

Sermon Text (Matthew 3:13–17 ESV)

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

You Are Baptized into Christ’s Righteousness

The time had almost come. It wouldn’t be long now before Jesus would begin his public ministry, and then, three years later, he would accomplish everything that was required to save us from our sins by his innocent suffering and death on the cross. But, until that time came, God called John the Baptist to prepare the way for him, and one of the ways that God had him do this was by baptizing people, which washed their sins away. As St. Luke says, “[T]he word of God came to John the son of Zechariah in the wilderness. And he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:2–3).

People flocked from all over to receive John’s baptism. We hear in the verses prior to our reading for today that “Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (Matthew 3:5–6). Among the people who went out to be baptized by John were many of the Pharisees and Sadducees. However, unlike the others, they did not go out confessing their sins, because they didn’t believe that they had any sins to confess. So, John said to them, “You brood of vipers! 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” (Matthew 3:7–10).

Of these two groups of people, who are you more like: the people who went out confessing their sins, or the Pharisees and Sadducees who did not go out confessing their sins? We may want to say that we are more like the people who went out confessing their sins, but there are times when we can be both. If we have not been baptized yet and we are made aware of the blessing of forgiveness that baptism gives us, then we can find ourselves going out to be baptized, confessing our sins. Even if we have already been baptized, if we are feeling weighed down by the guilt of our sins, we can find ourselves returning to our baptisms saying, as we sung at the beginning of our service today, “I’ve been baptized into Christ!”

However, there are also times when we can take our baptisms for granted. We can be aware of many sins that we’ve committed but not feel a need to repent for them because “I’ve been baptized into Christ!” We can even be aware that we are about to commit a sin but do it anyway, thinking that the forgiveness that Christ won for us is ours no matter what kind of life we live. Even though the reason why the Pharisees and Sadducees did not go out confessing their sins can be different from ours, in moments like these, we can still be like them in thinking that we do not need to go out confessing our sins.

Even when we fail to see the seriousness of our sins or the need to confess our sins, Jesus is there to call us back to him and offer us the forgiveness that he won for us by his innocent suffering and death on the cross. He knew how serious our sins were, and he knew that we could do nothing to pay the price for our sins. So, he paid the price for us. Though he was without sin, he bore our sin. Though he did nothing to deserve death, he died the death that we deserve. He was

our perfect substitute, the spotless Passover Lamb, whose blood was shed to cover our sins. As John said, “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).

Jesus even proved to be our perfect substitute by being baptized himself. The time had finally come for him to begin his public ministry, and he would begin it by being baptized. Therefore, “Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him” (verse 13). However, John did not have the idea of baptizing Jesus. In fact, our reading for today says that he “would have prevented him” (verse 14). Why? Because, as he said to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (verse 14).

When John said this, Jesus did not refute him. This is because what John said is true. John was a sinner, just like you and me, but Jesus was not. Jesus was perfect. As the writer of the letter to the Hebrews says, “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Hebrews 4:15). Therefore, while John needed the blessings that baptism provides, just like you and me, Jesus did not, because he had no sins that needed to be washed away. And yet, despite this, Jesus said to John, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (verse 15).

What did Jesus mean by this? First of all, Jesus meant that this was the will of his Father in heaven. Even though Jesus had no need to be baptized, because God the Father wanted him to do it, he did it. Second, by being baptized, Jesus showed his approval of baptism and that he wants all of us to be baptized too. And finally, Jesus was acting as our perfect substitute. We are all sinners and, therefore, need our sins to be washed away in the waters of baptism. Jesus did not need to wash away any sins because he did not have any sins to be washed away, but as our perfect substitute, Jesus entered those baptismal waters as though he had committed all of our sins. Those waters were poured over his head as though he needed to wash himself of our sins. Although Jesus

had committed no sin, he was acting as though he was a sinner, because he did become a sinner in our place. As the apostle Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians, “For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus took our sins on himself, and what did he give us in exchange? He gave us his perfection, his righteousness. We enter into the baptismal waters a filthy mess, but when we emerge, we are white as snow, wearing Christ’s perfection as though it were our own. We now appear as spotless as the Lamb who was sacrificed in our place, whose innocent blood was shed as the payment for our sins. This doesn’t sound like a fair trade at all. Why would anyone give up all of the blessings that are rightfully his just to suffer the worst kind of suffering there is? Why would anyone be our substitute if it meant taking on our sins and paying the ultimate price for it? It is for no other reason other than that he loves you. He loves you so much that he was willing to become sin and die for it, just so that you won’t have to face the punishment for your sins. As Jesus says, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

Despite all Jesus accomplished as our perfect substitute, and despite the fact our sins have been washed away through the waters of baptism, there are still times when we can feel filthy. There are even times when we can feel just as filthy as we did before we were baptized, if not filthier. This can cause us to despair, to think that Jesus has not forgiven our sins, or to think that our sins are too great to be forgiven. However, these are just attacks from the devil to get us to despair so much that we lose our faith. We not only have the assurance from God’s Word that no sin is too great to be forgiven, but we can also turn to our baptisms and, knowing the blessings that God gave us in our baptisms, sing as we did at the beginning of our service today:

“Satan, hear this proclamation:
I am baptized into Christ.
Drop your ugly accusation,
I am not so soon enticed.
Now that to the font I’ve travelled,
All your might has come unravelled,
And, against your tyranny,
God my Lord unites with me!” (ELH #246:3)