

Why Does Baptism Matter?  
Matthew 3:13–17; Romans 6:3–11  
Sunday, September 29, 2024

Let us pray: May your word wash over us, Lord. Wash over our ears, our minds, our hearts, our lives, reminding us that we belong to you and helping us to live in ways that show that to the world, in Christ. Amen.

Last week we talked about why Jesus matters, and since we had a baptism today, I thought we would just continue with that theme and use this as a chance to talk about why *baptism* matters.

There's a scene in the movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou* where three criminals who have escaped from jail in Mississippi are travelling through the woods when they come upon a congregation being baptized in a river. It's this surreal moment, and they stand there watching it for a while, until one of the criminals, Delmar, runs out into the water. The pastor dunks him under the water, and when he comes up, he says to his two friends, "That's it, boys. I've been redeemed. The preacher's done washed away all my sins and transgressions. It's the straight and narrow from here on out, and heaven everlasting is my reward. One friend says, "What are you talking about," and he says, "The preacher says all my sins is washed away, including that Piggly Wiggly I knocked over in Yazoo." The friend says, "I thought you said you were innocent of those charges." Delmar says, "Well, I was lying. And the preacher says that sin's been washed away, too. Neither God nor man's got nothing on me now. Come on in boys, the water is fine." And then the other friend runs out into the water to get baptized.

I've told you before about when I was baptized. I was 14 years old, and as I knelt on the steps in the sanctuary, the pastor dipped his hand in the water and reached it out toward me. I vividly remember closing my eyes and holding my breath, being perfectly still, because I thought, "This

is it. Something is going to *happen*. Something in me is going to *change*. I am going to *feel* different. I'm going to *be* different." The pastor placed water on my head, and I felt...exactly the same as I had before. I had been expecting some magical transformation to take place the instant the water hit my head. Like, "Not holy...not holy...not holy...BOOM, holy!" Like the nature of my soul was going to change in that moment. But as far as I could tell, nothing *happened*, and aside from my head being wet, I didn't *feel* any different.

That is the way that a lot of people think about baptism. A lot of people think that baptism matters because the moment of baptism is the moment of salvation, when there is some magical transformation that takes place within our very souls. That the act of baptism is what cleanses us of our sin. Up to that moment, we were going to hell, but now, once we are baptized, our sins are forgiven, and we can live forever with God. It is said that the Roman Emperor Constantine in the year 337 waited until right before he died to be baptized, because he believed that if he waited to get baptized on his death bed, he was in less danger of sinning again and not getting to heaven. If baptism is what cleanses us of our sin, then why not just wait until right before we die so that all our sin is forgiven, and we don't have the opportunity to sin again!

But if baptism is something that we do *so that* our sins are forgiven, it raises a really big question. Why was Jesus baptized? Jesus was God in human flesh and lived a sinless life. Why would Jesus need to be baptized if he was without sin? And if baptism *isn't* the moment of salvation when all our sins are forgiven and washed away, then why does baptism *matter*?

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It is important to remember that Jesus didn't *invent* baptism. John the Baptist didn't invent baptism. It was being practiced for a while before Jesus and John. We don't know exactly how long, but it has its roots in Jewish rituals of purification. It was literally a washing away of that

which defiled a person. If a person had been sick or had done something to make them ritually unclean (come into contact with blood or a dead body), then they engaged in specific rituals of washing, so that they could be considered clean again. It later became a ritual of *repentance*, where if someone was converting to Judaism or turning back to God (that's literally what the word *repent* means, *to turn*), then they took part in this ritual to show that they were starting over, beginning a new life with God, cleansed of whatever it was that had separated them from God.

So when Jesus comes to the Jordan River to be baptized by John, John says, "You're coming to me to be baptized? I need to be baptized by you!" John recognizes who Jesus is, that this is the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world, and he's asking, "Why do you need to be baptized?" To which Jesus says, "It is proper for us in this way to fulfill all righteousness." Well, what does that mean? There are a couple of ways to understand this.

The word here for fulfill is the Greek word *pleroo*. One understanding of this word is "to perform or bring about or bring into realization." And *righteousness* is often used to mean "the will of God." So there is a sense in which "fulfilling all righteousness" means, "doing the will of God." By being baptized, Jesus is showing the world God's will for us, what God wants for us, and that is to repent, to turn back to God, to begin a new life with God. Jesus himself didn't *need* to *do* that, but he took part in it because that is God's will for all humanity, and while Jesus was fully divine, he was also fully human. He came to stand with sinners, to stand in solidarity with sinful humanity. So he was showing us what God wants for us by doing it himself. That's one way of understanding what it means to fulfill all righteousness.

That word *pleroo* (or *fulfill*) also means to be made full or to complete. When something is made full or complete, you cannot add anything else to it. You don't need to add anything else to it. So we could understand Jesus as saying, "It is necessary that I be baptized in order to make righteousness complete. This thing that you do to cleanse yourself of sin, I am doing it in order to complete it. You don't need to do that anymore in order to be forgiven or made right with God. You *are* forgiven and made right with God *in me*. I have fulfilled righteousness. It is complete *in me*."

So up until Jesus, baptism *was* the moment when sins were cleansed. But when Jesus was baptized, baptism itself was changed. As Jesus comes up from the water, the heavens are opened, and the Spirit of God descends upon him like a dove, and the voice of God declares, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." In his baptism, the world comes to see that Jesus is the beloved Son of God. And that is what baptism means for us, too. Baptism shows the world that we belong to God, that we are beloved children of God.

We do not need to be baptized *in order to become* beloved children of God. We are baptized to show that we *are* beloved children of God. God did not start loving Brynn the moment the water touched her head. God loved Brynn before she was even born, and baptism just shows the rest of us that. We do not need to be baptized *in order to* have our sin forgiven. We are baptized to show that our sin has *already* been forgiven in Jesus Christ. That does not happen the moment the water hits our head. It happened 2,000 years ago on a cross on a hill just outside of Jerusalem. Baptism is not about what *we* do, it is about what *God* has done. We baptize to show the world what God has done *in us, for us, and for the world*.

The reason we baptize babies and children who are not yet old enough to even fully understand this and make those promises for themselves is because it shows that we belong to God before we even *know* we do. God is at work in us, drawing us to God before we are even *aware* of God's presence and love in our lives. And God's grace does not depend on our understanding of it or even our acceptance of it, as if God needed our permission to love us and forgive us. Baptism is not primarily about *us* choosing *God*. It is first and foremost about *God* choosing *us*, as Jesus said to his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Baptism is just our response to being chosen and loved and forgiven by God.

Baptism matters because it shows the world that we are beloved children of God, and it's not because of anything that we have done. It is God's grace; it is a *gift* that we can only *receive* with joy and thanksgiving. You belong to God. You don't *need* to be forgiven; you *are* forgiven. You just need to live into that forgiveness. Baptism connects us today with what Jesus Christ did 2,000 years ago.

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That is what Paul talks about in his letter to the Christians in Rome. He says, "All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death...we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, we too might live new lives." This is how the early Christians came to understand baptism, as dying and rising with Christ.

When the early church baptized, it was either done in lakes or rivers, or it was done in small pools inside people's houses, like large bathtubs. The person being baptized would remove all of their clothes and step into the water. The person baptizing them would lay them back, completely immersing them under water, like they had died and been laid in a tomb. Then they

would bring them back up out of the water, like they had been raised from the dead. They were dying and rising with Christ, sharing in his death and resurrection.

And what Paul says is that they have died to *sin* and come *alive* to *God*. That baptism marks the beginning of a new life. A life in which, as Paul says, we can no longer let sin control us. Just as baptism shows the world that we belong to God, we must now *live* in ways that show the world we belong to God. That's what Jesus did, right? He wasn't just baptized and then said, "Alright, I'm ready to be crucified now!" He spent the rest of his life showing the world that he was the beloved Son of God and showing *us* how to be children of God, too. People looked at him and said, "He belongs to God." Like the Roman soldiers (who didn't even *believe* in God) said as they stood at the foot of the cross, "Truly this man was God's Son!" They saw his *life* and his *death*, and they knew *who* he was and *whose* he was.

*That* is what *we* are called to do. Think about it this way. When you go to a Phillies game or an Eagles game, you see all these fans wearing what? Jerseys, t-shirts, hats of their team. So people can look at them and say, "She's a fan of *that* team. He belongs to *that* team." Because of what they are wearing, they are clothed like their team. Paul says later to the Romans that we are to "lay aside the works of darkness" and "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ. And he says to the Galatians, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have *clothed yourselves with Christ*." So that people look at us, at the way we live, the way we speak, the way we love our neighbors *and* our enemies, they see the way we act in our normal day-to-day lives and say, "They belong to Jesus."

And baptism doesn't just show the *world* that we belong to Jesus, it *reminds us* that we belong to Jesus. There is a story that Martin Luther, the great church reformer back in the 1500s, when he

woke up each day, he would sit on the side of his bed, place his hand on his head, and say, “I am baptized.” It was a way of reminding himself each day that he belonged to God, so that he could then live that day in ways that *showed* he belonged to God.

Each morning when I pray, after I confess my sin to God, I have a little shell with water in it, and I dip my thumb in the water, make the sign of the cross on my forehead, and say, “Through baptism I have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ’s own forever. I belong to *you*, Lord, and no one else. And in Jesus Christ, I am *loved*, and I am *forgiven*. Thanks be to God.” I start the day by reminding myself that I belong to God. And for a little while after that, I can still feel the water, cold and wet on my forehead, and it reminds me that I need to do the best I can to live that day in ways that show the world that I belong to God, not for *my own* glory but for *God’s*. And it also reminds me that when I inevitably fall short, there is *grace*, and God loves me still.

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Baptism *matters* because it joins us with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the salvation that he brought about 2,000 years ago. It matters because it marks the beginning of a new life in which we belong to God. It matters because it *reminds* us that we are beloved children of God who have been cleansed of our sin, and that we need to live accordingly, in ways that show that to the world. And when we inevitably fall short, baptism reminds us that there is *always* grace, that God loves us still, and we can try again tomorrow, reminding ourselves first, “I am baptized.” In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.