

What Is Baptism All About?

(Matthew 3:13-17)

From the chaos of creation and the psalmist's mystical visions, to Christ silencing storms on the Sea of Galilee, the Scriptures are filled with God's voice echoing across waters. Matthew's scene of Jesus' baptism by John is another such holy moment, when the heavens themselves open up and a voice publicly claims Jesus as God's Son. This is a declaration of approval as well as delight, witnessed by a crowd who oversees a divine blessing on the beginning of Jesus' public ministry.

Christ models the modesty of a true leader, approaching a figure as imperfect as John to be baptized, and declaring his allegiance to God's righteousness. Jesus' descent into the rolling waters of the River Jordan is also his inevitable joining in solidarity with the suffering of humanity, just as he would descend after his crucifixion to preach liberation to the captives of death. Jesus' **immediate**

rise from these waters speaks to God's commitment to raising up all those in whom God takes pleasure.

It must have been jarring to go from the mountaintop experience of being claimed by God to the desert-valley experience of being tempted in the desert. At our baptism, God does not promise an easy road ahead, but does promise to be with us, always, through whatever experience we travel over next. Like Jesus experienced an evolution in the roles of his life as marked by his baptism, so, too, do our own ministries and responsibilities shift over time as God calls us upon new waters. While it is sometimes scary to take that next, most faithful step, we can remember that just as God takes pride in God's beloved, so too we can find home within God.

Today's sermon from **Matthew 3:13-17** is about Jesus' baptism. Is there anyone here, besides me, who is wondering, "Why did Jesus get baptized? I thought he was sinless?" So, another question might be, "What is

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baptism all about?” The answer to that question is found in studying Jesus’ baptism and John’s reaction to Jesus’ baptism.

Okay, let’s get started by first looking at Jesus’ startling request to be baptized. I hope you noticed the words Jesus used, “to be baptized **by John**.” Jesus came specifically to John to be baptized. Jesus was compelled to be baptized, but not just to be baptized. He was compelled to be baptized **by John**. He was to identify himself with John’s ministry. After all, he was the Messiah, the Lamb of God, being proclaimed by John. We should also make note of why Jesus would seek to be baptized. The very fact that the Son of God would be baptized is startling. He was the Author and Finisher of our faith, the Founder of the movement of Christianity. He was the one who was making baptism possible and effective for men and women.

John's baptism was a call for men to take a stand and to become identified with a life of repentance and

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righteousness. Jesus, however, needed no repentance; he was already perfectly righteous. He was the **Purchaser** of righteousness, the ideal man. His righteousness was the pattern, the very righteousness that could stand for and cover every man and woman. Why then would Jesus be baptized? Very simply, in his own words in verse 15, "**to fill all righteousness.**" His baptism indicated that he was consecrated to God and officially approved by him, especially shown in the descent of the Holy Spirit (v. 16) and in the words of the Father (v. 17). So, all God's *righteous requirements* for the Messiah were fully met in Jesus.

In addition, at Jesus' baptism, John announced the arrival of the Messiah and the inception of his ministry. And by his baptism, Jesus completely identified himself with man's sin and failure, though

he himself needed no repentance or cleansing from sin, thus **becoming our substitute**. Finally, Jesus' baptism was an example to his followers.

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Now, let's look and John's humbling reaction and how he needed Jesus to meet **his** need. John argued against Jesus coming to him for baptism. Why? John simply said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" With this question John was saying **two** things. **First**, he was not worthy to baptize Jesus. Christ coming to him was too great an honor for John. He did not deserve to privilege of Baptizing the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

John's humility was most unusual, since John was the **great one** in the eyes of the people at that time. Multitudes of people were flocking to him (Luke 3:7); the general public (Luke 3:10); tax collectors (Luke 3:12); soldiers (Luke 3:14); and religionists (Luke 3:7). He had reached the summit in the public's eye. He was honored above all by vast numbers of people despite his being opposed by the religionists

and traditionalists (Luke 7:28). Yet when Jesus approached him, he lowered himself and

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acknowledged that he was nothing in comparison to Jesus.

No one is worthy of God's call; **no one** is worthy to minister to Christ. The fact that God allows any kind of relationship with himself is beyond comprehension. Yet he has. He calls man to be with him and to serve him. This fact is too much for the human heart to contain. Which is what the centurion was saying to Jesus about his sick servant in **Matthew 8:8**, "The centurion replied, 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed'."

So, everyone needs what John had and what Jesus had. John had humility and Jesus had the Holy Spirit and fire. It is no disgrace to confess one's need for Christ and what he offers. John so confessed. How can a person be disgraced by

confession what everyone else already knows?
Man dies and

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desperately needs God to give him life – eternal life. And man misbehaves and desperately needs the fullness of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, which is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

In addition, the great – (famous, powerful, wealthy) – as well as the lowly need what Christ gives: the Holy Spirit and fire. And the believer always needs more and more of the infilling of the Holy Spirit. We are told in **Luke 1:15** that John have been “filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth.” Yet, with Christ’s confronting him face-to-face, he confessed his need for more of the Spirit of God and of the Lord’s fire. The closer a person lives with Jesus Christ, the **clearer** he sees his need for more humility and more

of God's spirit. John was already close to God; in fact, he had been "sent from God" as we are told in **John1:6**. But he saw his need for what Christ had to offer.

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People often wonder, as John himself did in todays' passage, why Jesus—the sinless Son of God—would need to be baptized. This question itself reveals our bias toward the individual, focusing only on questions of sin and salvation. The culmination of this story, in which God claims Jesus as his beloved Son, demonstrates the too-often-overlooked significance of our own baptism. We too are being claimed as children of God, joining a family with all our siblings in Christ.

So, what are the lessons we can learn from this Scripture reading from Matthew?

This scripture reading teaches us key lessons about Jesus' identity, purpose, and the inauguration of His ministry. His baptism by John the Baptist shows his perfect obedience, his identification with sinners, his anointing by the Holy Spirit (like a dove), and the

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Father's declaration of him as the beloved Son, affirming the Holy Trinity's presence, and Jesus' divine mission. It signifies the start of his work, demonstrating humility and setting the pattern for believer's new life in Christ.

Please bow your heads in prayer.

Sinless Lord Jesus, humble us and draw us to your freely given love and mercy. Wash us clean of our sins, that we may delight in your righteousness and grace. When you entered the waters of your baptism, you took away all our sin. When we entered the waters of our baptism, we took on all your righteousness. You are truly our substitute!

Thank you for washing us clean in the name of the **Father**, who created us; the **Son**, who redeems us; and the **Holy Spirit**, who sanctifies us. Help all Christians to live in that truth. We ask this in the name of your Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ. **Amen.**