

S e r m o n s o n
Matthew

The Baptism of Jesus
Matthew 3:13-17

With Study Questions

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1/25/2004

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Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him. ¹⁴And John *tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"* ¹⁵ But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit *it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*" Then he allowed Him. ¹⁶ When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. ¹⁷And suddenly a voice *came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"* (Matthew 3:13-17).

After four hundred years of silence between the Old and New Testaments the human race finally hears from God. Other than one statement made by Jesus at the age of twelve, the silence of Christ comes to an end as well; both of these events occurring at Christ's baptism. The questions that jump out at us in this passage are: 1) Why was Jesus baptized? 2) What was the significance of the Spirit descending on Him? And, 3) What are we to learn from the Father's commendation of Him?

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We see some subtle, yet very significant, actions at Christ's baptism.

A Religious Ritual

One is Christ's willingness to engage in a religious ritual. It is very common today for high profile Christians to bash away at *churchianity*. The Lord's Supper and Baptism (sacraments instituted by Christ Himself) are thought of as expendable. We often hear, "It is my personal and invisible sincerity that God honors!" Of course personal sincerity is essential (Ephesians 6:24). But it is insincere to think that God is unconcerned with the Christian's participation in outward things—especially when He has ordained those things.

Going to church, tithing, the utilization of your gifts in Christ's body, the Lord's Supper, and baptism all test whether or not we have a sincere invisible and private faith in Christ. The Apostle Paul was "**testing the sincerity**" of the Corinthian's love by whether or not they would put their faith to work (2 Corinthians 8:8).

Jesus wouldn't start His ministry without being baptized. One may wish to examine popular Christian literature in an effort to see how high baptism (or the Lords' Supper) is on the list of things Christians ought to value. If it was that important to Jesus it should be that important to us.

This Doesn't Seem Right

John tried to prevent Christ from being baptized. His reasoning was, "**I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?**" Although John was given the epithet by Jesus as the greatest person born of a woman (Matthew 11:11), John had no inflated

view of himself. Leaders in the church should never view their clerical station as placing them one rung higher in the ladder which leads to heaven; all have the same need of Christ.

Jesus meets John's objection with a brief the answer, **"Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** This, apparently,¹ was sufficient for John. Certainly Jesus' reasoning would not be irrational or immoral. We can rest assured that the deeper we examine it, the more reasonable and glorious it will appear.

Modern sophists, liberals, skeptics and philosophers ought to take a lesson from John. That which is unclear to us now may become quite clear to us later. Let us, like John, be willing to give up our caviling (find fault unnecessarily) and objections to the declared word of God and trust that in due time its wisdom will be opened to us.

Fulfilling All Righteousness

The biggest question before us in this passage appears to be, "Why was Jesus baptized?" He wasn't sinful and in need of cleansing or repentance. His answer was, **"for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."** What does this mean? I would like to offer two suggestions.

First, Jesus, as a man, would do everything that every man should do. As God, Jesus could require worship and unquestioned obedience (John 14:15; Philippians 2:10). But as a man He was truly the model of humanity. Christ's participation in the sacraments is an example of the high priority God's places on such things. Simply put, it was an example to us.

Secondly, as Calvin explains,

He received the same baptism with us, in order to assure believers, that they are ingrafted into his body, and that they are "buried with him in baptism," that they may rise to "newness of life" (Romans 6:4).²

Cleansing from sin is not the only thing baptism represents. It is also a sign of inclusion among God's people (Matthew 28:18-20). Christ's baptism serves to show that He, as a man, is our brother who declares God's name to us and cares for us as children given to Him by the Father (Hebrews 2:11-13).

Baptism is a sign, if you will, of the organic union between Christ and His body (believers). We are baptized into the likeness of His death and resurrection. In other words, where He goes, we go (John 14:3). This is why Jesus is viewed as the **"firstfruits"** of the resurrection then, **"afterward those who are Christ's at His coming" (1 Corinthians 15:20, 23)**, i.e. us.

A flag flies above a nation's capital. When a soldier bears that flag upon his uniform, it is emblematic of his union with that nation and all it believes. His enemies see that flag and recognize its power and authority. When a Christian is baptized it is emblematic of his union with Christ and all attending blessings and the protection He provides—protection from the daunting and relentless foes of sin and death.

Christ's baptism is truly an act of great humiliation on His part and a source of great comfort to those who trust in Him and are baptized in His name.

¹Unlike Peter who, "...said to Him, __"Lord, are You washing my feet?" _7_ Jesus answered and said to him, "_What I am doing you _do not understand now, __but you will know after this'_ -⁸ _ Peter said to Him, "_You shall never wash my feet_" (John 13:6-8)!

² Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels: Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him (Matthew 3:16).

Two things attended the baptism of Jesus: 1) the heavens were opened to Him, and 2) the Spirit of God descended upon Him. Parenthetically speaking, there is nothing explicit in these verses regarding the mode of baptism (pouring or immersion), or why a dove, or in what form the dove actually was. I'll leave those for people with more time on their hands.

Heaven is Open

Strictly speaking, there is not a lot of information regarding the nature of **“the heavens”** being **“opened to Him”** so I will tread lightly here and merely suggest that the closing and guarding of Paradise by the armed Cherubim (Genesis 3:24), would come to an end. Jesus is the door to Paradise (John 10:9). The veil which represented the separation of men from God would be torn from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). And again, because of our being baptized into Christ, what is open to Him is open to those who trust in Him.

The Descending Spirit

Why in the world would God incarnate need the Holy Spirit? Matthew Henry makes the observation,

Christ was to execute the prophetic office, not by his divine nature... but by the afflatus (inspiration) of the Holy Spirit.³

Taking a deep breath here and seeking to be ever so careful when we seek to dissect Christ's humanity from His deity, it would seem that Christ worked His works and preached His message as a man gifted by the Spirit of God. What we will see is that the work of the Spirit in Christ is quite similar to the baptism of the Holy Spirit upon the early church; its design was revelatory (the revealing of God's word). Notice what action Luke associates with Christ operating in the power of the Spirit:

Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region. ¹⁵And He taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all (Luke 4:14, 15).

Christ's prophetic message and ability to perform the signs and wonders which confirmed His prophetic message (Mark 2:10, 11), at least according to Isaiah, seemed to be associated with the Spirit.

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Isaiah 61:1).

We often think of Christ as some sort of superman operating on a level quite different than that of mortal man. It should be honoring to Him for us to recognize that His operations on earth were done in His manhood. His humiliation and suffering were quite real. And He, like the apostles, was dependent upon the Holy Spirit to accomplish His ministry.

³ Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible: Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Mt 3:13). Peabody: Hendrickson.

And suddenly a voice *came* from heaven, saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17).

A Beloved Son

L. Laurence states,

God had been silent for over 400 years, since the close of the Old Testament. God’s voice from heaven identifying Jesus as His Son is the public announcement that He is about to act and the Messianic Age is about to dawn.⁴

In these three short verses we see the cooperative work of all three persons of the Godhead. Jesus is God’s beloved Son. The love between the Father and the Son is immeasurable. And it is wonderfully astonishing that we are **“made...accepted in the beloved” (Ephesians 1:5, 6)**. The immeasurable love the Father has for the Son (because we are baptized into Christ—Galatians 3:27) becomes the immeasurable love He has for us.

A Pleasing Aroma

Perhaps the most glorious portion of this text is found in the words **“in whom I am well pleased.”** Men delude themselves into thinking they have things worked out with God. But there is **“not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin” (Ecclesiastes 7:20)**. And although God called for the sacrifice of unblemished animals (Exodus 12:5) one could never be found for the fall of man had even corrupted the beasts of the field. Never did a sacrifice truly please God.

For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins (Hebrews 10:4).

We are accepted in the beloved, not merely as a result of a congenial disposition, but as a result of a sacrifice acceptable to God.

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children. ²And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma (Ephesians 5:1, 2).

We mentioned early in our study that the gospels are not designed, so much, to tell us what to do but to inform us of what God has done for us. We have been told that Jesus will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21). We are told that Jesus is God with us (Matthew 1:23). We are told that He will judge (Matthew 3:12) and that He will baptize His church with His Holy Spirit (Matthew 3:11).

But the first comment made by the Father amounts to Jesus being a pleasing sacrifice **“who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree” (1 Peter 2:24)**, thus making His delight for His Son His delight for those who put their trust in Him.

⁴Richards, L. (1991). *The Bible reader’s companion*. Includes index. (Mt 3:1-4:1). Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books.

Questions for Study

1. What was the first thing Jesus did as He entered His ministry (page 1)?
What do we learn from this?
2. Discuss John's response to Jesus' desire to be baptized (page 2)?
3. Why was Jesus baptized (pages 2, 3)?
4. What did it mean that Jesus would fulfill all righteousness (page 3)?
5. Discuss heaven being opened at Jesus' baptism (pages 3, 4).
6. Why would Jesus need the Holy Spirit (pages 4, 5)?
7. Why should the Father's commendation of Christ "my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased" be of comfort to Christians (pages 5, 6)?