

Chapter 6: The Baptism of the Beloved Son

Matthew 3:13–17

In the previous section, we saw the centrality of repentance to the message and ministry of John the Baptist. A question may arise from this theme of repentance, however, that we should not too quickly overlook: why does repentance “work”? Certainly, there is nothing in repentance that accomplishes some satisfaction for sin, or that itself forces God to pardon us from our guilt. Why, then, should repentance lead to salvation? The answer lies not in our own power or merit when we repent, but in the power and faithfulness of God to keep his own promises. God promises to save those who repent from their sins, and to look in faith toward Christ for salvation. This is a certain guarantee because of his grace alone, and not for anything we deserve on our own. God’s promise, then, stems from God’s purposes and plan to save the world through his Son. As we see Jesus baptized here in Matthew 3, then, we discover an extraordinary truth: *King Jesus came to cleanse sinners.*

Christ’s Association with Sinners (Matt. 3:13–15)

After telling us only a little about Jesus’ infancy, Matthew passes over the rest of Jesus’ childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood without additional comment. Just as abruptly as Matthew introduced to us John the Baptist, now Matthew reintroduces Jesus as a 30-year-old man in v. 13 (see Luke 3:23). We do not know what Jesus has been up to for the previous two decades. Matthew only tells us Jesus’ immediate purpose: to be baptized by John (v. 13).¹ To convey the connection of this moment to some of the events that have already recorded in this Gospel, Matthew uses the same word for “come” (παράγινομαι; *paraginomai*) here for Jesus’ coming as he did to describe the coming of the Magi, and the coming of John the Baptist (Matt. 2:1; 3:1, 13).² This is the third and final appearance of this particular word for “come” in the Gospel of Matthew, signaling that the preparations have been completed for the primary history that this Gospel records: the *coming* of Jesus into his earthly ministry.

Matthew does not completely explain to us Jesus’ reasons for being baptized by John. Instead, Matthew tells us that John himself found Jesus’ request such a surprise, that John attempted to stop Jesus, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (v. 14). The contrast between Jesus’ purpose and John’s surprise is captured, in part, by a subtle contrastive conjunction “but” (δέ; *de*) at the beginning of v. 14 that the ESV does not translate.³ The word for John’s attempt

¹ “The infinitive with τοῦ regularly denotes purpose: Jesus came to be baptized by John.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 122.)

² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 152.

³ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 63–64.

(διακωλύω; *diakōluō*) only appears here in the New Testament, and it appears as a “conative imperfect,” which describes “action begun but interrupted.”⁴ Based on the previous passage, John probably has two reasons behind his surprise. First, John had acknowledged the superiority of the baptism of the one who would come after him (Matt. 2:11).⁵ Why should John baptize the one who brings a mightier baptism of his own?⁶ Second, John taught that his baptism was “with water for repentance” from sins, so that those whom he baptized had to confess their sins (Matt. 3:5, 11). It was for this reason that John turned away the Pharisees and the Sadducees from his baptism, since they did not “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt. 3:8). John recognizes that he is a sinful man, so what right would he have to baptize the sinless Messiah?⁷

Why, then, *does* Jesus insist on being baptized? Jesus replies, saying, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (v. 15). On this response, Craig Blomberg comments, “Jesus’ somewhat ambiguous reply seems to acknowledge the force of John’s logic but nevertheless requests baptism for a different reason.”⁸ Jesus does not reject his superiority over John, and neither does he claim to be a sinner who rightly needs to repent from personal sin. Without disagreeing with John’s general concerns, Jesus suggests that this baptism is a special exception on the occasion of his entering into his public ministry: “Let it be so *now*....”⁹ Then, Jesus adds that to do so would be “fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” As John Nolland observes, the word “fulfill” is used in a variety of contexts in the Gospel of Matthew, including the fulfillment of Scripture, Jesus’ purpose in *fulfilling* the Law and the Prophets (Matt. 5:17), or for the scribes’ and the Pharisees’ *filling up* the sinful measure of their fathers by crucifying Jesus (Matt. 23:32).¹⁰ The basic idea of the word has to do with filling something up, so that Jesus is essentially talking about doing everything that is required for righteousness.

What, then, is the righteousness that Jesus must fill up through this baptism? At a very general level, Jesus clearly understands that his baptism is the will of his Father, and the Father himself confirms this in v. 17.¹¹ For Christ’s ministry, this requires Jesus to take the form of a servant, descending in humility and perfect obedience (Phil. 2:7).¹² Frederick Dale Bruner recognizes an important connection between this moment, at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry, and the end of Jesus’ life and ministry at the cross: “The first thing Jesus does for the human race is *go down with it* into the deep waters of repentance and baptism. Jesus’ whole life will be like this. It is well known that Jesus *ends* his ministry on a cross between thieves; it deserves to be as well known that he *begins* his ministry in a river among sinners.”¹³ As R. C. H. Lenski writes, “Jesus thinks, not of himself

⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 122. See also Hagner, *Matthew 1 - 13*, 55.

⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 81.

⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 153.

⁷ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 123–24.

⁸ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 81.

⁹ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 124–25.

¹⁰ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 153.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:202.

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:202.

¹³ Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, vol. 1: The Christbook, Matthew 1–12, Revised and expanded ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 101.

alone, apart from sinful men and concerned only about his own person, but as being concerned with men, as being sent to assume the great office and work of saving them.”¹⁴ By his own baptism, Jesus consecrates “baptism in his own body, that we might have it in common with him.”¹⁵

Christ’s Anointing from the Holy Spirit (Matt. 3:16)

There is some controversy in the description of Jesus’ coming up out of the water after his baptism (v. 16). Some Baptists argue that the language describes an immersion in water, where the “went up from the from the water” describes the final part of the baptism, where Christ not only is immersed under water, but arises up from the water—from death, to newness of life (see Rom. 6:4). This argument, however, does not follow from the precise language Matthew uses to describe the baptism of Jesus. R. C. H. Lenski explains: “

Matthew does not say that Jesus came up out of, or from under, the water. What he does say is that, after the baptism was finished (βαπτισθεῖς [*baptistheis*]), whatever may have been the mode of administration, Jesus without delay (εὐθύς [*euthus*]) walked away from the water of the river, so that his anointing with the Spirit of God did not take place, as many artists picture it, while he was being baptized or while he stood knee-deep in the water but on the bank of the river, a little distance from the water. There is no implication that Jesus was *under* the water.¹⁶

As. William Hendriksen summarizes, “The mode of baptism...is not indicated.”¹⁷

The emphasis of this narrative, then, is not on the mode of how Jesus was baptized, but on the event that happened after his baptism—immediately after Jesus went up onto the bank of the river. Matthew remarks on the significance of the event by the word “behold,” drawing our attention to what Jesus saw.¹⁸ What exactly did Jesus see? Leon Morris writes, “It is not easy to see what is meant by the opening of the heavens, but we should probably think that for a short time the barrier between this world and heaven was set aside so that there could be some form of intercourse between the two.”¹⁹

As the heavens were opened, Jesus saw the Spirit of God descending upon him like a dove. Some have suggested a connection between the hovering of this dove over Jesus, and the hovering of the Spirit of God over creation in the beginning, and others have suggested some kind of connection between the dove Noah sent out from the ark that never returned (Gen. 1:2; 8:12). The primary significance of this event, though, is to represent the *anointing* of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. Matthew has already declared to us that Jesus is “the Christ” (Matt. 1:1, 16, 17, 18), and “Christ” is the Greek

¹⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 125.

¹⁵ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:202.

¹⁶ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 129.

¹⁷ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 213–14.

¹⁸ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 214.

¹⁹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 66.

word for “anointed one,” like “Messiah” in Hebrew. In the Old Testament, there were anointed offices: prophets, priests, and kings (1 Kgs. 19:16; Ex. 29:7; 1 Sam. 10:1). Those whom God appointed to these offices were anointed with oil as a symbol of the spiritual anointing of the Holy Spirit, who rushed upon them from their anointing onward (e.g., 1 Sam. 16:13). Here, Jesus is baptized with water (not oil), but he is anointed directly by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One.

For Jesus, this experience must have been comforting and strengthening. As the divine Son of God, he had eternally known the person of the Holy Spirit. In the mystery of the incarnation, we see the Holy Spirit empower the man Jesus for his ministry. As John Calvin writes, “I do not hesitate to admit that Christ also, so far as he was man, received from it additional certainty as to his heavenly calling....as man, when he commenced a warfare of so arduous a description, he needed to be armed with a remarkable power of the Spirit.”²⁰ In a similar way, the anointing of Jesus with the Holy Spirit is a comfort for us. Again, John Calvin is apt on this point: “Now that the full time is come, for preparing to discharge the office of Redeemer, he is clothed with a new power of the Spirit, and that not so much for his own sake, as for the sake of others. It was done on purpose, that believers might learn to receive, and to contemplate with reverence, his divine power, and that the weakness of the flesh might not make him despised.”²¹

Christ’s Approval from the Father (Matt. 3:17)

For a second time, Matthew commands our attention with another “behold” (v. 17). This time, we do not see any form, but only hear a voice from heaven, declaring, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (v. 17). While Jesus is certainly the eternally begotten Son of the Father, that is not quite what the Father has in view by this announcement: “That fact would evidently need no announcement, nor would it be connected with this baptism by such an announcement.”²² Rather, the Father is announcing that this is his Son *in the flesh*, incarnate: “The designation of *Son* belongs truly and naturally to Christ alone: but yet he was declared to be the Son of God in our flesh, that the favor of Him, whom he alone has a right to call *Father*, may be also obtained for us. And thus when God presents Christ to us as Mediator, accompanied by the title of *Son*, he declares that he is the *Father of us all*, (Ephesians 4:6.)”²³ Here we see the clear revelation of the Holy Trinity: the Son incarnate, the Spirit appearing as a dove, and the Father speaking from heaven.²⁴ Matthew will continue to acquaint us with the three persons of the one God throughout his Gospel, all the way to the very end (Matt. 28:19).

Within the immediate context of Matthew’s Gospel, the very next passage will tell us about how the Holy Spirit will lead Jesus into the wilderness, where the devil will challenge Jesus’ sonship to the Father: “If you are the Son of God...” (Matt. 4:1, 3).²⁵ This is not a mistake, since these two

²⁰ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:203.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:204.

²² Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 134.

²³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 1:206.

²⁴ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 136.

²⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 124.

narratives are related: “Though it will initially take a form which is a puzzle to John, Jesus’ ministry is to emerge out of the ministry of John. Between them, Jesus’ dialogues with John the Baptist and with the devil establish, for the reader, foundational perspectives on the nature of Jesus’ ministry to come.”²⁶ The final word of this passage, however, gives us the infallible understanding of our Savior’s identity, even when that identity will be tested and challenged.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Matthew skips over the rest of Jesus’ childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood? What is the only thing Matthew tells us about Jesus as he abruptly reintroduces our Lord into his narrative (v. 13)? From what we know about John the Baptist’s baptism, why would it be a surprise for Jesus to want to be baptized by John (Matt. 3:11, 14). What does Jesus mean when he insists that his baptism is necessary to fulfill all righteousness (v. 15)?
2. Who is the “Spirit of God” (v. 16)? What relationship does the Spirit of God have to the eternally begotten Son of God? Why does the Spirit of God descend upon Jesus Christ, the Son of God incarnate, at Jesus’ baptism? Which offices in the Old Testament required anointing? How are we seeing that Jesus is the Christ/Messiah/Anointed One by the presence of the Holy Spirit? Why is this important for understanding Christ’s ministry and mission?
3. Who is speaking in v. 17? What is the significance of this statement? That is, is God the Father declaring that the Son has is eternally begotten of the Father, according to his divine nature? Or, is God the Father declaring that this person is the incarnate Son of God, the Mediator, the Christ, and the Savior of sinners? What does Christ gain from this declaration? What do we gain from Christ’s declaration?
4. How do we see the love of God for unclean sinners in this passage? How do we see this love of God manifested through each of the three persons of the Trinity in this passage? What might this passage correct for someone who thinks his or her sin to be too great to be saved? What might this passage correct for someone who does not think he or she needs to be saved from sin? What do you glean from this passage to correct your own misperceptions about God and his love for you?

²⁶ Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 151.