

Matthew 3:13-17
The Baptism of Our Lord
January 11, 2026

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The exchange between John and Jesus is easily confused or misinterpreted by people, and we'll explain that in a few moments. But, perhaps to understand the text aright (and that exchange aright), we ought focus in on the very first word of our Reading: "Then." That's no "throw away" word, but it ties us to what came *before* it. (Indeed, perhaps the easiest way to misunderstand the Baptism of Our Lord is to study it 'in a vacuum,' in a bubble, only by itself, and not with what comes before and after it). So, what happens *before* these words, that the "Then" properly carries its weight?

In the verses immediately before, we hear the longest monologue of John's preaching. Listen to its conclusion. John says to the gathering crowds,

"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. 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.”

“*Then*, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John,” the text says. In fact, it says even more, if you will, when you know that, in the Greek, the word for *came* – “Jesus came” – is present tense, so that it could be rendered, “Then Jesus comes.” A dramatic appearing of the One whom John prophesied. What makes it even more impressive of a phrase is that it’s not the most commonly-used word for the idea of coming and going (ερχομαι). Rather, it’s the word παραγίνομαι, a more specific word denoting a sudden public appearing – “Then Jesus comes.”

So, notice how consequential the whole first phrase of our text is, “Then Jesus comes...” And, that gravitas is illustrated further in John’s humble reverence, as he says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come *to me*?”

Now, that gives us the proper context, the proper ‘lead-up’ to this exchange between Jesus and John, but it still doesn’t clarify everything for us about Jesus’ response.

It's that appeal to "fulfilling righteousness" in Jesus' response that confuses so many: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." And the many are further confused by the fact that – as we mentioned in last week's text on Jesus' childhood – so many just want to see Jesus as the Christian's example. If that's how they want to see Jesus' childhood, it's *certainly* true with how they want to see Jesus' baptism: "*Why* was Jesus baptized?" they ask, "To be an *example* that it's important to be baptized," they posit. Church bodies and their doctrine will focus on that word "righteousness" and say that Jesus is here implying that Baptism is an act of righteousness, an act of devotion made by the righteous person to God. Indeed, many church bodies in America teach their hearers that it is the *Christian* who – after 'making his decision for Jesus' – is baptized with water to show his own personal righteousness.

The problem with that is that it's not at all what the text says. Listen to the exchange between John and Jesus. First, John's protest:

"John would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"

“I *need* to be baptized by you.” *Need* is not known by the righteous. They have no need; they’re righteous! Baptism is not for the righteous, and Jesus did not come to call the righteous, but sinners. “I *need* to be baptized by you,” John says, for John knows his sin, he knows his need. The voice in the wilderness calling sinners to repentance, call *you* to repentance and to baptism for the forgiveness of sins... even that voice himself is not above the need. He himself is, like them, a sinner. And sinners *need* salvation; therefore, they *need* to be baptized by Jesus.

John’s words totally undercut the decision theology of our day and the mindset of ‘a believer’s baptism.’ The so-called believer’s baptism, as taught by various groups that even (ironically) have John’s title – “Baptist” – but their “believer’s baptism” is the belief that righteousness *precedes* the baptism; that one becomes righteous for the presence of his faith, then is baptized as a sign of that faith, an obedient act of that faith, and – with it – their righteousness.

In truth, if one is baptized as a believer (we *can* speak of that), it is only in the sense that one has been taught his need of salvation and rightly believes that this baptism is Christ’s gift to meet that need – just as the Ethiopian cheerfully cried out to

Philip, “Here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?” Yes, penitent sinners know their need, not their ‘righteousness.’ They do not approach Baptism out of pride and *certainly not* with the idea they even *have* personal righteousness. They approach it specifically because they know their need depends upon God’s grace; parents bring their infant children because they know their need depends upon God’s grace. And so sinners hear and echo the cry of John, “I *need* to be baptized by you, Jesus.”

Now, again, it’s Jesus’ response by which so many are puzzled. Suddenly he brings in this term, righteousness. “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Didn’t we just say that righteousness didn’t have anything to do with baptism?

Actually, *no*. We said the righteousness of the sinner has nothing to do with Baptism. The sinner *needs* God to be gracious; but God’s graciousness is ours in one way only – He covers us in Christ’s righteousness. Baptism depends on *Christ’s* righteousness. St Paul says, “You who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have put on Christ.” And therefore you wear Him and His righteousness. You have a share in all that is his, so that

– in our epistle reading – St Paul says, “all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death.”

Such gift cannot be ours if it is not first instituted by the One who *is* righteous, the one whose righteousness fulfills God’s blueprints and plans and satisfies the demands of the cross... so that, immediately *after* His baptism (remember, we talked about what comes before and after His baptism)... so what comes immediately after, but that Jesus is driven into the wilderness as the scapegoat, the Lamb of God that bears upon himself the sin of the world... satisfies all the demands of God’s holiness.

Thus, Jesus the Fulfillment says to John the Forerunner, “Let it be so now...” In other words, “John, your need for salvation applied to you in Baptism *will* be answered, but in its own order. First, it ‘is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’” Jesus says. Notice, “It is fitting *for us*.” If this were an example of personal righteous obedience, Jesus would have had to say, “It is fitting *for me*.” Two Christians cannot supplement each other’s obedience or contribute to each other’s effort to perfect their individual righteousness. But, two people – namely the Forerunner and the Chosen One – can ‘work together’ (if you will) to fulfill God’s righteousness, God’s

righteous plans, to fulfill the prophecies the divine prophecies that the righteous One is coming as our Substitute, to “stand beneath the Father’s will and all His righteousness fulfill.” So, it’s as if Jesus says to John, “Finish your work as Elijah who is to come. Baptize me, that I may be publicly anointed as God’s Chosen and thereby fulfill Isaiah’s prophecies of my anointing for the benefit of the nations.”

Indeed, isn’t the Baptism of Jesus the first event since the visit of the Magi to make Jesus known to the nations, just as the prophet Isaiah said the Servant of God would come from the Lord with the Lord’s blessing and for the Lord’s purpose.

How does God say it in our Old Testament reading:

“I am the LORD; I have called you (the Father speaking to the Son) in righteousness;... I will give you as a covenant for the people (notice, not “I will give you as promised *by* my covenant,” but “I will give you *as the covenant*”... that covenant enacted in the slaughtered lamb upon an altar of sacrifice and the flesh of the sacrifice eaten by those involved in the covenant, just as John points to Jesus, “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.” And that Lamb of God is eaten and drunk and shared by those of the covenant, in the fellowship of the covenant.

So, we begin to see that Jesus' baptism foremost makes Him known to the nations – and makes the Trinity known to the nations – for it is only at the Baptism of Jesus and the declaration that He is the Son that the Scriptures begin to speak of God through the title, "Father." And it is only at the visual of the dove descending from heaven that the hearer has a clearer understanding that the Spirit of God is no mere breath or wind, but a distinct Person of the Trinity.

So, the Baptism of Jesus makes the Trinity known clearly and makes Jesus - the Chosen Servant of God – known to you, the nations. Indeed, in the Eastern Church, the liturgically-assigned Gospel text for the Festival of Epiphany is the Baptism of Jesus, for there is where the whole Trinity is "epiphanied." Isn't that how one of our "Baptism of Jesus" hymns says it? Our first distribution hymn will confess, "The Father's Word, the Spirit's flight, Anointed Christ in glorious sight"! – the Trinity epiphanied!

Thus the Christian can be content in learning that the Baptism of Jesus is not the same as yours, not for the same purpose as those who (John speaks for us all) *need* to be baptized by Jesus. Nevertheless, that does not mean Jesus' baptism is irrelevant to your baptism. For your Baptism *needs*

to be by Jesus precisely because His Baptism shows Him the One who is righteous to redeem you, to institute His Baptism for you... almost as if Jesus says at His Baptism, “Let it be that I be baptized to bring honor and purpose to this baptism, that I might make it holy, and bless all waters to be usable for a lavish washing away of sin.”

That’s what He did to those earthly waters, isn’t it? Think of the abundance of God’s grace... that He made all waters of the *first* creation to now be waters of the *new* creation! Isn’t this even hinted at in the final words of our Old Testament Reading, as the Lord says, “Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth” (doesn’t that sound like living waters?)... “before they spring forth I tell you of them.”

In the prophecies, He *promises* new things about to spring forth for you... and in Christ’s Baptism, that which was promised and prophesied for you is *fulfilled* for you by this righteous Servant, so that the waters of the old creation passing away may spring forth anew with life and meaning and purpose (which means they gave purpose to your baptism!), the purpose of being teamed with the authoritative Word of

Christ and baptizing you out of death into life. Our sermon hymn said it this way:

This heavenly washing now shall be
a cleansing from transgression
and by His blood and agony
release from death's oppression
a new life now awaits us.

Again, the hymn confesses

Our Lord here with His Word endows
pure water, freely flowing.
God's Holy Spirit here avows
our kinship while bestowing
the Baptism of His blessing."

Thus, in Christ's baptism is the *foundation* of yours. In Christ's baptism is the *certainty* of yours. In Christ's baptism is the *joy* of yours.

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

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