

The Power of Baptism

John 1:30-34

Sometimes we miss the boat on what's really important. Like baptism. I'm not saying that the mode of baptism is unimportant, and I really believe there are good reasons for the way in which we administer baptism, and good reasons why we baptize our children—but that's not the most important thing when it comes to understanding what baptism is all about.

Our focus this morning is upon the power of baptism, and the point of our text in John's gospel has nothing to do with sprinkling or immersion, and it has nothing to do with whether or not we should baptize our children. Instead, it has to do with the last Old Testament prophet preparing the way for the coming of Jesus the Messiah. In John 1, the focus is upon Jesus, the Lamb of God.

So here is John, the last of the prophets who would come before Jesus, pointing to Jesus, preparing for Jesus. And that transition is made so obvious in verse 29, which we studied last week,

v.29 “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”

For John, it wasn't just his words of prophecy that prepared the way for Jesus. It was his own personal introduction. With his own eyes he saw Jesus. With his own hands, no doubt, he pointed him out. There he is. “The Lamb of God.” The Messiah.

And John is speaking as a prophet. He speaks according to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He speaks not by his own authority or by his own wisdom, emphasizing in,

v.31 “I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to

Israel, therefore I came baptizing with water.”

I did not know Him! This is not the work and wisdom of John, but this is a revelation of God. Jesus shall be revealed to Israel, to God's people. And that's what it is all about. John makes his point pretty clearly,

v.30

It's all about Jesus. But notice, just how John has gone about his ministry as a prophet. God gave him something to do, an outward action that would prepare the way for Jesus. Baptism. Specifically, baptism with water. John came,

I. BAPTIZING WITH WATER.

What was this baptism all about? The simple answer, repentance. Confession of sin. Baptism was the outward act that accompanied those who would turn from their sins in repentance. And that was the final message that would prepare the way for Jesus. Repent of your sin. Confess your sin. Turn from your sin. That's how you prepare the way for Jesus.

Mat. 3:1 “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 2 and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” 3 For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight.’”

His message was well received.

Mat. 3:5 Then Jerusalem, all Judea, and all the region around the Jordan went out to him 6 and were baptized by him in the Jordan, confessing their sins.

But John wasn't well received by everyone. Those who loved their sins, those hypocrites who covered up their evil by the outward appearance of God, they wouldn't repent with sincerity of

heart, and John had appropriately harsh words for them,

Mat. 3:7 “But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to his baptism, he said to them, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, 9 and do not think to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. 10 And even now the ax is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 I indeed baptize you with water unto 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 fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather His wheat into the barn; but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

So the call to repentance included a warning of judgment! And the water of baptism was an outward sign of that repentance. “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance.” The water of baptism was the outward sign of turning from sin, and that is what was necessary to prepare the way for Jesus.

Luke 3:3 “And [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, 4 as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord; Make His paths straight. 5 Every valley shall be filled And every mountain and hill brought low; The crooked places shall be made straight And the rough ways smooth; 6 And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.”

That message is timeless, the call to repentance. The warning against hypocrisy is timeless, you who do not prepare the for Jesus in your own lives, you who live freely and willingly with

unconfessed sin. This is the danger, that you might hide behind the outward sign, hiding the sin that remains in your heart, hiding the sin that you continue to practice in your lives, and hide behind a religious ritual such as baptism. There is great danger in that. Because the outward sign, the outward action must be an indication of what is in the heart.

So we have John baptizing with water, in order to reveal Jesus. That’s the plain meaning of verse 31. John is revealing Jesus. And so the,

A. Water is an outward sign of Jesus.

Water baptism is an outward sign that the Messiah has come. The water marks a transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. John will make much of that image, water, a symbol of Jesus.

No longer are there bloody sacrifices to be offered. No longer is a priest required to kill an animal and pour the blood upon an altar. Now there is water, living water. The water of life.

John 4:10 “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water.”

John 4:13 “Whoever drinks of this water will thirst again, 14 but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst. But the water that I shall give him will become in him a fountain of water springing up into everlasting life.”

John 7:37 “On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, “If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. 38 He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.”

Living water. That's Jesus. The baptism with water—that's an outward sign of Jesus. And with the emphasis of John the Baptizer, this symbol of water represents those who would come to Jesus.

So what about you? Will you come to Jesus to give your life to him, trusting in him for eternal life? Will you come to Jesus, with repentance of your sin? That is the call of the gospel today, just as it was in the day John pointed out Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Water is such a good image, because it is not only an outward sign of Jesus, but it stands as a very obvious symbol of the work of Jesus. What is it, above all, that Jesus does for those who come to him with repentance? Cleansing. Spiritual cleansing.

B. Water is an outward sign of spiritual cleansing.

And that is what salvation is all about. It isn't a matter of doing enough good works to make up for your sin. It is a matter of pleading for mercy. And receiving it. The mercy of God to forgive you your sin. Especially, the mercy of God to cleanse you of your sin! Water is used for washing. And that is a very useful definition of salvation. Washing.

As I read earlier in the worship service,
Ezek. 36:25 "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. 27 I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. 28 Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. 29 I will deliver you from all your uncleanness."

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean." Never is the central message of the gospel made clearer! John makes the very same point,

1 John 1:9 "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Tit. 3:3 "For we ourselves were also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another. 4 But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, 5 not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life."

He saved us by the washing of regeneration, the washing of being born again. Here is another familiar description of that washing,

Is. 1:18 "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the Lord, "Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool."

So a very good definition of a Christian is a repentant sinner who has been washed!

1 Cor. 6:9 "Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God."

So what about you? Have you been washed? Have you been washed by Jesus, cleansed of your sin? If you aren't sure, then ask God to wash you right now. If you feel guilty because of your sin, then ask God to wash you right now.

Prepare the way for Jesus, by confessing your sins, clearly and plainly. Confess them to God, and turn away from them. And ask God to wash you white as snow.

That's the significance of baptizing with water. But of course, there is more. More to understand about this symbol of water. Most especially the connection, or contrast, between water and the Holy Spirit. Thus John's makes the contrast clear and plain. Specifically, John baptizes with water. Only water. Only an external sign. Only a symbol. Just water. Regular water. Ordinary water. Not holy water. Not magical water. Nothing superstitious, nothing mystical or mysterious. Just water. John baptized with water.

But everything that water represented in John's baptism, Jesus actually accomplishes in the spiritual reality of what is described as,

II. BAPTIZING WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT.

So John's message is simple. Behold the Lamb of God, behold Jesus the Messiah. And this is he, this is Jesus, the one on whom the Holy Spirit has descended.

v.32-33

We are given more details about what John is talking about here in Matthew 3, where we read of John actually baptizing Jesus, with water.

Mat. 3:16 "When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were

opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. 17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

What's happening there? Easy answer. Jesus is being anointed by the Holy Spirit for his earthly ministry as the Messiah, even empowered by that Holy Spirit of God. Jesus is being identified as the son of God. Jesus is being identified as God, even as all three persons of the Trinity distinctly show themselves here. The Father speaks, to identify the Son. The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Son, sent by the Father. Again,

v.33 "Upon whom you see the Spirit descending, and remaining on Him, this is He who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."

John certainly makes the conclusion obvious,

v.34 "And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God."

The Holy Spirit has an obvious purpose here. An obvious function.

A. The Holy Spirit is the evidence of Jesus' divine identity.

In other words, to repeat what we studied earlier in this chapter, Jesus is the eternal son of God, the second person of the Trinity.

v.1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God."

It was the Holy Spirit who made that evident and obvious!

v.32

John knew what that meant.

v.30

We saw that earlier in the chapter, verse 15. And the point is that John is older than Jesus, in human flesh. John was born first. John says that Jesus came “after me.” But John knew who Jesus was. He was God.

John knew his place, and he knew Jesus’ place. John knew he was a prophet, a man, a creature. And he knew Jesus was God, the eternal God. You and I must know that distinction as well. Jesus is God. And that is the message John came to proclaim, “After me comes a Man who is preferred before me, for He was before me.”

In other words, Jesus is eternal. He is the second person of the Trinity. And as John puts it, he “is preferred before me.” He has a higher rank than I, as the NASB translates it. Jesus ranks far above John in power and glory. And John perfectly understood that.

So his message was clear and plain.

v.34

I wish for my preaching to be just as clear and just as plain. I preach Jesus, I proclaim to you Jesus, the son of God. I proclaim to you the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. I proclaim to you the gospel of Jesus, upon whom the Holy Spirit dwells such that God the Father will say, “This is my beloved Son.”

This stuff is important. The identity of Jesus as eternal God is important. Indeed, your life depends upon it, your eternal life. The forgiveness of your sins depends upon it. No mere man can

take away the sin of the world. No mere man can cleanse you of your sin. Only Jesus can, Jesus the eternal God, Jesus the Son of God.

And the only way to have eternal life is to believe in Jesus, to believe that he is God. And the only way to live as a Christian is to consider your place before Jesus, just as John did, identifying Jesus as “a Man who is preferred before me.” A man more important than me. A man more exalted than me.

John puts it so well in,

John 3:30 “He must increase, but I must decrease. 31 He who comes from above is above all; he who is of the earth is earthly and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all.”

Dear friends, that attitude has to come to control and dominate your mind. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Can you say that about yourself today? Can you honestly say that about Jesus? “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

That’s the practical application of the doctrine of Jesus’ divine identity. He is to be exalted as God. He is to be worshiped as God. He is to be the Lord of your life, your master. You become the bond-servant. “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

That is the theme of our worship as well. It’s all about Jesus. “He must increase, but I must decrease.” And that must be the theme of your life also. It must be the vision and purpose for our church as well.

Col. 1:15 “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were

created through Him and for Him. 17 And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist. 18 And He is the head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in all things He may have the preeminence.”

Phil. 1:9 “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

One more thing in our text this morning. Let’s come back to the subject of baptism, specifically the power of baptism. And the point is obvious, that the power is not in the water. The power of baptism is not related to water baptism, but to the spiritual reality that is represented by water baptism. Namely, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

And that’s John point in our text, that,

B. The Holy Spirit is the evidence of Jesus’ divine power.

Baptism with water doesn’t save you. By itself, it doesn’t do anything for you. It’s just a sign. A helpful sign, but still, just a sign! There is no power in the water. But there is power in the Holy Spirit. So as John would baptize with water, Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit.

v.33

What does that mean? It means that, through faith in Jesus, God the Father pours out his Holy Spirit upon those who believe. God gives the Holy Spirit to those whom he claims as his children. God empowers those with his own divine power when he pours out upon them the Holy Spirit.

The baptism of the Holy Spirit is not a second blessing that comes only to some Christians. It is not the means by which God enables people today to speak in tongues or with words of prophecy. Rather, the baptism of the Holy Spirit is the spiritual reality of what is represented by the baptism of water. Water poured out on you might cleanse you outwardly, but it doesn’t wash away your sin. But when the Holy Spirit is poured out on you, it is the power of God unto salvation. And you are indeed washed! That’s power! The power to forgive sin. And only God has that power.

And so we ought to pray, with repentance. And with faith. With David, in,

Ps. 51:7 “Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. 8 Make me hear joy and gladness, That the bones You have broken may rejoice. 9 Hide Your face from my sins, And blot out all my iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God, And renew a steadfast spirit within me. 11 Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. 12 Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me by Your generous Spirit.”

Dear friends, prepare the way of the Lord in your own lives. With such a repentance, wherever and whenever there is sin. And believe the promise of the gospel, that by the power of the Holy Spirit as it is represented by the water of baptism,

1 John 1:9 “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Knowing that, let your heart be soft, your affections toward God warm. So that in your life, “in all things [Jesus] may have the preeminence.”