

The Jesus Way / **BE PREPARED**
Private to Public
Matthew 3:13-17

“He who fails to prepare prepares to fail.”

I know what you’re saying, “Wait a minute, that’s what you said several weeks ago!” You’re right. And I’m saying it again. Those are the words of Benjamin Franklin. I mention them again because they state so well the application to us of what we see in the earliest stages of Christ’s life and ministry.

A lot of our students have just had exams at school. And many of you have been reminded that if you fail to prepare you prepare to fail. This afternoon, some of you will be watching the Super Bowl. While Mary Alice was in the store the other day, I sat in the car and watched on my cell phone the latest update on the game. The video clip was called “All the Hooplaw.” Bob Costas interviewed Tiki Barber about his preparation for a previous Super Bowl. Barber discussed how all the media “hooplaw” hindered him from preparing mentally and emotionally for the game. In fact, as you watched the interview, little sub-titles would show up giving principles of proper preparation. If you fail to prepare you prepare to fail.

In our series on “The Jesus Way,” we are looking at various ways in which Jesus is being prepared for the ministry God called him to. We began several weeks ago looking at Jesus’ growth as a boy. His growth as a boy prepared him for his impact as a man. The challenge for us is to *grow like Jesus*. God calls us to grow holistically – spiritually, physically, mentally and socially. Jesus, the Son of God, provides the best example for us of just what that means. So, *be prepared by growing like Jesus*.

Then three weeks ago Pastor Reilly led us in discovering the importance of being prepared in both our *character* and in our *communication* as we looked at the ministry of John the Baptist. He asked us the question: What is most important, the messenger or the message? And the answer is “Yes.” Both are vital. For John the Baptist, the communication of the message flowed out of the character of the messenger. So, *be prepared in both your character and communication*.

JESUS’ BAPTISM

Today, we continue this theme of preparation as we look at Jesus’ baptism. And we discover here, too, that this is a crucial element in Jesus’ preparation for the ministry that lay ahead.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” ¹⁵ Jesus replied, “*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment (and as he was praying) heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending (in bodily form) like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am

well pleased.” Now Jesus himself was about thirty years old when he began his ministry.
Matthew 3:13-17

It is late summer or early autumn, A.D. 29 when Jesus comes from Nazareth to the area of the Jordan to be baptized by John. Jesus’ baptism initiates what we could call the “year of revelation” in Jesus’ life. Jesus is now coming out of obscurity. He has spent thirty years as the son of a carpenter in Nazareth, where he grew in wisdom, stature, and in favor with God and man. But now Jesus is moving from the private realm to the public realm.

Let me ask you: Have you? Have you moved from private to public with your faith? Jesus once said,

Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. Matthew 10:32-33

Have you gone public with *your* faith? An important part of “going public” is baptism.

IN HIS BAPTISM, JESUS HUMBLY *IDENTIFIED* WITH YOU AND ME

We can’t read this passage without asking why Jesus was baptized in the first place.ⁱ Apparently, John the Baptist was asking the same question. Verse 14 says, “But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’” “Not so fast, Jesus; we’ve got the roles reversed here! You should be baptizing me!”

Remember, John’s baptism (as Pastor Reilly explained to us) was a baptism of *repentance*. In other words, the person being baptized was publicly acknowledging that he or she was a sinner and was now making a decision to turn from sin. No wonder John was surprised. For Jesus was not a sinner, he was sinless!ⁱⁱ (Even though John may not have fully understood that at this point).ⁱⁱⁱ

So we have to ask: If John’s baptism was all about repentance from sin, and Jesus was without sin, then why was he asking John to baptize him? The answer is this: *In his baptism, Jesus humbly identified with you and me*. Just as Jesus was born a human, circumcised as a Jew, and presented in the Temple according to the Law, so now he is also baptized as a sign of complete identification with sinners like you and me.

The Old Testament prophets said that this would be the case. The prophet Isaiah says, “...because he poured out his life unto death, and *was numbered with the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12). By submitting to John’s baptism – a baptism of repentance from sin – Jesus was “numbered with the transgressors” like you and me. Think of it – Jesus’ first public act intimately identified him with the human race. And then throughout his life, Jesus was known as the friend of sinners, the physician of the sick and the shepherd to the lost. He did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

Maybe this morning you feel dirty, guilty and unacceptable before God. It may be that the sin of your past and present is ever before you. You can’t escape it. Actually, whether you *feel* that way or not, it is true. As Isaiah says, we are all transgressors. “All we like sheep have gone astray, we

have turned everyone to his own way.” Paul puts it this way, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

Take a moment and look up at the high ceiling in this auditorium. Yes, you heard me right...just lean your head back and look up. Notice how high, how far removed that ceiling is. Now keep looking at it and reflect with me. You could jump as hard and as high as you possibly can, but you would never be able to jump high enough to touch that ceiling. And that’s how it is with God’s righteousness, his holiness. It is unattainable. We all fall far short. We have broken God’s law, every one of us. That makes us all “transgressors.” But here’s the good news. *While we can’t reach up to God, God reached down to us.* And he did it in His Son, Jesus Christ. And beyond Jesus’ birth as a human, the first sign we have of God reaching down to us and identifying with us is Jesus’ baptism. For there, he was “numbered with the transgressors,” like you and me. “He who knew no sin became sin for us...” the Bible says.

IN HIS BAPTISM, JESUS *DEVOTED* HIMSELF TO MAKING SINNERS RIGHTEOUS

But that same verse, goes on to say, “In order that we (i.e. sinners like you and me) might become the righteousness of God in him (i.e. in Jesus Christ).” And I think this gives us a hint as to part of the meaning of Jesus’ words in Matthew 3:15. Jesus replied to John, “*Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.*” (Matthew 3:15).

John refuses, but Jesus insists. “Let’s get on with it, John. No time for further delay! This is important if we are to ‘fulfill all righteousness.’” What did Jesus mean?

Maybe several other passages will give us some insight. According to John 1:29, and right before Jesus insisted on being baptized, John said as he saw Jesus approaching: “Look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” “Takes away the sin of the world?” “Fulfill all righteousness?” Do you see the connection?

But just how would our sin be taken away in order that we might be made righteous in God’s sight? I believe there are two other passages that give us some insight. Take a look at Luke 12:50-51. There Jesus says, “But I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is completed!” Is Jesus here talking about his water baptism in the Jordan river? No. He’s referring rather to the baptism of death on a cross. This is clear when he tells James and John who request the seats of honor at Jesus’ right and left hand: “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38).

The point is this: *In his baptism, Jesus devoted himself to making sinners righteous.* But this could only be accomplished through Jesus’ death, burial and resurrection. Again, this seems to be what the prophet Isaiah is saying, written over 700 years before the time of Christ: “After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light [of life] and be satisfied; by his knowledge my *righteous servant* will justify (i.e. declare righteous) many, and he will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:11).

Now look up once again to that high ceiling above us. If that ceiling, so high and removed, speaks of God’s perfection which you and I can never attain in our own effort, then this cross to

my right speaks of what Jesus did to forgive our sin and to declare us righteous. You see, in his baptism, Jesus devoted himself to making sinners righteous – fully acceptable to God – through his cross work. Do you believe that? Have you accepted Jesus' work on the cross as *your* only way of salvation?

IN HIS BAPTISM, JESUS WAS *DECLARED* GOD'S MUCH LOVED SON

In his baptism, Jesus identifies with you and me. In his baptism, Jesus devotes himself to the cross, our only hope of forgiveness and righteousness. But there is more in this passage. Notice verses 16-17:

¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him.
¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

In his baptism, Jesus was declared God's much loved Son. There were three things that happened the moment Jesus was baptized that demonstrate this: heaven opened, the Spirit descended, and a voice spoke. First, heaven opened. This is in response to the prayer of the prophet Isaiah: "Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down..." (Isaiah 64:1). The evangelist Mark uses an even stronger term in describing what took place at Jesus' baptism. He says the heavens "split apart." He uses it only one other time in describing the splitting of the temple curtain at Jesus' death. What does this mean? It means that only the Son of God has access to the Father, and only he makes it possible for you and me to have access to the Father!

Not only were the heavens split apart, but the Spirit of God descended upon Jesus like a dove. This is Jesus' anointing for ministry.^{iv} This is how the early church viewed Jesus' baptism. Notice what Luke says in the book of Acts:

You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- how *God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power*, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. Acts 10:37-38

By the way, the role of the Spirit is crucial for understanding Jesus' ministry. The Gospel accounts do not explain Jesus' miracle working power by referring to his divinity (i.e. the fact that he was God), but rather to the power of the Spirit upon him.

But there is a third phenomenon. There is a heavenly voice, saying, "This is my much loved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Remember how God spoke at the initial creation, pronouncing all that he had made as "good?" Now God speaks again, pronouncing his approval upon his Son who makes us a new creation.^v

It is the Son, and *only* the Son, with whom the Father is well pleased as the way to God. Religion is not like a cafeteria line where we get to choose what we like and not choose what we don't like. Nor is it like a vast interstate system where many roads lead to God.^{vi} Jesus himself

said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No man (or woman, or child) comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Of course, many today don't believe that Jesus is the only way to God. And even the meaning of baptism is being redefined. According to a recent *USA Today* article, there are baptism-style ceremonies where God is never mentioned. The article speaks of two parents who had their daughter, Greer, "baptized," but into all faiths. The mother said, "We just wanted all her bases covered." After all, Greer believes in "angels and fairies, leprechauns and Santa Claus." The couple grew up Presbyterian, but now (as they put it) they do "Christianity L-I-T-E."^{vii}

YOUR BAPTISM

So this raises the question, "Just what is the meaning of Christian baptism?" What does it mean for *you* to be baptized? After all, if Jesus was baptized, shouldn't we as his followers be baptized? But what does it mean for you and me to be baptized?

The word itself, "baptize," means simply "to place into." It was often used at this period of time of a cloth being "dipped into" or "placed into" a vat of dye. The image is meaningful, for believers are like a scarlet, red crimson cloth dipped into a vat of white dye and given the very righteousness of Christ! So when Jesus was baptized, we have every reason to believe that he was "placed into" the water of the Jordan. In other words, he was immersed. And so Matthew adds, "he went up out of the water."

Some of the most important verses on baptism for the believer are found in Romans 6:3-4. Here's what Paul says:

³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. Romans 6:3-4

Again, to be baptized into Christ is to be identified with Christ. According to the Bible, we are first baptized into Christ by the Holy Spirit the moment we believe (1 Corinthians 12:13). When you trust Jesus Christ as the forgiver of your sin and as the leader of your life, at that moment the Holy Spirit places you *into* Christ. You become His. Water baptism is only the sign and symbol of Spirit baptism. But it is not optional!

I often compare water baptism to a wedding ring. The ring I wear and that Mary Alice wears does not *make* us married. But it sure tells others that we are married. It is the outward sign of an inward commitment. On the other hand, if Mary Alice didn't wear a ring, then other men could pretty well assume that she wasn't married. It's the same with water baptism. Water baptism helps us move from the private to the public with our faith.

There's something else about water baptism. In going down into the water and coming up out of the water, we are identified with Jesus in his death, burial and resurrection. When Jesus was baptized, he fixed his eyes on the cross. When we are baptized, we fix our eyes on Christ. We identify with him in death to sin and resurrection to a new life. The old clothes of the past life are

stripped off; the fresh clothes of the new life are put on. That's why Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, "When Jesus calls a man, he bids him come and die." Our baptism is a symbol of that death as we go down into the water. And our baptism is a symbol of new life as we come up out of the water.

This past week I read the story of an Iranian man identified as "M." It was told by a missionary working in Athens, Greece, a city which has become a sort of "refugee highway" of people looking for a better life.

In 2003, everything "M" knew was destroyed by an earthquake. Tortured by the question of why something like this would happen, he went to live with relatives in Afghanistan. But finding no answers, he headed west and ended up in Athens, Greece, staying with more relatives. Though he and all his family were Muslim, "M" became interested in Christianity, finding himself strangely moved by the sight of the crosses he saw decorating the Orthodox churches in the city. He was given a Bible and started reading. He would use a tiny flashlight to read during the night after his uncles were asleep.

He studied the Bible this way for two years. Finally, "M" realized God was calling him to follow Jesus. On Sunday, May 7, 2006, "M" set his alarm for 6 a.m. He wanted to spend time reading his Bible and praying that morning, because on that day he was to be baptized at a fellowship with other Iranian believers. But his cousin had discovered the plan. Before "M's" alarm went off, the cousin boiled water in a saucepan and poured it on "M" while he slept, scalding both thighs and one arm.

"M" came to the baptism anyway. Standing before those gathered, the burns on his arms clearly visible, "M" declared, "No matter what they do to me, I will love Jesus." After the baptism, "M" said he felt like standing in the center of the city of Athens and shouting to everybody, "I belong to Christ!"^{viii}

What about you? Are you willing today to say "yes" to Christ for your salvation? If you are, I invite you to immediately "go public" with your faith. I invite you to be baptized this morning. We'll give you a robe and a towel. We have all you need in order to take this important step. Remember, baptism doesn't save you. It is merely the outward sign of an inward faith.

An interesting story is told in the life of the early church. Philip encountered an Ethiopian making his way back home. The Ethiopian man was reading from the book of Isaiah, which we cited earlier. He read about the Messiah, the savior, who is described as a "sheep led to the slaughter." He asked Philip who this was and what meant. Philip preached Christ to this man and he believed. But after he believed, his first question was, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" (Acts 6:36-38). And Philip baptized that new believer that very instant.

This morning we say, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't you be baptized?" If you say for the first time this morning, "Yes, I trust Christ for my salvation!" then you can come and be baptized. Or, if you've been a believer for some time but have never taken this public step of baptism, we invite you also. While we sing, would you come? For any who come, we'll celebrate together this important step in being a follower of Christ.

ⁱ John the Baptist marked the end of an era – the era of the Old Testament prophets. And Jesus’ baptism marks the beginning of new era, the era of the cross. Jesus’ baptism mentioned in the first three gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and commented on in John. In all three accounts, three things take place: (1) the heavens open; (2) the Spirit descends; and (3) a divine voice gives approval of Jesus. Luke adds two important points not found in the other accounts. Jesus was baptized after all the people were baptized. A second feature is that Jesus was in prayer immediately after his baptism (Luke 3:21). “And as he was praying, heaven was opened...”

ⁱⁱ A Jewish Christian gospel of 2nd Century puts these words into the mouth of Jesus: “What sin have I committed, that I should go and be baptized by him? Unless perhaps this very thing I have spoken is ignorance” (and therefore sinful!!). (Cited by Jerome, *Adversus Pelagianos* iii.2).

ⁱⁱⁱ But there is more here. John had earlier said that One would come who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire. Jesus was that *One*, and John knew it! So John is also saying, “Hey, I need *your* baptism, and you’re asking me to baptize you?!” For these Jews who heard John’s message, to submit to such a baptism was as humiliating as it was for Naaman to dip three times in the dirty Jordan river. Why? Because only proselytes –i.e. non-Jews who wanted to adopt the Jewish faith – were baptized.ⁱⁱⁱ But here John is telling these Jews who are listening that even *they* must be baptized. How humbling! John’s baptism – as well as Christian baptism – was the great “leveler.” Now everyone is on common ground. The sinful Jew is called to enter the Kingdom of God just as the sinful Gentile. And both must repent. But when it came to Jesus, he had no sin to repent of. Given the nature of John’s baptism – a baptism for repentance of sin – it’s no wonder that John is saying, “Not so fast, you should be baptizing me!”

^{iv} In the Bible, there is also a close association between water baptism and the Holy Spirit. The reason for this is that baptism speaks of the beginning of phase of life. All the way back in Genesis we read that the Spirit hovered over the waters of the unformed earth. And then God began the work of creation. Here, Jesus is beginning his ministry that will lead to a new creation. This anointing is also part of another aspect of Christ’s baptism, which was to reveal the Messiah to Israel. This is seen in John 1:29-34: “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! 30 This is the one I meant when I said, ‘A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’ 31 I myself did not know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was *that he might be revealed to Israel.*” 32 Then John gave this testimony: “I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. 33 I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit.’ 34 I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.” Deffinbaugh notes that “Long before David was publicly presented as Israel’s King, he was privately designated to Samuel by God (1 Sam. 16) and anointed by him. It was also at this time of secret identification to Samuel that David was empowered by the Holy Spirit (1 Sam. 16:13). It was not until years later, after David had fled from Saul many times, that God removed Saul and inaugurated David as King. In similar fashion at the baptism of Jesus, God signified (privately, I believe) to John that Jesus was the promised Messiah. At that time, He received the anointing of the Holy Spirit for the task ahead. It was at the transfiguration of our Lord that His disciples received divine confirmation that He was God’s Messiah. In Acts, Paul used the resurrection of Christ as an evidence that God had accepted His sacrificial work on the cross and had exalted Him to His heavenly throne where He waits the time of His final and public coronation when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Him as Lord (Phil. 2:9-11) because God has put all things under His feet (cf. Acts 2:32-36).” (Deffinbaugh, notes).

^v The statement is a citation of two Old Testament passages, Psalm 2:7 and Isaiah 42:1. Psalm 2:7 emphasizes the Messiah as King and is taken from 2 Samuel 7:14 where God assures David of an everlasting kingdom with these words: “I will be a Father to him and he will be a son to me...” (2 Samuel 7:14). The second passage, Isaiah 7:14 emphasizes the Messiah as the suffering servant. These same two aspects, king and servant, are seen in the transfiguration (Luke 9:31, 35) where Jesus is declared the Son but also his suffering and death is spoken of.

^{vi} Darrell Bock, 120.

^{vii} http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/search_print.html?query=%22Baptism%22&type=keyword&filter=&tone=&start=

^{viii} http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/search_print.html?query=%22Baptism%22&type=keyword&filter=&tone=&start=