

# First Sunday after Epiphany

January 8, 2017

**Matthew 3:13–17 (EHV)** – <sup>13</sup> Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. <sup>14</sup> But John tried to stop him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?” <sup>15</sup> But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, because it is proper for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then John let him. <sup>16</sup> After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, <sup>17</sup> and a voice out of the heavens said, “This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.”

## Introduction

Recall that the word “ministry” means “service.” When we talk about Jesus’ earthly ministry, we’re referring to the service he provided to carry out our salvation. That involved two things – actively and perfectly keeping all of God’s law as our substitute (remember last week’s sermon how God sent his Son to be born of a woman, born under the law) and passively undergoing God’s just judgment for sin by his suffering and death on the cross. You could say that his ministry, his service, began when he was chosen as the Savior before the creation of the world. You could also say that from the moment of his conception he was actively serving as our perfect substitute as he kept the commandments for us.

Although Jesus’ earthly ministry began from day one, it wasn’t until he was 30 years old that he began his *public* ministry. Other than a brief glimpse of the twelve-year-old Jesus at the temple, all of the Gospel writers flash forward from his infancy to that period of time.

## Theme: Jesus Begins His Public Ministry.

So that’s where we find ourselves this morning, just a couple short weeks after Christmas. We see how it happened that **JESUS BEGAN HIS PUBLIC MINISTRY**. We see **the Son accepting the work of salvation** and we see **the Father accepting the worker of salvation**.

## Part I: The Son accepts the work of salvation.

When we last saw Jesus, he was twelve years old, living in holy obedience to his parents after they’d had quite a scare. Then Jesus faded out of the spotlight for about 18 years until John the Baptist stepped forward to set the stage for what was going to happen next. He preached a message of repentance and the forgiveness of sins to prepare the hearts of the people for their Savior.

In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is called “the carpenter.” Apparently Joseph had trained his adopted son in the family business up in Nazareth of Galilee. After living for several years in relative obscurity, we read of him, **“Then Jesus came from Galilee to be baptized by John at the Jordan. But John tried to stop him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and yet you come to me?’”**

Ironically, thirty years earlier, Jesus made a similar journey to the south, carried in the womb of his mother. In both trips we see the willingness of Jesus to carry out his Father’s will to save the world.

The big question that the text raises is why Jesus needed to be baptized in the first place. We’ve already noted that John’s message and baptism were of **“repentance”** and **“for the forgiveness of sins.”** That’s fine as far as the people were concerned. But what about Jesus? We know good and well that Jesus was completely free from sin – both original and actual. If Jesus didn’t need the forgiveness of sins, and he didn’t have any sinfulness for which to repent, why would he need to undergo that kind of baptism?

Many have asked that question, not the least of whom was John the Baptizer himself. We can almost visualize the mini-argument that must have taken place on the banks of the Jordan. John knew that God granted the forgiveness of sins through the baptism he applied. He knew that Jesus was the unblemished Lamb of God who had no sin. So, our text says, **“He tried to stop him.”** “Umm, Jesus, I know you’re more powerful than I. I’m not even fit to untie or carry your sandals. And I know that when you tell me to do something, I should listen to you. But Jesus, what you’re asking me to do doesn’t make any sense. Didn’t I just prophesy that I baptize with water, but you’ll baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire? You should baptize me, not the other way around.”

Back to the question: Why did Jesus need to be baptized? He told John, **“Let it be so now, because it is proper for us fulfill all righteousness.”** This statement implies a couple things. First of all, Jesus implies that John’s thinking isn’t off base at all. “You’re right, John. I don’t need a baptism for the forgiveness of sins. And at some other time, your argument would be valid. But right now this baptism needs to happen. Why, you ask? To fulfill all righteousness.”

God’s demand of righteousness involves two things, actually two sides of the same coin. On one hand, a person has to keep the commandments perfectly to be righteous in God’s eyes. On the other, a person can’t have any sinfulness whatsoever. If he does, he faces God’s righteous anger and punishment. And I shouldn’t have to tell you how you and I stand on either side, do I? Up to this point, Jesus implies that he’d fulfilled *part*, but not *all* of God’s righteous demands. He’d lived that perfect, holy, sinless life. We call that Christ’s ACTIVE OBEDIENCE. What still needed to be taken care of was the atonement for the sins that already had been and were being and would be committed. Undergoing baptism was his transition into his work of PASSIVE OBEDIENCE. In his baptism, he officially set himself on the same level as the people whom he came to save – sinners. His baptism didn’t signify the beginning of his ministry; he’d been living a sinless life in our place from day one. His baptism did signify the beginning of his passive obedience as he took on the persecution and humility and suffering – OUR persecution and OUR humility and OUR suffering – that ultimately led him to bear our cross and condemnation.

## Transition

Because **“he who had no sin became sin for us,”** Jesus stooped to a sinner’s baptism. And when Jesus explained this, John willingly consented. The Son accepted the work of salvation. The rest of our text gives us just as much reason to rejoice. There we see how the Father accepted the Worker of salvation.

## Part II: The Father accepts the Worker of Salvation.

You’ve heard the saying, “No news is good news.” If you’re never called into your supervisor’s office or the principal’s office, that’s usually a good thing. But we all like to receive recognition, don’t we? We like to have the approval and praise of others for the hard work we do. If, after a service, I said, “Thanks to all the people who help out around church,” that may or may not make people feel good. But if I pull one of you aside and personally thank you for specific things that you do around the church, that means a lot more, doesn’t it?

For thirty years Jesus had been faithfully living in accordance to his Father’s will. Now, as he began his *public* ministry, God the Father gave his approval in a spectacular way. **“After Jesus was baptized, he immediately went up out of the water. Suddenly, the heavens were opened for him! He saw the Spirit of God, descending like a dove and landing on him, and a voice out of the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, whom I love. I am well pleased with him.’”**

People have used this passage improperly to support their opinion that Jesus was baptized by immersion. People use this passage correctly as a support of the Trinity. But don't lose focus on what was happening there on the river bank. The Holy Spirit recorded these words for a specific purpose. In our Old Testament Lesson, God said of his suffering Servant / Messiah, "**Here is my chosen one... I am placing my Spirit upon him.**" In our Second Lesson, Peter said, "**God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.**"

The Christmas message should still be fresh enough in our minds to remember Luke's words, "**Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.**" Christ and Messiah mean the same thing: Anointed One. At Jesus' baptism, he became THE Christ in the fullest sense of the word. He was anointed as the Chosen One to redeem God's people. The descending Spirit and the Father's voice of approval validate Jesus' person and work. The Father clearly states that Jesus is his very Son. He clearly states that he approves of the work his Son is setting out to do, to make atonement for sin.

Jesus steps up onto dry land with the full authority of God's Anointed, the Savior. How often Jesus' enemies questioned his authority! But Jesus always countered those arguments by saying his Father approved and authorized his person and plans, and that John the Baptist was his reliable witness.

## **Conclusion**

How important the words of our text are to our faith! We see how Jesus became one with us so that he might live in our place as our Savior. He willingly took up our sins and willingly accepted the path of suffering that the Father had mapped out for him. But that work would've been worthless if God the Father hadn't counted his Son's perfect life as ours and his Son's holy death as our own. Because God was well-pleased with Jesus, he can say the same of you and me. Because he accepted his Son's work, he accepts us as his dear children. Amen.