

## **“X” Marks the Spot(?)**

Isn't it nice when a plan comes together; when everyone's ideas intersect and meet and agree? It's such a great feeling to be able to point to something and say, *“You want to know what success looks like? You want to know what teamwork looks like? You want to know what being blessed by God looks like? Look no further than right here! ‘X’ marks the spot.”*

It is this same “X marks the spot” reality that kept coming to mind as I read over Luke's report of the formative years of Jesus. *“And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and with man.”* Apparently, both God and man saw Jesus the same way in those early years. ***There wasn't a difference of opinion.*** The favor of God ***neatly intersected*** with the favor of man as far as anyone was concerned. Here was a healthy young boy who was bright, intelligent, well-mannered, and faithful. You want to know what the ideal child looked like? “X” marks the spot. Look no further than the intersection of God's favor and man's favor—the boy Jesus.

*“Okay...so what's the problem?”* The problem is the fact that man's notion of favor really wasn't the same as God's. It never has been and it never will be. Fallen and sinful man looks to the ***things of this world*** as a litmus test or measuring stick, especially in our society/culture today. We look to things like health, wealth, fame, beauty, and intellect as benchmarks for favor. That's just how human nature works. ***Deny it all you want. It doesn't change the truth.*** We show more favor to those who meet these benchmarks. Pretty people, rich people, celebrities... they get more breaks, no matter how foul they may actually be. It's amazing how ***selectively blind/deaf*** we can be when we want to! Ugly people, poor people, overweight people, people who fail to meet a certain level of education? We don't see them in as favorable of light. They don't get shown ***nearly*** as much favor as those who do hit the shallow benchmarks and pass our sinful litmus tests. Again, maybe you don't want to confess this ***sinful shallowness*** about yourself, but your failure/refusal to confess doesn't make the sinful reality any less true. Like it or not, certain people find favor with us over others, and for all the wrong, sinful reasons.

Let me ask you: ***Why did the boy Jesus find favor with God?*** Was it because of His healthy stature and intellect? Was it because He was the handsome young son of the local successful small businessman; the heir to the carpentry empire in Nazareth? Or... was it because of His faithfulness? The answer is quite clear when you couch it in those terms, right? God's favor rested on Jesus because of His faithfulness. God's favor had **nothing** to do with Jesus' good looks or wit or charm or station in life. ***In this way, you can think of God's favor and man's favor not as an intersecting, “X marks the spot,” but as a blessed parallel reality.***

At that particular time in Jesus' life, man's notion of favor with Him ran parallel to God's favor with Him. However, we must be very careful to ensure that we don't confuse the two different perspectives and plot some sort of intersection that God never intended.

So what does that mean? God's favor and man's favor were *parallel*? Well...think about it in terms of the world you call home. There are many people in this world today who seem to have it all. Has God blessed them in their abundance? Yes, actually He has! Does that mean that they have found favor in His eyes? ***Not necessarily!*** Remember: God causes the rain to fall upon the righteous as well as the unrighteous. There are plenty of foul unbelievers in this world, even people who outright hate God, who have been blessed with the best that all this world has to offer. In man's eyes they are truly favored. However, without faith, these people, as great and smart and beautiful and wealthy as they may be, are outside of salvation, and thus, ***outside of God's good favor.***

Conversely, there are plenty of very faithful people in this world who seem to have gotten ***every raw deal and bad hand*** dealt to them that life could dish out. However, in the midst of all that pain and suffering, is a **vibrant, living faith** in Christ Jesus. God looks on this person and calls them favored. The rest of the world sees them as cursed or bad luck or forsaken, ***but God calls them holy and precious in His sight.*** Think of Lazarus laying in the gutter. He wasn't shown any favor by anyone on this side of eternity. Only a few stray dogs would even look his way or pay him any attention. You may not want to admit it, but you most likely wouldn't have shown Lazarus any favor either. However... ***did Lazarus find favor with God?*** Absolutely! Lazarus is called home to God's place of honor at the heavenly feast table. Conversely, where's the anonymous rich man, who was undoubtedly Mr. Popularity during his earthly life, feasting sumptuously and throwing lavish parties for all his fancy friends? He may have found favor with all of society. They'd laugh at all his stupid jokes and look past all his sinful ways and words, singing his praises and acting like he's the best thing ever. But he didn't find favor with God, did he?

This reminds me of the words the angelic host spoke to those lowly shepherds that first Christmas Eve... you know... guys who were most certainly not shown any favor by the rest of society. *"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace upon whom His favor rests."*

Now...before we go any further, there is something very important that needs to be cleared up. ***God doesn't show you favor because you first have faith,*** as if God shows you favor ***because*** of your faith. It's sad how consumer-laden our understanding of God's grace and peace can be! How often we turn it into a business transaction; i.e., I bring my faith to the table, and in return, God shows me favor. ***Sorry, but it doesn't work that way.*** In keeping with the angelic message of

peace and favor, that would be no different than saying God shows you favor **because** you have peace. You bring peace to the table, and God, in return, shows you favor. Lazarus didn't **first** have peace in his squalor and suffering, and **then** God showed him favor. That doesn't work, does it? It's just the opposite. In/through faith, you have peace because you know God has shown you favor. In/through faith, you have peace because you know God's unconditional grace and favor towards you.

This peace shows itself out; it bears good fruit, in spite of what is shaking out in life. Because of God's free and unmerited gift of saving faith, you can confidently hold fast to what the rest of the world calls scandalous and foolish. You can know and trust that what God says in His Holy Scriptures is **absolutely true** and **absolutely meant for you and for all mankind**. All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. The wage of all sin—everyone's wage, regardless of age, race, social status, health status, wealth, intellect, or anything else—is death—temporal and eternal. However, God loved the **whole world** so much that He gave His one and only Son, Jesus, to be an all-redeeming sacrifice for the sins of the entire world. In Jesus Christ, the wage of sin—**the entire wage**—has been paid in full. It is finished, once for all.

Folks: That's where the true "X marks the spot" takes place between God and man. **It takes place in Christ**. Holy, perfect, and almighty God Himself gave up all of heaven in order to come down to this fallen and sinful world and take on our fallen and sinful flesh. However, Christ—in the flesh—did what fallen and sinful man can never do, **no matter how hard we try**. Christ Jesus lived the **perfect** life. He kept every one of God's laws **perfectly**. He lived out a perfect faith. Not a "fair-weather faith." Jesus wasn't faithful only when it was convenient or beneficial. He wasn't faithful only when He was in a pinch and needed something. Perfect life, perfect obedience, perfect faith. And He did it all for us, in our place, precisely because we cannot do this—**not ever**. On top of that, Christ Jesus took every single sin of the entire world upon Himself, taking every single one of those sins to the cross so that they would be put to death, **once and for all**.

Look at that cross! You want to see what **God's wrath** and, at the same time, **God's love** looks like? "X" marks the spot! You want to see where man's sin and God's holy justice, grace, and mercy all intersect? **The cross marks the spot!** This cross is where you are saved. This cross is where all men are saved. "X" marks the spot of God's love, grace, and favor. You can see this love, grace, and favor intersecting with us this very day. Look no further than that little bit of bread and wine you will receive in just a few minutes. In, with, and under these humble elements almighty God mercifully **intersects and interacts** with us. He brings all the victory of the cross to us in this humble meal. *"Take and eat. This is My body. This is My blood. Given and shed for you for the complete forgiveness of all your sin."*

Sadly, it is these very realities that are so often despised, forsaken, and forgotten because they don't match up with ***our sinfully selfish and shallow notions of favor, wisdom, success, or peace.*** It is this same cross that people so often try to avoid, instead setting ***parallel courses*** in life, assuming that the parallel course is ***just as good, if not better.*** After all, if you can get to the same ending point without having to intersect with all that pain and suffering, isn't that better? In man's eyes it is! The problem with that sinful logic, though, is that parallel lines never end in the same spot. They may run parallel to infinity, but they never meet/intersect. "*No one comes to the Father except through me.*" It doesn't get any clearer than that, does it? ***No one comes to the Father without intersecting with Christ.*** No one comes to the Father without going through the intersection of the cross of Christ. **There are no parallel alternatives.** There is one way—one very narrow, straight way: the way of Christ Jesus and His cross. "*Take up your cross and follow Me.*"

May God grant you in this new year the peace that comes with simply trusting with a child-like faith; trusting whole-heartedly that His favor rests upon you ***because of the all-atoning work and person of Jesus Christ alone.*** You don't need to hope to find favor with God. God has already shown His favor to you in Christ! May this blessed reality intersect with all that you say, think, and do, this day and every day until your heavenly Father calls you home to heaven to live with Him in an eternal peace that truly surpasses all human understanding. **AMEN**