

YOU'RE STILL BAPTIZED

Romans 6:1-11

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series B)

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The epistle lesson for The Baptism of Our Lord comes from *Paul's Letter to the Romans*, chapter 6, verses 1 through 11. In this epistle lesson, the apostle Paul teaches us what Baptism means for our daily lives as well as out eternal lives. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From Romans 6, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We 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.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For one who has died has been set free from sin. ⁸Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear saints of God in Christ Jesus,

You are baptized. You are *still* baptized. It doesn't wash off when you take a shower. It doesn't wear off when you sin. It doesn't fade as time passes. It's not like the bath or shower you take to clean your body. Right after you wash your body, you start getting dirty again. And you get dirty faster if you play outside or work in the garage. But that's not how it is with Baptism. Scripture calls Baptism "the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). So it is a washing, but it's not the kind of washing that fades. You're Baptism does not wear off a little bit every time you sin. It remains. It's not just that you *were* baptized, but that you *are* baptized.

So don't think of your Baptism merely as a one-time event in the past. It is an event that happened in time and space. So it's appropriate to say something like, "I was baptized on April 17, 1983 at Bethany Free Lutheran Church in Bemidji, MN." That's my baptismal birthday. In that sense we can say, "I was baptized." But it's such a significant event that it has lasting implications. It's an event that creates a new state of being. So it's more appropriate to say, "I *am* baptized."

It's kind of like marriage in this sense. There's a wedding, and there's a marriage. There is no marriage without the wedding, but the marriage ends up being so much more than the wedding.

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And that doesn't take anything away from the wedding day. If anything, it makes it that much more significant, because the new state of being that comes from the wedding day is a really big deal. And so, if you are married, you probably don't say, "I was married," even though that's true. You can say something like, "I was married on March 17, 2015 in Edina, MN." And that makes sense. But if you just say to someone, "I was married," they might say, "Oh, I'm sorry. What happened?" Instead, if you are currently married, it's much more natural to say, "I *am* married."

The same thing is true for Baptism. Instead of saying, "I *was* baptized," say, "I *am* baptized." It's a state of being that we live in every moment of our Christian lives, which will continue on into eternity. In the new creation you will stop saying, "I am married," but you will continue to say, "I am baptized." So don't think of your Baptism as a one-time event.

Both liberal Lutherans and evangelicals—and I'll define what I mean with those terms—both liberal Lutherans and evangelicals make a similar mistake in this area, but with opposite negative consequences.

First, regarding liberal Lutherans. And when I use the word "liberal," I'm not talking about their politics, but their approach to theology. It's a method of interpretation that takes more *liberty* with the text of Scripture. So they allow modern opinions to influence whether or not certain events in the Bible actually happened or whether or not certain biblical doctrines are actually true. To a liberal theologian, the virgin conception might sound too miraculous or the doctrine of hell might sound too mean. So they take extra *liberty* when interpreting Scripture. This method is in no way compatible with historic Lutheran doctrine, but that's what I mean by the term "liberal Lutheran."

Liberal Lutherans tend to have a "once-baptized-always-saved" view of Baptism. And I think this developed mostly at funerals. You can understand how it goes. Someone dies. And the pastor doesn't even know him. He never came to church. By all outward appearances, he lived as if God does not exist. His friends all know that he wasn't a Christian. But the pastor has to preach something at the funeral. And he wants to provide some kind of comfort to the family. So he looks in the parish records and finds that the guy was baptized. Okay. That's something. So he takes the part of our doctrine that says, "Baptism saves" (1 Pet. 3:21). And this is true. But he leaves out the part about how Baptism is a new way of life. He leaves it as a one-time event. But being baptized means that we live in daily repentance.

Evangelicals make a similar mistake, but often with opposite consequences. And I'll define what I mean by "evangelical." The word "evangelical" is extremely difficult to define these days. It used to be simple. It comes from the Latin word "evangel," which means "good news" or "gospel." Lutherans were the first to identify as "evangelicals." And by using that term we meant that we emphasize the forgiveness of sins in Christ Jesus. For the last five hundred years, this has been what Lutherans mean by the term "evangelical." I wish this were everyone's definition of the word, but it's not. The news media seem to think it means "white Republicans who go to church, probably in a building that looks like a warehouse." That's because most journalists see religion as a subset of politics, so they try to identify voting blocs. This is the worst definition of the word "evangelical," because it has almost nothing to do with doctrine or the historical usage of the word. Within the Christian Church, there still isn't agreement on what the word means. So it gets used different ways. My impression of how it's usually used is that it refers to a movement that developed from the revivalism of the eighteen and nineteen hundreds. So there's usually an emphasis on having a conversion experience, followed by a transformed life. I think

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this is the way the term “evangelical” is most often used today. So for today that’s what I mean by the term “evangelical.” Next time I might mean something else, but I’ll let you know.

These evangelicals often make a similar mistake as liberal Lutherans, but with opposite consequences. They see conversion as a one-time event. They don’t associate Baptism with conversion, even though Scripture clearly does (e.g., Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5). But they look for a different conversion experience, which they often refer to as being “born again,” which is ironic because, in Scripture, Baptism is defined as being born again (John 3:5). But they locate a conversion experience, maybe at a Bible Camp or an evangelistic rally, and that’s the moment when you gave your heart to Jesus. You were converted or “born again.” This conversion, or repentance, was a one-time event. Occasionally this gets treated the same way liberal Lutherans treat Baptism. *You know you’re going to heaven, because you gave your heart to Jesus. And whatever you do or believe later in life doesn’t really matter. You got born again, so you’re good.* Sometimes it goes that direction. But more often it goes in the other direction, *Now that you’ve given your heart to Jesus, it’s time to see some real transformation in your life.* And there is some truth in this, but they leave forgiveness and repentance back at that one-time event. Maybe, if you’re what they call a “backslider,” you will need periodic events of repentance and forgiveness, but they certainly don’t see it as an ongoing thing. They think forgiveness, ideally, is not something you should still need. Repentance is reserved for when you really blow it. Otherwise the Christian life is just about trying harder, getting better, living the transformed life, progressing in sanctification, laying your all on the altar, and so on. These are all so-called “evangelical” phrases that describe the Christian life as moral improvement. And the Christian life does include moral improvement, but there’s something missing. And that something is forgiveness.

So the liberal Lutherans often treat Baptism as a one-time event with their once-baptized-always-saved idea. Here a person can neglect both Law and Gospel, and they’ll be fine because of this one-time event. Evangelicals, on the other hand, treat conversion as a one-time event and then the Christian lives, primarily, by the Law, with occasional reminders of the Gospel, which is used as motivation. Both of these errors must be rejected.

Now why am I telling you about the errors? It should not be to glorify ourselves by putting others down. Among Christians who value right doctrine, there is always a temptation to take pride in our doctrine. And if our doctrine is right, we should be proud of it, that is, the doctrine. But the temptation is to be proud of *ourselves* for having grasped the right doctrine. So we get this twisted and sinful satisfaction when we see errors in other people. I’m guilty of this. So I need to repent. And I need to learn to lament that we have divisions among Christians. We should find no satisfaction in this.

But we do need to be aware of it. And that’s why I’m telling you this. Because we encounter these errors when we interact with other Christians, both personally and through media. So we might hear a liberal Lutheran say something that sounds kind of gospel-ish, or they might say that Baptism saves. And it sounds close enough to true that it might hook us, but it usually ends up somewhere very unbiblical. I’ll give you a real-life example. See if you can identify the error and also why it almost sounds right. Recently I saw a liberal Lutheran say, “There is no resolution that, if kept, will make you more worthy of love. You, as your actual self and not as some made up ideal, are already worthy” (Nadia Bolz-Weber). This sounds kind of gospel-ish, right? It affirms that God loves all people, which is true. That’s the thing that makes it almost sound right. But it implicitly denies God’s Law, and when God’s Law is denied, there is no Gospel. The reality is that you are unworthy of love. We are all unworthy of love, and nothing

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we do can make us less unworthy. But God loved us in spite of our unworthiness. And this is way more awesome than God loving us because we are worthy. If we are worthy of love, then there's no need for the cross, and Christ died in vain. The Law teaches us that we are unworthy. And the Gospel teaches us that God loved us in spite of our unworthiness. So the proper teaching of Law and Gospel leads us to find our confidence in Christ, not in ourselves. Liberal Lutherans often switch it around, and it's not the Gospel. It can sound gospel-ish. Especially when they speak of Baptism, it can sound like the same doctrine, but it usually goes somewhere contrary to Scripture.

Then we might hear an evangelical talking about holy living. And we think, *Yeah, that's right. We should be living holy lives, and keeping the commandments, and loving our neighbors, and growing in good works.* This is all true. But if repentance and forgiveness is not a regular part of the Christian life, it becomes an impossible burden. It can actually turn into the burden Christ came to free us from.

We need to be aware of the errors so that we can stay on the right track.

So let's talk about the right track. You are baptized. You are *still* baptized. Your Baptism happened at a fixed point in time and space, but we should not regard it as limited to that fixed point. The Christian daily lives in his or her Baptism. And notice, I didn't say the Lutheran, but the *Christian* daily lives in his or her Baptism. It is the new reality for every Christian. We are baptized into Christ. We are baptized into Jesus' death and resurrection. And we live each day in that reality, dying to sin and living to righteousness.

Baptism forgives sins. That's one of the things we heard in the gospel lesson. John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4). It forgives your sins, not just the sins you committed before your Baptism, but all of your sins. God's forgiveness is always for all sins, not just the ones in the past, but also the ones in the future. Baptism forgives your sins.

This passage from Romans sheds a great deal of light on how Baptism forgives sins. It's not just a matter of divine fiat where God says, "If you let someone sprinkle some water on your head while they say my name, I will forgive you." That doesn't really make any sense. If that's all God said about Baptism, we would still believe it and do it, but we would be really confused. So the apostle Paul gives us a peek under the hood to see how Baptism works. And what he reveals is that Baptism unites us with Jesus in his death and resurrection.

At Jesus' Baptism, we see that he identifies with us. Jesus had no need to be baptized, because he isn't a sinner. He had no sins to repent of. He had no sins that needed forgiving. But he was baptized to identify with us. He stood in the muddy waters of the Jordan River—a place for sinners—and was baptized there. He identified with us, and he continued to identify with us, especially when he went to the cross and to the grave. Those are also places for sinners. The cross was a place for really bad sinners, the kind the government sentences to execution. It was a place for murderers and traitors. It was for the worst sinners, and Jesus went there. Then he went to the grave, which is the place for all sinners. We die because we are sinners. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). If we didn't sin, we wouldn't die. The grave is a place for sinners, and for sinners only. But Jesus went there in our place. The cross and the grave were foreshadowed by Jesus' Baptism. He stood in the place of sinners to identify with us and show that on the cross he would also hang in the place of sinners, and in the tomb he would lay in the place of sinners. He is baptized to identify with us and show that he identifies with us.

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And then we are baptized to be united with Christ in his death and resurrection. This is what we read in Romans: “All of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized 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. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (Rom. 6:3-5). Those are the nuts and bolts of Baptism. That’s a peek under the hood to see where the power comes from. The power comes from Jesus’ own death and resurrection. The power is not in the water. The water, together with the Word, is God’s way of uniting us to Jesus’ death and resurrection. We have died in him. Our sin was crucified in him. The death we are required to die because of our sin—we already died that death in Jesus Christ when we were baptized into him. Baptism is death. It is death with and in Jesus. And if we are united with him in his death, then we are also united with him in his resurrection. That is how Baptism saves, and that is how Baptism continues to impact our lives every single day.

The resurrection part of Baptism defines our ongoing existence in two ways.

First, it defines who we are and how we live in this world: “You ... must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (6:11). That is, the reason we should not just go on sinning, following the passions of our sinful flesh, is because that sinful flesh was put to death in Christ. It was buried in Baptism. It’s not who you are anymore. You are a new creature in Christ Jesus. That new creature was born in you at your Baptism by the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead. The sinful flesh still clings to us. That’s why we must remember our Baptism daily. We must remember who God has made us to be in Christ Jesus. Repentance is the daily life of a Christian. When we daily confess our sins, we are returning to our Baptism.

Luther explained this beautifully in the Small Catechism. I’m sure you all have it memorized, so I should be able to just say, “SC, Baptism, IV,” and you all know what I’m talking about. But since a non-Lutheran might hear us, I’ll quote the catechism for their sake. Luther asks, “What does such baptizing with water signify?” Answer: “It signifies that the old Adam in us, together with all sins and evil lusts, should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death; and that the new man should daily come forth and rise to live before God in righteousness and holiness forever.” Then he goes on to quote Paul in Romans 6.

The key word in Luther’s explanation is “daily.” If anyone thinks that Baptism is just an irrevocable ticket to heaven, they are nowhere near the biblical, Lutheran doctrine of Baptism. It is more than that. It is better. It is our entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven, and it is a new way of life.

It doesn’t mean we stop sinning. We still blow it, over and over again. Maybe you blew it again just last night. Maybe you blew it this morning on the way to church when you called your wife a dirty name. I can’t even count all the ways we blow it. But if you’ve blown it recently, you know what at least one of them is. Return to your Baptism. It didn’t fade away when you blew it. You are still buried with Christ. You are still raised with him. You are still baptized. Living as a baptized child of God doesn’t mean you quit sinning. You want to quit. And you try to quit. If you don’t desire righteousness, there’s a problem. We do desire righteousness, and we are still children of Adam who desire rebellion. So living as a baptized child of God means you return, over and over again, to the fount of forgiveness. And the blood of Jesus is still shed for you. You are still crucified with him. You are still raised with him. Baptism means daily repentance and forgiveness.

And Baptism also defines our future after this life. It means this cycle of repentance and forgiveness will, eventually, come to an end. Not only are we raised to new life now, but we will

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also be raised like Christ on the Last Day. The daily cycle of repentance and forgiveness can be kind of wearying. At some point we wish we could just stop sinning. And we will. We want the struggle to end. And it will. Baptism is also the guarantee that “we will be united with him in a resurrection like his.” When Christ returns, he will raise us and transform us (1 Cor. 15:51-56). That means that every last ounce of the sin the currently clings to us will be removed. Your sin will not endure into eternity, but your Baptism will. And then we will experience the fullness of Jesus’ righteousness.

You were baptized. You are still baptized. So live in this Baptism. And you will continue to be baptized for all eternity. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.