

## Baptism is for Sinners

**Matthew 3:13-17** Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. <sup>14</sup> John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. <sup>16</sup> 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; <sup>17</sup> and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

*In the Name of the Father, and of the ✠ Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

1 John called sinners to repentance. That was his purpose. He was the voice calling in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord." His particular way to call sinners to repentance was to call them to repent and be baptized in the Jordan River. His baptism was a cleansing, an admission of one's need to be cleansed. And his call to repent was unyielding. No one escaped the law when John was preaching. Jerusalem and all Judea came to the Jordan to be baptized, to repent of their sins. Even the Pharisees and Sadducees, the religious elite, the pious, seemingly-well-meaning, experts in the Jewish law, came to John.

2 But Jewish laws and regulations won't help. The problem is rebellion against the Lord's law. "You brood of vipers!" John preached to the teachers. "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit in keeping with repentance. 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. 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. 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 with 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." (Mt 3:7-12)

3 Watch out, sinners, John warns. Repent or face the consequences when the Lord comes with winnowing fork in hand. If you don't submit to John's baptism for repentance, you'll face the Lord's baptism of fire. Repent! Be turned from unbelief to faith! Jews by birth, be readmitted to the people of God through a baptism for repentance. This is John's message. His baptism is for sinners. It's for everyone because none is without sin.

4 Except One. The One John said would come with winnowing fork in hand to judge sinners comes to the Jordan empty-handed. Was He in need of repentance? Was He in need of being turned from unbelief to faith? Was He cast out of the people of God because of His sin? John knew the answer was "no." This One who came to Him seeking to be baptized was the only One John knew didn't need to be baptized for repentance. John's baptism was for sinners. And Jesus was the only Sinless One.

5 Seemingly worse, still, was the fact that Jesus didn't come with the display of power and wrath John had predicted. John called sinners to repent lest they be burned up like fruitless trees and scorched in the fiery wrath of the coming Lord. John even confessed that he, the one calling sinners to repentance in the Jordan, was not worthy even to perform a lowly task like touching the sandals of the Lord who was to come. No, no, no, this was all wrong to John. Baptism was for sinners to prepare for the coming of the Lord. But then the Lord came to be baptized by John? "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

6 "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness," Jesus answers John. This baptism is for sinners. That's exactly the point. These sinners have come to the Jordan, confessing their sin, confessing their inability to deliver themselves from this plague of sin. They are unable to save themselves from their sin. So Jesus, the one whose very name means "He saves His people from their sin" comes to be

baptized in a baptism for sinners. Jesus comes to be baptized with sinners, or, more precisely, Jesus comes to be baptized in the place of sinners.

7 This fulfills all righteousness: Jesus stands in the place of sinners. He, the Sinless One, the One born to save His people from their sins, took their place. By entering the Jordan River for His baptism, Jesus took the sins of the world on Himself. God's righteousness is His desire to save sinners. Jesus fulfills all righteousness by becoming the sinner in the world's place. John baptized Jesus with water, but His baptism wouldn't be complete until He had been baptized with fire. On the cross, the Sinless Son of God was baptized with the fire of the wrath of God against sinners. He was baptized with the fiery flames of hell, abandonment, rejection by God the Father. His baptism was completed at His own words: "It is finished." The wrath of God against sinners was finished, spent completely on Jesus.

8 Baptism is for sinners. John's baptism was for repentance. The baptism of Jesus was to take your sin upon himself, to be punished as the worst sinner. And the baptism Jesus entrusts to His ministers is likewise for sinners. "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, for the forgiveness of sins," St. Peter admonishes the crowd on Pentecost. Christian baptism is the opposite of Jesus' baptism. At Jesus' baptism, He took your sin upon Himself. At your baptism, He took your sins away from you. He received condemnation; you received forgiveness. The very Father who spoke from the heavens, declaring, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased," later rejected His only-begotten Son on the cross so that, through the waters of Holy Baptism, He might claim you as His beloved child, so that He might place His name upon you.

9 With John in the Jordan, Jesus fulfilled all righteousness so that He might give to you His righteousness. This He has certainly done. St. Paul says, "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ." You wear Christ. He is your righteousness. The Lord of all has become your Heavenly Father because He looks at

