

Matthew 3

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[0 : 00] We're doing a series on worship, on why we do what we do. And what we've learnt is that, although each week we come, week by week, confess our sins, we sing, and we pray, and we hear God's word preached, what we've learnt is God is doing something to us as we gather, that worship is not just one way traffic. And for the next few weeks I want us to look at the sacraments. And so, you've got to be careful, because baptism is such a secondary issue.

It's such a divisive issue. It's so secondary. I spoke at Christy Newell a couple of years ago, and the President's CEO, we were walking there, and he said, I'm thinking of getting baptised. I'm wondering about whether I should get baptised. And I said, are you thinking about committing adultery? He's knocked me away. I said, well, they're both commands, aren't they? You're commanded to be baptised. You're commanded not to commit adultery. And at that point he laughed and said, well, it's a secondary issue, we don't want to divide over it. The problem is this, who says it's a secondary issue? Who says it's a secondary issue? Does Jesus? Who? Does the Apostle Paul? No. I was brought up in a Baptist home. I believed in adult baptism only. And I'm very, very thankful for that home. And I'm thankful that my mum and dad have never just said to me, it doesn't matter that you've changed your mind. We disagree.

We disagree fervently, heatedly at times. And yet they are convinced in their own mind and I'm convinced in mine. And I think as churches, we want to be clear on baptism. And I think that is the road. I pray the best preacher in London, I think as a Baptist preacher, I love to go and hear him, Gerard Hemings, he is a solid convinced Baptist. And I pray for his church to prosper. I disagree with him. I think he's wrong. I couldn't be in that church. And I want IPC as a Presbyterian church. We believe in the baptism of covenant children. And I want us to hold to that. I want us to preach that. I want us to do that as generously as we possibly can. With a broad smile on our face that welcomes all.

So two things. First of all, baptism is a sign and seal of our adopting Christ. There should be a summary at the back. This sermon will create some questions. So there should be a summary at the back and also an article by Dennis Johnson. And I suggest you read both those things before you kind of throttle me. So first of all, baptism is a sign and seal of our adoption in Christ. I want us to look to get to Matthew 28, 16 to 20, the Great Commission.

But I also think we need to look at Jesus' own baptism. Because Matthew has put these bookends into his Gospel. The start of Jesus' ministry in Matthew chapter 3 begins with the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. And it ends, Matthew's Gospel ends with baptism again. The Great Commission.

[3 : 05] Jesus thinks baptism is important. Go and baptise the nations. And so before we look at Matthew 28, where we see Jesus gives the commission to baptise, we've got to spend a little time in Matthew chapter 3. So let me read you those verses again. Matthew 3 verses 13 to 15.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him saying, no, no, no. I need to be baptised 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 fulfil all righteousness. Right before that, Matthew has told us that many people have been going to the Jordan River to confess their sins, to repent, to return away from them, and to be baptised by John. So it is understandable, isn't it, when Jesus, who is queuing up to be baptised, and John suddenly sees him, John says, no, Jesus, you've got it back to front. Jesus, you should be baptising me, John, not the other way round. And that makes sense, doesn't it? Jesus is the sinless one. He is the one who never did anything wrong. Jesus is coming with no sins to confess.

He does not need a baptism of repentance. But Jesus says, no, John, indeed you have to baptise me. You need to baptise me to fulfil all righteousness. There's a lot of ink that has been spilt over

the years trying to explain what Jesus means by that statement. But everyone is agreed that it means at least this, that Jesus sees his baptism as a kind of inauguration, as a kind of beginning, as the initiation, as representative of what his mission is to be. That as the waters of repentance from sinners are poured over him, as he buries himself in the waters of repentance with sinners. He is identifying with you and me. That he's come to bear our place, bear our sin. He's come to take our guilt. He stands in the line of sinners. And Jesus identifies with us as our substitute in our sin. He is the one who will stand in our place so that you and I can be rescued from the punishment that we deserve.

And even in his baptism, Jesus is pointing forward to what he's going to do, what his ministry will be. And we know that that is how Jesus actually saw his baptism. Because later on in his life, Luke tells us that Jesus uses the language of baptism to describe his death, his own death on the cross. So if you look at Luke 12 verse 15, Jesus said, I have a baptism to undergo. What does that mean? I have a baptism to undergo and what constraint I am under until it is completed. He's talking about his death. But look what happens in response to Jesus' submission through baptism to the mission of rescue. As he stands in the place of sinners, as he identifies with us. Can you see it? Verses 16 and 17 of chapter 3? When Jesus was baptised, 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 upon him. And behold a voice from heaven, he said, this is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Three things happen. Can you see it?

What's the first thing that happens? The first thing that happens, verse 16, what happens? He comes out from the water and the heavens open. The heavens are ripped open. Does that ring a bell? It should ring a bell.

[7 : 02] Because God had split the heavens before when he gave Moses the law at Mount Sinai. And from heaven, the sky was split with thunder and with lightning. And the prophet Isaiah, do you remember? He prayed that God would rend the heavens, would rip open the heavens and make himself known to the nations. And that is exactly what God does here. But it is not thunder and lightning that comes out of heaven. It is.

What is it? What is he? It is all the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God descending like a dove. And coming upon Jesus. That God has rent the heavens again to reveal himself to the nations. But now it comes through the anointed Jesus. The anointed Jesus for ministry. Do you know there is no record in the Gospels of Jesus doing a miracle before his baptism? There is no record in the Gospels of Jesus doing a miracle without the anointing of the Holy Spirit of his baptism? And he is commissioned from ministry. And then thirdly from heaven, the third thing is, he said verse 17, and behold a voice from heaven. And the voice says, this is my son with whom I love, with him I am well pleased.

It is not street at all. You know, I am well pleased with him. I am well pleased. He is delighted in his son the Father. And so Matthew begins his account with this powerful scene of his baptism at the Jordan River. And then you go all the way through Matthew's Gospel right to the end, after his miracles, after his teaching, after his death, after his resurrection, and here is his commission to the disciples. Look at Matthew chapter 28. Matthew 28 verses 18 to 20.

You just turned there. Matthew 28 verses 18 to 20. You know it. Jesus came and said to them, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always to the end of the age. And I think even in the words that Jesus uses here, it is very surprising.

[9 : 18] Because it is interesting, isn't it? I don't know how many of us, and I don't know how many people who would call themselves conservative evangelicals or reformed people, naturally think of baptism as an integral key part of our discipleship in the local church. Some people talk about discipleship programmes, don't they? And we talk about Sunday morning and Sunday night worship and the sacraments. But isn't discipleship, you might think, well discipleship is all about teaching about Jesus, it's all about being transformed by the gospel into the likeness of the Lord Jesus. And of course it is all of those things, but Jesus says the first step is what?

Being baptised. Baptised in the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit. And I think Jesus is picking up on his own baptism. He is saying that the first step is to receive God's pledge, God's promise and the gift of the Holy Spirit's presence and power in our lives. And hear the Father saying the same words to us as he said to Jesus. As he looks at you and me and he says, this is my

son, this is my daughter, whom I love. With him, with her, I'm well pleased. That is the promise at baptism. It is the promise that through the Holy Spirit of adoption by the Father and it is all received by faith, we become marked people by our baptism.

Jesus chooses the name of or into the name of. And he's using a term that actually came from the world of banking back then. To the account of, or into the possession of, that in baptism we come under new management. We become members of God's family. We become part of his covenant community. In essence of baptism, God claims us as his own. He looks at us. He says, you belong to me. Now, it might be so perhaps, you might be thinking justifiably, and lots of my friends think this, why can't we just read it? Don't we just get the same message? Isn't that essentially what we've done over the last few minutes? Why do we have to involve water? Either by sprinkling or pouring or pouring or immersion. Doesn't that just complicate matters and get messy potentially? What's the point? We just read this, we know this from the print. Why do we need baptism? And here's where we see wonderfully and lovingly and freshly the loving condescension of our Heavenly Father. How kind is this to you and me? This question makes sense to us because baptism isn't communicating a different gospel. You don't get a different gospel in baptism. It's giving us the same message. Baptism is giving you and I the same gospel as the spoken word, but it does much more than just repeat it. Let me give you this definition of a sacrament from John Calvin, okay? Concentrate for a minute. A sacrament is an outward sign by which the Lord seals to our consciences the promises of his good will towards us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith. And we in turn attest our piety towards him. We're talking about faith in the presence of his Lord and of his angels. Just think about that middle a little bit for a minute, okay?

In the sacraments, God stoops to our weaknesses. You and I are not disembodied beings. We are not spirits floating about in the air. We are physical embodied beings. And without appreciating it, physical acts, physical rituals are important. The sacraments of the Lord's Supper and baptism are tools in the hands of our Heavenly Father for strengthening our faith. Every time you come to the Lord's table, every time you witness a baptism, it is a tool in the hands of our Heavenly Father for strengthening your faith and mine. We'll think of this next week in how it applies to the Lord's Supper. But now think about baptism. In baptism, the gospel of our adoption through Christ, the gospel that we are new creations in Christ, it's not only proclaimed to your ears so that you can see, you can hear it and you can understand it, but it is poured over you.

[14:05] You're immersed in it. In baptism, the very same gospel that comes to you in words splashes over you in water to meet us in our weak faith and to strengthen it. One writer, Leonard Fanderson, illustrates the relationship between the preached word and the sacrament in thinking about how do we communicate with each other. This is what he says, since we are embodied persons, communication is seldom, if ever, merely a matter of thoughts passing from one mind to another. That when you and I interact, when you interact with each other, we interact with friends and with family and there is body language, isn't there? There are those tell-tale gestures and minute movements, raised eyebrows, smiles on the faces that convey the true meaning of the words we are saying. And so experts say, don't they, 50% of our communication comes from body language. And so all of you have had that experience, some of you, sometimes it's embarrassing, sometimes it is just plain terrible, where a communication has happened in a text or an email or a telephone conversation and our words have been divorced from our physical gestures. That is the importance of physical body language, isn't it?

There are certain things which you've got to say face to face. A smiley emoticon at the end of your text doesn't do it, alright? You've got to see the look on someone's face, haven't you?

How often have you had an email or a text which you've misunderstood because you haven't been able to see the body language? But van der Seer says this, the sacraments are like God's body language to us.

As his creatures who live in this physical world, they explain the word to us. The sacraments, they paint a picture of what the gospel is all about and that strengthens our faith. And God doesn't have to do it, but he does it because he loves us. And the sacraments strengthen us in our weakness, not only by explaining the word, but more importantly by confirming the word. That is by being signs and seals of the gospel, because that is what they are.

They are covenantal, they are that pledge that God has made, they are signs of that pledge and they are seals of that pledge. And they confirm the word as well as explain it. It was the reformers who emphasised that.

[16 : 44] They talked about this language of signs and seals to help us understand the sacrament of baptism and the Lord's Supper, what they are all about. And basically what they teach us is that in baptism they recognise that God is actually doing something. In baptism God is actually doing something.

In other words, baptism's primary function is not to symbolise our response to the promise of the gospel, but it is to signify and seal the gospel to which we are called to respond in lifelong faith and obedience. And if that is true, then I would say to you it is very applicable that we bring infants to baptism. And we don't compromise the significance of it. Let me say it again, baptism's primary function is not to symbolise our response. It is not about what we are doing, but it is to signify and to seal the gospel of what God is doing. To which we are called, aren't we, to respond in lifelong faith and obedience. What do I mean when I call baptism of a sign and a seal? Let's think about the sign for a moment. Imagine two young women here this morning. Two young ladies who have got special men in their lives. Both men are talking about a marriage and they are making big promises. There is a lifelong commitment of sharing their life and their resources and so on. The two women are treated equally in every respect. But one of the women has received an engagement ring and the other has not. So you could say, couldn't you, what does the engaged young lady have that the other does not? And the answer is quite obvious. A ring. We say to her, does that make a difference? Is that a big deal?

Well, my guess is this. If you ask the lady without the ring, it would make a pretty big difference, wouldn't it? Wouldn't it? The visible token of the ring, it doesn't alter the promises made, does it? It doesn't alter it. But what does the ring do? The ring makes those promises more firm in the mind of the recipient. And that is true. It's a sign of baptism. Baptism gives a tangible expression to the certainty of God's promise to us. And that is something more than the promise that is given verbally. And baptism is not only a sign of God's commitment and promises. Also the reformers taught, I think rightly, they recognise it as a seal of his promise. That is, baptism actually does something. The baptism doesn't just reveal the grace of the gospel to us, it confers the grace of the gospel on us. It is a means of saving grace. And like the gospel it portrays, it's not an automatic thing, don't think I'm saying that. It's not that you can be baptised and then just automatically, by the action of doing it, that everything is changed. No, it has to be received by faith. It's how the reformers set themselves apart from the Roman Catholic Church at the time of the Reformation. Baptism does not benefit us at all if it is not received by faith.

Let's just ponder for a moment, think for a moment, God's goodness here, in terms of what sealing means. Such is God's love for us. That in baptism he seals us with his grace through faith. God did something to you at your baptism, whether your parents were believers or not.

Whether you were baptised as an infant. Or whether you were baptised as an adult. God did something to you at your baptism. And that is why Paul speaks of baptism in a way that is shocking to us.

[20 : 51] Isn't it? The language of baptism for the Apostle Paul seems to function as a virtual substitute for salvation. So come with me to Romans 6. Come on, come with me. Romans chapter 6. And Paul is here in the argument, in Romans chapter 6, we can live whatever way we want. We can live in whatever way we want, because it is by grace we have been saved. Here's how Paul responds to them. Romans chapter 6, verses 3 to 4. He says this. Do you not know? Do you not know that all of us have been baptised into Christ Jesus? And were baptised into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death. In order that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. We don't tend to speak like that, do we? We would say, if you're a Christian, if you've been born again, you don't live like that. But Paul wants to bring it back to what happened at their baptism.

It's shocking. We don't tend to give, do we, baptism such an identity-defining role in our lives. Well look at what Paul writes in Galatians chapter 3, verse 27. It's on page 9, 7, 4.

Turn there. Galatians chapter 3, and verse 27. Look what it says. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. That as far as the Apostle Paul is concerned, our identity as Christians, who we are as Christians, has everything to do with our baptism.

Randy Zuckerberg is the sister of Mark Zuckerberg, you know the founder and CEO of Facebook that so many of you love. And Randy worked for Facebook for many years, but she has written a book called, what's it called? Dot Complicated. Dot Complicated. Untangling Our Wired Lives.

There's an interview with her on the BBC website. And the interviewer asks, does she have one

secret for untangling our wired lives? Randy Zuckerberg replies, the secret is be your authentic self. It used to be, she said, that we felt the need to be different people in different contexts. So in our professional life we would be someone, in our home life with our friends. But she says, in today's wired world, where it only takes a little bit of research for people to find out an awful lot about you, you only get to have one identity online. You only get to have one identity online, so be your authentic self. Well that's good advice as far as it goes, isn't it? What it's meant for most people is that we have to construct my authentic self.

And I need to build it very, very carefully. Life becomes this huge exercise in how to define who I am. And that usually means, as I try to prove my worth to other people, earning my identity.

[24 : 06] But listen to this, the identity that you construct for yourself is very different from an identity that you receive by grace from God. Baptism is a sacrament of identity. It tells you who you belong to. It confers a new identity upon us. So when we ask, who am I? Who am I? The answer is, by faith I am a new creature in Christ. By faith I am not what I appear to be. But my life is hidden with Christ in God. And at Jesus' baptism the heavens opened. And the voice of God spoke, and the Spirit descended. And at our baptism into Christ, heaven opens upon us. God smiles upon us. The Spirit descends upon us. And through his Son the Father says to you and to me, you are my beloved sons and daughters with whom I am well pleased. Through baptism, God redefines our identity. Telling us who we are in Christ. So baptism has everything to do with our Christian identity. Baptism serves first as a sign and seal of our adoption in Christ.

But secondly, and much more briefly, baptism serves as a sign and seal of our membership in Christ's family. Baptism is something revolutionary. Because through it, we identify ourselves with a whole new family. But with the promises we make at baptism, whether it's the one being baptised, or the parents of an infant being baptised, or the congregation as we respond, in the baptism, we signal that what counts most as family, what counts most as family is not the nuclear unit that is so often idolised in our culture, but rather the church constitutes our first family.

Let me just say that again. In baptism we signal that what matters most as family is not the closed nuclear unit that is so often idolised in our culture, rather the church constitutes our first family.

And some of you probably don't agree with that, but let me quote you someone. Let me quote you the Lord Jesus Christ. Mark chapter 3, verses 31 to 34.

And his mother and his brothers came and standing outside they sent him and called him. And a crowd was sitting around him and they said to him, your mother and your brothers are outside seeking you. And he answered them, who are my mother and my brothers?

[26 : 52] And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother. I think one of the cultural idolatries that we constantly face today, probably particularly in kind of middle class for it, which I know many of you are not, is the idolisation of family.

And perhaps in the church we are as bad as the rest of the world. And it's seen in the prioritising of family functions, of everything else. It's seen as in the overscheduling of children's lives by their parents.

It's seen in the almost impossible pressure for our family to become, to function as this kind of closed, self-sufficient, autonomous unit. Those of you who are parents, I've gone to the school of Gates, Morris, and, you know, they'll be the usual times where we were in, we were in, Tenerife, or Harriet's did horse riding all week.

What did you do? You feel terrible shame at saying, oh, we just went to the park each day. Jesus says, the nuclear family is, it's so important yet, the promises you make at baptism, you join another family.

So at baptism, we commit to a counterculture. We make promises that initiate us into a household that is bigger than the real fast physical house. We commit ourselves to a world where loving obligations go beyond the boundaries of our private residence.

[28 : 27] The church becomes our first family. And I don't mean by that the kind of church universal, the church kind of out there. I mean here.

Weddings are great. Weddings are great. Baptisms are better. Baptisms are better. I look around this room, I think back to this past year.

We think of Sandra. Think of Malouj. And you're family. We are family.

We are family. I've got all my sisters with me. You've been baptised into Christ's death.

And resurrection. You've been clothed with Christ. And now in a very real sense, their first family is Jesus' family. It is the church. And their baptism serves as a sign and scene of their membership of their church.

[29 : 31] And in that family of Christ, you may have been baptised as an infant. I hope you were. You may have no recollection of that day. You probably don't know who the minister was. You may not know where the church was. But even though you have no recollection of that day, God made a promise to you.

On that day, but through water, he gave me a sign and a seal of the gracious gospel promise that is to be received by faith. That voice from heaven saying to me, you are my beloved son with whom I am well pleased.

Not because of anything I have done now or would do, but because the one who heard those words first, having been buried and the judgment for my sin being taken in my place. The baptism of mine and every baptism is more about what God does than about me and what I do.

He made a promise that day that he keeps because he is the promise keeper. That means I don't have to go to the waters of baptism again because that falls into question his integrity, doesn't it? But what it does say to you this, is it says to you and I, it says we are to go back to our baptism over and over and over and over again. That I am to go to the truth that I am a marked man.

[30 : 47] I'm not my own. That God has claimed me as his own and I am to take fresh strength and encouragement from that. A few points of application. Martin Luther, when he battled spiritual depression, he would turn to his baptism as a physical sign of God's grace to him and through the dark shroud of doubt and despair, he would shout, I have been baptized.

I have been baptized. It's a perfectly appropriate way to use your baptism. That when you face temptation, when you face the temptation of the world and the flesh and the devil, you say to him, I have been baptized.

I am a marked man. That God has given you this physical sign and seal, this landmark on your journey, precisely that your faith can cling to it. You're not dependent on on the baptism itself, on this empty rite or ritual.

You are depending on the Lord Jesus Christ and his promise. With whom you've been clothed with in baptism and whom you must receive by faith. So use this baptism on yourself.

But let me graciously say, let's use this baptism on one another. And particularly speaking of parents. The father of Matthew Henry, the 17th century Presbyterian minister, Philip Henry, you know Matthew Henry wrote all those great Bible commentaries.

[32 : 13] Philip Henry said this, when his children misbehaved, the first thing he would do would be grab them by their baptism. Isn't that brilliant? Grab them by their baptism.

I think that makes a lot of sense. I think it's fantastic for parents. We say to our children, you are a baptized child. You are a marked man or woman.

In other words, we seek to encourage and counsel one another by reminding each other that we are not our own. We are marked by the water of baptism.

We were marked as belonging to God so that by faith we think back on our baptism and we hear the voice of the father saying, you are my son or my daughter with whom I am well pleased.

And who then invites us as his children to live in such a way that makes our heavenly father proud. Two last points. Let me speak to the children who are here.

[33 : 11] Children, wake up for a minute. Let's stop drawing. You have been baptized. You have had the sign and seal of God applied to you.

And do you know what that sign says to you? That sign says to you, believe. It says to you, this promise is for you. It says to you, take hold of it.

It says to you, do not harden your heart. It says to you, don't pull off what you need to do. You might be tired of you, you might be two, three, four, five, call on the Lord Jesus Christ.

And you will be saved. This promise is for you and your children for those who are far off. I wish I could say more on what baptism works both ways.

Baptism works both as a covenant blessing but it also works as a covenant curse for those who reject the covenant. And then lastly, I want to speak to those who are parents and those who brought their children to be baptized in this church probably and your children are far away from the Lord and you know that and it grieves you and it hurts you.

[34 : 29] And I want to say to you, the story is not over. The story is not over. And you go with the covenant promises of God that he has said to you, I will be your God and the God of your children. And we confess our sins. We know we fail as parents every single one of us. And yet God is more full of grace than I am of sin. And we plead the promise and the signs and the seals of the covenant. Let's pray. Amen.