

## **The Baptism of Our Lord, A ✕ D 2010**

### **Matthew 3:1-13-17**

*In the Name of the Father and of the ✕ Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

1 The popularity of WWJD bracelets, hats, t-shirts, wall plaques, bumper stickers, boxer shorts, and more exposes what most people hope for in Jesus as a Savior: a moral example. Even atheists who believe Jesus was a good teacher or Muslims who believe Jesus was a prophet can ask the question “What would Jesus do?” to guide themselves in making decisions. Speculating what Jesus would do and trusting what He did do are not the same. And trying to live your life as Jesus would have lived it does you no good. It may do your neighbors some good if they benefit from your good works, but doing what Jesus would do does you no eternal good unless you can do it constantly.

2 It’s natural to want a Jesus who will call us up higher. It’s normal to want a God who gives you laws that are able to be obeyed. It’s logical to think that you will be rewarded for doing good and punished for doing evil. You naturally think in terms of the Law, even if a watered down version of it. That’s why every other religion in the world is ultimately a religion of works. Every religion except Christianity relies on your ability to climb to God, to ascend into heaven by your works. Your human reasoning knows nothing other than a religion of the Law, a religion of works. That’s why nearly every schism in the Christian Church is over the question of works. How many good works are necessary, and how do you do them? Do you do them completely of your own power and expect God to grade on a curve? Does God enable you to do good works, infused with His grace, thereby earning His forgiveness? Has God completed the salvation deal and is merely awaiting your signature, your decision, your acceptance? Repent of answering yes to any of those questions. If your answer to the question “How do you know you’re saved?” begins “Because I” you’re wrong. No work, no decision, no deed, nothing you can do is involved in the transaction. If your answer begins with anything other than “Because God” you’ll have no certainty. Repent of falling into the trap of thinking that Jesus came to give you a righteous way to live.

3 John fell into the same camp-wanting a Jesus to call us up to Himself. His preaching was spot-on. John called everyone to repent; when he blasted sinners with God’s Law, there were no exceptions. Everyone was guilty in John’s sermons. But everyone had hope. When John saw Jesus coming for the first time, he preached, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” This was no hypothetical “What would Jesus do?” but a prophetic “What does Jesus do?” He takes away the sin of the world. The crowds responded to John’s preaching in faith. Confessing their sin, they submitted to his baptism, a baptism for sinners. With repentant faith, they did what John called them to do: behold the Lamb of God who takes away your sins.

4 And yet, for all his pin-point accurate preaching, when Jesus came to the Jordan to be baptized by John, John protested. John would have prevented Him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” This is not the Jesus of WWJD bracelets, who watches the company He would keep and would have you do the same. This is not the Jesus of popular piety, who leads you by example to do what is right and righteous. This is not the Jesus praised by atheists and liberal Christians alike for his moral teachings. This is not the Jesus of common sense who hoists you up, who pulls you out of the mire of sin and enables you to obey God’s Commandments. This is the Jesus who comes to John, standing in the shallow, stagnant water of the summertime Jordan where John had been baptizing sinners for repentance.

5 Jesus descends into the water with sinners, immerses Himself in the sewage of our sin. John needed little convincing: “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” To call you out of your sin is not why Jesus came. To give you a moral example is not His reason for being at the Jordan River. To encourage you, to enable you, to exhort you to holy living: none of that is why Jesus came to be baptized by John in the Jordan. The Son of God wasn’t born into creation to call you up higher. He descended to you, took on human flesh. It’s the opposite of human logic, that God became man, that the sinless Jesus deals with sin by taking it away, by making your sin His own. But that’s the beauty of grace. It’s not logical.

6 It’s not a hypothetical “what would Jesus do” but an historical “what did Jesus do?” The great exchange, begun at His birth, confirmed at His baptism, culminated in Jerusalem. In the Jordan, Jesus stood

numbered with sinners. If John preached a baptism for sinners, then Jesus came for that baptism. He Himself was sinless, but He was the greatest sinner ever because He took your sinfulness—all of humanity's sinfulness—upon Himself. In the Jordan, Jesus stood in the place of every sinner ever. And on the cross, Jesus died in the place of every sinner ever. There, the exchange is completed. He endured the wrath of God so that sinners might receive God's mercy and favor. He suffered hell, separation from God, so that sinners might receive salvation, eternal union with God in paradise.

7        "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; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" The Baptism of Jesus made holy the otherwise ordinary waters of Baptism. Because Jesus went down into the waters of the Jordan, water is different. So at Holy Baptism, we pray, "through the Baptism in the Jordan of Your beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, You sanctified and instituted all waters to be a blessed flood and a lavish washing away of sin." Because of the Word and promise of God, every drop of water could be used for this holy purpose.

8        In Holy Baptism, you stand in the water with Jesus. Standing with Jesus in the water of Holy Baptism, Heaven is opened to you. All the merit of Jesus righteousness is credited to you, washed onto you through these holy waters. Heaven stands opened to you, and you have the promise of eternal salvation. In the waters of Holy Baptism, the Holy Spirit descended upon you and delivered to you the gifts of faith and the forgiveness of sins. The same Holy Spirit continues to work within you, keeping you firm in repentance, displaying the proof of His work inside you through the outward mortification of the flesh, through your outer good works. To all those in the water of Holy Baptism, the Heavenly Father boasts, "This is my beloved child, with whom I am well pleased."

9        What would Jesus do is not important. What did Jesus do and what does He continue to do are what matter. He took your sin and delivered to you His righteousness. He didn't summon you up to Him, but descended to you. He died for you to deliver you from death. And He continues to keep you in the waters of your baptism by forgiving your sin through Holy Absolution. What does Jesus do? He sends ministers to deliver the forgiveness He won for you on the cross. He comes to you, even today, at His altar, with His true flesh and blood, to bring the benefits of His death on the cross to you today. What Jesus did and continues to do are what set you free from sin and enable you to live in love toward those around you.

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