

New Year; New You 1) Empowered by Baptism

Matthew 3:13-17 • January 12, 2020 • Epiphany Series: New Year, New You



A new year is a great time to kick off some new goals. New Year's resolutions can include noble goals like, "This year I will spend more time encouraging others so they can feel better about themselves." Or they can be resolutions with a little more selfish goals like, "This year I will spend more time on myself so that I can feel better about myself." And such goals are big in our minds... for a few days. Then we either become selfish or lazy. And we realize that just because the calendar has advanced that doesn't automatically mean we have advanced -at least not automatically advanced in any good fashion. For some it can get rather discouraging when Spring, or February, or even January 3rd reveals that we can't change ourselves to be just what we might want to be. But there is one who has made us new. The Scriptures say that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come. ^(2 Cor 5:17) This Epiphany season we'll be looking at the biggest change that all Christians have -all who are in Christ through faith. We'll be spending the next few weeks looking at what Christ has given us to make us new. And it begins for every Christian with a most empowering change, baptism.

Baptism doesn't seem important or life-changing on the surface. It includes just some simple water and a few short words. But it is important. Make no mistake. It deserves all the attention that surrounds it in Christianity. We need baptism as surely as we are guilty of sin. We need what baptism gives us as surely as we need the Holy Spirit to bring us to faith and turn our hearts from cold stone to living faith in the living God. One thing everyone can appreciate about baptism is that it is so simple. Washing with water through the Word of God. The simple act of applying water with the Words "I baptize you" and invoking the name of the Triune God "...in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Yes, many will wrongly try to add human rules to the simple gift of baptism. But no Christian would argue with the fact that everyone needs baptism.

Yet today we read about someone being told he doesn't need baptism. It's a striking picture. It was thirty years before that the angels sang on the night of his birth. Almost three decades have passed between the gifts given by the Magi in Matthew chapter 2 and what we read today in Matthew chapter 3. This is a thirty-year time in which we don't have any recorded words of Jesus apart from one sentence at the age of twelve. Even then at such a young age Jesus showed that he was aware of his divine purpose. He never lost sight of that purpose. That's what makes Jesus' first appearing as an adult so striking. The first words are almost are in the context of an embarrassing argument or misunderstanding.

Behind this misunderstanding was a man named John. He had a special role to carry out: prepare the way for the coming Messiah. When John was about 30 years-old he began preaching and baptizing. Large crowds came out to him. That's because John's baptism was not just a human invention, but a divine gift. John preached repentance and offered people forgiveness through the water with the Word of God. But as great and important as John might have been, he knew his job was to prepare people for the coming of the greatest man that ever walked this earth: Jesus. He didn't seem so great on the surface. Jesus grew up in the lowly small town of Nazareth; meanwhile John was the son of a priest in Jerusalem. But John had always known Jesus' great importance. By the Spirit's working he knew even from the womb! Everything he had learned and knew about the man now coming to him told him that Jesus was the Messiah.

That's where the misunderstanding and confusion came in. Imagine John's surprise when Jesus comes to where he is baptizing. Matthew tells us that Jesus came all the way with a purpose in mind. He came for baptism. This puzzled John. If Jesus is the Messiah, he would be sinless. He had no need for baptism for the forgiveness of sins. On top of that John had spent so much time telling people how much greater than himself the Messiah was going to be. And now the Messiah wants to get baptized by John! The Greek says here that John was trying to deter Jesus. It isn't like John just gave a puzzled look. He was in conflict. And he was repeatedly making it clear to Jesus that this was all out of order! What would the people think!? What kind of a Messiah gets baptized by his herald and forerunner? What kind of a Son of God needs to receive forgiveness? "Jesus, you don't need to be baptized by me! If anything I need you to baptize me!" Is Jesus really the Messiah if he gets this first appearance wrong? Wouldn't it have been bizarre if the first recorded Words of the adult Jesus were, "You're right, John, never mind. My mistake."

If you feel puzzled by this account, don't worry. You're in good company. It has many theologians wondering. It has bible readers searching for something, somewhere by Matthew, Mark, or Luke to explain what is going on here. It has believers intently digging through the pages of prophecy and the apostles to see if they can shed light on what this all means. It has John the Baptist, who Jesus calls the greatest prophet who ever lived, puzzled, starting an argument with the Christ in total confusion. This is Jesus epiphany, his first public appearing!?

Yes, and it is an awesome epiphany. "Let it be so now." With a word of command Jesus takes control of the situation. He tells John what to do. John might have his own ideas, but John will submit to Jesus' plans. He won't argue with this man. Jesus' first recorded words as an adult show his authority even above the greatest of the prophets.

What is the significance of this baptism? Jesus' sinless life isn't in question. John's reasoning had merit. "Why should the sinless need baptism for forgiveness?" Notice that Jesus doesn't say, "It is necessary." He didn't have to get baptized.

Nor does Jesus say, "You're wrong John, I do need it. I am a sinner." Jesus doesn't say that. John is right in that Jesus has no need of forgiveness. He doesn't need baptism for that, but he decides to undergo it— to fulfill all righteousness. He says it is "proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." The time has come to complete God's righteousness, his saving work. Jesus will later repeat the idea that he came to fulfill everything prophesied by the law and prophets. That included his baptism, his anointing by God.

That had always been Jesus' purpose -fulfill all righteousness, carry out God's plan of salvation long-prophesied in Scripture. And don't make the mistake of thinking this was the start of Jesus' work. Jesus wasn't idle all these years. He had been living in perfect fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. The prophets spoke of the world's Savior doing what he had done—growing up in Galilee and being perfect and sinless—a spotless lamb who had no deceit and no wrong.

The plan of salvation involved more than Jesus living in our place. It involved him offering himself as the perfect sacrifice for all. In order to complete all righteousness and fulfill all prophecy Jesus came to the Jordan where John was baptizing. He wasn't about to begin his work, he was about to begin the stage that would complete it. It was time for him to step up onto the center stage as the light of the world. He was ready and willing to carry out that plan. Now it was time for the Messiah King to be revealed by his forerunner and by God.

There was no mistaking his baptism as a fulfillment of God's plan. As Jesus stepped up from the river's water heaven was opened and the Holy Spirit descended in visible form, in what looked like a dove and remained on Jesus. This fulfilled what we read earlier from Isaiah: "I will put my Spirit on him." A voice from heaven then spoke, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." This fulfilled the second Psalm as the Father spoke to him, "You are my Son" - words spoken to the Messiah.

At his baptism Jesus appears with the authority and authenticity of the Triune God. By the authority of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, he is declared to be the Son of God. Here we see our Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three distinct persons, all mysteriously united as one God. Not three different Gods, not three different ways that one person of the deity shows himself, but three in one. And God himself testified to the authority of Jesus as he begins the path to the cross. Later when people will question Jesus' authority, he doesn't speak of his own accord, but refers back to this event. As Christians throughout the centuries might wonder if John the Baptist got it right, they refer back to this event. There was no room for doubt. Jesus appeared publicly with full authority and authenticity.

At his baptism Jesus appears vindicated as sinless. He appears as the one in whom the Father declares "I love." He has lived these past thirty years in perfect obedience to the law of God. He is our perfect substitute. That love will continue as the Father once again declares, "This is my Son". And that love will bear the weight of the world's sin as the Son suffers on the cross. And that love will be shown true and right as the Son is raised back to life. Proving not only did he set out with divine authority, he died with divine approval of his sacrifice—our sins are forgiven. Jesus was chosen by the Father and anointed by the Spirit to fulfill God's plan of salvation. He appears as both the sinless and the sinner's friend. He appears speaking for the first time in Scripture wanting to show himself taking on your place and mine. And he does so with the Father's stamp of approval and by fulfilling prophecy by his anointing from the Spirit.

Jesus made a big trip for his baptism. He did far more than walk to the wilderness near Bethany across the Jordan. He came down from his heavenly throne of glory to walk in the flesh. And he came to be declared the Son of God, the holy Savior of all. And his baptism had great importance because of God's plan and promises. Your baptism is no less life-changing than this most important baptism. By your baptism you were connected with Christ and washed of all sin. The Father declared you his child, adopted into the family of Christ, loved as clean and holy. By the authority of God himself you are declared loved and sinless, clothed with the righteousness of Christ. The Holy Spirit is yours as a gift, received in baptism. As the apostle Peter declares, "Be baptized, every one of you, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children."^(Acts 2) And as he writes in his letter, "Baptism saves you."^(1 Peter 3) And as the apostle Paul writes "God saved you through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit."^(Titus 3) "Christ loved the church cleansing her and making her holy with washing with water through the Word, to make her holy."^(Eph 5) And Jesus declares, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved."^(Mk 16)

It's a new you! You are baptized and forgiven as a child of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Your life is now dedicated to serving the Triune God and his name is upon you with blessing and love! All your self-improvement resolutions can and will fail in the end. But Jesus' goal for you cannot fail. He has washed you. He has given you his Spirit. And he will forever carry out his promised plans of love for you. He has made you new! Baptism is a big deal. Because we can celebrate Christ's baptism so also every day you can celebrate yours. And that is done with thanksgiving and new life worked by the Spirit. It is done as you live a new life of faith and a new life of love for God.

It's a new you! You are forgiven by the Father and loved. You are clothed in the righteousness of Christ. You are empowered by the Holy Spirit in your baptism.