

The Mandate and Meaning of Believer's Baptism

Matt. 28:18-20

Intro. This morning we've planned to worship the Lord by way of the two ordinances He has given us. The first is believer's baptism and the second is Communion or the Lord's Table. Both of these ordinances are rich in meaning, but neither has saving power. By their baptism, 7 believers will declare their faith in Christ while the rest of us serve as happy witnesses. Then later in the service, each of us who believe is invited to remember Christ's sacrifice as we participate in the Lord's Table.

The relation between these two ordinances is similar to the relation between a marriage ceremony and anniversary celebrations that follow. Like a marriage ceremony where a man and woman publically declare their love and commitment to each other, baptism happens only once as the believer identifies with Jesus. Then once a year after their ceremony, married couples typically do something special to remember and celebrate their wedding day. Intelligent husbands will remember that date. The vows the couple made on their wedding day are sometimes repeated as they celebrate their marriage. Communion is like that. Once a month we gather around the Lord's Table to give thanks for what Christ has done for us. It's a time to examine ourselves and renew our fellowship with Him. In the busyness of life and service, communion was designed to be a pause when we remember our Savior's sacrifice. While neither ordinance has saving power, both symbolize the effectiveness of the cross and the life and hope we have through faith in Christ. This morning I want to focus on the mandate and meaning of believer's baptism.

1. The mandate of believer's baptism - In the passage known as the Great Commission, Jesus gave a command to His followers... He said, "**All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.**" - Matt. 28:18-20 This same basic command was recorded by Mark in these words, **He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."** - Mk. 16:15, 16

The commands are clear and uncomplicated. The responsibility of the believing Church is to **go into all the world / preach the good news / make disciples / baptize whoever believes / and teach obedience to the commands of Christ.** He said, "**those who believe and are baptized will be saved but those who don't believe will be condemned.**"

A number of facts about believer's baptism emerge from this Great Commission.

First, Jesus said baptism is to be administered **in the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.** This means baptism is endorsed and blessed by each member of the Triune Godhead. As an act of identification, baptism is an ordinance by which the believer publicly declares association with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Though God's **name** is singular **v.19** the grammatical way the three names are joined together, points to the oneness and equality between the three persons who are entirely equal in power and glory.

The Jewish people had ceremonial washings and were willing to identify with God the Father. But most of Israel refused to believe and confess that Jesus is God the Son. Speaking to them, Jesus said, "**Unless you believe I am He, you will die in your sins.**" He told His disciples, "**You believe in God, believe also in Me.**" So in baptism the believer gladly identifies with Jesus as God.

Since last Sunday, the media has been obsessed by the NFL players who refused to stand for the flag and our national anthem. I mention this only to say that baptism has far greater significance.

Baptism involves taking a stand for Jesus Christ, the Savior King of humanity. It's a stand that affects eternal destiny. Jesus said, **"Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven. - Matt. 10:32, 33** So believer's baptism is a public confession of faith that signifies solidarity with the God of the Bible who eternally exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Those baptized declare they believe Jesus is God who came in human form to save them from their sin.

2. So those baptized must be mature enough to hear the Gospel with understanding and based on what they hear, put their faith in Christ. We know this because the order presented consistently in the NT always has baptism subsequent to faith in Christ. We find this order 8x's in the Book of Acts. The disciples were not commanded to baptize everybody. **Mk. 16:16** says they were to baptize **whoever believes**. For this reason, the baptism of infants is not consistent with what the NT teaches about baptism. In fact, the Bible says nothing at all about infant baptism. Infants simply aren't mature enough to hear and believe for themselves. Four of the adults being baptized this AM were baptized as infants. But during the course of their spiritual journey, they've come to believe and embrace the teaching of the NT. Though their parents and the one who baptized them were noble and well intentioned, they were misinformed. Now as adult believers these friends have come to realize that only those mature enough to believe in Christ can take the step of obedience and be baptized.

Yet there's a world of people who have been deceived. They feel they're OK with God because they were baptized in church as an infant. But having heard the good news, the NT makes it clear that we must personally decide to believe and ask Christ for His cleansing and forgiveness...and no ceremony at any age can do that for us.

3. In the construction of these verses, the baptizing of believers is made equally important to going into all the world / preaching the Gospel / making disciples / and teaching obedience to the commands of Christ. Suppose the Church went into all the world but didn't preach the Gospel or make disciples. Would we be faithful to the Lord? Suppose we taught obedience to the commands of Christ but never preached the Gospel. Would we be true to our calling? In the same way...we can't be faithful to all that Christ has commanded if we neglect the baptism of believers.

This is significant because today more and more people find their Christianity in electronic media or by migrating from one Christian event to another. Baptism doesn't happen in these venues and self-baptism is weird and invalid. As a result, in all history, today there is probably the greatest number of professing believers who have not been baptized. Maybe you're one of them. I say this not to shame you but to encourage you. Indifference towards baptism reveals unfaithfulness to the commands of the Lord and reluctance to go public as one who has left sins behind to fully embrace the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

4. The time period when this commission is to be carried out is specified by the phrase, **surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age**. Since **the end of the age**, or the return of Christ, hasn't happened yet...baptism remains to be practiced by all who believe. It's the responsibility of those who serve the Lord by preaching His Word. And it's the responsibility of those who believe the Word that is preached. As such, it becomes a test of our obedience to Jesus.

So if we put these thoughts together, we find that baptism symbolizes identity with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It pertains to those who are old enough to hear / understand / and believe the Gospel. It's an essential part of the commission Christ gave His Church and the present responsibility of all who believe. So what does it mean to be baptized?

2. The meaning of believer's baptism - We've already said baptism represents the believer's association with the Triune God of the Bible. But there's more. Through baptism, a believer also identifies with the saving work of Christ on his behalf. A passage that explains this is **Rom. 6**. Allow me to read **vs.1-4** - **What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? 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.**

Now let me be clear about something. **Rom. 6** is a dry passage. By "dry", I don't mean boring. What I mean is this...there's no water here. Paul had Spirit baptism in view here just as he did in **I Cor. 12:13** where he wrote, **For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body--whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free--and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.** The baptism here is Spiritual not ceremonial and it pertains to every believer. Notice **I Cor. 12:13** says, **For we were all baptized...** This spiritual baptism happens to every believer the moment they believe. As a mysterious work of God, we are spiritually placed into union with Jesus Christ. Water baptism, on the other hand, is the ceremony / the visual aide / and the symbol of that mysterious happening. It visibly portrays the invisible spiritual reality of Spirit baptism. Are you with me on this?

When answering the question, should Christians go on sinning? Paul answered, No! **By no means.** Why?...Because we've been given a new life that is wired for righteousness. He then supported his answer by reminding his readers of the significance of their baptism. By the work of the Spirit, God places every believing into Jesus Christ. That's another way of saying He permanently unites us to Christ. Just as a man and woman become one in marriage, God creates solidarity between the believer and the Savior and there's no sin in our Savior's life!

In **v. 3** he said, **Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?** Not only does the baptized believer confess their willingness to identify with Jesus, but they confess their willingness to identify with **the death** and burial of Jesus. Here's what that means...In baptism, the believing sinner acknowledges that they could not be saved apart from Christ's death on the cross. When Jesus died for sin, He died as our substitute. He took our place. Since He died for us this way, it was as though we died. This what baptism portrays.

The water in the baptistery represents the realm of death. As air-breathers, we can only survive a few minutes beneath the surface of the water. Am I right? In this regard, a large mouth bass has it all over a large mouth human being! For just a moment, as the candidate is lowered beneath the water...they enter the realm of death. By submitting to this dunking, they testify their belief that because Jesus died for them, in God's sight they died with Him. So in a public and visual way, they tell us they have personally relied on the death of Christ for the cleansing and forgiveness of their sin. And just as Christ was buried, their old life died and was buried when they trusted Him.

Then, if all goes well and it usually does, the candidate is raised from beneath the water. **v. 4** says, **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.** As the believer is lifted up out of the water they re-enact the resurrection. Just as Jesus was raised from the dead, baptism symbolizes the believer's release from the power and sentence of sin and death. Their faith in Christ has set them free to live a new life...a life that is new in terms of quality...a life guided by obedience to the Word and empowered by the Spirit...a life pleasing to God. This is the testimony is declared by baptism.

Now the water doesn't cleanse anybody. The ceremony saves no one. It only serves to publicly and visibly declare what happened for them, to them and in them the moment they trusted Jesus.

Now let's be real honest for a moment or two. We won't be honest too long...just for a couple of minutes...then we can go back to being dishonest. It's a little humiliating to undergo baptism, isn't it? It's unnerving for some to speak in front of a crowd. It's humiliating to get into that silly angelic white robe and get dunked in front of so many people. I mean, your hair gets all wet and out of place. (No problem for me!) You might sputter a little and water might come out your nose.

Why do it if there isn't anything meritorious about it? I mean, we aren't baptized to be saved...we trusted Christ to save us. We don't do it for some special blessing. It doesn't make us more clean or spiritual. So, why do it? We do it because Jesus is Lord. It's just that simple. Jesus commanded all who believe to be baptized. And ever since that day when He said it, a great multitude of believing sinners have obeyed His Words and entered the water to be identified with Him. As I think about all this, I remember the Lord's command to Naaman.

3. An Old Testament Illustration of obedient faith – II Kings 5 - Let me refresh your memory with a shortened version of the story. Naaman was a Syrian general who had the loathsome and incurable disease of leprosy. He was a great man in his day. God told Elisha to tell Naaman that if he would dip 7x's in the Jordan River, he would be healed. By the way, this dip in the Jordan has nothing to do with Christian baptism except this...what God required tested Naaman's faith and obedience. When general Naaman heard what God's said, he protested inwardly... *"What a ridiculous thing to do!"* Out loud he questioned, *"Why does it have to be the Jordan? The rivers in Syria are closer and cleaner than the waters in Israel?"* *Our ecoli count is lower.* In a display of offended pride, he stormed off.

But Naaman's servants were wiser than their master. They persuaded him saying...**"My father, if the prophet had told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more, then, when he tells you wash and be cleansed!"** In other words, *"God's command isn't so hard as you're making it. In fact, it's so easy you ought to do it in a heartbeat. Set aside your pride and logic and do it because the Lord, the only One with power to heal you, says you must."*

In this regard, the story of Naaman reminds me of baptism. By faith Naaman obeyed the Lord and was completely and instantly healed. And the moment we trust Christ as Savior we're completely justified and forgiven. Jesus did the hard part for us. He did the heavy lifting...the saving. He endured public shame and humiliation. He suffered the agony of the cross and separation from His Father. There is no comparison between what Jesus did and what He asks us to do. The water in the tank is warm. Most of the people gathered here this morning are friendly and supportive. We minimize the level of embarrassment every way we can. But it still takes a humble heart to say, *"Jesus, your will be done. I'll do this, because You've asked me to."*

The water didn't cure Naaman and the waters of baptism can't cleanse anybody from sin. But as **I Peter 3:18** says, **baptism...is the pledge of a good conscience toward God.** It's a testimony to the kind of faith that takes God at his Word and obeys even when doing so is a little uncomfortable. Each candidate to be baptized here this AM knows they needed to be saved and that they couldn't save themselves. Each candidate has placed their faith in Christ to save them. They believe and confess that Jesus died and rose again for them. So they enter the water which represents Christ's death, burial and resurrection and they do it because Jesus says so and His Spirit has led to obey Him. The Bible says this new life Jesus gave them is to be lived by this same principle...by faith. So they testify before all of us, that their purpose going forward is to live for Jesus by simply doing what He says they should do in the power of His Spirit. Let's pray together.