

HARD KNOCKS: When You're Busy and Burned Out

A Study of Matthew 3:13-17

Characteristic of Completeness: Christian Life

Big Idea: God's love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do.

Related Scriptures: Psalm 51:16-18; Matthew 22:36-38; John 1:12;

Romans 5:8; 6:4; 8:1; 1 Corinthians 15:22; 2 Corinthians 5:17-21;

Galatians 2:20; Revelation 2:1-7

Introduction:

- A. This last summer, Cathy and I took a little vacation on a beach in Mexico. I can't think of a setting much more laid-back than that. But during the trip, Cathy asked me: "Bob, do you think you're a workaholic?"

I said, "Why do you ask?" And I'm thinking to myself, is it because I brought four boxes of church-related books on vacation? Is it because I brought my laptop *and* a printer? Is it because I'm still getting up at about 4:00AM to get some work done?

I'm afraid I am a workaholic. And I'm not proud of it. Sometimes I'm recovering. Other times I'm binging. It's hard for me to rest.

- B. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you find yourself constantly busy. Maybe *compelled* to be busy. Maybe even burned out.

You're standing at the kitchen sink full of dirty dishes, loading the dishwasher, feeling desperately tired, and you just want to cry. Or you're at work and you've got 123 unread emails and 238 items in your Outlook task list and people are waiting to meet with you.

Or maybe you're like me: You can't even go to the bathroom without something to read or study because otherwise you would feel like it would be a waste of precious time.

- C. Why are some of us this way? Why do some of us push ourselves and others so hard? A number of reasons occur to me.
1. Sometimes circumstances dictate it. For example, I think of single mothers trying to hold down a job and raise the kids. Being busy and hard-pressed is an inescapable reality of life for them.
 2. Sometimes I think certain personality traits and temperaments contribute. For example, Pastor Jeff Bauer recently passed along to me some information about different personality profiles. According to this information, the one word that describes my personality is "driven." Other descriptions include:

“always a mountain to be climbed, and a goal to be achieved . . . always looking at a more efficient and effective way of getting things done . . . never idle—even leisure activities can be accomplished efficiently.” Sounds about right for me.

3. Certainly circumstances and personalities play significant roles. But, in my case, and I suspect in many others, there’s another big factor. You see, sometimes I get confused. And I begin to think that my acceptance is based on my performance. I get to thinking that I must earn approval from God and others based on my achievements. And so I work hard to measure up. And I’m so afraid to fail.

I forget that God’s love and acceptance are rooted in who I am, not what I do. And my drive to perform actually crowds out my relationship with God. I end up substituting performance for the relationship.

- D. Compounding the problem is the fact that this kind of thing is socially acceptable. Let’s face it: Employers like to hire perfectionistic workaholics. In church, we wink and smile at the perfectionistic workaholics because they get things done.

But God does not wink or smile—not at the substitution of performance for relationship. In early Christianity, there was a church in Ephesus that was apparently chock-full of workaholics who had substituted performance for relationship. In Revelation ► 2:2-4, God says to them:

^{NAU} Revelation 2:2 “I know your deeds and your toil and perseverance . . .”

These words resonate with workaholics: deeds, toil, perseverance. These are good, working-hard words.

God ► continues:

^{NAU} Revelation 2:2 “I know . . . that you cannot tolerate evil men, and you put to the test those who call themselves apostles, and they are not, and you found them *to be false*”

These are good things, too: working against evildoers and sniffing out the crooked preachers based on our painstaking attention to the Scriptures.

God ► continues:

^{NAU} Revelation 2:2 “I know . . . 3 . . . you have perseverance and have endured for My name’s sake, and have not grown weary.”

More good works: working hard, persevering, enduring for the work of the Lord. And I imagine the workaholics who listened to this for the first time were thinking, “It’s about time somebody recognized how hard we’re working.”

And then God ► says:

^{NAU} Revelation 2:4 “But I have *this* against you . . .”

And as a workaholic, I think: “Say what? Something against me? Lord, did You mean to say You have something *for* me? What could You possibly have *against* me?”

And God ► says:

^{NAU} Revelation 2:4 “But I have *this* against you that you have left your first love.”

That is to say, “You have substituted performance for relationship. You seem to love your to-do list more than you love Me.”

One pastor and author, ► Wayne Cordeiro, himself a workaholic who recently pushed himself to the brink of an emotional and mental breakdown,¹ provides a loose paraphrase of what God is saying in Revelation 2:

► “You’ve forgotten your first love relationship with me. ► You’ve displaced that simple and pure relationship that’s independent of what you do and how you perform. ► Those are wonderful things, but you’re trying to please me without the relationship, and you can’t exchange the two. ► Relationship is what really pleases me, and that validates everything else you do. Return to that.”²

Here’s ► the big idea of my message today: God’s love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do. God adopted us into His forever family because He loves us, not because He admires our performance or achievements. Our relationship is the basis of God’s pleasure, not our works. God can also be pleased with our works, but only if they spring from our relationship with Him. The relationship is foundational.

Pursuing works instead of a relationship—well, that’s what God has against us.

This truth lies at the center of the Christian life. In fact, ► the Christian Life is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. It’s about understanding the significance of our position in Christ and His provision for living the Christian life.

¹ Mary Kaye Ritz, “Burnout a Reality for Many in Clergy,” *Honolulu Advertiser*, August 20, 2006; internet, <http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Aug/20/il/FP608200318.html/?print=on>; accessed 8 September 2007.

² Wayne Cordeiro, “A Personal Relationship,” *Preaching Today*, Tape 225.

- E. The primary biblical text we're going to study this morning is Matthew 3:13-17. It's not what you'd expect. In fact, unless I miss my guess, I'm going to read it, and you're going to scratch your head and wonder what it has to do with what I've been talking about. You'll see. For now, just listen.

Last week, in our ongoing study through Matthew, we were introduced to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah. John was baptizing people in the Jordan River. Now Jesus Himself comes to be baptized by John. Verse ► 13 begins:

^{NAU} Matthew 3:13 Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan *coming to* John, to be baptized by him. ► 14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" ► 15 But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit *it* at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. ► 16 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him, ► 17 and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased."

- I. Let me ask you a couple of questions concerning this text.
- A. First question: At this point in history, how does God the Father feel about God the Son? The Father is "well-pleased" with His Son. Right?
- B. Okay. Second question: At this point, what has Jesus been able to accomplish in His ministry on earth? What could He put on His resume under "accomplishments"? Well, let's make a list.

At this point in history, how many sermons has Jesus preached? None. He hasn't even started His public ministry.

How many people has He healed? None.

How many demons has He cast out? None.

How many miracles has He performed? None.

How many churches has He started? None.

How many converts has He won? None.

How many followers does He have? None.

So why is the Father so well pleased? And why is this point made, before anything else, at the very beginning of Jesus's ministry? I think it shows that God's pleasure is tied to relationship. God's love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do.

- C. Let me give you an imperfect but helpful earthly illustration of how our heavenly Father's love for us is independent of our performance.

My son, Chase, performed in the worst concert I've ever been to. He was in kindergarten and his class did a concert for parents and family. It was awful. The singing was off key and sometimes nonexistent. Kids forgot to do stuff and had to be reminded. Some picked their noses up front. And the worst part was Chase's pants. We bought him a brand new pair of khaki pants for the concert, but they were a little too roomy. So roomy that while in the front row of the choir, Chase got bored and decided to explore and shall I say exhibit the roominess. He plunged his arms down into his pants nearly up to his elbows and kept running them around from front to back. It was not a good performance.

But I applauded. I delighted in him. I look back on it with joy. Why? Because of who he is. Because I love him. Because of our relationship. He's my son.

God's love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do.

- II. Back in our text, let's very briefly consider all the ways in which the Father declares His approval of the Son.
- A. First, in ► Verse 16, the heavens open. The opening of heaven in the Bible is generally recognized as a sign of God's favor and deliverance.³
- B. Then ► the Spirit descends like a dove as Jesus emerges from the water. In the imagery of the dove over water, some see echoes of Genesis 1:2, where the Spirit of God hovers over the waters, superintending the creation—the creation God pronounced “very good.”⁴ Others see echoes of Genesis 8:8-12, where the dove returns to Noah in the wake of the flood waters with an olive leaf as the sign of a new and better world.⁵ Either way, the dove symbolizes God's favor and approval.
- C. Then, in ► Verse 17, the voice of God the Father speaks.

³ See Isaiah 64:1 or Ezekiel 1:1, for example; Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 132.

⁴ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew, The New American Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1992), 82; David L. Turner, *The Gospel of Matthew, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary*, ed. Philip W. Comfort, (Carol Streams, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2005), 63.

⁵ Keener, 132-133.

1. The Father declares the Son to be ► beloved. The Greek word describes “a very special relationship with another,” one who is dear, prized, and valued.⁶
2. And the Father also declares the Son to be ► well-pleasing. This means He takes pleasure in Him; He finds satisfaction in Him; He is delighted in Him.⁷

Why? Because of who He is. Because He’s a Son. It’s about the relationship.

III. You ► may be thinking, “Now wait a minute, Bob. Jesus actually did *do* something in our text. He got baptized. So isn’t God expressing His pleasure at what He did?” Good question. You’re paying attention. Two things occur to me.

- A. First, I think God is pleased with what Jesus did, and He can be pleased with what we do. But only when it comes directly out of our relationship with Him. Remember, the relationship is foundational. We can’t trade in the relationship for performance. Let me give you an example.

Psalm 51 was written by David in the aftermath of his adultery with Bathsheba. In ► Psalm 51:16, David says to God:

^{NAU} Psalm 51:16 For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it;
You are not pleased with burnt offering.

This is an odd thing to say. As recorded in the Old Testament, God had instituted a system of sacrifices and burnt offerings to deal with wrongdoing. In the wake of David’s sin, the thing to do would have been to offer a sacrifice. But David seems to be saying that God isn’t really interested in such sacrifices; He does not delight in these offerings; He is not pleased with such works.

But then, just three verses later, David seems to contradict himself. In ► Verse 19, he says to God,

^{NAU} Psalm 51:19 Then You will delight in righteous sacrifices, In burnt offering
and whole burnt offering . . .

So which is it? Is God pleased with sacrifices or not? It depends. It depends on whether or not the sacrifices come directly out of a relationship with God. In Verse 16, David is describing sacrifices made with no relationship—just cold, external, distant, heartless conformity to some rules—exchanging relationship for performance. This does not please God.

⁶ W. Bauer, F.W. Danker, W.F. Arndt, and F.W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., s.v. “ἀγαπητός,” (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), hereinafter abbreviated BDAG.

⁷ BDAG, s.v. “εὐδοκέω.”

But in Verse 19, David is describing sacrifices that spring from relationship. In between Verses 16 and 19 is a pivotal relational turn. It comes in ► Verse 17, where David says to God:

^{NAU} Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; A broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.

Brokenheartedness signals concern for relationship—relationship with God. When we’re genuinely pursuing our relationship with God, even in the wake of a very bad decision, God is pleased with the pursuit because His pleasure is based on relationship.

This ► is the way relationships work. Will my wife be pleased with my sacrifice of giving her flowers? It depends. If she knows they are a genuine sign of my heartfelt desire to have a relationship with her, she’ll probably be pleased. On the other hand, if she knows it’s not about my pursuit of a relationship with her; rather, it’s just a way for me to feel better about myself, or maybe just a way to get her off my back—to appease her so that I can continue to do the things I want to do, independent of her—now that’s a different story.

God does delight in our works, but only when they stem from our relationship with Him.

- B. There’s a second significant thing about Jesus’s baptism there at the Jordan River. Clearly, it was done to please no one else but God.

We workaholics tend to be acceptance junkies, and in particular, we want to be accepted by people. If I’m honest, sometimes that’s what drives me: I want people to think I’m good. So I work for acceptance.

But what Jesus did would have impressed no one. No one but God. You see, the baptism that John offered was a baptism of humiliation and repentance. To be baptized was to declare that you are a sinner in need of a Savior.

But Jesus was not a sinner. He did not need to be baptized. He did not personally need to humble Himself. And John knows it. Back in ► Verse 14 of our text, it says,

^{NAU} Matthew 3:14 But John tried to prevent Him, saying, “I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?”

This makes the Father’s approval of the Son all the more remarkable. At this point, not only has Jesus not yet done anything the world would find impressive, but the only thing He’s done is something that you would not want to put on your resume under “accomplishments.” The only thing He’s done is humiliate Himself by surrendering to a baptism that He did not need, identifying Himself with sins He did not commit, and

numbering Himself among sinners with whom He does not belong. The world calls it underachieving or a waste of potential.

And as I voice those words I can hear my high-school P.E. teacher. I was fairly athletic in high school but I didn't go out for sports because I was too afraid to fail. And so my teacher said to me, "You are the biggest waste of talent in this school." The words still sting.

But God's love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do.

IV. So, ► how does the Father's love and acceptance of the Son relate specifically to us?

A. Well, the Bible says that when we believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life, we take on a new identity; we are "in Christ." And because we are now "in Christ," we enjoy the very same love and acceptance He does. How can this be?

1. In ► Verse 15 of our text, Jesus says that He surrendered to baptism in order "to fulfill all righteousness." It's hard to know exactly what this means, but other parts of the Bible help us. Elsewhere in Scripture we clearly see that, when we believe in Jesus, He takes on our sin and we take on His righteousness. Indeed, His surrendering to baptism symbolizes His identification with our sins. In ► 2 Corinthians 5:21, it's explained this way:

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin *to be* sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

You see, when we believe in Jesus for eternal life, an exchange takes place. All our sin is charged to His account. And all His righteousness is credited to our account. We receive the gift of His righteousness; He pays the price of our sin. This substitution of Jesus for our sin is the fulfillment of all righteousness.

2. God did this because He loves us and wants a relationship with us. Romans ► 5:8 says,

^{NAU} Romans 5:8 But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Notice when God demonstrates His ► love: "while we were yet sinners." His love is not based on performance; it is not earned.

3. When we believe in Jesus for eternal life, we are adopted into God's forever family. John ► 1:12 says,

^{NAU} John 1:12 But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, *even* to those who believe in His name

4. So, when we simply “believe in His name” our debt is forgiven our adoption as children of God is sealed. Romans ► 8:1 declares:

^{NAU} Romans 8:1 Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

We are “in Christ Jesus.” And that is how we can say: God’s love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do.

And this simple truth frees us from the tyranny of performance. We can quit trying to pay for the love and acceptance God has already given us for free. We can embrace the love and acceptance God offers, and let go of our tiresome pursuit of cheap substitutes.

There’s nothing wrong with performance. Nothing wrong with working hard. Nothing wrong with giving your best. As long as it’s not independent of or instead of the most important thing: our ongoing relationship with God.

- B. What ► difference does this make? If you find yourself incredibly busy and maybe even burned out, how can this help?

I invite you to prayerfully ask yourself just one question. Here it ► is: Pursuit or fruit? When it comes to love and acceptance, does the busyness of your life reflect more the pursuit of it or the fruit of it? Let me explain.

First the pursuit. Busyness in pursuit of love and acceptance is unbiblical, ungodly, and unhealthy. The pursuit can include incessantly trying to please or impress people. The pursuit can include chasing just about anything other than God for love and acceptance. The pursuit can include workaholism and perfectionism and materialism. It’s a lie. It’s a dead end. It’s a mirage. You will burn out. That’s “the pursuit.”

Now the fruit. Busyness as the fruit of love and acceptance is healthy. It’s when we realize that, in Christ, we’re already loved and accepted. It’s when we pursue a relationship with God, who already loves and accepts us. And in the context of spending time with Him, we sense from His Word and His Spirit what He wants us to become and what He wants us to do. And we gladly do it. With thankfulness. And by the power He supplies. That’s “the fruit.”

So which is it for you? Pursuit or fruit?

Take a hard look at your life. Your schedule. Your to-do list. Is it pursuit or fruit?

It might be good to break it down item by item because it may not be all one or the other. Some items might be pursuit; others might be fruit.

The truth that God's love and acceptance are rooted in who we are, not what we do frees us. It frees us to drop the pursuit and become the fruit.