

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

Pastor Adam Parker

12/11/24

Sermon Title: The Son: The Only Begotten God

Scripture Text: John 5:15-29

John 5:15 The man went away and told the Jews that it was Jesus who had healed him.

John 5:16 And this was why the Jews were persecuting Jesus, because he was doing these things on the Sabbath.

John 5:17 But Jesus answered them, “My Father is working until now, and I am working.”

John 5:18 ¶ This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.

John 5:19 ¶ So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.

John 5:20 For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel.

John 5:21 For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.

John 5:22 For the Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,

John 5:23 that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.

John 5:24 Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.

John 5:25 ¶ “Truly, truly, I say to you, an hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

John 5:26 For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself.

John 5:27 And he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man.

John 5:28 Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice

John 5:29 and come out, those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment.

Main Idea: Jesus is equal to the Father, receiving the life that he has “in himself” from the Father, but denies that he is a different deity. He is instead “light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made.”

Outline:

1. The Son is God
2. The Son is Begotten
3. The Son is Eternal

Introduction

Two years ago, Ligonier Ministries did a survey that they called “The State of Theology,” and in that survey an eye-opening number of people who called themselves evangelicals but they also agreed with this statement: “Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God.” 43% of people who said they are evangelical Christians also agreed with the statement that Jesus is not God!

Now, part of this you can attribute to the fact that many people call themselves evangelicals but at least theologically they are not. They don't regularly go to church, but they think they are evangelicals maybe because of their political views. That has to be a large portion of those who said yes.

But there's also an additional explanation: many people just aren't being disciplined well by their churches.

Most people who have a passing knowledge of the Bible know that it says that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

And that's actually the place where I think many people become confused. You know he is the Son of God, but do you know what it *means* that he is called the Son, and that the Father is called the Father? A lot of Christians hear these terms that Jesus uses and it isn't hard for them to think, "Well a son comes from a father, so the son must be created."

You have this challenging thought ("what does it mean for Jesus to be called the son?"), *in combination with* a modern tendency not to look to the past to help answer the question. C.S. Lewis called this "chronological snobbery" where people just aren't as interested in church history or the creeds of the church. They don't think they're going to find help by looking back there. You also see this chronological snobbery in the way that many of the largest churches in our land don't even read or recite the creeds today.

And *then* factor that with a time where so many pulpits avoid deep theological topics from a fear of scaring people off. And so every sermon series becomes a marriage seminar, or a lesson in time management; meanwhile, the people in the pews are growing in theological errors because there's not a whole lot of theology being done from the pulpits that are supposed to be discipling them.

So in part, because of this shyness about theology, many churchgoers are often left to figure these things out on their own, without the help of their church or their pastor. And so they wonder, "what does it mean that Jesus is a Son?" and they sort of just do their best, or hope that Google will be their friend (and it's usually not). The results being what we see in that Ligonier poll: 43% of evangelicals saying, "Jesus was a great teacher, but he was not God."

Part of my job is to make sure that the members of *this* church are *not* left to figure out theological terms like “son of God” all on their own. I am determined that at least in our own congregation we will teach the whole counsel of God, even when it means talking about incredible and deep things.

And let’s face it: even just saying a phrase like “eternal generation of the Son” gets some of us on edge. “Is he about to teach us some Greek words today?” Maybe.

But these things are precious. They are the inheritance of the church. We should think well about this question: here we are in this Christmas season, and next week we’re going to be meditating upon the birth of Jesus Christ, who is called God with us by the prophet Isaiah.

But between the three persons of the Trinity, it isn’t the Father or the Spirit who are born in Bethlehem, it is specifically the person of the Son. Only the Son becomes incarnate and dwells among us.

We are accustomed to calling him Son. Scripture calls him the son. But what does it *mean* that Jesus is the Son? If the Father is the Father, what does that actually mean? Well, we actually will find help by looking to church history. In fact, by looking to one of the creeds we say every few weeks: the Nicene Creed.

The early church fathers thought very deeply about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, and the result of that reflection on this relationship was a phrase that was taken from Scripture.

The Scripture describes the Son as being “begotten.” This is a word that is in the original language of Scripture. John’s Gospel uses the word four times, always with reference to Jesus. John 1:14 says Jesus is “the only begotten of the Father.” John 1:18 says “No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has declared him.” You may recall John 3:16 and 18, both of which say that “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.” In every instance, John uses this Greek word, *μονογενής* and applies it to Jesus.

Now, if you’re looking at a newer English translation they have probably replaced “only begotten” with one of two words: either “unique” or “only.” I’m not going to follow the rabbit trail regarding the question of why this shift in modern translation has taken place, but I am convinced that “begotten” is still the best

word here (especially since John 1:18 makes very little sense without the word “begotten”). I really wish that the newer translations (including my beloved ESV) kept that older rendering of the word μονογενής as “begotten.”

This is why the Greek is our friend, though. Because that word μονογενής is there, regardless of what the English translators say. Whatever it should be translated as in English, it is the word that Jesus says helps to explain what it means that he is the Son.

Now, in Scripture, begetting is usually connected with having a child. So Adam begets his son Able, for instance. But Scripture says that yes, the Son is begotten, but not like human begetting. The way the Nicene creed elaborated on this begetting of the Son is that it says, “he is *begotten* of the Father,” but he is not “made.” “Begotten, but not made.” It is a kind of begetting that excludes being created or made.

I have two sons. There was a time when my sons were not. I had a Father. And there was a time when I was not. Not only that but there was also a time when I was, but was not a father. And this is true of all of us going back to Adam, the first man. We were all begotten, and until that time we didn’t exist.

But when the Scripture says that the Son is begotten, it is not saying that he was made or created. When the Son was incarnate, his human nature was created and made, but that’s not what the creed is talking about. It’s not talking about the incarnation in this instance, it’s talking about his relationship with the Father before the incarnation. There was a time when I was not a father, but there was never a time when the Father was not the father.

So there is a big difference between human begetting and the sort of divine begetting that happens between the Father and Son.

And the Church Fathers reflected very deeply on this relationship between Father and Son. And the fruit of the reflection of the early church fathers was what we call the Nicene Creed.

And before we go much further I want to remind you of the first part of the Nicene creed, where we speak of Jesus the Son of God. Listen to the denials, listen to the affirmations here:

We believe in one God the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
Of all things visible and invisible:
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the *only begotten* Son of God,
begotten of His Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made,
being of one substance with the Father,
by whom all things were made;

In particular, notice that in the creed there are affirmations and denials here.

Yes, the Son is begotten. But no, there is no *time* when he was begotten, nor is there a time when he was not begotten. His begetting is eternal, outside of time. There is no before or after to his existence or his sonship, ever.

He was begotten “before all worlds.” Even to speak of “before” for the Son is to suggest some measure of time when he might *not* have been, but because the Son is of the same substance as the Father and the Father is eternal himself, the son himself is also eternal. He is as eternal as the Father. There is no beginning of his existence or his sonship.

Notice that it is not the *incarnation* that makes him Son. It is his Sonship that defines his person and makes his incarnation so unique from other births.

His birth is precious, but his birth is not what makes him the Son. The Scripture is telling us that he was Son long before he was ever born.

Okay, so he is the Son because he was begotten. But we also said he isn’t made or created. So what’s the point of him even being *begotten* if he was never made? If there was never a time when he began to exist? What even makes this begetting idea meaningful?

Well let’s talk about this begetting. The theological phrase that is used to describe this eternal begetting is “eternal generation.” In fact, that’s what I want to spend the time we have left on.

But I need to warn you that the plan is not for us to comprehend eternal generation completely or comprehensively. This subject is one of the deep things of God. Comprehension isn't possible, but I do think that if we can have that teaching in place, and the guardrails up that Scripture gives us, then we will be equipped to have better, more mature reflection on the Scriptural teaching that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, "begotten of His father before all worlds" and that the Son is in fact, (contrary to what 43% of evangelicals think) very God of very God.

In fact, one of the most common things that I used to get asked by my own children when they were younger was, "How is Jesus talking about God, if he *is* God?" And I think meditating upon the incarnation and upon eternal generation really helps us to read all of the Bible. So my hope is that even if we find this challenging, that we will become better readers of the Gospels and of the Scriptures overall by giving our attention to this.

What did the Church Fathers mean when they spoke of Eternal Generation? They began with this core commitment: there is one God, but this one God subsists in three persons. Each of those persons is fully the one God. They are not a "part" or God, because God is not divided into nor is he composed of parts; instead, God is a simple unity.

The three persons in whom God subsists are distinguished by their relations of origin: the Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. All of these things take place in eternity, outside of time. And so there is no time when these things were *not* so. The Father has *always* been Father who begets, the Son has *always* been the begotten Son, and the Spirit has *always* been Spirit who proceeds.

And yet the church fathers, as they wrestled with these things, asked the question: what is it that makes the Son the Son and the Father the Father? When they asked that question in looking to the Scriptures, the answer that they saw was eternal generation.

Now, we will be turning to the Fathers for help, but I want all of the substance of our answer to come from the text of John today. In my opinion, today's passage from John's Gospel is one of the clearest at bringing together all of the pieces of what it means that Jesus is the "only begotten son" of God in one place.

Because of that, I want to draw three truths from the text. First, that the Son is God. Second, the Son is Begotten. Third, that the Son is Eternal.

I've already laid these things out in my really long intro, but it's more important to me that you to *see* it in the *text*. I want you to be convinced that what the church believes and has always believed is not just an old tradition, but I want you to be convinced that God has really told us this about himself.

1. The Son is God

First truth we need to see is that the Son is God.

You'll notice in our reading that I included verse 15 and those surrounding it. I wanted you to see the context of what Jesus says here. So what happened? Jesus heals this man on the Sabbath, and the Jews want to know what authority he has to do this. So this whole conversation starts as an authority challenge. And his answer in verse 17 is, "My Father is working until now, and I am working."

Now, I don't know what *you* make of that. Maybe you think it's a pretty tame answer. But his listeners don't.

He answers them with a statement about his Father, and then a statement about himself. And then he says that his relationship to the Father is such that anything the Father is allowed to do, he is allowed to do. So he reasons this way: "The Father is allowed to work on the Sabbath, and therefore so am I." Only one who is equal to God can have the same rules of God applied to himself.

Or think of it this way: "You don't question that God is at work on the Sabbath. Therefore you shouldn't question my right to work today, either." That's what he's saying. And they hear him loud and clear, because then John makes very clear their issue with this: "he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God."

Then he gives an answer in verses 19-27, telling them that they partly have him right, as long as he is not misunderstood. If I could summarize verses 19-27 Jesus is saying, “Yes I am making myself equal with God, so long as you know I am not a second god or another god than the Father.”

So this whole section is an emphatic claim of Christ to be God. Chapter 1 of John’s Gospel has already said that for us, “In the beginning was the Word. The word was with God, and the word was God.” If you read John 1:18, the ESV translates it as “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” Now, that is already weighty, but it’s actually weightier than it seems: the ESV calls him the “only God.”

But they should have used the word “begotten” here. In the Greek it uses that word *monogenes*, so John actually says, “No one has ever seen God; the only begotten God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” So in either case whether you translate *monogenes* as “only” or “begotten,” it’s a powerful reference to the Son as God who reveals the Father. And it’s an incredibly deep and heavy statement of the deity of Christ.

And how is Jesus – the only begotten God – able to reveal the God whom no one has seen? Jesus is able to do this, according to his own word, because only God can know God. And only God can be equal to God. And only God can reveal God. And Jesus Christ does reveal God. It follows that the Son is God.

How is it possible, then, for the Father *and* Son to both be the same God? Well keep going.

2. The Son is Begotten

Second, that takes us to the second part of Jesus’ claim, that the Son is Begotten.

Think of what happens here. Jesus has just made himself equal with God. And only God can be equal with God. And there is no such thing as a creature that can be equal to the creator. You are either creature or you are creator, but you cannot be both. You’re on one side or the other of the line between creator and creature.

This is why John 1:3 says, “all things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” According to John, the Son of God falls firmly on the creator side of the creator/creature distinction. He cannot make everything that was made if he was also made. And yet he was begotten. And so we know then that the Son’s being begotten excludes his being made. When we say that the Son was begotten, the writers of Scripture do not mean that he was created.

So then Jesus explains the pattern of his existence. He is God. He is also *firmly* denying that he is a second god or second type of deity alongside of Yahweh. He is God, but he is not overturning any Jewish notions of monotheism. He is not overturning or rejecting the Hebrew shema, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” What he is saying is entirely in harmony with all they have been taught throughout redemptive history up to this point. He is changing nothing, he is overturning nothing. He is only unveiling and revealing here.

Instead he explains that all of his activities are co-extensive with the Father. Verse 19: “Whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.” This is an incredibly far-reaching statement. “*Whatever* the Father does.”

The father creates all things, so does the Son.

The Father raises the dead, so does the Son.

Everything that the Father is worthy of, the Son is worthy of, as well.

And in the context he is saying, “Yes, of course, I may work on the Sabbath, because the Father may work on the Sabbath.” It’s an incredibly potent claim to his own divinity. It’s why they seek to kill him, according to verse 18. They’re hearing him loud and clear.

Okay, so his activities are coextensive with the Father. How can this be so? The answer is in verse 26.

It begins with the word “for,” and then what follows is what derives from all that was prior to that. That first word “for” there means an explanation is about to come. And verse 26 says, “For as the Father has life *in himself*, so he has granted the Son also to have life *in himself*.”

I'm not sure I can overstate this. This is huge. Think about this biblical truth: the Father has life in himself. There is little controversial about that. To have life in himself is a statement of what the Greeks called aseity: self-existence.

Aseity is one of the things that makes us as human beings – as creatures – so vastly different from God. Human beings do not have this at all. Think about us. We exist, but we do not have life in ourselves. We are completely dependent. We depend on God for our existence, for our breath, for our food, for our life. We do not have life in ourselves. We do not have aseity.

But Jesus is saying that the Father has life “in himself.” This is speaking of absolute being. He is the one being in all the universe who is in a way that is absolute. This means that he is independent and complete in his fullness – the sole cause and final goal of all things. To steal some language from Herman Bavinck, God “is a boundless ocean of being” (2:151).

Life – the fullness of the divine life that depends on no one else and nothing else – fully belongs to God. It is what it means to be God. He is life. He has life, existence, and all that he is, “in himself,” not as something borrowed, or something found, or as something earned, but as something that is his, and *fully* his. All that he is, and all that it means to be God belongs to God because he is absolute existence by his very nature.

And just as the Father has this aseity – this full life *in himself*, Jesus says that the Son has the same! Hilary of Poitiers, writing around 350 AD, said this:

“He bore witness that life, to the fullest extent, is his gift from the living God. Now if the living Son was born from the living Father, that birth took place without a new nature coming into existence. Nothing new comes into existence when the living is begotten by the living, for life was not sought out from the nonexistent in order to receive birth” (On the Trinity 7.27).

So Hilary is careful to say, the Father does grant life to the Son just as the Father has life in himself. Because of this, the Son has life in himself. In John 17:3, Jesus prays and says, “This is eternal life, that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.”

If I might be very direct here: this is not just a statement about Jesus, it's an offer and a promise for us. If we will come to Jesus Christ, we are coming to life itself. To come to Jesus in repentance and hoping in his death on our behalf, we get to participate in the divine life of God through him.

This is why to know Jesus Christ is to know life. Because the Son has aseity. He is fully God, and is as fully God as the Father is fully God. The same God as the Father. He is claiming to be absolute being itself.

This is why he can say, for example, in John 8:58, "before Abraham was born, I am." He uses the divine name to refer to himself. This is why Jesus can say in John 14:9, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." It's why Thomas can see Jesus in the flesh and call him, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

Because of this, we are immediately taken to our third point.

3. The Son is Eternal

The third thing I want us to see is that the Son is eternal.

Here is the connection with what went before: the Son, according to verse 26 has been given a "grant" of divine life in himself from the Father. When did this happen? How did this happen? How does he not simply have life borrowed from the Father? How does he receive this from the Father, without this making him a mere creature? How can he have life "in himself" in the same sense as the Father?

In John 17, Jesus is praying to the Father and says, "Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you." And he acknowledges the eternal begetting from which all that he has is derived when he prays, "Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (17:5). You see how what Christ has is his eternally, before creation, before the world existed.

The question we asked a moment ago was, how can the Son have life "in himself" in the same sense that the Father has life in himself?

And St. Augustine's answer to this question was that the life Christ has in himself is shared with the Father, but since he is begotten of the Father, then it cannot have

happened in time. What has been granted to him by the Father is none other than an “eternal grant.” This life Jesus has in himself is the same life that the Father has, meaning it is absolute, and there was never a time when it was not so.

This is why we use the phrase “eternal generation” to speak of what it means for the Son to be the Son. Augustine, writing back in the 300s, draws these things together. Listen to this:

Therefore, [the Son] does not live by participation; rather, he lives without change and in *every* respect is, himself, life. The Father has given the Son to have life. As the Father has, so he has given. What difference is there? The difference is that the one has given, the other has received...Therefore, when it says, “He has given to the Son” it is as if he said, “He begat a Son,” since the Father gave by begetting. Just as the Father gave the son to be, he also gave him to be life and he gave him to be life in himself. What does it mean to be life in himself? It means that he would not need life from any other source. It means that he himself would be the fullness of life out of which others, who believe in him, might [truly] have life while they live. Therefore “He has given to him to have life in himself.” He has given to whom? He has given, so to speak, to his Word, to him who “in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God” (TRACTATES ON THE GOSPEL OF JOHN 22.10.3–4).

So here’s what Augustine has done. He’s helped us, I think to draw these things together. To see that the eternal grant of life in himself from Father to Son happens in this eternal begetting. And now we see that the full picture emerges: the Father eternally begets the Son, and in doing so they share the same nature, and yet are distinct persons. This is also true of the Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and Son together. Not that the Spirit deserves to be neglected, but my interest and focus here today has been on the Son because our focus at this time is on the incarnation.

Who is the Son who became incarnate? No less than God himself, eternally begotten of the Father, fully possessing life and the divine life in himself, without ever being made or created.

This begetting of the Son is an eternal grant – absolute life, always and forever, without beginning or end. Any idea of the Son as a lesser person or as eternally subservient to the Father is a mistake. All three persons of the Trinity are of the same substance, equal in power and glory.

Here's what that means, at least in part: When you are united to Jesus Christ by the Spirit through faith, you are united to the one in whom the fullness of deity dwells. You are united to the one who not only loves you, but who has life in himself.

As 2 Peter 1:4 says, in Christ you are now a “partaker of the divine nature.” The crucified, risen, and reigning Jesus Christ, the creator of all things, possesses the fullness of divine life. And if you are united to him through faith, then here's one major implication that I hope you'll take with you. This is from Leo the Great, writing in the 400s (and I'm going to conclude with this):

“Realize your dignity, O Christian! Once you have been made a partaker of the divine nature, do not return to your former baseness by a life unworthy of that dignity. Remember whose head it is and whose body of which you constitute a member!” (SERMONS 21.3)

Let's pray.