

**MATTHEW 3:13-17.** (EHV)

Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “**Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.**” Then John let him. After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

In preparing to author a book on mega churches and community churches, one of the pastors in our church body went to visit one in the Chicago area that had been called “the most influential church in America.” It just so happened that none other than the senior pastor and founder of that mega church was preaching that day. There also happened to be a baptism scheduled that day, and during the service the senior pastor said to the crowd in a matter-of-fact way, “If you were baptized as an infant, it has no value. We have a rule here...that you have to be at least thirteen years old to be baptized, and the only reason to be baptized is because Jesus commands it, not because it will benefit you in any way.”

Over 20,000 people heard what that pastor said. (It was a *large* church.) Over 20,000 people heard that being baptized as an infant has no value, and that baptism does not benefit us in any way.

Matthew tells us otherwise in the account of Jesus’s baptism. Jesus’s baptism shows that baptism does indeed benefit us. Baptism had power for Jesus, and it has power for us.

**1.**

“Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan.” The word *then* tells us that Jesus’s baptism took place at a certain time. That time was after John the Baptist had begun his ministry of preaching in the wilderness of Judea and administering a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Luke tells us that Jesus’s baptism marked the beginning of his ministry, and that Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.

So that word *then* might seem to justify what that mega church pastor said: “If you were baptized as an infant, it has no value.” After all, Jesus was not baptized as an infant. He waited until he was about thirty years old to be baptized.

But we must remember that Jesus was the bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. When John the Baptist began to baptize, long after Jesus was an infant, that was something new in the midst of God’s people. There was no baptism for repentance and forgiveness in the Old Testament. But there was another covenant that was still in force for Jewish males when Jesus was an infant—circumcision. And as we heard two weeks ago, Jesus was circumcised when he was a week old.

We still have the practice of circumcision today, but we usually do it for health reasons or other reasons, not because God requires it of us or seals his covenant of grace to us through it anymore. The only circumcision God still commands of us is the circumcision or putting off of the sinful nature, and Paul tells us in Colossians that that takes place in baptism.

So actually, it's amazing that Jesus came to be baptized at all. He was already circumcised, and he had no sinful nature to put off, no sins to be washed away. What did he need baptism for?

That's exactly what John the Baptist was thinking: "John tried to stop him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?'" We are told a little bit about what a typical baptism by John looked like earlier in the chapter: "They were baptized by him in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins." What sins did Jesus have to confess?

Immediately before Jesus shows up, Matthew tells us that John was preaching, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But the one who comes after me is mightier than I. I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing shovel is in his hand, and he will thoroughly clean out his threshing floor. He will gather his wheat into the barn, but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire." So Jesus is mightier than John. Jesus's baptism will be better than John's. And John calls heaven Jesus's barn.

Doesn't it look like John's sermon was a lie, then, when Jesus comes to be baptized by John? John is the sinner; Jesus the sinless. John is but man; Jesus is the God-man. John needs to be baptized by Jesus, and Jesus is instead coming to him.

But "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now, for it is proper for us [in order] to fulfill all righteousness.'" There is so much in this verse to meditate on that we can only make a beginning. First, note that Jesus does not contradict John. John has said, "I need to be baptized by you," and Jesus does not say, "No, you don't, John. You've got me all wrong." No, he basically says, "Allow it anyway."

Second, note that Jesus does not say his baptism is *necessary*. He says it is *proper*. If you asked your mother at dinner, "Mom, what hand should I hold my fork with?" and she told you, "Well, son, the *proper* way is to hold it with your left hand," you wouldn't expect her to give you a spanking if you decided to hold it in your right hand anyway. But if she said, "You *need* to hold it with your left hand," there might be some repercussions if you disagree with her.

Jesus does not say his baptism is necessary, but that it is proper. What does that tell us? It confirms for us that Jesus is in fact the Son of God. Baptism is not an absolute need for him. He does not have any sins that need to be washed away. His mission will not fail if he is not baptized.

Third, if it is only proper, not necessary, then why does Jesus undergo it? Because "it is proper for us in order to fulfill all righteousness." Baptism doesn't just give the Holy Spirit for the forgiveness of sins. It also gives the Holy Spirit so that the person baptized has strength to fight temptation and live a godly life. Jesus was the all-powerful, sinless Son of God, but he was also true man for whom the temptations of the devil were just as real as they are for us. If God gives strength for fighting temptation and living a godly life in baptism... If that is precisely what Jesus came to do—to live a holy life under God's law as our substitute... If Jesus was about to begin his formal ministry as the Messiah, and the devil would begin tempting him in earnest to get him to botch it up... If all of this was true, then it would not have been proper for Jesus *not* to make use of that divine power available to him in baptism.

And finally, note that he says, "it is proper for *us* in order to fulfill all righteousness." John the Baptist was not going to live a holy life under God's law in our place. He had no such

mission, and he was not equipped to do so. He had a sinful nature just like we do. So how would John also play a role in fulfilling all righteousness?

In his first letter to Timothy, Paul encouraged him, “Watch your life and your doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, *you will save* both yourself and your hearers.” Timothy would save people! Of course that was not something he did or had the ability to do in and of himself. But just as a hammer or a nail, if it could talk, could say, “I built that house,” just as well as the person could who wielded the hammer and pounded the nails, so also representatives ministers are the human tools God uses to accomplish his saving work through the Word and sacraments.

By imparting God’s power to Jesus in baptism, John the Baptist was going to help Jesus and give him strength for his mission to fulfill all righteousness. And so Jesus can include John when he says, “It is proper for *us* in order to fulfill all righteousness.”

And John listens to the words of his Savior. We are told: “Then John let him. After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.’”

Matthew very carefully includes the words “immediately” and “suddenly,” so as to draw a direct connection between Jesus’s baptism and the events that followed it. It was because of and through baptism that the heavens were opened for Jesus. It was because of and through baptism that he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting upon him. It was because of and through baptism that the voice came from heaven saying, “This is my Son whom I love, in whom I have taken delight.”

We heard the apostle Peter earlier paraphrase what happened to Jesus at his baptism: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (Acts 10:38).

Baptism clearly had power for Jesus. It clearly benefitted him. He was now publicly anointed as God’s Son and was fully equipped to begin his teaching, healing, and saving ministry.

## 2.

Brothers and sisters, if baptism even had power for the holy and sinless Son of God himself, then who are we sinners to despise it or treat it lightly?

But how do we treasure it and use it rightly? Let’s ask and answer a few questions on the basis of God’s word, not just here in Matthew but also elsewhere.

First, how and when should we use baptism? If baptism isn’t just for Christians who are thirty years old or older, then whom is it for? The apostle Peter answers that most concisely in Acts chapter 2, when he says that God’s promises in baptism are for adults who repent and believe the gospel of Jesus and for their children. No age restrictions are given anywhere in the New Testament. In fact, we are told on a couple different occasions that the apostles baptized entire households. That’s why the regular practice in the Christian church up until the time of the Reformation was to baptize not only adults who converted to Christianity, but also their children soon after they were born. To cite just one example, a pastor named Cyprian wrote around 252 AD that he and sixty-five other pastors unanimously agreed that baptism ought not to be withheld from anyone born of man, no matter how young.

So what exactly does baptism do for us? Why is it something we should not withhold from anyone who desires it or from any Christian's children? Again, the apostle Peter says it most clearly in Acts 2 and in 1 Peter 3:21. In Acts 2 he says, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ *for the forgiveness of your sins*" (Ac 2:38). And in 1 Peter 3:21 he says, "Baptism saves you." Of course, it is not the mere water that saves us; it is God's word and institution that is connected with the water that gives baptism its saving power. And we all need saving no matter how young, because Jesus himself says that sinful flesh gives birth to sinful flesh and that therefore no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again of water and the Spirit, namely baptism (John 3:5-6). If we remain in our natural birth, then we remain in our natural sinful condition and are ruled by it, and we will die eternally in hell. But in baptism, we undergo a *rebirth*, out of our natural birth and into a heavenly birth. The apostle Paul reinforces Peter's and Jesus's words in Titus 3 and Galatians 3, where he calls baptism a washing of rebirth and says that in baptism we were clothed with Christ and given faith in him.

To draw a comparison: Think of how in the Garden of Eden, God told Adam, "Do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. You will surely die" (Gen. 2:17). The devil then told Eve, "Go ahead and eat from the tree. You will not surely die" (Gen. 3:1-5), and he tried to explain away God's prohibition. The devil said the opposite of what God said and explained away what God said. So too Peter, an apostle called and appointed by God's own Son, could not be more clear or straightforward when he says, "Baptism saves you." So when people say, "No, baptism does not save you," and try to explain away Peter's words, it should be clear, in that instance, that the devil is really the one speaking. Baptism saves us, give us new birth, washes away our sins, and clothes us with Christ.

But God doesn't just forgive our sins and make us holy in baptism. Perhaps this morning as we consider Jesus's baptism, we ought to consider especially the blessing Jesus received in his baptism. It is also a blessing we receive in our baptism, but it's not often the blessing we focus on—namely, the power to resist the devil's temptations and to live a godly life. Paul writes in Romans 6 that through baptism we are connected to Christ's death and resurrection, and that, just as Christ is done with sin and has nothing to do with it anymore, so our sinful body is thereby rendered powerless and we are no longer slaves to sin.

This is an extremely comforting and bolstering thought for a Christian, because there are many times throughout Christians' lives when temptations plague them, and we sometimes feel helpless against them. But Paul reminds us that sin is no longer our master. If we were baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, there is not a single temptation of the devil to which you cannot say no. There is not a single command of God to which you cannot say yes.

Sometimes we adopt a defeatist attitude about certain sins—alcoholism, lust, foul language, you name it. We think, "I cannot overcome this sin. It is too strong for me. If people are going to know me, they are just going to have to know me as this kind of person." If you received a Christian baptism, that is a lie. You all have the God-given ability and power to tell Satan off and to do what is right. You may need to make more use of more tools that God has put at your disposal than the next person does. You may need to talk to your pastor more regularly or find another Christian to whom you can hold yourself accountable and from whom you can receive regular help and encouragement. But no sin is your master.

I like to think of these two aspects of baptism as the morning and evening power of baptism. In the morning, as the new day stretches out before us, we can say, “I am baptized into Christ. I have been given God’s own power over the devil and temptation. Today I will strive to live to God’s glory.” And in the evening, when we look back over the day and see all of its sins strewn throughout its path, see how often we failed to make use of God’s power given us in our baptism and instead gave into temptation in thought, word, and action, we can confess our sins to God and say, “I am baptized into Christ. I have been washed clean of all my sins through the blood of Christ and am God’s beloved child with whom he is well pleased, for Jesus’s sake.” Our head can then hit the pillow with a good conscience, and we can wake up in the morning with fresh strength to renew the battle against the devil and sin. It is this dual power—forgiveness of sin and resistance to sin—that makes our lives as Christians lives of joy and purpose.

A megachurch pastor or any other person can tell a million people that baptism will not benefit them in any way, if he wants. That doesn’t make it true. God’s word tells us otherwise. God’s word tells us that through baptism in the Jordan, Jesus himself received the Spirit’s power to fulfill all righteousness, and he did, for us. God’s word tells us that through baptism at the font, we have received the full forgiveness Jesus won for us and the Spirit’s power to walk in his steps. We can say with the old hymn writer:

God’s own child, I gladly say it:  
I am baptized into Christ!  
He, because I could not pay it,  
gave my full redemption price.  
Do I need earth’s treasures many?  
I have one worth more than any  
that brought me salvation free,  
lasting to eternity!

Satan, hear this proclamation:  
I am baptized into Christ!  
Drop your ugly accusation;  
I am not so soon enticed.  
Now that to the font I’ve traveled,  
all your might has come unraveled,  
and, against your tyranny,  
God, my Lord, unites with me! (*Christian Worship* 679) Amen.