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Matthew 3:13-17:

## **Standing Where Sinners Stand**

- I. The Sinless Baptized.
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## **Standing Where Sinners Stand**

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

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,

When I first began preparing for this sermon on the baptism of the Lord Jesus, I set out with the grand idea that I would seek out some of the very hard questions about this account and, as far as Holy Scripture would allow, present to you the answers. Proverbs 19:21 states, “Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand.” As it turns out, that verse applies not only to Christian living, but to sermon preparation!

As I studied some of those harder questions and realized it would take several Bible Classes to get to where I wanted to go, something about this account struck me that changed the whole trajectory of today’s sermon. The mysteries surrounding the theology and meaning behind the baptism of Christ are not unique to me or to you, but they deeply impacted the one who was prophesied to prepare the very way for the Lord.

#### **I. The Sinless Baptized**

To John the Baptist, the idea of the Lord receiving a baptism meant for sinners was just as preposterous. He says, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” In other words, John is saying, “I am the sinner, Lord, and you are sinless. I am the one who should be standing where you are and not the other way around.” This is in stark contrast to John’s treatment of the Pharisees earlier in this chapter, when he refused to baptize them because of their unbelief and unrepentant sin.

If we look at it honestly, John’s objection makes perfect sense. His entire ministry had been ordered toward preaching repentance, calling sinners to confess their sins, baptizing those who believed, and turning away those who refused to repent. Baptism, as John administered it, was for repentance. And since Jesus has nothing to repent of, the question naturally follows: why be baptized at all? The answer lies in the words of Jesus Himself. He responds to John, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” With that brief statement, Jesus explains everything. He is not baptized because He needs something. He is baptized because we do.

Here, the sinless One steps forward and takes His place as God in the flesh among sinners. He does not come to observe repentance from a distance or to approve it from above. He comes to stand where sinners stand, bearing their place. By stepping into the Jordan, Jesus binds Himself to sinners and to the baptism meant for them, so that New Testament baptism would not be simply water, but water to which Christ has attached His own death and resurrection, cleansing sinners from all sin. From the very beginning of His public ministry, Jesus places Himself exactly where salvation requires Him to be in bearing what is not His so that He may give what is.

As R. C. H. Lenski explains,

“He, the Sinless One, the very Son of God, chooses to put Himself alongside of all the sinful ones for whom John’s sacrament was ordained. He thus connects Himself with all instances of John’s baptism; for it is His mediation that makes these truly efficacious for sinners. By thus joining Himself to all these

instances of John's baptism, He signifies that he is now ready to take upon Himself the load of all these sinners, that is, to assume His redemptive office."

Lenski is not suggesting that John's baptism was ineffective before Jesus was baptized, nor that Christ's baptism somehow activated it after the fact. Rather, he is confessing that Christ Himself is the ground and source of all saving efficacy, and that even John's baptism derives its power not from John, not from water alone, and not from human repentance, but from Christ's redemptive work.

And this is why the baptism of Jesus is not a moment meant to puzzle us, but a decisive moment meant to comfort us. In the Jordan, God publicly reveals what has always been true: there has never been forgiveness, repentance, righteousness, or salvation apart from Christ, and there never will be. Everything that John's baptism promised now rests visibly and unmistakably on Christ Himself, who willingly takes the sinner's place and carries the sinner's burden. What looks strange to John (and to us) is in fact the very Gospel: salvation does not come by a sinner's movement toward God, but by the Savior stepping down to us.

## **II. The Sinners' Objection**

John's objection is not only understandable, but it is also familiar. We share it when we resist the idea that God would come so low, that He would take our place so completely. In that resistance, we take it a step further than John's simple confusion, and see our own reluctance to confess just how deep our need truly is. Friends, the need for forgiveness in Christ is far deeper than I think we ever truly give it credit for. When we consider the Law of God written on our hearts and revealed through His Word, we quickly realize that we have failed at every corner and at every step of the way apart from the righteousness of the Lord Jesus. This we must be reminded of every day.

It is not only in the obvious and outward sins that our need is revealed, but in the quiet and familiar places of our daily lives. As we confessed at the beginning of this Divine Service, we have failed to love God with our whole heart and failed to love our neighbor as ourselves. In those moments when we have spoken when we should have remained silent, and when we have remained silent when love required us to speak, this too was sin.

The Old Adam in us has trusted our own understanding more than God's Word, excused our anger, justified our impatience, and harbored resentment long after we knew better. Indeed, we have been careless with our words, indulgent with our desires, fearful in our witness, and slow to forgive. Even our best intentions have been stained with self-interest, and even our repentance has been incomplete apart from the Holy Spirit. In ways both visible and hidden, deliberate and accidental, we have fallen short of the holiness God's Law demands, leaving us with nothing to offer Him but our need.

If you don't believe the sinful man standing before you who shares in this plight, believe the familiar words of the apostle in Romans 3,

"For we have already charged that all... are under sin... Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin."

## **III. Standing Where Sinners Stand**

Indeed, this stops our mouths. Accountability to God is no joke. An honest examination of our lives yields a very simple verdict when put to the test of the Holy Law: guilty. And this is precisely why the baptism

of Jesus matters so deeply for sinners like us. After the Law has spoken and every mouth has been stopped, God does not leave us standing in silence or uncertainty. He speaks.

As Jesus stands in the Jordan, standing where sinners stand, the heavens are opened, the Spirit descends, and the Father declares, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” That declaration is not spoken after Jesus performs miracles, preaches sermons, or goes to the cross. It is spoken here, at the very moment He takes His place among sinners. The Father publicly approves not only who the Son is, but what the Son has come to do according to His gracious will.

That is where the comfort of Christ’s baptism reaches all the way to you and me. When we were baptized into Christ, we were baptized into His very obedience, His very righteousness, and His Sonship. All of this, because the same Christ who stepped into the Jordan for sinners has stepped into your place before the Father. By His work, the baptized sinner (you and me) now stands where He stands—Heaven opened, the curtain torn, sins forgiven, claimed and declared as God’s own children.

As Luther writes,

“Heaven which before was closed, is opened by Christ’s baptism and a window and door now stand open for us to see through. No longer is there a barrier between God and us, since God himself descends at the Jordan. The Father lets his voice be heard, the Son sanctifies baptism with his body, and the Holy Spirit descends in the form of a dove. Is this not a great manifestation, a truly great sign of how very precious baptism is to God, that he does not abstain from it?”

Indeed, if Christ Himself did not despise baptism or consider it beneath Him, then we should be careful never to treat it as something small, optional, or easily forgotten. Many false teachers today will take positions that tend to diminish it or remove it as being of no significance whatsoever. Baptism is not a religious ceremony we move past once it is finished, nor is it a symbol we outgrow as our faith matures. It is the place where Christ chose to stand for sinners, and the place where He chose to place His name upon us. To neglect baptism is not a mark of spiritual strength, but a sign that we have begun to look elsewhere for assurance. This is always inside ourselves, in our feelings, or in our efforts, rather than where God has promised to meet us.

Therefore, do not leave your baptism behind; return to it again and again. When sin weighs heavily, when guilt speaks loudly, when the Law has done its work and every excuse has fallen silent, God does not send us inward. He sends us back to the water joined to His Word, to the promise spoken over us, to the Christ who stood in the Jordan and stands for us still. There, and only there, the sinner finds rest. Jesus stands where sinners stand, and in Him, the baptized stand forgiven, secure, and at peace with God.

Amen.

Pastor Lucas Abbott