

Sermon 9: Luke 2:39-52: The Childhood of Jesus

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INTRODUCTION

'Who am I?' a basic question that all of us have struggled to answer. For many of us this has been a tremendous struggle, for those brought up in a Christian home and taught a biblical worldview, you have been saved from unnecessary confusion in so many areas. Many today think they are nothing more than evolved apes; others are experiencing gender dysphoria; many are struggling with basic questions about what career they should do, what do they like and want to pursue, etc. My own personal time of crisis with all of these questions were my teenage years, I remember being confronted with the big questions, like what is the meaning of life and having no clue and being in the dark and so frustrated with the lack of answers. My experience will be typical of many of us, but Jesus had a very different experience. What would the childhood of the Sinless One be like? What would the childhood of the One who was God be like? The gospels do not give us a lot of information about the childhood of Christ, the birth narratives are extensive in their detail, and then Jesus suddenly appears at the age of 30 to begin His ministry. What happened between birth and thirty?

There are many theories about what happened. Matthew records the flight to Egypt, Luke chooses to leave it out. This flight to Egypt and its scant details have led to many fabrications. It has always been the temptation of people to fill in the blanks, not content with God has chosen to reveal they have to add more. For this reason there are several false accounts of Christ's infancy, these are known as pseudopigrapha, they are false books written in the names of other people like Matthew, Thomas, Peter, etc. For example in the pseudo-gospel of Matthew when Jesus is born he stands up. Then three dragons appear which he instantly tames. On his journey lions and panthers accompany him. On the third day of their journey Mary became fatigued so Jesus spoke to a palm tree and it bowed over to offer her its fruit and it opened a spring from its roots for her. The Egyptian Orthodox church has several holy sites which relate to fabricated events from the childhood visit of Christ to Egypt. In all of these accounts the humanity of Christ is undermined, instead of Jesus coming as a weak and vulnerable child, He is always made out to be a type of demigod. In fact some of the accounts not only err in making Him less human but even sinful.

Luke 2:39-52 is a welcome window then helping us to see that Jesus was in fact fully human. Think of this revelation by God as a typical of the rest of Christ's childhood. As we look at it we will note firstly, the normal human development of Christ, and secondly the unique self-awareness that Christ has as He grew up.

Jesus development

Jesus childhood is bracketed with summary statements, v40, 'And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.' And v52, 'And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.' What we need to stress from these simple statements is the full ordinary humanity of Christ. Like any other child Jesus would have grown in the ordinary way, we see that He become strong like any

child would do, that He had to grow not only in body but also in mind. Those apocryphal accounts of Jesus being born and standing and talking within three, or suddenly appearing from a light and crawling across his mother to feed, this science fiction type accounts would agree more with the theory that Jesus is some sort of alien or demi-god but not, fully God and fully man.

Why do we need to make a big deal out of this? I am not sure how many of you have read church history. You will know that the first four centuries of the church were full of fighting about the truth about Jesus identity. You had the Arians who denied that Jesus was fully God and that He is created. You had the Apollinarians who taught that a divine soul inhabited a human body making Jesus 50% man and 50% God. You had Docetism that made Jesus humanity to be no more than an appearance of humanity, a façade, that He was 100% God and only appeared human but wasn't. Now if you don't like big words, or history, or Christians getting into disagreements you might think all these things unimportant; but they are critical. If Jesus is not completely human He cannot be our Savior. Please note how Luke presents Jesus development as normal and not weird. He grew up and Luke mentions different words referring to the different stages of His development, baby (2:16); child (2:40); and boy (2:43). Needing to learn as He wasn't born with a brain that had already all the information added. He experienced the same things we do in needing food, being thirsty and hungry and tired (Jn 4:6-7). Being made in the image of God as we are He had the same spectrum of emotions like anger (Mk 10:14, Jn 11:33); love (Jn 11:3); sorrow (Lk 19:41); Joy (Jn 17:13); compassion (Matt 9:36); and He needed God to strengthen Him as He was even overwhelmed with grief and fear (Mk 14:33-34). However, being without sin He was perfect in each one, representing God in each one, with no sinful distortions/proportions added. He experienced the pain and stages of a human death, and so while His human body was in the ground His human soul was with the Father, and the thief on the cross in paradise (Lk 23:46). He has experienced all that is common to our humanity and more having gone on before us as the firstfruits to experience things that we will one day experience as He did, e.g. resurrection and glorification. And even now He intercedes as a man, our High priest (1 Tim 2:5), still representing us before the Father.

It is a great mystery to think about Jesus growth in knowledge. If He is indeed fully God, and we know God to be all knowing, how can Christ be ignorant of certain things. There are a number of verses that indicate that Jesus was not omniscient in His humanity. Luke mentions the fact He had to grow in wisdom, in other words go through the normal process of learning we all do. But there are other indications of ignorance in the gospels. Mark 6:38 And he said to them, "How many loaves do you have? Go and see." And when they had found out, they said, "Five, and two fish." Mark 9:21 "And Jesus asked his father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood." John 11:34 "And he said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Lord, come and see." Mark 13:32 "But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father." Here are two ways of reconciling these verses with the fully humanity and deity of Christ. Firstly, we reject any notion that Christ was pretending not to know, to try and convey a sort humanity like ours. And secondly, we reject any kenotic view that would seek to truncate Christ's deity in order to accommodate a full human ignorance.

Firstly, in response we say that we rejoice in this human ignorance of Christ. For it proves to us a full humanity. He is then able to be our mediator. Secondly, we affirm the full deity alongside the full humanity of Christ claiming a mystery beyond our ability to grapple. Let me say that if you could fathom how the divine omniscience and human ignorance are able

to dwell in the one person you would need to have the knowledge of God to do so. We happily accept our inability to know and would be suspicious of simple overconfident solutions that could neatly summarise these problems revolving around the divine mind. In beginning to respond we make the disclaimer that we will never fully know. So let's look then at Christ's human knowledge and appreciate what we can know.

Several observations can be made from the Scriptures about Christ's knowledge. Firstly, Christ often claims to do nothing of Himself, but only what the Father has given to Him (John 5:19,20,30, etc). It is the Father who reveals things to the Son, so that Christ took the position of every other human being of having to learn divine truths by revelation. So He would only have known what the Father chose for Him to know in regard to issues of revelation. Secondly, Christ betrays a supernatural but not an infinite knowledge in His humanity. In other words, because He has the Spirit without measure He would know things as a prophet would know things (2 Kings 6:12), and to a greater extent than any other prophet, for He is the Prophet. We could add that this is to be expected for which human brain has enough RAM, or a CPU sufficient to process infinity immediately? Thirdly, Christ's human knowledge would have been like but unique from ours. He was not sinful, He would have had a self awareness of His own identity as being the Son of God, His awareness of God, His interaction with God, and all of the other faculties of human knowing would have been functioning without the usual problems we have. We have seared consciences, prejudices, the image of God in us is polluted and tainted, the noetic effects of sin as they affect our knowing, willing, feeling, etc. And He had the Spirit without measure aiding His finite humanity. This would have meant that He would have been smarter than everyone else, had the quickest wit, possibly His hand eye co-ordination would have been faultless and a genius in many ways, but all veiled and His energies given to earning a living for His mother and family, and His ministry. Fourthly, some have theorised that Jesus would have held to the views of His day, for example a flat earth theory, having ignorance in common with other humans of His time. I don't think that it is safe to theorise in this fashion, we are not aware of what God would and wouldn't have revealed to Him. Liberals take this line of argument trying to undermine the doctrinal statements about creation, Adam, the fall, demons, satan etc. We don't need to respond by saying that Christ would have had a perfect knowledge of mathematics, science, medicine, physics, nuclear fusion, etc, portraying Christ as having a mind full of every known fact. Donald Macleod has suggested a position that saves us from needing to explore too deeply in this area. He suggests that it is possible for God to have revealed not all information of the physical world in all disciplines to the mind of Christ, but merely the provisional nature of the knowledge of His own day so that Christ would know that the views of His day were limited and not commit Himself to any particular scientific paradigm (p170). Fifthly, we need to emphasize that Christ had no culpable ignorance, the type of which we see due to sin in Romans 1. Sixthly, He knew all that He needed to know in order to fulfil the role of mediator that He was made for. And so when we look at the things that He did know like the events of His own death, He knew all that was needed to be known in order for Him to save us. Seventhly, Christ's human ignorance is an example for us. We are told that Jesus had to learn obedience by what He suffered (Heb 5:8), having to trust in God's goodness when circumstances seemed to portray otherwise, exercising faith in prayer and waiting on God's provision of grace just like every one of us. He models the perfect way of living in a fallen world. And we see it is not this trumped life of victory and strength where we are impervious and victorious, but one of suffering, persecution, obedience, and full submission as creatures in our weakness and frailty. Seventhly, we need to note that human does not imply fallible. Some have doubted the Scriptures because they are human, but we know that God by His Spirit has preserved them from error, how much more the sinless Son of God. Eighthly, if Jesus did not know the day of His own return, how dare any other human

being pretend to know. Surely this should be our greatest encouragement to restraint. If the Father did not want Christ to know the day, why do you think He would tell you?

In conclusion to this aspect of our appreciation of the humanity of Christ, we conclude that He was a perfect human as well as God. How the two tie together, we will have to wait until heaven to see, but we can take comfort that He was just like us, and so is thereby able to save us, and sympathise with us.

Jesus' self-awareness

The event of Jesus in the temple has been cherry picked from Jesus childhood by Luke from all that Mary would have treasured up in her heart. And we should view it as a token of what the rest of Christ's childhood would have included. We are told in v41 that Jesus parents were on their annual visit to the Passover in Jerusalem. The fact that Mary went too implies that she was particularly devout as only the men were commanded to attend. This was their custom, v42, and where you only had to attend for 3 days of the seven Jesus parents stayed for the whole affair, v43.

It was a common practice at the time to travel in large caravans as there were wild animals and robbers on the roads. It is likely that these large bands were made up of extended family and those from the same area as yourself. Your children would be playing with other children, they might have been visiting with grandparents or aunties and uncles and so the situation where Jesus goes missing is not a case of parental neglect but a common problem.

Jesus was twelve years old, thirteen was the year of adulthood, the practice of Bar mitzvah did not exist yet, but it is based on an earlier understanding. Jesus was in His final year of preparation before His official adulthood began. The time was often a time of intense teaching and this would also be done by the father of the son as well as other teachers and religious leaders. It appears that Jesus stayed on in Jerusalem to receive further teaching and instruction. This would have been a golden opportunity since all the best teachers in Israel would have been present.

It was on the third day that His parents found Him in the temple, v46, 'After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.' Please notice that Jesus was being taught, that unlike the apocryphal infancy accounts which make Jesus out to be an omniscient teacher he was a normal child in the fact that He had to learn. The practice of asking questions was a typical teaching style in that day. This does not mean that He was dumb, look at v47, 'And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.' Here is a child who is sinless, how does sin impact our education? Sin can make us lazy so that we do not apply ourselves to our learning. We can become apathetic content to pass but not excel. Jesus would have been a model student in this way. Did this mean He had a superior brain to all others? There is a mystery here we cannot penetrate, He would have inherited whatever family traits Mary's genes would have passed on, apart from sin. Was He mechanically minded or a natural scholar? We don't know, we can trust that God made Him all He needed to be for His purpose, and because He was not a sinner He reached His potential. If we only use a certain percentage of our brains, Christ used it all. He would not have been self-deceiving choosing to shut down as soon as something He didn't like was put before Him. He would not have been distracted by sinful pursuits but prioritized the learning He had to do in order to be equipped to do God's will. In this way Jesus as a child is a good example for all children. It is clear from the impression that He made that He had made tremendous strides in learning.

Then we have Mary's reaction to the scene, v48, 'And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." We can sense their parental distress and Mary like most mothers mentions her distress and Joseph to make an impression upon Him. Jesus responds, v49-51, 'And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"' ⁵⁰ And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. ⁵¹ And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.'

Now these are the first recorded words of Christ. Some get hung up on what appears to be rebellion on the part of Christ or at least disrespect, and miss Jesus self-awareness. Let's deal with the question that is often raised, is Jesus disobeying his parents or being disrespectful? We must answer no, for the scripture everywhere declares that Jesus was sinless, and this would have extended to His childhood. We don't have enough of the narrative to make a judgement of this kind. Luke is not providing this information so that we can make such an accusation. We don't know whether for all 7 days of the Passover Jesus would have been sitting and doing the same thing, or if He had communicated that this is where He would be, and His parents misheard Him, or failed to understand Him. But what is very clear is Jesus awareness of His identity.

When there was a conflict between what Mary and Joseph expected and Jesus identity and calling to prepare Himself for His true Father's work, obeying His true Father must take precedence. There is a gentle reminder of this fact in Jesus words. But notice that Jesus is not a teenage rebel. He is not throwing off parental restraint altogether in a false bid to be independent, He returns with them submissive to them. This rare situation of conflict between Jesus and His earthly parents was when He had to be busy preparing Himself in His Father's house for His Father's business. The only time an apparent disobedience happened in Jesus life was when He was obeying God above others. How different this is to our own rebellion against our parents.

Jesus was obedient to the 5th commandment, and so should we be as well. Now the nature of a parent's authority is a delegated one, God puts us in charge. And the nature of our charge is one of stewardship. For our children are in fact God's children entrusted to us that we might lead them in God's ways not ours. Tedd Tripp, in his book *Shepherding a Child's Heart* writes, "As a parent, you have authority because God calls you to be an authority in your child's life. You have authority to act on behalf of God. As a father or mother, you do not exercise rule over your jurisdiction, but over God's. You act at His command. You discharge a duty that He has given. You may not try to shape the lives of your children as pleases you, but as pleases Him." (Tripp 1995:29) We are given the task to shape our children according to God's will. We therefore cannot force our career aspirations for them upon them, or some unrealistic physical achievement beyond their ability and interests. We must help them discover their gifts that they might know best how to serve God themselves. Also we are to allow the gifts and interests God gave them surface and be developed for their vocation in life.

How then are children to submit to this authority? This question needs more than one answer because of the variety of situations we meet with. Firstly, we must say that for young children this means obey. This is not only an OT reality but a NT as well, Eph. 6:1-3, 'Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.2 "Honor your father and mother" (this is the first commandment with a promise),3 "that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.'" Jesus Himself leads us in this, Luke 2:51, 'And he went down

with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart.'

Secondly, we need to talk about the relationship of adult children to parents. Because children grow up, and the purpose of our parenting is not to control people for the rest of our lives, but to equip children to become self-supporting adults, there must necessarily be a change when a child reaches adulthood. They are to respect their parents, but they are no longer in the same submission that a younger child is. For example, does an adult child need the blessing and approval of their parents in order to marry?

How should we view teenagers who are neither children who should unquestionably obey and who are not yet mature adults who are self-supporting?

Thirdly, the duty to honour ones parents endures until the grave, 1 Tim. 5:3-8, 'Honor widows who are truly widows.⁴ But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God.⁵ She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day,⁶ but she who is self-indulgent is dead even while she lives.⁷ Command these things as well, so that they may be without reproach.⁸ But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.' This will include financial aid, opening the home and ongoing communication and relationship.

Fourthly, I would suggest that this means that there should not be a failure to reconcile with a parent. If there is a breach in the relationship due to past hurts or sin, it is the duty of a Christian child to pursue reconciliation. As far as depends upon you be at peace. This may involve confronting the sins of a parent, and forgiving them, but a total cutting off or neglect of them is a violation of this command.

As with all authority relationships the obedience of a child to a parent is not a unilateral authority to do whatever one wants. A Christian child is obey Paul says, 'in the Lord.' This important qualifier is a safety net against sin. A child need not obey when their parents command them to sin. As with all other authority relationships we always obey God first, and all other authorities in obedience to God.

The question of obeying when we are commanded to sin is an easy one, the more difficult one is this: should a Christian child obey when their parents are requiring something that is not fair? This is a careful one to negotiate because the sinful heart always seeks to dress up its rebellion in the clothing of legitimacy and constantly cries that something is not fair without a careful analysis of the situation. Our reaction to pain and our anger can often disguise itself in righteousness. The answer to this question like most difficult ethical scenarios is a case of yes, no and depends.

A parent does not gain the right to command a child because of their perfect wisdom and instruction. Parents are sinners too who err and so their authority is not to be seen as being at the mercy of a child's agreement. A child should seek to communicate and understand a situation it thinks is unfair and ask for clarification. But a child must also accept rules that are coming from a loving heart and good motives though they may differ in how things ought to be worked out. The way a grounding is outlined, the curfew imposed on a weekend night, the amount of time on devices, which programs can be watched, etc. When a parent is hands on, seeking to make principled decisions, and doing it from a motive for the child's good, a child should obey even when they disagree. In this case they should

meditate on the text that love covers a multitude of sins. It is in the case of vindictiveness or in order to preserve one's safety that injustices should not be tolerated. However, 99% of the time in parenting it is a case of imperfect love than spite that is driving a parent. Christian children should grasp the truth of our imperfection and appreciate that God calls upon us to submit to imperfect authorities anyway.

Jesus' first recorded words are the first recorded instance in Scripture of someone claiming such intimacy with God as a Father in this way. Some liberals have tried to imply that Jesus grew into a god-consciousness as He got older, but here we can clearly see His awareness of His relationship with God as Father and He as Son in a distinct fashion. What does Jesus mean by this reference, is it a reference to merely being human and the fatherhood of God over all; is it a Messianic claim where the King of Israel is viewed as the Son or vice-regent of God; or perhaps it is because He is the Archangel Michael as the Jews claim and angels are called sons of God. No, read the gospels and you will see that Jesus' claim to be Son and God is Father is a distinct relationship that reveals Him to be equal with God. MacArthur writes the following: 'It was Jesus' claim to be the Son of God above all else that infuriated His Jewish opponents and led to His execution. In John 5:17, Jesus defended His healing of a crippled man on the Sabbath by saying, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." The Jewish authorities were outraged, and as John noted in verse 18: "For this reason therefore the Jews were seeking all the more to kill Him, because He not only was breaking the Sabbath, but also was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." In John 10:36, they accused Him of blasphemy for calling Himself the Son of God. At Christ's mock trial it was His affirmation that He was the Son of God that gave the Sanhedrin the excuse to declare Him guilty of blasphemy and thus deserving of death (Matt. 26:63–66). After Pilate pronounced Jesus innocent "the Jews answered him, 'We have a law, and by that law He ought to die because He made Himself out to be the Son of God' " (John 19:7).¹

Who is this child who has been born in this fashion? He is God our Savior, He I Emmanuel, God with us, He is the second person of the Godhead come down to save sinners. But why and why as a man? He came to be fully human to identify with us in order to obey the law of God for us and in order to pay our sin debt as well.

¹ MacArthur, J. F., Jr. (2009). [Luke 1–5](#) (p. 195). Chicago: Moody Publishers.