
Fulfilling all Righteousness

Matthew 3:1-17

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How do we think about the ordinance of baptism? How does it fit into the life of a person and the life of the church?

Any understanding of baptism in the church must take into account the gospel of Matthew. Since Matthew was writing to the church and is using these events as a part of his argument, we need to think about something.

First, baptism opens the ministry of Jesus. The beginning of Matthew's presentation of the King and the arrival of the kingdom unfolds with John the baptist.

Last, baptism closes the ministry of Jesus. Jesus, as King with all authority given Him, sends his disciples into the world to make disciples through baptizing and teaching.

Baptism then has a deep, rich, and important connection to our King, His Kingdom and our responsibility as a church. This is why we developed the idea of being a "Commissional" church.

Notice how Matthew builds his story. Jesus comes up out of Egypt to live in Nazareth. Then he skips thirty years of Jesus' life and takes immediately to Jesus' baptism.

Why is this important? 1 Corinthians 10:1-4 helps with how to interpret Old Testament events. Remember, while Matthew is writing about these events after Jesus' death and resurrection, the events themselves, when they happened, are in the Old Covenant.

10 For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.

The Old Testament stories are meant, intended to portray New Testament realities. Those come to us personally and practically through Christ. Notice the New Covenant language here. For me, this warrants seeing how Matthew has organized the sequence of narratives. Like Israel...

Jesus goes down to and comes up out of Egypt.

Jesus is baptized in the Jordan.

Jesus is tested in the wilderness.

Jesus begins to extend the kingdom.

In Matthew 5, he will present Jesus as the new Moses.

A Powerful Messenger (v.1-3)

Before all that, Matthew presents to us, a voice preaching in the wilderness...

3 In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ²“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” ³ For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah when he said, “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.’”

His Abrupt Appearance

This is abrupt. Sure, we have a chapter break that hinders us from hearing the uninterrupted flow. In the days that begin Jesus’ public life, John suddenly makes an appearance. He does so as one who is preaching, proclaiming.

He simply is preaching in the Judean wilderness. Now this is significant. Don’t think desert. Wilderness was simply a wild area like a forest or an open scrub plain. In other words, John begins by going outside the cities and villages. He is not doing what everyone would advise. In Matthew, every reference to wilderness is a reference to the forerunner, to John the Baptist.

His Startling Message

John comes preaching. He is proclaiming. His message is a call to "Repent..." We are used to hearing calls to repent to us. We know that we are in need of repentance every day. But to the Jewish ear, this would sound like, “Be saved!!!!” What if I stood here and told you, all of you, that you need to be saved? That would sound like a denial of your faith, of what you believed. This is how John sounded. His message of repentance was something that was said and preached to Gentiles, to apostates, not to practitioners of the Law.

Why must they repent? Why must they turn away from their religion? Because the “Kingdom of heaven is near...”. This is the way Matthew will primarily refer to the kingdom. Only 4 times in the book does Jesus speak of the kingdom of God. They are almost interchangeable. The only discernable difference is that Matthew is emphasizing that the kingdom is from heaven. That is its source. It is incarnation. The kingdom of God is here because Jesus is here. If Jesus and the kingdom are here, then the Jews of Jesus’ day need to repent.

His Biblical Identity

Who is this John the Baptist? Why does Matthew ignore all that the other gospels tell us? After all, John and Jesus are cousins! Who is John? John is a voice. Matthew says John the Baptist is the one predicted in Isaiah 40:3. He is the word in the wilderness. Listen to what Isaiah wrote in verses 4-9

³ A voice cries:

“In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord;

make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together,
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

⁶ A voice says, “Cry!”
And I said, “What shall I cry?”
All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field.

⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades
when the breath of the Lord blows on it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades,
but the word of our God will stand forever.

⁹ Go on up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good news;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news;
lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Behold your God!”

John is this voice that Isaiah said would come. This defines John’s ministry. Yes, he is the forerunner, the one who goes before. But he is also the prophet, the preacher, the voice of one speaking for God. What will this voice say, announce, proclaim?

He will cry out that the glory of the Lord will be revealed before all the world (v.1-5)

He will cry out that all flesh, humanity including the Old, will fade but the Word of God will stand forever (v.6-8).

He will cry out as the herald of the Gospel “Behold your God” (v.9).

Jesus is all this. He will be the glory of God walking among people. He will be the Word and His words and deeds will become a part of the forever Word. And he is God. This is what the voice cries out as he preaches.

Through repentance, Israel prepares the way, the road, for the King and thus the arrival of the kingdom. So, the first call is for a come to see. The final send is to go and tell.

A Dramatic Manner (v.4-6)

Now that Matthew has established John the Baptist’s identity and credentials from the Old Testament, he proceeds to highlight the kind of ministry John employed.

⁴ Now John wore a garment of camel's hair and a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵ Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, ⁶ and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Evokes the Old Testament Prophets

John the Baptist's attire and food are not because he was poor and homeless. They were rough and simple. What he wore and ate were meant to evoke the prophetic office. It showed the hard life and powerful message of humble prophets of the Old Testament. A voice in the wilderness is not coming in the city, from the religious leaders. It is coming from someone whose food and attire were witnesses against the wealth, power and self-view of the religious leaders.

Draws Large Crowds

Surprisingly, he draws large crowds. Through John's preaching, God is granting repentance to many Jews. This is preparing the way. This is opening the road. This frankly is not expected. But what is taking place is the beginning of the move of God. But this description is for us to imagine... to think about... Remember, the story is being told in a different age to a different audience than were there... or, maybe not. Is Matthew suggesting that Pentecost has its roots right here?

Baptizes the Repentant

Baptism was for Gentiles. It had become an entry rite into Judaism. It stood as a means for a person to recognize and renounce their sinful past and to be identified with God's people. Repentant people are baptized. This is fundamental to the New Testament. That sentence cuts two ways. **Only** true repenters are to be baptized. And **all** true repenters are to be baptized. Once again, we must see the connection to the great commission at the end of Matthew.

A Confrontational Message (v.7-10)

But all is not well.

⁷ But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? ⁸ Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. ⁹ And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

John confronts the religious leaders.

Their Insincere Piety (v.7)

We are introduced to two of the groups of religious leaders in Israel. Pharisees were the Old Testament fundamentalists. They were very conservative and saw

themselves as the protectors and interpreters of the Mosaic Law. The Sadducees were the Jewish liberals. They denied a great deal of the inspiration of the Old Testament and only kept what part of the Law suited themselves. They saw themselves as the educated, sophisticated, moderns of their day. For the most part these two sects hated each other but were tolerated both by the ruling governments and by the people.

John the Baptist sees many of them coming. He knows who they are by the way they dress. They are coming in the crowds probably to check out who John was and what he is preaching.

Their Severe Condemnation (v. 8)

John lights them up. In words that Jesus would later use of them, He calls them a brood of venomous snakes. Why would they come to repent? Why would they seek to be identified with the true remnant? John has evidently been warning of the outpouring of the wrath of God in his preaching. His sarcasm is biting. Why have they come to flee from what they do not believe in? The Sadducees denied God's wrath. The Pharisees believed that God would establish His kingdom for and by the Jews. Wrath was what the Gentiles would receive.

Their False Confidence (v.9)

Then he makes clear what repentance and baptism are all about. The Jewish leaders and their followers thought that natural lineage was going to deliver them from God's wrath and entry to God's kingdom. They were Abraham's children and that is all that matters. Now, Paul will tell us that all God's true people are Abraham's children. But that is not physical; it is spiritual. God can raise up rocks if He wants to.

Their confidence is false and deadly. This issue is going to come up repeatedly in Jesus' ministry. It was an issue in the church. 1st generation Jews struggled with the fact that they were on exactly the same spiritual footing as the Gentiles. Their Old Testament privileges were gone.

Many of you have false confidences as well. You are trusting in works, being good, raised in the right family, the right church. You may even be trusting in some sinner's prayer. My friend, you need to repent. The wrath of God will fall after you last breath. It will be final and terrible.

Their Sure Cutting-Down (v.10)

Not only will God raise up, but He will also cut down. Stones may come to live. But trees will be cut down. The axe is laid to the root. This is a starting imagery. While John's original audience might not have known what this was referring to, Matthew's audience should. The original audience thinks of the Pharisees and the Sadducees as the trees to be cut off. That is certainly correct. Jesus is going to totally cut down the religious leadership of his day. And by seventy AD, the Temple and the city will be destroyed and Israel as a nation will come to an end.

A Prophetic Message (v.11-12)

The humility of John the Baptist is evident as he magnifies Jesus in his preaching.

¹¹ "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The Greatness of the One to Come

Matthew highlights the man and the message. He is a humble man. This powerful preaching does not come from arrogance or pride and self-importance. The power of his preaching is rooted in his view of Jesus Christ. He is not worthy to loosen the Lord's sandals, an act by the lowest servant that was usually accompanied by washing the feet.

The humility of John is also seen in the contrast of his ministry and Jesus'. John is baptizing in water. Jesus will baptize with the Spirit and with fire. John is responding to people who repent. Jesus's baptism by the Spirit initiates the response.

The Purpose of the One to Come

This is an important statement about Jesus. Just in summary because these two themes will be taken up in Jesus' words and deeds.

Jesus will immerse in or with the Spirit like John was immersing in water. The symbol of one must and will correspond to the reality of the other. By its very meaning, baptism means, "to immerse".

Jesus will immerse in and with Spirit and fire. This is an allusion to Pentecost. John probably does not know that. He is speaking prophetically. But Matthew knows it for sure. Jesus sent the Spirit who in His baptism at Pentecost appeared as tongues of fire.

A Symbolic Baptism (v.13-17)

With a similar abruptness, Jesus now appears on the scene.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

This event has raised many, many questions. At the center is, "Why, Jesus who had not need of repentance, was required to be baptized?" Jesus actually answers the

question if we would only listen to what He says and think about what Matthew means.

The Assent by John (v.13–15)

John's objection is entirely understandable. (v.13–14): He at first refuses Christ's request to be baptized. He thought he was unworthy to do so. He needed Jesus' baptism. Jesus did not need John's. While from John's perspective this is true, there was a greater issue here.

John's obedience is illustrative. (v.15): After the explanation as to why this was necessary, John seems to understand and baptizes Jesus. What is it that Jesus says?

...thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

Being baptized by John in some way "fulfilled all righteousness." There are many interpretations of what this means. I will not go through them. Baptism itself is appropriate for Jesus not because He is a sinner needing repentance. Baptism pictures the passing away of the old and the beginning of the new. Matthew knows this. Jesus knows this. John may understand it. What Jesus is doing probably has the following significance.

Jesus is fulfilling what being justified accomplishes. Righteousness will be put to our account.

Jesus is doing what God's true people will do. They will be baptized in water.

Jesus is setting an example that righteous people will be baptized. Baptism is not for those who are outside but those who are on the inside.

Jesus is publicly identifying with God's true people. He is now clearly and openly not a part of apostate Israel but is a part of those who are truly the elect.

Two consequences follow from Jesus' obedience.

The Anointing by the Spirit (v.16)

The Holy Spirit descends like a dove upon Jesus. This is the outpouring of the Spirit upon Jesus equipping Him for ministry. It is through the power of the Spirit that Jesus will do miracles and know what people are thinking. Jesus is going to live a holy life and do the ministry the Father gave Him to do through the Spirit that came to rest upon Him.

The Spirit came at Pentecost to equip and empower the Apostles for the beginning of the church. It was a one time event that was not repeated. We now live and serve in the downstream power of the indwelling of the Spirit.

The Approval by the Father (v.17)

A voice from heaven says, "This is my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with him." Having been baptized to fulfill all righteousness, the Father clearly speaks

from heaven giving His approval to Jesus. This is not merely that Jesus has done well in obeying but more importantly, this is the Father certifying two things:

This is the Son of God. This man who was coming up out of the water is God's Son. No one should question it. The earthiness of this event in no way denies the heavenliness of who Jesus is.

God is pleased with Jesus. This word implies the kind of delight in a child who has carried out the Father's wishes and will.

Reflect and Respond

Here we have a meeting of the Old and the New. John is representing the Old and is its prophet. Jesus is bringing the new and will begin soon to preach.

Here we have clear obedience. John's preaching and Jesus' baptism are both acts of obedience.

Baptism is important. Matthew is highlighting it. Jesus' ministry opens with being baptized and closes with send us to baptize.

Baptism is an act of obedience by those who have already repented, been washed of their sins and had righteousness imputed to their account. This limits who should be baptized. This calls all who want to profess Christ to do so.

We have once again the Incarnation – the human man being certified from heaven that He is deity.

Matthew, as part of His beginning of the new, describes the presence of Trinity in this scene. The Son is here. The Spirit is descending. The Father is speaking. That, my brothers and sisters, is the essence of the New Covenant.

And so I challenge you... have you followed the Lord in believing baptism? Have you taken that step of discipleship?