

THE BAPTISM OF JESUS
LUKE 3:15-22

We know little about the ministry of John the Baptist; we only have one sermon (really, just one line from a sermon — “be baptized for the forgiveness of sins”). Yet, for all the limited information about him, he was an important person. He came from humble beginnings, living in the desert/wilderness and eating locusts and honey, but what he did was influential. While the world didn’t have this view of him (and Herod certainly didn’t), Jesus said this of him:

“...What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? “But what did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Those who are splendidly clothed and live in luxury are *found* in royal palaces! “But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and one who is more than a prophet.

This is the one about whom it is written,

‘BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU,
WHO WILL PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU.’

I say to you, among those born of women there is no one greater than John...” (Luke 7:24-28; NASB)

So John was not powerful or wealthy or well-positioned. But he was great. And significant. And humble. We also know John lived for the glory of Christ. He lived to exalt Christ above all things. In the apostle John’s gospel, John the Baptist says, “He must increase. I must decrease” (Jn. 3:30). It’s all about the exaltation of Christ, of pointing people to Christ, of being satisfied in and helping others be satisfied in Christ. And we see that exaltation of Christ in John’s preaching ministry and in his first (and only) recorded direct interaction with Jesus in Luke 3. In this passage, we learn...

CHRIST IS SUPERIOR TO ALL THINGS AND ALL PEOPLE. DESIRE HIM. LIVE FOR HIM.

The Gospel of Luke is all about the **Jesus Christ as the Son of Man** — the King from Heaven who will reign on David’s throne. And even before Jesus’ ministry begins, Luke has been demonstrating the significance of Christ and the superiority of Christ. And here we see His superiority again. In this account of John’s baptizing ministry and the baptism of Jesus we find that **four aspects of Christ’s superiority...**

1. **Christ is Superior because of the BAPTISM He GIVES (vv. 15-16)**
2. **Christ is Superior because of the JUDGMENT He DISPENSES (v. 17)**
3. **Christ is Superior because of the SIN He EXPOSES (vv. 18-20)**
4. **Christ is Superior because of the BAPTISM He RECEIVES (vv. 21-22)**

1. Christ is Superior because of the BAPTISM He GIVES (vv. 15-16)

- We don't have extended information about John the Baptist's sermons — but it seems that they all contained the same message — baptism of repentance for forgiveness (vv. 3, 8). He warned of judgment and he exhorted for transformed lives. Pretty basic message (that is still unchanged).
 - ✓ Yet there was something compelling about the message because people were coming (**crowds**, vv. 7, 10). And he had a loyal group of men who followed him who were called disciples (7:18ff). And that group persisted even into the early church age (Apollos in **Acts 18:25**).
 - ✓ But people weren't just listening to him and following him around the countryside. His message was compelling enough that they (**the people** — the great majority) **were in a state of expectation**.
 - This expectation is a reference to anticipating something that is coming soon (e.g., a baby).
 - It is also used for anticipation of the end of God's plan for history (7:19-20), which is what it means here. They are anticipating the Messiah (which is what John was called to preach).
 - But they were **wondering in their hearts** if **John was the Christ**.
 - ... Usually, we would understand "in their hearts" to refer to internal contemplation. But there was public conversation about John (7:19ff) — even after he died (9:7-9).
 - ... The people thought that John might possibly be the Messiah (anointed One, Dt. 18:15).
 - ... What made them think this? John was not a descendent of David and he did no miracles. He was from the line of priests, but he did not serve as a priest, and he was poor. The only thing that commended John was his preaching (likely both the message and the boldness).
 - ... They heard him preach and they thought (and said), "that's preaching like the King..."
- We don't know how long this kind of talk happened, but John stopped it definitively (v. 16).
 - ✓ He does not deny that what he was doing was significant — both his message of repentance and his baptism of repentance were essential (they fulfilled prophecy and were God's calling, 1:15).
 - ✓ John explains that he is not the Messiah because —
 - Jesus is inherently greater than him (**mightier than I**).
 - ... The word **mightier** doesn't refer to physical strength but to influential position.
 - ... The same idea is used in the OT to refer to the Messianic King (Dt. 10:17; **Is. 11:2**) and Redeemer of Israel (**Jer. 50:34**).
 - ... Jesus is so much mightier that John isn't even **fit to untie the thong of His sandals**. This was the job of the lowest servant in the house to untie the sandals of others and wash their feet; John says he is lower than the lowest servant in comparison to Christ. He is "unqualified" for even that task for the Messiah (which is why **Jn. 3:30**).

- Jesus will bring a greater baptism than him — the **baptism of the Holy Spirit**.
 - ... Last week we noted that the basic idea of **baptism** is identity — so to be baptized with repentance for forgiveness is to identify with the truth that one needs repentance and forgiveness. Nothing salvific happens in the water, but there *is* identification with a truth.
 - ... But Jesus would bring a baptism that is far greater than water baptism — **He will baptize with the Holy Spirit**. That is, He will identify/connect us to Himself by means of the Holy Spirit, who guarantees our life in Christ (today and always) — cf. **Rom. 6:3-7**.
 - ... The baptism of the Spirit is the reality while the water baptism is only the picture.
 - ... Christ is greater than John because John only preaches about what He will do; Christ *does* it!
 - ... [Aside: How does Christ baptize **with fire**? The OT typically connects fire to judgment (e.g., **Is. 4:4-5** — purging the people so some might dwell with God). John is probably saying that all men will be baptized by the Spirit or condemned by fire (Lk. 12:49ff). The Messiah will divide the people. There is an offer of one baptism but there are two consequences: either into Christ or into wrath. And this also is infinitely beyond John's ability.]
- These two phrases affirm that Jesus is greater than John in both person and work. He is greater because of who He is by nature and what He does in service and ministry.
- Even while he is preaching repentance (*because* he is preaching repentance), John emphasizes the greatness and superiority of Christ.
 - ✓ Christ is greater than any other power or authority.
 - ✓ Christ is greater than any sin (and its consequences).
 - ✓ Christ is greater than all (Col. 3:11). He is our everything. (And the temptation is to think of our "treasures" as everything and Him only as "something.")

2. Christ is Superior because of the **JUDGMENT** He **DISPENSES** (v. 17)

- John continues the idea he began with the concept of fire (v. 16) — Christ is not only great for what He gives to those who belong to Him, but what He gives to those who reject Him.
- The Messiah will rule in grace over His people (**Mt. 19:28**); He will also rule in judgment over those who rebel against Him (**Mt. 13:41-42**). So in this verse he amplifies what he said in v. 16b using an analogy.
 - ✓ The **winnowing fork** was something like a pitchfork that was used to lift the cut grain into the air so that the chaff would blow away while the grain would fall to the ground.
 - ✓ The **threshing floor** was "a level, circular area twenty-five to forty ft. in diameter, in or near the grain field, preferably on an elevated spot exposed to the wind. It was prepared by removing the loose stones (by which a grain-containing border is made), then wetting and tamping the ground, and finally sweeping it." [ZPEB]
 - ✓ John's message is that the Messiah will come and separate the spiritual grain from chaff.

- There are two ends for the grain and chaff —
 - ✓ Because the wheat is useful, it is **gathered** and brought into the **barn** for safekeeping.
 - ✓ The chaff will be **burned up** in judgment. It is totally consumed (though without being fully destroyed (Mt. 13:40-42, 49-50; 18:8; 25:46). It is burned in the **unquenchable** fire — that is the inextinguishable fire; it will never go out and cannot be avoided. The judgment of Christ is decisive, unending, and irreversible. And terrible.
 - ✓ Hell is so bad because the consequences perfectly fit the sin; the sin is an infinitely great crime and the penalty is also infinitely weighty and infinitely long. We cannot imagine just how horrid it is.
 - ✓ [This is why our unrighteous anger is so wasted — it is incapable of exacting a judgment to fit the sin. But we can trust God that He will do it — Rom. 12:19. Leave the sins against you with Him. He will extract the appropriate judgment.]
 - ✓ Christ is fair (just) in His judgment, unending in His judgment, and thorough in His judgment (no individual will escape it and no sin will be overlooked.)
 - ✓ If you are not a believer in Jesus this is your end; you will have to pay for all your sins yourself. And your payment in Hell will never be enough to satisfy God, so you will always be there. Or you can ask someone to pay it for you. And there is One Person who has enough “wealth” (righteousness) to make that payment — the Lord Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose from the grave to prove that God was satisfied with His payment. Believe in Him for forgiveness (Lk. 24:46-47).
- This is a second reason why John says, “I’m not the Messiah!” Christ is greater in authority and King and the baptism of the Holy Spirit He provides for those who are in Him. And He is greater in authority to exact every judgment against every sin.

3. Christ is Superior because of the **SIN** He **EXPOSES** (vv. 18-20)

- Having answered their question about whether He was Messiah, John kept preaching (v. 18).
 - ✓ He had **many other exhortations** — “he had more to say.” He had not exhausted the truth of OT.
 - ✓ But every other thing he said was connected to **the gospel** (repentance and faith, vv. 8, 10).
 - ✓ This is another affirmation that he is not preaching himself or his ideas; he is preaching Christ (Messiah) and the message that will lead people to trust in Christ.
 - ✓ In the context of preaching the gospel, Luke records how John spoke to one of the most influential men of that region, if not the world — **Herod** (v.19).
- This is not the Herod the Great that slaughter all the babies in Mt. 2. This is **Herod** Antipas.
 - ✓ He was the son of Herod the Great (who had many children because he had 10 wives).
 - ✓ After Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided between three sons and Antipas who ruled over the **region of Galilee** (northern Israel).

- ✓ Herod Antipas was not a Jew since his father was an Edomite and his mother a Samaritan (both people groups were hated by Jews).
- ✓ But John wasn't concerned about Herod's ethnicity, his political decisions, or his alliance with Rome. He was concerned with his personal character and morality:
 - John wasn't just concerned: he **reprimanded** Herod — “reproved” (cf. Mt. 18:15).
 - The reproof was because of **Herodias**. This is a truth-is-more-bizarre-than-fiction story:
 - ... Herod had ten wives; he had Antipas with Malthace, Philip (not Tetrarch) w/ a second wife.
 - ... Antipas married the daughter of the king of Nabatea (SE of the Jordan River).
 - ... Philip married Herodias, the daughter of his half-brother, Aristobulus (his niece and Herod the Great's granddaughter).
 - ... On a trip to visit Philip, Herod became enamored with Herodias, divorced his wife, and compelled her to leave Philip and get married to him.
 - So Antipas' sin was divorce, marrying his brother's wife (Lev. 18:16) and incest (Lev. 20:21).
- ✓ **John was more angered** (righteously) by Herod's open flaunting of sin than he was afraid of Herod. He was bold in speaking the message of repentance even to powerful rulers (you might imagine Herod saying, in the spirit of v. 12, “what about me?...” — this was John's answer).
- ✓ Matthew and Mark also mention this story but only Luke points out that John talked about ***all the wicked things which Herod had done*** — there were many opportunities for repentance and John was unafraid to address them all.
 - Let us note that when sin is left unrepented, it grows, and it feeds and stimulates other sins. We never sin in isolation — sin likes the company of more sin. Sin likes to “hide” under other sin.
 - And all sin brings judgment. Sin does not escape the eyes of the Lord. He cares about all sin.
- Because John called out Herod's sin, Herod **added**/compounded (even more) to his sexual sin. He **locked John up in prison**. The imprisonment of John is an attempt to stop him from talking; it is a blatant attempt to suppress the truth.
 - ✓ Herod seems content to have simply locked up John (Mark 6:20 says he used to enjoy talking to John, which may suggest a hardened heart).
 - ✓ But Herodias wasn't content; she hated John and had him killed (literally had his head served on a platter, **Mk. 6:19, 25**). Cf. Lk. 9:6-7.
- So this is the ministry of John — preaching the gospel of repentance and faith in the Messiah. And that preaching is superior because it brings conviction of sin to even the most powerful people. Implications:
 - ✓ John's message doesn't convict of sin, but Christ's **gospel** does — it is superior and authoritative.
 - ✓ Just because someone is convicted of sin doesn't mean they repent; Herod was apathetic and Herodias was apoplectic — but neither repented. So, John kept preaching.
 - ✓ The responsibility of the preacher is not to bring about repentance (that's HS), but only to preach.

4. Christ is Superior because of the BAPTISM He RECEIVES (vv. 21-22)

- These final two verses are the most important of the passage:
 - ✓ They mark the end of John's ministry (notice that while he baptizes Jesus, he is unnamed in vv. 21-22).
 - ✓ They mark the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. He has been in obscurity for 30 years; that is over.
 - ✓ It is one of the most important Trinitarian passages in the Bible because it presents all three members of the Trinity of God present at the same time (refuting modalism).
 - ✓ It is one of the most important Christological passages in the NT because it is one of three divine testimonies of Christ in the Gospels (cf. 9:28-36 [Transfiguration]; Jn. 12:27-28).
- While ***all the people were being baptized***...Jesus appears alongside others who were coming for baptism. It suggests that there was still a large crowd that was coming to John (***all***...).
- ***Jesus was also baptized***...
 - ✓ Like so many other statements about Jesus, it is severely understated (He was born, He was crucified, He died, He is not here...). The understatement is Luke's way to emphasize that what was most important about Jesus' baptism was not the water and not the act, but what happened after (v. 22).
 - ✓ While the Bible is largely quiet about baptism in the OT, there does seem to be some form of it:
 - Baptism seems to be connected at least superficially to the OT act of ritual cleansing with water.
 - Non-biblical writers tell us that baptism was used by Jews to bring Gentile converts into Judaism.
 - That proselytizing act was done by immersion, though without the idea of death and life.
 - So the Jews *did* practice baptism before John the Baptist; it was a way of identifying with a new set of beliefs and a rejection of previous beliefs (which is why the Pharisees rejected it, **7:30**).
 - So when the Jews responded to John's message of repentance, they were identifying themselves as sinners who needed repentance and forgiveness because they were totally unrighteous.
 - And this water baptism doesn't save: it's only a symbol just like my wedding ring represents my marriage to Raye Jeanne. Every time I look at that ring I am reminded that I am united to her as one flesh. But the ring isn't what united us; what united us is fact that on May 16, 1987 we vowed to each other to be one. This ring is merely a symbol of that truth, and baptism also is only a symbol of the reality of what happened in our salvation.
 - ✓ Since that is true, the question is *why* was Jesus baptized?
 - It represents an endorsement of John's ministry and message (20:1-8). In baptism, Jesus connects His ministry to John's.
 - In His baptism, Jesus identified himself with the people who need repentance and with John's message of repentance (1:76-77; 3:3; **2 Cor. 5:21**); His is endorsing the need of people to repent.
 - In His baptism, He fulfills the righteous demands of God: God commanded John the Baptist to baptize (Jn. 1:33). And since God wanted people to be baptized, the righteous needed to be baptized. And whatever God required, Jesus did—even things He personally did not need to do.

In so doing, Jesus fulfills all righteousness for His people ([Mt. 5:17](#)).

- In the Spirit's descending, Jesus is revealed as the Coming One to whom John pointed and who brings a greater baptism (vv. 15-18). He doesn't need baptism because He is already approved by God; His baptism pictures what He will provide for His people.
- The climax of the story of Jesus' baptism is given in v. 22 —
 - ✓ **While He was praying...** — Only Luke says that Jesus prayed at the baptism; we don't know what He said, but it appears that the Father's declaration is at least partially as response to Jesus' prayer.
 - ✓ **Heaven was opened** — the curtain/veil that separates this life from the next was momentarily pulled back and God "steps out" to address the people. It appears something physical happened that was visible to those who were present to demonstrate that this was divine intervention.
 - ✓ **The Holy Spirit descended...like a dove** — the Spirit didn't come in the form of a dove (the Spirit is *not* a dove), but the movement of the Spirit was like a dove.
 - ✓ What did they see? We don't know. What's important is not what they saw, but what they heard.
 - ✓ **A voice came out of Heaven** (cf. 9:35) — this declaration is the main point of the passage.
 - **You are My beloved Son** — right at the beginning of His ministry, the uniqueness of the Triune relationship and the Father-Son fellowship is emphasized ([Ps. 2:7](#)). And the nature of their relationship is love. There is eternal delight between Father and Son — and in the incarnation.
 - This is also a fulfillment of the prophecy of the Messiah from [Isaiah 42:1ff](#). He is not only the Son, but He is a King (also in Ps. 2:7); there is authority with this Son.
 - And the Father is **well-pleased** with His Son — the Father "approves" — which reminds us that Jesus wasn't baptized for His own repentance; the Father wouldn't give "approval" to a sinful Son — "He cannot look on wickedness with favor" ([Hab. 1:13](#)).
 - Remember that when we are justified, the righteousness of Christ is accounted (imputed) to us — and if we have His righteousness, then we also have the Father's approval. You may not be "approved" by your father, your siblings, your friends, your boss, your spouse. But in Christ, you have the infinite and eternal approval of God. You are safe in Him.
 - ✓ This is the message of this section: Christ is supreme, because Christ alone is approved by God for His inherent personal righteousness and because of the union of fellowship that they share.
 - ✓ Yes, Jesus was baptized — not because He was *inferior*, but because He was (is) *superior*.

CONCLUSION: In less than a month we will have an election to mark our national approval of the person to lead us for the next four years. On this day in 28-29 A.D., Heaven spoke. And God put His approval on Christ as the Son of Man who is authoritative and will eternally rule with Him and is adequate to redeem sinners. And having received that approval, Jesus' ministry can begin. And we can learn to delight in Him.

BENEDICTION: [Jude 24-25](#)