

Matthew 3:13-17

Verse 13 – “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.”

Aside from the crucifixion of Jesus, this is in my opinion the biggest “problem” in all of Matthew. There simply aren’t any words to fully describe how totally *wrong* this would seem to be. In light of all that we have seen in chapters 1-2, we know that Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Christ. We know that Jesus is the one that John just finished speaking about in verses eleven to twelve. John said: “He who is coming after me is mightier than I” (11b). The obvious question is if Jesus is really *mightier* than John, then why should John baptize Jesus? Again, it’s just a *logical* question.

John said: “He who is coming after me is mightier than I, *whose sandals I am not worthy to carry*” (11c). Taking off and carrying someone’s sandals was the role of a slave. It was specifically stated that this “slave’s role” should never be required even of the lowest disciple. One Jewish source said that this task was too low and menial even for a Hebrew *slave* (cf. France). And yet John the Baptist says that he is not even *worthy* to carry Jesus’ sandals! So the question just begging to be asked is if John is *really* not even worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals, then how is it that Jesus comes to John to be baptized *by him*? It seems preposterous.

John said: “I baptize you with water... [but] he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (11a,d). We saw last week that John’s water baptism was just preparation for the real thing – the stronger, more powerful, more effective and apocalyptic baptism of the Holy Spirit and fire. John’s baptism symbolized on the outside what Jesus would give to his people on the inside – the cleansing and forgiveness of their sins along with all the blessings of God’s salvation. So the question that must burn in any sane mind is this: Why should the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire submit Himself to the water baptism of John? It seems ludicrous – even (at first sight) almost like a joke.

John said: “I baptize you with water *for repentance*” (11a). Remember the whole point of John’s baptism! John is calling out from the people of Israel a *remnant* in preparation for the coming of the Lord God. But Matthew has already told us that Jesus was conceived from the Holy Spirit, apart from any human father (1:18-20). And so His name would be called “Immanuel” which means “God with us” (1:23). So if Jesus *is* the Lord, what need is there for Him to join the remnant in preparing for the Lord’s coming? Why should *Jesus* be baptized? It would seem to make absolutely no sense at all.

The people coming to John’s baptism were joining the remnant by repenting and confessing their sins. But according to the angel’s words to Joseph, Jesus is the one who will *save* His people from *their* sins (1:21). When Jesus comes to John to be baptized, is He admitting that He Himself needs the salvation that He is supposed to have come to bring to others? If you really think about it (and you don’t have to think that hard), it seems completely self-defeating for Jesus to be baptized – like it would ruin the whole point for His coming.

The people coming to John’s baptism were fleeing from the wrath to come (3:7) so that the arrival of God’s kingship and rule might mean good news for them and not bad news. John

warned: “Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire” (3:10). This is the wrath that those being baptized were seeking to escape. But listen to what John said about the one who would come after him (namely, *Jesus*): “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” (3:12). If it is Jesus who will do the burning, then why should He be concerned about the wrath to come?

Not only does it not seem logical, it very much seems *wrong* for Jesus to be baptized by John. And yet we read in verse 13: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.” There simply aren’t any words to describe how unseemly and how shocking this appears to be. The one who is mightier than John, whose sandals John is not worthy to carry, and who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire is going out to be baptized by John. The one who is the Lord is going to the baptism of those who are preparing for the Lord’s coming. The one who has come to *save* his people from their sins is going to the baptism of those who are *repenting* and confessing their sins. The one who will clear the threshing floor and *burn* the chaff with unquenchable fire is going to the baptism of those who are *fleeing* from the wrath to come. The irony is completely over the top. I honestly think that if I were John, the tension would have been nothing less than paralyzing.

Verse 14 – “John would have prevented him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”

Put yourself in John’s “shoes” just for a second! If you know that you’re not even worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals, how would *you* feel about baptizing Jesus? And you can’t say that John would have at least been *more* worthy to baptize Jesus than you. Jesus said, “Truly, I say to you, among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Matthew 11:11). That’s us! So which of us would not *strongly* object if Jesus asked us to baptize Him? If you know that Jesus is the sinless Son of God who has come to save *you* from your sins, how would you feel about baptizing Jesus? John recognizes his own need as a sinner (“I *need* to be baptized by you”), but he can’t think of any possible reason for Jesus to come to *him* for baptism (“Do you come to me?”). Not only does it seem wrong that Jesus would go to John to be baptized by him, but it also seems wrong that John should agree to baptize Jesus. Why *should* John agree to baptize Jesus? Can you think of a good enough reason (apart from the fact that Jesus commands him)? And no, it should be self-evident that setting us an example is not nearly a good enough reason. There must be more than that!

Verse 15 – “But Jesus answered him, ‘Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.’ Then he consented.”

“Let it be so now”

“Let it be so” would have been good enough, but Jesus says “Let it be so *now*”. This is not to be demanding, as though Jesus were getting impatient with John. The New American Standard Version says “Permit it *at this time*” while the New Century version says “Let it be this way *for*

now.” You could almost say that Jesus is making a “concession” to John. It’s as though Jesus is saying: “Yes, John, you are right in all of your objections. I am mightier than you. There are none truly *worthy* to carry my sandals. Yes, I am the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire. I am the coming Lord. I am the sinless Son of God. I am the one who will gather the wheat into the barn, but burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. You are right about all of these things. And it will not *always* be appropriate that I should come to be baptized by you. Nevertheless, let it be this way *for now*”. But *why*?

“For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

What is this righteousness? The New Living Translation says, “For we must carry out all that God requires”. The New Century Version says, “We should do all things that are God’s will.” So basically, Jesus is telling John to baptize Him because this is God’s will for Jesus. But we know that Jesus can’t be talking about what God requires of *everyone* because He has just “admitted” that His baptism is very, *very* different from everyone else’s. He says: “For thus it is fitting for *us* to fulfill all righteousness.” When John baptizes Jesus and Jesus is baptized by John, *something* is happening here that is unique and different from every other person’s obedience in baptism. Jesus is fulfilling a requirement that’s impossible for anyone else to fulfill. But what is this requirement? What is God’s unique will for Jesus in His baptism?

Did you notice the word “fulfill”? Jesus didn’t say: “For thus it is fitting for us to obey all righteousness” (to obey God’s will). No, Jesus said: “For thus it is fitting for us to *fulfill* all righteousness” (to *fulfill* God’s will). This tells me that Jesus is coming to John to be baptized in order to fulfill the Scriptures (the Old Testament; cf. 1:22; 2:5, 15, 17, 23; 3:3)! As Jesus said: “Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms *must be fulfilled*” (Luke 24:44). “Let it be this way for now, for we must fulfill all that God requires.” God’s will for the Messiah was plainly revealed and foretold by the prophets. And here as we struggle with the tension and the seeming “wrongness” of Jesus’ request, I am reminded of the words of the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 53:11-12 – Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.

Jesus came to John, to be baptized by him, in order that He might be numbered with the transgressors – in order that He might be counted in the same group with sinners. The astonishing thing—that we don’t often fully comprehend—is that Jesus did not just die *for* sinners. Before He could die *for* sinners, He had to be numbered *with* sinners, counted in the same group – “*although* He had done no violence, and there was no deceit in His mouth” (Isaiah 53:9). Jesus didn’t just die for sinners, He expressed His solidarity and identification *with* sinners by going so far as to even share in their baptism – and without any disclaimer that He needed it not! How humbling is this?!? Here at the very *beginning* of His public ministry, Jesus sets His face toward the cross. In coming to be baptized by John, Jesus was showing that *His* humbling would be not just on the cross, but every single day, every single minute and second of His life

(especially and uniquely) from that day forward. Every day would be a self-emptying. Every day would be identifying and being numbered with sinners. Every day would be a dying. Every single day would be another purposeful step on the road to crucifixion. In *everything* that Jesus said, in *everything* that Jesus did, it would *all* be for the sake of our salvation. In *nothing* did Jesus come to be served, but in *everything* to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). We have three years until the cross, but here at the very beginning—on day one—Jesus shows that He will live each and every day in the shadow of the cross. He will live each and every day as one who has shared in the baptism of sinners – as one who has been numbered with the transgressors – as one who will one day experience the full force of God’s wrath against sin. He will live each and every day for us, and for our salvation. Though He is mightier than all, though no man is worthy even to carry His sandals, though He baptizes with the Holy Spirit and fire, though He is the coming Lord and sinless son of God, and the one who will burn the chaff with unquenchable fire... Yet He came to John, to be baptized by him. *Oh* what self-denying obedience and love!

“Then he consented”

John was not worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals, how much less to baptize Jesus! But John *needed* to baptize Jesus. As a sinner himself, John needed Jesus to be numbered with transgressors. And so in baptizing Jesus, John did his part in bringing to fulfillment God’s will for the Messiah. In baptizing Jesus, John showed how very desperately he needed a Savior. As I meditated on this, it hit me that perhaps never in all the history of the world has any sinner humbled himself more than when John consented to baptize his Savior. Perhaps in all of history, this act of humility is surpassed (infinitely) only by Jesus’ willingness to be numbered with *us* from the day of His baptism by John to the day of His death at the hands of sinful men. How *we needed* Jesus to come to John, to be baptized by him. And how *we needed* John to “let it be so”.

As I think about these things, there are several obvious implications for us. If Jesus was willing to be numbered with us, then we must be willing to be numbered with those who in the world’s eyes are the most lowly and the most despised. Paul said, “Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” (Romans 12:16). Let us show favoritism to *no one*, for any reason, ever, at all! If Jesus was willing to be numbered with us, then let us do *nothing* from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than ourselves. Let each of us look not only to our own interests, but also to the interests of others (Philippians 2:3-4). If Jesus was willing to be numbered with us, then let us live every day as those who are not ashamed to be numbered with Him and to endure persecution and suffering as those who are not ashamed to bear His name (Mark 8:38). He was numbered with us, and so He called down upon Himself the wrath of His Father. Let us boast to be numbered with Him, though we call down upon ourselves the wrath of the whole world. If Jesus was willing to be numbered with *us*, then let us fall *in love* with the Gospel all over again. This *is* the Gospel. And it is the *Gospel* that is powerful to change and transform us into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ.

Verse 16 – “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.”

In Genesis chapter one, when *God created the world*, the Spirit of God is described using the imagery of a bird in flight.

Genesis 1:1-2 (cf. Deut. 32:11) – In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. ***And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.***

In Genesis chapter eight we find a dove flying over the waters of the flood until the dry land appears and the *creation is renewed*.

Genesis 8:8-12 – Then he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground. But the dove found no place to set her foot, and she returned to him to the ark, for the waters were still on the face of the whole earth... He waited another seven days, and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came back to him in the evening, and behold, in her mouth was a freshly plucked olive leaf. So Noah knew that the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he waited another seven days and sent forth the dove, and she did not return to him anymore.

When the Spirit of God descends like a dove and comes to rest on Jesus, it is perhaps a sign that through Jesus' being numbered with transgressors, He will succeed in bringing into existence a *new creation*. As Isaiah said, "He will make many [sinners] to be accounted righteous" (Isaiah 53:11). But this we can know: When the Spirit of God descends like a dove and comes to rest on Jesus, it is a sign and guarantee that He will be successful in His mission.

Verse 17 – "And behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"

There is an echo in these words of God's command to Abraham over 2000 years earlier:

Genesis 22:2 (LXX) – He said, "Take ***your son, your beloved son Isaac, whom you love***, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."

And we are clearly reminded of the words of Isaiah:

Isaiah 42:1 – Behold my [suffering; Isaiah 53] servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, ***in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him***; he will bring forth justice [salvation] to the nations.

So these verses (16-17) are *God's response* to Jesus' willingness to humble Himself and be numbered with transgressors, even sharing in their baptism. The descent of the Spirit of God, together with the voice of God from heaven, provides overwhelming, irrefutable, joy-producing proof and assurance that Jesus' identification with sinners will not be in vain. From the very beginning, here on *day one*, the final outcome is already assured.

Teaching our Children

Q. Why did Jesus come to John at the Jordan river?

A. Jesus came to John, to be baptized by him.

Q. Why do you think John didn't want to baptize Jesus? Think of *lots* of reasons!

A. Read verses 11-12 for ideas and clues or see I. B. – E. above

Read verse 14 (“I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?”)

Q. How do you think you would respond if Jesus came and asked *you* to baptize Him?

(Spend a minute *really* trying to imagine this!)

Q. Would we be wrong about our reasons for not wanting to baptize Jesus?

A. NO! This is why Jesus said: “Let it be this way *for now*.”

Q. So why did Jesus *say* that He needed to be baptized?

A. Jesus said that he needed to be baptized in order to fulfill God's will (in order to fulfill all righteousness).

Q. What did the Old Testament prophets say that God's will was for Jesus? What would explain why Jesus came to John to be baptized?

A. The Old Testament prophets said that it would be God's will for Jesus to be counted in the same group with sinners (read and reflect on Isaiah 53:11-12 – III. B. 3. c. above)

Discuss all the ways that Jesus was numbered with transgressors when He was baptized by John (review all of the reasons why He “*shouldn't*” have been baptized!)

Q. Jesus was baptized at the *very beginning* (on *day one*) of His public ministry. What does this tell us about the next three years of Jesus' life (until His death on the cross)?

A. ~ In *everything* that Jesus says and in *everything* that Jesus does, it will *all* be for the sake of our salvation.

~ In *nothing* did Jesus come to be served, but in *everything* and at *all times* to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28).

~ Jesus will live each and every day for us, and for our salvation.

Q. If Jesus was willing to be counted in the same group with sinners like us, then we should

_____.

A. Spend time filling in the blank with as many answers as possible (See III. D. above) Exult in the Gospel!!!

Q. What did Jesus see and hear when He went up out of the water?

A. See verses 16-17

Q. Why can these verses give us so much comfort and joy?

A. These verses prove that Jesus will be successful! When He is counted in the same group with sinners like us, it will not be a waste of time or a defeat. Instead, because Jesus is willing to be counted with sinners like us, He will one day succeed in making the sinners righteous. It's only “*day one*”, but we don't need to worry. The end result is already a “*sure thing*”.