

**Series:** From Israel to Everyone: Disciples who Demonstrate God’s Presence (a study of Matthew).

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 3:11-17

(App to get lesson/slides, ask questions. Color Pg)

Last time, we learned how *John* was a *baptizer* with a powerful message for the present: “*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*” We discussed how this implies **Faith is far more than a ticket to heaven.** God cares how we live here and now, not just there and then. Today, we’ll dive into *John’s baptism* in *3:11-17* and submerge ourselves in this...

**BIG IDEA: Baptism is far more than a ceremony.**

Let’s start reading in *verse 11* which contrasts *water baptism for repentance* with internal spiritual cleansing: “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.* It may seem odd to find a Jewish *prophet baptizing* when Judaism is best known for circumcising. People often presume *baptism* began with Christianity, yet it’s always been part of Jewish worship habits (liturgy). God’s law prescribed “*ritual cleansing ceremonies*” where, for example, priests washed before serving and people washed and offered a sacrifice to re-enter community after sickness (cf. Leviticus 8, 15-16). Whether public or private, the *baptismal* location was called a “Mikveh” which means “*a collection of fresh or living water.*” Ancient prophets played on the semantics of related Hebrew words which express hope in, waiting on, or aligning with God. For example, Jeremiah (17:13) wrote: “*O LORD, the hope (Mikvah) of Israel...the fountain of living water (Mikveh).*” My point, however, is that *John* did not invent a new worship ritual, he honored the intent of an ancient practice which further proves Christianity is fulfilling Judaism, not replacing it!

Now, recall those *Pharisees and Sadducees John* called out in *verses 7-10*. *Pharisees* were middle-class scholars who worked in local synagogues to reform Jewish people. *Sadducees* were wealthy, elitist priests who controlled Israel’s temple and high court (the Sanhedrin). As we’ve seen, *Matthew* arranged his gospel to highlight God’s history of including “*outsiders.*” He seems to depict *John*

*baptizing* people who the *Pharisees and Sadducees* deemed too impure for their Mikvehs. So, for *John* to question the purity/sincerity of these officials was quite ironic! This hints at [an interesting but imperfect theory](#) that *John* had been raised/influenced by a stricter Jewish group known as [Essenes](#), best known for preserving [the Dead Sea Scrolls](#)! Unlike *Pharisees and Sadducees* who tried fixing things from the inside, Essenes believed the system was so broken that the only *righteous* response was to abandon it and start over in the *wilderness*. History buffs will love the links in our notes, but hopefully we all can see [John moving things in a more communal and inclusive direction like Jesus did](#). Before we move on, let's re-read *verse 11* to glean *John's* point: "*I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*" Water was an external and communal way to declare kingdom buy-in, but only an internal *Spirit and fire baptism* achieves true internal purification and character transformation. Like ancient Jewish prophets, *John* expected the Messiah to achieve God's new covenant promise spoken by Ezekiel (36:25-27): "*I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and...I will give you a new heart, and...put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes...*"

Let's now plow through *John's* farm metaphor in *Matthew 3:12: His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.*" The *threshing floor* is where farmers separate *wheat* from its outer shell (the *chaff*) with a *winnowing fork*. By tossing it into the air, the heavy *wheat* remained and the lighter part was blown away and *burned*. You can [follow the link in our notes](#) to read about that, but *the Pharisees and Sadducees* knew *John* was again challenging the sincerity of their worship! You see, Jerusalem's temple was built on a *threshing floor* bought by King David (cf. 2 Samuel 24), so *John* was basically reminding them that weightless rituals won't survive the final sorting! In their case, worship had become performance instead of liturgical acts (habits) to help people connect and partner with God. In our case, we must ask questions like: "*What weight does all this put on our liturgy? Do our worship habits function as a 'liturgical gym' that builds the*

*muscle of love, or as a 'hollow shell' of performance that won't survive **winnowing**? Do our practices produce the 'wheat' of enduring faith or just the 'chaff' of religious highs that blow away in life's storms?"*

Finally, don't be confused about why sinless Jesus **consented to a baptism of repentance**. Scripture repeatedly claims He had NO SIN to **repent** of. However, our newfound knowledge of Jewish practices suggest Jesus came to **John** for a ceremonial washing to start His priestly work of reconnecting creation with Creator. It was like a public declaration of intent to gather a harvest of people to lead on paths of righteousness with God. This seems evident when we read **verses 13-17: Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."** After inscribing endless echoes of the Exodus in **chapters 1-3, Matthew** began shading in some colors of creation. We're meant to see some glimpses of the beginning: **1)** The unity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **2)** The heavens and the untamed waters of Earth. **3)** The **Spirit** hovering and bringing order over the chaos. Matthew painted a picture that frames the **baptism of Jesus** as a ceremony commissioning a new creation!

In closing, let's circle back to the echoes of Exodus which further insinuate what Gary told us a few weeks back: Jesus was re-running Israel's Exodus story as the model human. It's common to presume **the voice from heaven** was saying, "*This is the divine Son of God.*" While Jesus IS fully God, He is also fully (what?) HUMAN! That's a side of Jesus we don't emphasize enough, but it's the part that fills us with hope because if human Jesus can obey God, then we can too with His help! We know that **Matthew** was talking about Jesus as the model human because he was repeating what Moses was told in Exodus 4:22, "*Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son.'*" God made similar comments in Psalm 2

about His king ruling from Zion and about His servant-king in Isaiah 42:1, “*Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations.*”

All this was **Matthew’s** setup for **chapter 4**. After having us see Jesus as the new Moses who emerged from Egypt and crossed a major body of water where He was anointed to serve, Matthew will now show us how this model human leads God’s people to victory! Of course, unlike when Moses led Israel across the Red Sea and Joshua led them across the Jordan River, this conquest of earthly territory will succeed as the prophet Zechariah (4:6) predicted: “*not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts.*” All this confirms our BIG IDEA that our **Baptism is far more than a ceremony**. It’s an outward and communal declaration identifying us as co-participants in all Jesus’ **baptism** meant, by grace activated through faith in God’s kingdom story! For now, remember, wherever you are on your journey of trusting Christ, you need not work through anything alone. Reach out and let us help!

**Sunday to Monday Connection:** With the depiction of Jesus’ baptism, Matthew paints the powerful picture of Jesus as the new and better Moses, the faithful Son Israel could not be, re-running the Exodus story by passing through the waters and emerging to lead His people into true deliverance. When the Spirit descends and the Father declares, “This is my beloved Son,” we also hear echoes of creation with God bringing order out of chaos again. For us, then, baptism signifies things like death and rebirth, rescue from slavery to sin and entrance into Spirit-empowered obedience.

- **Question:** Where are you still going through religious motions instead of trusting and obeying Christ’s Spirit-empowered faith?
- **Next Step:** Ask the Lord and some close friends to help you take that next step of obedience you’ve been putting off.
- **Note:** If you are not a Christ follower and would like to explore what all this might mean for you, please speak with someone you know here or one of our church leaders.

**Takeaways to discuss with your people** (in addition to the underlined questions above!):

1. Perhaps it bothers you that **John** hesitated to **baptize** certain **Pharisees and Sadducees** whose lives didn’t **bear the fruit of repentance**. He wasn’t impressed by their ability to quote the Bible while missing the point of the story. They got high marks for rule-following while failing to have loving

relationships with God and others. Their worship was mostly performance instead of being [liturgical acts](#) (habits that help people connect and partner with God). Here's a few questions to help us avoid the errors of *the Pharisees and Sadducees*:

- a. *"When have my Bible reading posts been sincere and when have they been for show?"*
  - b. *"In what ways do I served people unselfishly and when is it just to score points?"*
  - c. *"How could our preaching, praying, and instrument playing be less "short-term entertainment" and more of an exercise that equips us for the week ahead?"*
  - d. *"Why does it matter if we treat congregations like an audience for performers instead of participants being prompted by leaders?"*
2. John's hesitation to baptize certain people may seem insensitive or exclusive in our day. For us, the question is: *"Do you think the church is obligated to baptize anyone who claims to follow Jesus with no questions asked? If not, then what needs to be considered?"*
  3. It seems Jesus basically presented Himself to John for ceremonial washing before starting His priestly work of reconnecting creation with Creator. So, ponder this: *"What does that imply about our baptism, and would you say this has been true for you?"*
    - Scholars debate what Jesus meant, but there are 3 good suggestions based on what we've learned today: 1) *"This is God's will for me."* 2) *"This is my ceremonial washing to commission me for priestly duties."* 3) *"This is my formal intention to trust God's story and let it rule my life."* One question for us is: *"In what ways should we see our baptism as a commissioning for our priestly duties, and what does that really mean?"* (see also [this link about duties of priests](#) in Scripture).

### **Considerations for discussion leaders:**

1. Keep circling back to the big idea and main points of the passage to stay on track.
2. Keep the group small for deeper sharing. Single underlined sentences are for discussion, while key points are double underlined.
3. Keep the discussion around 30 mins. Once you hit the "sweet spot", spend your time there.
4. Keep these simple questions in your back pocket: What is God teaching you? What are you going to do about it? How will it help you love & serve others?

**Other Articles/Songs/Videos:** Please ask us for help obtaining other resources.

- The Bible Recap has some great info breaking down the different views of baptism (if you're going there next week). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wii3YmIN2z4&t=441s>
- Bible Project - Gospel of the Kingdom [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Heaven and Earth [Videos](#) and [Podcast episodes](#).
- Bible Project - Temple [Videos](#).

- Bible Project – Day of the Lord [Podcast episodes](#).

### Quotes related to this passage:

- **History of Jewish Baptism:** “While the term ‘baptism’ sounds so non-Jewish to most people, it should be noted that the act of t’vilah has ancient roots in Judaism. For example, there were prescribed ritual cleansings for the priests as they served the community (cf. Leviticus 8; 16) and for the common Israelite who had been healed of a disease like leprosy (cf. Leviticus 15). While these practices are no longer followed in modern Judaism, ritual immersion still takes place to acknowledge the cleansing of a woman after her monthly period (nidah) and to welcome new Gentile converts who are said to be spiritually cleansed at their immersion. The great rabbi of the middle ages, Maimonides, even attributes the verse in the prophet Ezekiel to convert immersion: I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols (cf. Ezekiel 36:25 as quoted in the Mishneh Torah, Mikva’ot, 11:12). (Kasdan, 27-28)
- **Discerning John’s Baptism:** “The exact background to the purposes of John’s baptism is debated, given that Jewish sources do not provide a single, definitive answer for understanding how John’s baptism of fellow Jews would have been perceived. Certainly, baptism would have had general associations with various Jewish ceremonial practices of washing for ritual purification (e.g., Num. 19:12; bathing pools for ritual cleansing were commonplace in first-century Israel). The question is whether Jewish ceremonial washings provide the primary lens for interpreting what John was doing, given that John’s baptism seems to have been performed upon a person only once. Instead, John may have been mirroring proselyte baptism, the practice of baptizing Gentiles upon conversion to Judaism. The difficulty in definitively supporting this idea is that there are no references to proselyte baptism in pre-AD 70 sources, although Craig Keener notes that proselyte baptism does appear in early Palestinian Jewish texts. John’s baptism also seems to have differed from other Jewish washing practices in its explicit connection to repentance and forgiveness and its focus on eschatological cleansing. The sum of these various rather unusual elements suggests that John’s baptism functioned as a call to the people of Israel to return and embrace a life of covenant loyalty in preparation for the coming reign of God.” (Brown, 28-29)
- **Immersion and Identity:** “The Hebrew noun form of ‘immersion’ is t’vilah, which the Greeks called baptidzo, meaning ‘to totally immerse or dip.’ In secular usage, the term is often used to describe the process of dipping a piece of cloth in a dye in order to change its appearance. Perhaps the best word is ‘identification,’ as the cloth is now identified with the color of the dye. This gives us the meaning of immersion. T’vilah is a complete immersion to identify with a particular event or message. This act of immersion would take place in a proper pool, called mikveh (from Kaveh, a collection of water). Numerous mikva’ot were found on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as well as in any sizable community throughout the Land. Certainly, the Yarden

(Jordan) would serve as a ‘kosher’ mikveh, as it would have more than the minimal requirements of fresh water.” (Kasdan, 27)

- **Mikveh rules:** “Rabbinic standards require a mikveh to be large enough for complete immersion of an average person, contain at least 150 gallons of water, and be filled from natural springs, rivers originating from springs, or rainwater.” Evangelical Dictionary of World Religions, ed. H. Wayne House (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2018), 323.
- **To fulfill all righteousness:** “It may be that Jesus refers to the necessity of obeying God’s will for him. Yet his baptism is not an expression of God’s general will expressed in the Torah. More likely, *dikaiosynē* is used in this context to signal God’s work of salvation now being inaugurated in Jesus the Messiah. God’s faithfulness to the covenant promises to Israel, including final restoration, is beginning to be fulfilled in Jesus’ life and ministry. Jesus comes “to fulfill all [God’s] righteousness” (cf. 6:33). Of the four Gospel writers, Matthew particularly draws upon language of *dikaiosynē* (‘righteousness,’ ‘justice’) to describe God and God’s work as well as Jesus’ expectations for his followers.” (Brown, 31)
- **Baptism of repentance:** “There are several interesting points of comparison between John and the Essenes (i.e., members of the Dead Sea community located near Wadi Qumran): (1) Both the Essenes and John ministered in the wilderness; the Essenes near the Dead Sea, John near the Jordan River (see Luke 1:80). (2) Both the Essenes and John practiced baptism as a rite signifying cleansing from “sin” (so John) or “evildoing” (so the Community Rule [1QS] 5:13–14). John’s call for baptism centered around the demand for repentance and, although not employing the exact terminology, the Essene practice probably carried similar meaning. From 150 B.C. to 250 A.D. there were numerous Jewish and Christian baptismal groups in Palestine. (3) Both the Essenes and John eagerly looked forward to God’s intervention in human affairs. In the Gospels and Acts this hope of John’s revolves exclusively around the Messiah who is to follow, but among the Essenes the hope for vindication and redemption rest as much with an anointed priest as with an anointed prince and descendant of David. (4) In introducing the quotation from Isa. 40:3–5 Luke adds (v. 4) the word “book” (not found in Mark 1:2 or Matt. 3:3). A similar quotation formula is found in several Essene writings (see examples below). (5) Not only is the quotation of Isa. 40:3–5 (or 40:3 in Matthew and Mark) linked with John’s ministry, but the Essenes themselves cite this Old Testament passage as justification for their peculiar lifestyle. These parallels make it reasonable to suppose that John may have had some contact with the Essenes prior to his public ministry. (Josephus himself in Life 2 claims to have spent some time with the Essenes.) John’s call to preach a baptism of repentance to all of Israel would, however, signal a break with the Essenes, who were reclusive and exclusivistic.” (Evans, 69)
- **John’s baptism differed from the Essenes:** “Essene baptism functioned quite differently from John the Baptist’s practice, despite surface similarities that have led some scholars to speculate about possible connections between them. Essene baptism—at least among the Qumran community—involved

ritual cleansing of the body, undertaken only by those whose souls were already purified through righteousness. This represents a fundamentally different approach than John's method. John baptized individuals seeking to transform their lives and would baptize immediately anyone willing to declare their intention to change, whereas Qumran initiates had to demonstrate they had already reformed before participating in ritual washings, often waiting a year or two. The structural character of these practices also diverged significantly. John's baptism occurred once and could not be repeated, while Essene ritual washings were performed repeatedly. More importantly, Essene baptisms functioned as ongoing ritual purification for community members rather than as an admission rite into the sect. John's baptisms formed part of preparations for the anticipated Messiah's arrival, whereas Qumran washings held no messianic connection and instead symbolized the moral and spiritual purity the community sought to maintain. While both groups practiced baptism as cleansing from wrongdoing, with John's emphasis on repentance paralleling the Essene understanding, the theological frameworks and practical implementations remained distinct. If John had ever belonged to the Qumran community, he would have fundamentally altered his perspective by the time he began his public ministry, and both John and the Essenes likely represented different responses to the first-century Jewish crisis rather than expressions of a shared tradition." F.F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins Outside the New Testament: Non-Biblical Stories of Jesus and the Christian Church* (F.F. Bruce Copyright Intl, 2024), 35. John William Drane, *Introducing the Bible* (Fortress Press: Minneapolis, MN, 2004), 415–421.

- **Jordan's Significance:** "This was a major river crossing. In the 'Kingdom' sense we discussed, this location was highly strategic. It was the same area where the Israelites traditionally crossed into the Promised Land under Joshua and where the prophet Elijah was said to have been taken up to heaven."
- **Echoes of Exodus:** "Jesus as God's son has already been introduced at 2:15, where Jesus' sonship is compared to that of Israel's ('Out of Egypt I called my son'). Now the motif of Jesus as the faithful Son of God is highlighted at his baptism (3:13–17) and will be contrasted with Israel's unfaithfulness in the temptation narrative that follows (chap. 4)." (Brown, 28)
- **Israel wasn't being replaced:** The mistake many make is to say, "*Israel is God's chosen people and the church is something different.*" A better explanation is found in Galatians 3:8-9: "*And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles (non-Jews) by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham (the first Jew), saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'* So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith." In other words, the true people (Israel of God) are Abraham's spiritual ancestors, just not automatically his physical ones! Again, this means the church is continuing what God started in Israel, not going to plan B!
- **One baptism:** "Luther, in fact, placed baptism at the center of the Christian life. We never lose God's baptismal promises to us but may always return to them. Perhaps what he says in the Large Catechism on baptism is even better than what we attribute to him: 'Baptism is not a work that we do but ... a

treasure that God gives us and faith grasps. ... In baptism, therefore, every Christian has enough to study and practice all his or her life. ... Thus, we must regard baptism and put it to use in such a way that we may draw strength and comfort from it when our sins or conscience oppress us, and say: ‘But I am baptized! And if I have been baptized, I have the promise that I shall be saved and have eternal life, both in soul and body ....’ (Book of Concord, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert; Fortress, 2000). Therefore baptism remains forever. Even though someone falls from it and sins, we always have access to our baptism so we may again subdue the old creature. But we need not have the water poured over us again. Even if we were immersed in water a hundred times, it would nevertheless not be more than one baptism, and its effect and significance would continue and remain. ([Web Article](#) + check out [this article](#))

- **My Son:** “These divine words of commendation at Jesus’ baptism evoke at least one Old Testament text. Scholars have argued for three possibilities: Genesis 22 (in which Isaac is referred to as Abraham’s beloved son [v. 2]), Psalm 2:7 (‘You are my son’), and/or Isaiah 42:1 (‘Here is my servant/child’). The most likely candidates are Genesis 22 and Isaiah 42. The latter is especially likely as an intentional Matthean intertext because of a number of alignments that Matthew makes between the words of commendation and the Isaiah passage, which he quotes at length in 12:18–21. There Matthew conforms two verbs (‘love’ and ‘well pleased’) to the verbs in 3:17 (also 17:5). If Isaiah 42 is the primary backdrop for God’s words at 3:17, this is significant for at least two reasons. First, this connection highlights Jesus’ role as the Isaianic servant figure (from Isa. 42–53) at the very beginning of his public ministry in Matthew (see the ‘Jesus as Isaiah’s Servant Figure’ in the unit on 12:15–21). Second, Isaiah as backdrop also highlights Jesus as Spirit anointed and his ministry as Spirit empowered, since the second half of Isaiah 42:1 indicates that God’s Spirit has been given to the servant (Matt. 12:18b).” (Brown, 31–32)

**Bibliography** (Note: Our use of these materials does not imply full agreement with them)

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