, this is important to know about God, He wants you to be in a good mood. The Bible says the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in your life is stuff like love, joy, and peace and that stuff will affect your mood. In fact moods are quite contagious, so not only does God want you in a good mood but other people in your life want you in a good mood!

It can feel kind of selfish to want to be in a good mood, but actually in your family... if my wife, if my kids, if my grandkids are in a good mood, I get the spillover from that. The opposite is also true. If folks around you are in a bad mood it spills over on you. We have a platitude about that, "If mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy." (If daddy ain't happy, nobody cares.) Your good mood is a gift to me. If people I work with come in and are in a good mood, it puts me in a good mood too. As a church, we want to be a place where when people come to our church, they are greeted by people who are in a great mood, are taught by people who are in a great mood, are led in worship by people who are in a great mood, where you actually sit next to people who are in a really good mood! There's an old hymn we don't sing anymore because it's kind of whiney but it has one great line in it I love. The line is, "*Cheer up my brother, live in the sunshine.*" So if you are sitting next to someone today who is in a bad mood would you just turn to them and sing that. Or if you don't want to do that just look at them and give them your goofiest grin and see if you can make them grin back at you.

On the other hand, following Jesus is about something different than just wanting to be in a good mood all the time. If I actually want my life (including my moods) to be redeemed by God, I'll have to die to my insistence that life is always doing stuff to put me in a good mood. Jesus actually came, among many other reasons, to impact the mood of the human race. How he does that depends on people's receptivity to him.

As kind of an exercise of looking at Jesus and moods, let's take a look at some of the characters in that very first Christmas and what happened when they found out Jesus was present and just do a little assessment. Are they in a good mood or a bad mood because Jesus is with them? Let's look at a few of them.

"When [the magi, also known as the wise men] saw the star, they were overjoyed." Are the magi in a bad mood or a good mood? Good mood! The shepherds find out God is present with Jesus. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God..." Are the shepherds in a bad mood or a good mood? Good mood! Then there are the angels. "Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest...'" Are the angels in a bad mood or a good mood? Good mood! Now in the Bible you hardly ever read about a grumpy angel. They're probably always pretty happy, but the coming of Jesus just makes them sing deliriously.

Maybe the most remarkable example of impact on a mood is Jesus' mother Mary. She is pregnant with Jesus. She goes to visit a relative of hers named Elizabeth. Elizabeth is pregnant with a child who is going to be John the Baptist. All Mary does is walk in the room in her pregnant condition. This is what the text says. "In a loud voice [Elizabeth] exclaimed: 'As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy.'" What kind of mood was the fetus in? A little happy fetal mood. Fetal joy for the first time in human history! Jesus is apparently a very powerful mood-enhancing force, but he doesn't always put people in a good mood.

Another character in this story is a guy by the name of Herod. He was called Herod the Great. He wanted to be the greatest. Anybody who was going to be greater than him was a threat. Along comes Jesus and Herod wants to snuff him out. The magi don't let him do that. "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under..." What kind of mood was Herod in? He was in a really foul mood. When somebody with a lot of power is in a really bad mood, it gets really dangerous for a lot of other people. Herod had what you might think of as kind of a mood disorder. A lot of us suffer from this. For a lot of people when we think about what mood we're in, we make this kind of association: "My mood is basically a product of whatever circumstances I happen to find myself in." If I have good circumstances I'm in a good mood. If I'm in bad circumstances then I'm in a bad mood. I just kind of go through my days, wake up in neutral and expect life to give me good stuff. If it does, then I'll be in a good mood, and if it doesn't, I'll be in a bad mood. Herod was very much a moody guy. All this money, all this power, didn't make him happy. He had either 11 or 12 wives only one whom he really loved, Mariamne. He became convinced she was a threat to his throne, so he had her executed, the only woman he ever loved. He had a son by Mariamne, and he was afraid that son was going to try to take power, so he had his own son executed and two others of his sons. When his barber said to him that he thought it was not good for him to be executing his sons, he had his barber executed. Herod was such a mean guy that when he was on his deathbed, it was really clear nobody in Israel was going to be sad. So he had 70 of the most prominent citizens of Israel rounded up and locked in a room and left orders that on the day he died all 70 were to be executed. He knew nobody would cry for him, so he said, "I want 70 innocent, prominent people to die on the day I die so there will be mourning."

If having a lot of power and a lot of money and the ability to alter your circumstance ought to make you happy, Herod should have been the happiest guy in Israel, but he was a miserable train wreck. By way of contrast, there's this young girl. She has no money, no power. Her name is Mary. She gets visited by an angel from God, and then all these extraordinary things happen. She takes them, and she absorbs them.

There are two words to notice in this little sentence: *treasure* and *ponder*. "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Those words are both really significant. To ponder something means you think about it really deeply. She would look at what was going on in her life in light of what she studied in the Bible. She would talk to God about it to try to discern what's going on. Mary would ponder, and then she would treasure. To treasure means you find great value in these thoughts. You delight in them. You savor them. You turn them over and over in your mind. They move you to worship.

As a general rule, whatever is going on in your life, your mood will tend to reflect what you habitually ponder and treasure. It could be your money. It could be your looks. It could be your health. It could be your success. It could be God who is present with you in Jesus and loves you. For a few minutes this morning I want to walk you through five practices to engage in so that your whole person, including your moods, can be guided by God. Here's the first practice.

Wake up and ask Jesus to set your mood.

Do this first thing in the morning. There are some people who are morning people. How many of you love waking up in the morning? How many of you hate people who love to wake up early in the morning? Our moods are such a mystery to us, aren't they? We'll actually say to people sometimes if they seem to be really grumpy, "You must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed." Which side is that?

A sleep disorder specialist named Neil Robinson did a study of over a thousand subjects and actually found out there is a correct side of the bed. He actually found out if you get up on the left side of the bed, you are between 4 and 10 percent more likely to be in a better mood, to be a friendlier person, to enjoy your job or your school than if you get up on the right side of the bed. By the way, I get up on the right side of the bed so it's not my fault if I'm moody. Here's the idea on this one. When you get up tomorrow morning, don't worry about right side/left side. When you get up, make a commitment that your knees are going to hit the ground before your feet hit the floor that you're not going to begin your day with, "Oh, all the stuff I have to do! All the problems I have to solve! All the questions I have to answer!"

Most of us are kept from going through life in joy and wonder the way God wants because we swim in an ocean of self-judgment. "I'm not good enough. I'm not smart enough. I'm not successful enough. I'm not pretty enough. I'm not strong enough." This causes us to live a life of anxious mulling instead of joyous doing. What a contrast! A life of anxious mulling instead of joyous doing! The idea is starting tomorrow, when you wake up, instead of anxious mulling, just recognize this is God's day and God is going to take you through it. It's all in God's hands, and God loves making the day fresh. There's a fabulous statement in the Old Testament where the writer says to God, "*God, your mercies are new every morning.*" The idea isn't just that God is always a merciful God. It's almost like when you were sleeping, God was in the kitchen cooking up a batch of fresh mercy. He loves doing that every morning.

Do you understand God never gets tired of being God? God never gets tired of whipping up a new batch of mercy. When he faces every day, God never gets bored. We see it a little bit in children. There's this great writer, G.K. Chesterton who talks about how God is like children in this way. This is what Chesterton writes: "*Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged. They always say, 'Do it again'; and the grown-up person does it again until he is nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exult in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, 'Do it again' to the sun; and every evening, 'Do it again' to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them. It may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we.*"

Isn't that fabulous? "*...we have sinned and grown old...*" Sin isn't good. Sin doesn't bring life. "...we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we." Tomorrow morning wake up and be young. Say, "*God, do it again! Bring the sun up again. Bring those same, old people into my life again. Give me another shot at them. Let me love them. Give me moments where I can be so glad to be in this world with you. God, heal me from sinning and growing old in my spirit.*" The first practice is when you wake up tomorrow, seriously let your knees hit the floor before your feet hit the ground and ask Jesus, "*Jesus, deliver me from my mood. Don't let me start the day in neutral. Don't let my circumstances control my day.*"

Be intensely curious about Jesus.

Let's just get honest here. When we come together to sing about God and to study about God we easily just go on autopilot as if, "Yep, I know that, heard that. Been there, done that." If nothing else, even if it's to be filled with thoughts of skepticism and doubt, just be staggered by the immensity of God and life and the mystery of it all. It's easy to look back on those characters of Christmas and think, "Well, yeah, it was easy for them. We live in a day of science and modernity. It's easy for them to believe." You tell me if this sounds like it was easy for Mary when the angel came and said to her, "*Blessed are you, favored among women. God is going to come and be with you. God is going to give you a child,*" her immediate response was not one of easy belief. "*Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*" She had her own barriers to faith. She was brought up as a young Jewish woman to believe God was one, and God could never, ever occupy a human body. God could never be in flesh. That's why the second command was given, "*Never make an image of God.*" So this idea that God was going to come to earth in human form ought to stagger us like it staggered Mary.

We easily let worship become rote. We come to church. We sing the songs. We say the words but shut out the Holy Spirit because "been there, done that." There was a Lutheran church in Minnesota that when computers first came into use they found out, for example, if you had a funeral service the computer could just spit out the order of the service. If somebody else died, you'd just replace the name but have it spit out the same order. That all worked fine till one time they'd had a funeral for a woman in the church named Mary. Then the next person who died was a woman named Edna. They told the computer, "Just reproduce the funeral service but replace the name *Mary* with the name of *Edna* wherever you find it." It worked fine until they started to follow their tradition of reciting the Apostles' Creed together. Everybody said, "*I believe in Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Edna.*"

God loves you so much he came to earth to be one of what you are, to live in a body like yours, to know what it is to grow and to experience pain and to be sad and to be hungry and to be tired. Aren't you just intensely curious about that? When you care about somebody, you're curious about them. You think about them. Think about God. Be curious about Jesus.

Cultivate gratitude.

We have this weird thing where somebody gives me something, and it's a surprise. I'll be really grateful for it. If they give it to me every day for a week, you'd think I'd be seven times more grateful, but I'm not. What happens is if I get it every day for a week, I start taking it for granted. If I get it every day for a year, I feel entitled to it. I feel like you violated my rights if I don't get it.

"For we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we." Now what does this say about my relationship with God where God gives me more gifts than I can count every day, day after day, week after week, year after year? "Oh yeah, that's my right." I'm mad if I don't have it. Another great line from Chesterton: "*When we were children we were grateful to those who filled our stockings at Christmas time. Why are we not grateful to God for filling our stockings with legs?*" How come every morning I don't say, "God, my feet work again, and my hands work"? How much giving into your life does it take for you to feel gratitude?

It's strange how often people whose lives hurt the worst feel gratitude the most keenly. William Porter had a really painful and difficult life. When he was born, his mom died. When he was an infant, his dad was a raging alcoholic and fled, left the scene pretty early on, so he had to fend for himself. Somehow, he made it to adulthood. He married a woman, and she gave birth to a baby boy, but he died when in infancy. Then his wife got really, really ill. The company he worked for crashed, and he got arrested for embezzlement. He said he was innocent, but he had to flee the country. He lived in Honduras for awhile. Then he got word that his wife (whom he loved) was deathly ill, so he came back to the States. She died and he was captured and incarcerated for

embezzlement. While he was in prison for several years, he discovered he had a real gift for writing. He'd write short stories. He knew nobody was going to want to publish or buy a story from a jailbird, so William Porter wrote under a penname of O. Henry. Anybody here heard of a writer named O. Henry?

One of the stories he wrote was about a young couple. They were a really impoverished young couple, Jim and Della. All Jim has of any value in the world is a gold watch. It was his grandfather's and then his dad's and then his. He has managed to hang onto it. He doesn't look at it often because it's attached to a really cheap, kind of ugly leather strap. He can't afford a chain. The other thing he really loves, because he loves his wife so much, is her long, beautiful hair. He wants so badly to give her a wonderful Christmas present, to give her these really expensive hair accessories with jewels (they called them combs back then), but he has no money. He gets this idea, "I could sell my old gold watch. I love it, but it would be worth it to sell it just to see her eyes light up and to see her put these in her hair." So he does. He is so excited on Christmas morning, and he goes to give them to Della. Then he sees, to his shock, she will not be able to wear them. She has cut off her hair and sold it to a wig maker in order to buy a platinum chain for the watch he no longer owns. The last paragraph just drives the message home: *"And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days, let it be said that of all who give gifts, these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi."* May we all learn to just stand before God with a grateful heart and say, *"God, you've done it again. More gifts than I can count. My body. Every lungful of air. Legs to fill my stockings. And especially your Son. God, what can I give? How can I be a giver like you?"*

Worship Jesus in your problems.

You know, the first Christmas, there were problems for everybody. There were problems for Joseph. There were problems for Mary. There were problems for Jesus. There were problems for the family. Decades later Jesus' brother, James, would write these words: **"Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance."** Consider it pure joy when you face trials. Quite honestly I'm awful at this. This week you will have problems. I promise! It's Christmas. You will not have enough time. You will wish you'd given a different gift to someone. You will not have enough energy. There will be somebody who you wish was at the table on Christmas who is not there. There will be somebody who is at the table on Christmas who you wish was not there. You're going to have a problem of one sort or another. Make a commitment that this week you are going to worship God in your problem. When the problem comes, you are going to say, 'Problem, I count you all joy.'

Spread the word.

You know, when Jesus came, when somebody actually got confronted with the reality of Jesus, they had to tell people. It just spilled out of them. **"When [the shepherds] had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child..."** There was an old woman named Anna in the temple. When Jesus was brought to her, Anna gave thanks to God. She **"...spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."** There's something about when I do that, God becomes more alive inside me when I spread him to people outside me.

There's nobody God doesn't love. God is always in a good mood, but Jesus said something about what especially produces joy in heaven. **"I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."** What do you say? Let's make the angels happy. Let's make laughter in heaven. Let's make our homes, our lives, our church a place where sinners know they are welcome.

This morning I am not going to wish you a Merry Christmas but a Moody Christmas and you get to pick the mood!