

What were you up to when you were twelve years old? I was in seventh grade at St. Peter Lutheran School, growing up in the town of Hemlock, Michigan, smack dab in the middle of the Lower Peninsula. At this point in my life, I just assumed most of the world was Lutheran; after all, our basketball team, the St. Peter Panthers, played in a league made up of other Lutheran schools exclusively, there were five or six other church schools that could field a team back then. Lutherans would rent out the Saginaw Civic Center for Reformation and Good Friday services and pack the place. Frankenmuth was nearby, the capital of this central Michigan Lutherland, and I was tied into all this because my father had been a pastor for about four years at this point.

One specific way this affected my life was that it meant my dad and another pastor were my confirmation class teachers. They would come into the classroom at various times during a normal school week and teach, and as you might imagine, I was pretty motivated to do well. I wanted to know my stuff and didn’t even want to think about what would happen if I didn’t. But here’s the point: at age twelve, I am quite certain that I did not astonish my teachers with my command of Holy Scripture. Scripture had a lot of competition in my twelve-year-old brain, such as basketball and the Star Wars trilogy. Sure, I could tell you the Minor Prophets in order—but that was expected. You weren’t going to “wow” my dad with that.

Suffice it to say that when Jesus was twelve, He “wowed” the teachers in the temple, and that’s remarkable on its own terms. Here He was, among men who had given their lives to the discipline of working with the Word of God, and He was dazzling them with His knowledge and insight—a twelve-year-old boy hanging with the experts in the field. Now, somebody will always say, “Well, yeah, but it’s Jesus. He kind of had an advantage, right?” Well, here’s something to think about. Luke, who is writing about this event, is very careful to bookend the account with statements about Jesus’ growth. Verse 40 of chapter 2: “...the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him.” And then verse 50, “...Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.” So yes, Jesus has the favor of God and is *growing* in wisdom and strength. This is as much of a mystery of the incarnation as his conception and birth was. Jesus increased in wisdom. That means He grew and developed as a human child, and at the same time was the Word made flesh, living in the world

He made with His Father. The teachers of the Law were blown away by what they perceived to be an exceptional student of the Word, when, in point of fact, they were talking to the Author, who, in his humanity, was still growing. It's a lot to take in.

It is important to delve into the mysteries of Jesus' personality, and the Christmas season gives us plenty of opportunity to do so. Here at the beginning of a new year, I'd also like to let this story challenge us by the *example* that young Jesus was setting. It's fairly easy to pick up the overall message Jesus was sending here, though Luke goes for full transparency and tells us that Mary and Joseph did not understand the saying, "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" The fear of losing Jesus had them thinking in practical terms, as good parents would in this situation. But it seems obvious that Jesus is using this embarrassing event to signal that there was a relationship at the center of His life that mattered more than anything else. Honoring this relationship would drive certain behaviors and would force certain choices. We can only guess at how Joseph would have felt hearing Jesus talk about the temple as "My Father's house," but Jesus could not have been trying to hurt Joseph's feelings. He was speaking the truth. His Father was Yahweh, God of Israel, who had agreed to locate Himself in the Jerusalem temple. Jesus wanted to be where His real Father was; to engage in the activity of His Father's house, which included conversations about the Word of God. This is not rebellion on Jesus' part, but it is a direct declaration of priority, and is a display of self-awareness about His identity. In other words, Jesus was saying, "I know who I am, and being close to my Father is most important." There was some risk involved on Jesus' part here, but Luke immediately tells us that Jesus went back to Nazareth with mom and stepdad and submitted to their authority, and Mary treasured this memory in her heart. So, it did not tear the family apart; in modern terms we can imagine Mary and Joseph chalking this up to "Jesus being Jesus" and going on with everyday life.

But a crucial message had been sent; one that asks for a response from you and me. Look again at twelve-year-old Jesus. He says, to the most important people in His young life, "I know who I am, and being close to my Father is most important." His relationship with Father God was at the center of His life. It mattered more than anything. Honoring His Father would drive certain behaviors and force certain choices. At the beginning of 2022, how do you compare to Jesus at age twelve? It would be easy to connect the dots to certain behaviors—yes, I am

going to church regularly, check—yes, I am involved in Bible Study, got it—or, I'll try to do those more in the new year because I know I should.

But look deeper at that twelve-year-old. He's there in the temple because he knows who he is. He's not just ticking off a list of new year's resolutions for self-improvement. He's made it a priority to be in his Father's House because it's his heart's desire. Being close to His Father is central to who he is. It's this that I invite you to compare yourself to. Can the most important people in your life see that living in step with God is your number one priority? Are you willing to look your loved ones in the eye and say, essentially, "being close to my heavenly Father is most important to me?" You will not be the best friend, spouse, sibling, parent or child that you can be unless you can gently but firmly say, "I love you 100 percent, and, God is my number one priority." This will drive behaviors and force choices that put God first, and there's risk involved. Are you willing to take that risk?

Why would a person take that risk? Excellent question. There's one thing I haven't mentioned regarding the temple yet, and it's a defining characteristic of it. It was the location where sacrifices were enacted for the purification and atonement of the people. The blood of countless animals was shed and sprinkled as a covering over of sin and a visible sign of its price. But the day would come when sacrifices would no longer be offered. There would be no need, for a once-and-for-all blood sacrifice would pay for all sins in full—not only covering them but eliminating them forever. That sacrifice was not just conducted by the Jesus we meet here, but it was Jesus Himself, nailed to a cross outside the city wall. At the moment of his death, the great curtain in the temple that sheltered people from the glory of God was torn from top to bottom. Jesus' death tore a hole in the barrier between God and humanity, so that by faith you can enter in. At the cross, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit made you their number one priority. As another year begins, will you make him yours?