

## Text: Mt 3.4-12

In thinking about what to preach for our baptismal service, I came across the passage in Matthew where John the Baptist talks about baptism. This is just before Jesus himself is baptized.

I was struck by the Baptist's bracing language as he spoke to the Pharisees. Our text says they were "coming for baptism." Given their prejudices, it seems hardly possible they were sincere.

As I thought about this incident, this title came to me:

### *The Challenge of Baptism*

I don't mean that baptism is itself challenging for the recipient. The recipient is (or should be) pleased to identify with Christ. Baptism for the recipient is a joy, not a challenge. (The challenge comes after, in living out the Christian life...)

What I was thinking about was how baptism challenges those who observe it, especially those who are outside the faith.

Read Mt 3.4-12

The challenge comes because baptism is a picture, and it has a story to tell. The story is joyful to some and terrible to others.

### **How John's baptism challenged Judaism:**

- Judaism practiced ritual immersion for Gentile proselytes
- The Essenes (a kind of monastic sect) practiced ritual bathing daily "to symbolize repeated cleansing from sin"<sup>1</sup>
- John proposed a one-time baptism of repentance for ordinary Jews
- John's baptism implied that
  1. Jewish descent wasn't enough to be right with God
  2. Jewish rituals weren't enough to be right with God
  3. Individual hearts had to humble themselves before God

All of this would be almost offensive to the sophisticated and self-righteous in Judaism.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, The New American Commentary 22 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 75.

There is a distinction between John's baptism and Christian baptism.

- John's baptism symbolized repentance; Christian baptism adds identification with Christ.

### How Christian baptism challenges unbelief:

- It pictures death to self – you cannot save yourself.
- It pictures repentance – you are a sinner.
- It pictures dependence – you must depend on someone else for salvation
- It pictures division – you are turning your back on your old life

In our culture, even today, baptism is viewed as a positive generally, even if someone isn't "particularly religious" — they are happy for you, it's seen as a good thing.

In many cultures, baptism means turning your back on the accepted way, taking on a new life that rebukes the life of everyone else. Baptism isn't positive in cultures like that.

Having said all that, let's think about the challenge of baptism and how it impacts those who come near to it.

## I. The challenge accepted (4-6)

### A. John's portrait: unattractive

1. Poor
2. Rough
3. Prophetic

### B. Public response: enthusiastic

1. Many people
2. Confessing sins

Despite any stigma associated with the prophet, with his message, with his methods: these people came to God

## II. The challenge asserted (7-10)

### A. The unlikely candidates

1. Pharisees: extremely zealous for purity according to the Law (as they interpreted it)
2. Sadducees: extremely self-righteous in their dismissal of much of God's word and in their disdain for the common folk

Whatever they were doing, John did not think they came sincerely for baptism.

#### B. John's message to them

1. You really need to repent (you vipers!)
2. You have no ground of self-confidence (not your pedigree)
3. You are in danger of judgement

The gospel message has a similar challenge to unbelievers today – they need to repent, they have nothing to justify themselves, judgement is coming.

Baptism marks a distinction: on one side of it, your sins are forgiven; outside of it, your sin remains.

### III. The greater challenge predicted (11-12)

- A. A greater Prophet is coming
- B. The greater Prophet has a stronger message
  1. Baptism of the Holy Spirit
  2. Baptism of fire (a lot of debate in commentaries)
- C. The greater Prophet marks the dividing line of judgement

#### Conclusion:

Baptism divides between people. Those who receive it (in faith) are part of God's family, with a guarantee of heaven.

Those who think of it as a