Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Why Was Jesus Baptized?
Scripture: Matthew 3
Code: BQ33111

Then Jesus arrived from Galilee at the Jordan coming to John, to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" But Jesus answering said to him, "Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he permitted Him. (Matthew 3:13–15)

It is not difficult to understand John's concern. His baptism was for confession of sin and repentance (3:2, 6, 11), of which he himself had need; but Jesus had no sins to confess or be forgiven of. John's baptism was for those who turned from their sin and thereby became fit for the arrival of the great King. Why, then, would the sinless King Himself want to be baptized?

It was because John the Baptist was fully aware of Jesus' deity and sinlessness that he **tried to prevent Him**. The Greek verb is in the imperfect tense (*diekoluen*) and suggests a continued effort by John-"he kept trying to prevent Him." The verb is also a compound, whose prepositional prefix (*dia*) intensifies it. The pronouns in John's statement are all emphatic, giving evidence of his bewilderment. **I have need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?** He did not directly contradict Jesus, as Peter would do (Matt. 16:22), but he thought that somehow he surely misunderstood what Jesus intended, that He could not possibly mean what He seemed to be saying.

John's attempt to **prevent** Jesus from being baptized is therefore a testimony to Jesus' sinlessness. This prophet, of whom the Lord Himself said there had "not arisen anyone greater" (Matt. 11:11), knew that he himself was not sinless. **I have need to be baptized by You**, he told Jesus, **and do You come to me?** "I am only a prophet of God," John was saying, "and I am sinful like everyone whom I baptize. But You are the Son of God and sinless. You are not a sinner. Why, then, do you ask me to baptize You?" Among John's many God-given insights into who Jesus was, what He was like, and what He had come to do, was his knowledge that the One who now stood before Him was without sin. In a less direct but yet definite way, John declared with the writer of Hebrews that Jesus, though "tempted in all things as we are, [is] yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). So even in his reluctance to baptize Christ, John was fulfilling the role of a herald and the office of a prophet by proclaiming the perfection of the Savior.

Why did Jesus, who was even more aware of His own sinlessness than John was, want to submit Himself to an act that testified to confession and repentance of sin? Some interpreters suggest that He intended His baptism to be a sort of initiatory rite for His high priesthood, reflecting the ceremony

which prepared the Old Testament priests for their ministry. Others suggest that Jesus wanted to identify Himself with the Gentiles, who were initiated into Judaism as proselytes by the act of baptism. Still others take Jesus' baptism to be His recognition and endorsement of John's authority, His accrediting of John as a true prophet of God and the genuine forerunner of His own ministry. A fourth view is that the Lord intended to be baptized vicariously for the sins of mankind, making His baptism, along with His atoning death on the cross, a part of His sin-bearing, rederuptive work.

But none of those views is supported by Scripture, and none fits the context of the present passage. Jesus Himself explains to John His reason for wanting to be baptized. In His first recorded words since the age of twelve, when He told His parents, "Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?" (Luke 2:49), Jesus said, **Permit it at this time; for in this way it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness**. These are words of royal dignity and humility.

Jesus did not deny that He was spiritually superior to John or that He was sinless. **Permit it at this time** was an idiom meaning that the act of His baptism, though not seemingly appropriate, was indeed appropriate for this special **time**. Jesus understood John's reluctance and knew that it came from deep spiritual commitment and sincerity. He gave permission for John to do what, without divine instruction, he would never have been willing to do. He assured the prophet that **in this way it is fitting**, and went on to explain to John that His baptism was important for both of their ministries, **for us to fulfill all righteousness**. For God's plan to be perfectly fulfilled, it was necessary for Jesus to be baptized and to be baptized specifically by John.

It seems that one reason Jesus submitted to baptism was to give an example of obedience to His followers. As the King of kings Jesus recognized that He had no ultimate obligation to pay taxes to a human government. When Peter on one occasion asked about the matter, Jesus replied, " 'What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?' And upon his saying, 'From strangers,' Jesus said to him, 'Consequently the sons are exempt. But, lest we give them offense, … give it [a stater coin] to them for you and Me' " (Matt. 17:25–27). As Scripture makes clear in many places, it is proper and right for believers, even though they are sons of God, to honor and pay taxes to human governments (see Rom. 13:1–7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet. 2:13–15). In every case, Jesus modeled obedience. In His baptism He acknowledged that John's standard of righteousness was valid and in action affirmed it as the will of God to which men are to be subject.

Jesus came into the world to identify with men; and to identify with men is to identify with sin. He could not purchase righteousness for mankind if He did not identify with mankind's sin. Hundreds of years before Christ's coming, Isaiah had declared that the Messiah "was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isa. 53:12). Jesus' baptism also represented the willing identification of the sinless Son of God with the sinful people He came to save.

That was the first act of His ministry, the first step in the redemptive plan that He came to fulfill. He who had no sin took His place among those who had no righteousness. He who was without sin submitted to a baptism for sinners. In this act the Savior of the world took His place among the sinners of the world. The sinless Friend of sinners was sent by the Father “in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh” (Rom. 8:3); and He “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21; cf. Isa. 53:11). There was no other way **to fulfill all righteousness**.

Jesus’ baptism not only was a symbol of His identity with sinners but was also a symbol of His death and resurrection, and therefore a prefiguremerit of Christian baptism. Jesus made only two other references to personal baptism, and each related to His death. Not long before His final trip to Jerusalem He told His disciples, “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:50). On the other occasion He was responding to the request by James and John that they be given the top positions in His heavenly kingdom. “You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?” (Mark 10:38). Jesus’ supreme identification with sinners was His taking their sin upon Himself, which He did at Calvary.

Though John, having been given such a brief explanation, could not possibly have comprehended the full meaning of Jesus’ baptism, he accepted His Lord’s word and obeyed. **Then he permitted Him**.

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