

Lesson 9: Baptism

Key concept

Outward sign of an inward grace

Bible study

Romans 6:3-7
Matthew 3:13-17

Memory verses

Romans 6:4-5

Objectives

- ❖ Understand baptism as a sacrament
- ❖ Understand what baptism signifies
- ❖ Understand who should be baptized

Bible Study

Whether you are a brand new follower of Jesus or an old-timer, baptism is central to the journey. Baptism is one of the two sacraments instituted by Jesus for your spiritual journey; the other is the Lord's Supper. A sacrament is really just a sacred rhythm for your life instituted by Jesus. He wants you to have these sacred rhythms that keep you centered on Him, and baptism and the Lord's Supper are sacred rhythms of life. Baptism marks the beginning of your journey with Jesus, and the Lord's Supper marks your ongoing journey and your need to continually feed on Him. This lesson explores baptism and how it applies to both new followers of Jesus and to those who have been following Jesus for quite some time. We will look at the meaning of baptism, the meaning of a covenant renewal ceremony, when baptism should happen, and who should be baptized.

What is baptism? Historically, the language used to describe baptism is that it is an outward sign of an inward grace. That is helpful language. Think about a wedding ring. It is an outward sign of an inward grace. Outwardly, it signifies to others that you are married. But the ring also points to an inward grace, the grace of love that has been experienced so deeply on the heart that you are willing to give yourself fully and completely to this person for the rest of your life. So, when you are baptized with water, it is an outward sign of an inward grace. What is it a sign of?

a. Baptism is a sign of entrance into the family of God

1 Corinthians 12:13 says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free." Baptism is an outward sign that we are entering into a family, God's family. Baptism doesn't save us,

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but rather it is a marker that Jesus has already saved us by grace as we put our faith in Him (see Eph. 2: 8-10). When Jesus saved us, we were born again spiritually into the invisible and spiritual family of God. In baptism, we are marking the entrance into this family of God by entering into a visible family of God in the church. This is why we celebrate baptisms in the context of the church.

b. Baptism is a sign that we are dead to sin

Romans 6:3: *“Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?”* Baptism is a sign of death. It is a sign that Jesus’ death is also your death. But what does that mean, given that all of us reading this are alive? How is it that Christ’s death could be our death? This is addressed in verses 6-7: *“For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.”*

Baptism publicly proclaims to the world: I am dead to sin. I am free from sin. But how is it that we are dead to sin if we keep on sinning? While you are dead to sin’s penalty (because Christ paid that penalty on the cross and, according to Romans. 8:1, freed us from sin’s condemnation), you aren’t completely dead to sin’s power. At least not yet. Unfortunately, until you get to heaven, your complete liberation from the power of sin won’t be fully realized. The old self will still rear its ugly head from time to time. Even though, as Paul says in verse 6, the old self was crucified, the old self is shockingly resilient, and the death of the old self takes a really, really long time. Just when you think the old self is completely dead, you relapse. Relapse happens because the old self still has a little life left. Just when you think the old self that was full of fear is dead, you find yourself crippled by fear again. The old self is currently in the process of dying a slow, painful death.

But why? Why does the crucifixion of the old self, when it comes to sin’s power, take so long? A preaching mentor helped me with this by sharing with me an illustration by Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Lloyd-Jones asked his church to imagine a country in which one group of people has for centuries enslaved another group of people, which is not a hypothetical for us here in America. Whenever members of the enslaved group would meet members of the oppressing group, the oppressors had the power to order them to do whatever they wanted. If the enslaved people didn’t obey, then the oppressors could beat or kill them. But then, a good king took over one day, and he abolished slavery.

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Lloyd-Jones asked, “Do you think that is all it takes? Do you think the oppressed group started acting like freed men and women?” In some ways they did, but, sadly, not in others. Despite changing the law and placing guards in each town, whenever members of the enslaved group saw members of the group of oppressors, they trembled and quaked with fear, even though the oppressors had no legal power to do anything to them. When the oppressing group still ordered the formerly enslaved group around, the enslaved group still obeyed their orders.

When they were they still acting like slaves even though their status had changed, they were acting in their old self. They hadn’t grasped or realized the full extent of their freedom. This illustration helps us see that the power of sin isn’t just felt in sins that you commit, but sometimes the power of sin is felt in sins that others commit that are inflicted upon you. The old self is a product of not just your own sin, but the way others have sinned against you. And so baptism is a bold and powerful declaration of freedom. It says to the world that the old me is dead and dying and will one day gasp its last breath. Yes, vestiges of the old me remain, but there is a new self being formed right in the midst of the old.

c. Baptism is a sign of a new self

Baptism isn’t just a sign of death; it is also a sign of life, new life in Christ. This new life in Christ, this inward grace, creates a new self. Look at Romans 6:4: “*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.*” Baptism is a sign that a new self is being formed—a kinder, more loving, more faithful, more obedient, more beautiful you. This isn’t just about the after-life; this is about a new you forming here and now. Verse 5 says: “*If we have been united with him like this in his death [if baptism is a sign of death], we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.*” Baptism is a sign of resurrection, of new life bursting forth out of the old. We go down under the water and emerge out of it anew. If we’re united with Him in death, then we’re also united with Him in His resurrection. His resurrection becomes our resurrection.

If you are united with Jesus in this way, then whatever is true of Christ in His baptism is true of you and your baptism. You are inextricably bound up with Christ, and you can’t be separated. You are united to Christ; you become one with Him. Your past, no matter how bad, doesn’t own you or define you because Jesus was willing to identify with your past and to redeem it. Conversely, His past, His successful life, becomes your past.

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“Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’ Jesus replied, ‘Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then John consented” (Math. 3:13-15).

“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. And a voice from heaven said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased’” (v. 16-17).

When Jesus is baptized, the heavens open and a booming voice shakes all of creation and says, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.”* If you are united to Christ, if you have put your faith in Jesus, what is true of Jesus in His baptism is true of you. God the Father loves you. He is wild about you. He is your daddy, and He is well pleased with you. And nothing can alter His love for you. He will always and forever be well pleased with you. Romans 8:38-39 says, *“Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”*

The text of Jesus’ baptism in Matthew 3 is like going home for me. It marks one of the most significant moments in my spiritual journey—a moment when God’s love really sank in and began to change me.

I was playing football at the University of Virginia. It was my senior season and we were playing Auburn. For a boy who grew up in Montgomery, Alabama, as a University of Alabama fan, this was a dream. As a kid, I had played against Auburn every day in my backyard. And in those games, I would always make the game-winning catch, dragging one toe in the corner of the end zone as time ran out for the winning touchdown. Now, I was actually playing against my hated foe, the Auburn Tigers, in Charlottesville on my home turf. It was the first game of the season, and it was being broadcast on a Thursday night on ESPN to a national audience.

During the game, my big moment came, but I didn’t end up being a hero. I was playing safety, and I was beaten deep. The moment that I had dreamed of all my life ended up playing out radically different in reality.

After I got cussed out by my coach, I sat on the bench, alone. The most alone I’d ever felt. And then came one of the spiritually defining moments of my life. A voice said, *“This is my Son, whom I love; with him, with #49, I am well pleased.”*

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One thing was for sure—this wasn't the voice of a UVA fan. I looked up and said, "But Father, didn't you see what I just did." And the voice again, "Precisely, this is the moment I have been waiting for to reveal my love to you. Only now can you see that my love has nothing to do with your performance. I love you because you're my son, not for what you can do for me, or for the ways that the world is or is not impressed with you. Now, my son, go play in light of this love." And I was set free. I knew that I was loved, no matter what. I could now go enjoy the game of football and life properly because I had a deeper and more full delight: God Himself. His love had changed me; I had found such an enjoyment in Him that the other pleasures that I thought were necessities, like football, academic success, or a career, all paled in light of this deeper joy of being loved as a son.

On a Thursday night in Charlottesville, the love of God came home to roost in my heart. God was no longer my boss who only loved me when I increased His bottom line (as if I really could), but He was a Father who delighted in me. I was His beloved son. Have I forgotten this since then? Yes, I forget all the time. I start living like God is my boss and I am His employee, and I jump back into performance mode. But baptism reminds me of a different reality. God isn't my boss. He is my Father. That is why it is so critical for all of us to be "improving our baptism" on a daily and weekly basis (see the Westminster Larger Catechism, Question 167).

Improving our baptism doesn't mean that we get baptized again, but rather we remember it and rejoice in this amazing reality that we're united to Christ in His death and resurrection. Each week as we worship together in church we are improving our baptism by celebrating and giving thanks that our sin has been washed away. And as we watch baptisms, we should give thanks for our own baptism and the gift of new life that has been given to us. Another way to improve your baptism is through a covenant renewal ceremony.

What is a covenant renewal ceremony? Covenant renewal ceremonies in the Bible are set up to allow God's people to reaffirm or renew their vows to follow Jesus and live as the people of God (see Nehemiah 8-9). A covenant renewal ceremony looks and feels much like a baptism. Individuals going through a covenant renewal ceremony will share their story of how God drew them to Himself (or brought them back home). They will then renew their baptismal vows. Finally, to help them "improve upon their baptism," water will be used. But, rather than going through a

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second baptism, the recipients will be challenged to *remember* the love of God the Father that brought them back to Him, to *rejoice* in the grace of Jesus that empowered them to come home, and to *receive* the fellowship of the Holy Spirit that has been guiding them back into the family of God.

There are two groups of people who should go through a covenant renewal ceremony. First, if you were baptized as an infant and just recently trusted Jesus as an adult, then you should go through a covenant renewal ceremony. Second, if you have already been baptized but have intentionally and willfully withdrawn from Jesus (and/or the church) for an extended period (years) and are now renewing your commitment to follow Jesus, then you should go through a covenant renewal ceremony.

Who should be baptized?

a. Those who have trusted Jesus

The Bible is really clear on this. Baptism isn't optional. If you have trusted Jesus, you should be baptized at some point. If you have never been baptized, then make it happen, not so that you will be saved (remember, Jesus has already done that), but out of obedience and, also, to simply receive the blessing of baptism.

For those of you who are new followers of Jesus, don't wait to get baptized. Many often wrongly think that they need to get cleaned up or they need to know more of the Bible before they are ready. However, the consistent pattern in the Bible is to be baptized immediately when you trust Jesus because baptism marks the beginning of your journey (see Acts 2:41; Acts 8: 12-13 and 35-38; Acts 16: 25-34).

b. Infants of those who have trusted Jesus

At Harbor Mid-City we encourage infant baptism because we believe it is biblical. If you are interested in why, see the addendum to this lesson. We do, however, recognize that many faithful followers of Jesus read the Bible differently on this issue. In fact, we believe this is a great opportunity for us to demonstrate to the world how the Holy Spirit can unify us even when there is a diversity of belief and practice. As such, we celebrate the reality that we have many faithful followers of Jesus on both sides of this issue in our church. Either way, we are committed to helping you raise up your children to follow Jesus and will provide a path for baptism in either case.

c. Children who weren't baptized as infants and have been through our Communicants class

Our Communicants class will provide an opportunity for children who have not been baptized to begin to understand baptism and then to receive baptism in the church if they so desire.

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Memory Verses

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. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.

-Romans 6:4-5

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Individual Study and Group Discussion

Opening Question

Based upon the reading, what did you find most helpful? Was anything confusing? What was most challenging?

Study and Discussion Questions

1. Explain the difference between the “old self” that is crucified with Christ (Rom 6:6) and the new self that is being formed in union with Christ?
2. In what ways is God a Father to you and you a son or daughter to Him? (Matt. 3:16-17)
3. In your own words, what does baptism signify?
4. Can you remember a spiritually defining moment in your life when you realized that Jesus loves you unconditionally?
5. Do you have a story to tell about your baptism and what it means to you?