

BAPTISM FORGIVES SINS

Matthew 28:16-20

Second Wednesday in Lent

February 24, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson tonight comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 28, verses 16 through 20. We will consider several different Scripture passages in this sermon, but this is where we will start. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 28, beginning at verse 16, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁶ Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷ And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. ¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

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,

You have a great treasure in your Baptism. Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day.

These are marvelous gifts. But I'm not going to take for granted that you believe this. I hope you do believe it, because these are all clear biblical teachings, but I'm not taking it for granted. And the reason I'm not taking it for granted is that the majority of pastors and theologians in the United States today deny all of this. And this includes pretty much all of popular Christian media. My intention is not to pick on anyone, so I'm not going to name any names, but we need to be aware of this. And if I did name names, I would have to name all of them. I don't know of any contemporary Christian authors who are even remotely famous who also hold to a biblical view of Baptism. And this has certainly had an effect on how American Christians view Baptism. Perhaps it has even effected the way Lutheran Christians view Baptism.

I call this the “Dental Majority Effect.” It's like when a commercial says that nine out of ten dentists prefer peppermint ice cream to chocolate. So we start to think that peppermint ice cream must be better for our teeth. That's the “Dental Majority Effect,” and in some cases, it's not the worst way to live. It recognizes that we are not experts in every field, and it is often wise to rely on the expertise of others, even if we don't completely understand it. But sometimes it's helpful to ask, “Why?” Then nine out of ten dentists say, “Because it tastes better.”

The majority of pastors and theologians in America deny that Baptism does anything. They say, “Baptism is an act of obedience that demonstrates our commitment to Christ.” Or they say, “Baptism is an outward sign of an inward change.” That slogan gets repeated so often that we might assume it's from the Bible. But it's not, and the Bible never says anything remotely close to it. But this is what the majority of pastors and theologians in America teach.

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But if we're going to trust the majority opinion in determining truth, especially in the area of theology, I would suggest that you also consider what pastors and theologians throughout history have taught. And when we listen to the voices from the past, the majority opinion actually swings back to the biblical understanding of Baptism. It was not until the 16th century that Christians started to object to the notion that Baptism forgives sins, or even the practice on infant Baptism. And it's really been in America in the last two hundred years that the doctrine of Baptism has fallen on the hardest times. I once heard a theologian say, "America was invented to destroy the doctrine of Baptism" (Steven Paulson). I think what he meant was, the American spirit is so individualistic, that we don't trust anything outside of our own experience. But when we look around the world, and especially when we look back in history, we see that what we see as the majority opinion here and now, is not really the majority opinion in Christian history.

But we still don't do theology by majority vote. When the vote includes our forefathers in the faith, it's much more valuable, but it's valuable to the extent that it makes us consider their view. We need to consider the possibility that the spirit of our times has clouded our judgment, and perhaps they actually saw things more clearly. That's the value of their witness. But we do theology on the basis of Scripture. If you want to develop a doctrine of Baptism, the best place to start is with the Scripture passages that speak of Baptism. And when you do that, you see that Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day.

I've had conversations with other pastors and church workers, where I say something like, "Baptism forgives sins." Then they laugh at me. Then I quote a Bible verse that says exactly that, and they say, "But it can't actually mean that." Naïvely, I think to myself that if a person believes in the truthfulness of Scripture, all I have to do is show them the right verses, and they will be convinced. So when they reject those verses, it kind of seems like the Bible isn't really their highest authority. And maybe it's not, but I think there's usually a different problem. Every person has a system of theology. We construct it in our brains. And if something doesn't fit into that system, we won't accept it, because it might threaten the other items in that system. From listening to their responses, I've come to the conclusion that the thing in their system that is threatened by Baptism is faith, or at least their understanding of faith.

And this is where the American spirit has changed the playing field. Americans typically understand faith to be something we do. We place our trust in something. Or we decide to trust something. Faith is an intellectual thing that we have authority over, or so we think. And that's the key thing that makes it so American. We're still the ones in control. And so, in this American understanding of faith, when we say, "We are saved through faith," they take that to mean that God forgives us because we placed our trust in Jesus. This rules out the possibility that anything outside of our own minds can be the cause of our salvation. That includes Baptism, regardless of what the verses seem to say.

But faith can never be something we have control over. If we have control over it, it's not really faith, because then we're really just trusting ourselves. So one of my friends wisely defines faith as dependence. And I think this is very helpful. Faith is a trustful dependence.

Consider the relationship between parents and children. This is the human relationship where faith is strongest. This is also the primary way that Scripture describes our relationship to God. So we should pay attention to the nature of this relationship. And I'm assuming a positive relationship between parents and children. I know that isn't always the case in this evil world. But it's the positive relationships that reflect our relationship to God. Children trust their parents.

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I think that's pretty obvious. But where does that faith come from? Does a child decide to place their trust in their parents? No! That's ridiculous! The trust is actually created by the parents. Children have faith, but it's not their own creation. It's not even their choice. It happens by virtue of the relationship. First, children trust their parents because they are dependent on them. They have to trust them. They literally have no choice. From day one in their mother's womb, children are dependent on their mothers. They have no choice. They don't even have an awareness of it. After children are born, they continue to be dependent on their parents. Eventually they learn more about their parents, and they find them to be trustworthy. Children grow up to trust their parents. Faith becomes an active thing. And children even become aware of their faith. But it's never because they decided to place their trust in their parents. Children have faith in their parents for two basic reasons: First, by nature of the relationship they are dependent upon their parents. And, second, their parents prove themselves trustworthy. This is the strongest picture in this world of faith. And we see in this picture that faith is not really something we have control over. Even in other relationships, we don't trust someone because we decided to trust them. We trust them because they proved themselves trustworthy. The American definition of faith doesn't even correspond to reality. Nor does it correspond to Scripture. But it's the false definition of faith that leads many Christians to deny the biblical teaching of Baptism.

With that said, now we can look at the passages. If you want to develop a doctrine of Baptism, the best place to start is with the Scripture passages that speak of Baptism. And when you do that, you see that Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day.

These are all plain statements drawn straight out of Scripture. So I'm going to turn this into a bit of a Bible study, and we're just going to go through the passages. And I broke the verses down into two general categories. This week we'll look at the verses that speak of Baptism more in terms of the forgiveness of sins. And next week we'll look at the verses that speak of Baptism more in terms of the new birth. And we're not going to hit every verse, but we'll hit enough to see the biblical doctrine.

We'll start with Matthew 28:18-20. It's where Jesus officially instituted Christian Baptism. It occurred after his resurrection, and before his ascension into heaven. This is what we often call the "Great Commission." The resurrected Jesus appears to his disciples and says, **"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and 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."**

The primary command is "Make disciples." This is a quick survey, so I'll try to skip all the nerdy grammar stuff. The primary command is "Make disciples." And Jesus prescribes that his apostles should make disciples through two actions: baptizing and teaching. These two actions, baptizing and teaching, are not merely "good enough" to make disciples of all nations. This is the Jesus-mandated disciple making plan. And why do we have confidence that this disciple-making plan will work? First, because Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth. If he says this plan will make disciples, then it will. Second, because Jesus remains with us. Even after his ascension into heaven, he is still with us. He is with us to make it happen. It is Jesus who causes this two-part disciple-making plan to work. And we do not separate the two parts. Baptism is the effective

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start of making disciples. But we do not stop there. We continue to teach them this Christian faith they have been baptized into. So here we see that Baptism, along with teaching, is the way to make disciples. That is, it is the way to bring people into the family of God. It is how we are saved. It is how we become children of God.

Next, let's back up to John the Baptist, and we'll go chronologically from there. John began baptizing before Jesus began his public ministry. He baptized, and he preached about the one who was about to be revealed: Jesus. I'll read from Mark 1:4, but Luke 3:3 also says the same thing. This is how Mark introduces John: "John appeared, baptizing in the wilderness and proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." So what did John's Baptism accomplish? It worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins. That's pretty awesome. And if John's Baptism does that, do we think that Jesus' Baptism will do less? If John's Baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins, is it reasonable to conclude that Jesus' Baptism is merely a symbol? Just an outward sign of an inward change? That's ridiculous. Jesus' Baptism will do at least as much as John's.

And John goes on to reveal the extra benefit of Jesus' Baptism. This is Mark 1:8. He says, "I have baptized you with water, but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." Now John wasn't saying that Jesus would stop using water and replace it with the Holy Spirit. Jesus still used water when he baptized, and so did Jesus' apostles. Rather, the extra thing Jesus' Baptism would give is the Holy Spirit. John's Baptism worked repentance and the forgiveness of sins, and John promised that Jesus' Baptism would also give the Holy Spirit.

Now let's fast forward to Pentecost. If we did all these verses strictly chronologically, we would have done Matthew 28 before this one, but we started with that, so now we go to Acts 2:38-41. This is about fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, and ten days after his ascension into heaven. Jews from all over the world were gathered in Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost. That was one of the three major feasts. And Peter preached a sermon about how Jesus is the Christ, how the Jewish leaders had him crucified, and how God raised him from the dead. When the people heard Peter's sermon, "they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brothers, what shall we do?'" (Acts 2:37). Peter responds with a gracious invitation: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself."

The first thing I want to do with this text is recognize the gifts attached to Baptism. There are two gifts Peter attaches to Baptism: the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit. Remember, this is the same gift that came through John's Baptism: the forgiveness of sins, and added to it now is the gift John spoke of concerning Jesus' Baptism: the Holy Spirit. According to Peter, Baptism forgives sins and grants the Holy Spirit. The gifts are the first thing to recognize with this text.

Second, we want to recognize who Baptism is for. Peter says it's for mature Christians who are ready to make an outward display of their inward faith, right? No! Peter puts no restrictions on it. He did not restrict it to Jews. He did not restrict it to mature Christians. None of these people had been Christians at all before that day. He did not even restrict it by age. He said, "The promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off." Those who restrict children from being baptized are in clear contradiction to Peter's promise. And Peter did not distinguish between ages of children. It wasn't children over the age of nine or whatever. There is no doubt that there were children there of the youngest ages. Three thousand people were baptized that

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day (2:41). It's absolutely ridiculous to argue that none of them were children, especially when Peter specifically said that the promise is for children.

Baptism forgives sins. It grants the Holy Spirit. And it is for every member of the human race.

Now another quick one from Acts. In Acts 22:16, the apostle Paul recounts what a Christian named Ananias said to him after his sight was restored: "And now why do you wait? Rise and be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name." I have no comment. I'll just let that one speak for itself.

Let's do one more passage. 1 Peter 3:18-22. If you're looking for the clearest statement possible, this is it, especially verse 21, and really just the first part of the verse. It's surrounded by verses before and after it that go into more detail. And maybe we'll discuss that technical stuff next week, but I want to leave you with a clear and simple statement. Here Peter compares Baptism to the flood—you know, with Noah, the ark, and all the animals. In the flood God saved Noah and his family. And he used water to do it. The problem threatening Noah and his family wasn't really the flood. God sent the flood. The problem threatening them was the wickedness on the earth (Gen. 6:5). So God used the waters of the flood to drown the wicked, thereby saving Noah and his family from the wickedness on the earth. Here's the full quotation from 1 Peter:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit, in which he went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison, because they formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through water. Baptism, which corresponds to this, now saves you, not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers having been subjected to him.

There's a lot here we could talk about. Perhaps we can fit it in next week. But I want to leave you with the clear and simple statement in the middle: "Baptism, which corresponds to [the flood], now saves you." Or we can break it down to the most basic part of the sentence: "Baptism now saves you." I cannot even imagine a simpler statement than this: "Baptism now saves you."

There is much more that still needs to be said about Baptism. You may still have objections. You might still be wrestling with how this biblical teaching of Baptism fits with the biblical teaching that faith is necessary for salvation. Remember that faith is not something you do. Faith is God's gift. And, at its bare essence, faith is dependence on God. Think of yourself as God's dear child, because you are. Next week, when we consider the passages that speak of Baptism in terms of the new birth, we will see that Baptism is really the beginning of the life of faith.

This week I simply want you to notice the plain statements we've heard from Scripture. Baptism saves you. Baptism works repentance and the forgiveness of sins. Baptism gives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Of course, it does not do any of this apart from Christ. These are all benefits of Jesus' death and resurrection. That is where all of God's blessings really come from. Baptism is simply the Holy Spirit's instrument to deliver these gifts to you. Jesus won your salvation at the cross. Jesus paid for your sins at the cross. And that work prepares the way for him to give you the Holy Spirit. All of it flows from the cross. Baptism is simply the instrument the Holy Spirit uses to deliver these gifts to you. And that is why we treasure it so highly. That is why we insist that

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these statements from Scripture about Baptism are true. We insist on it so that you might know that your salvation does not depend on your own feelings. It does not depend on your wavering commitment. It depends on forces outside of you. It depends on Jesus' work at the cross, and it is delivered to you through the Sacrament of Baptism. Baptism saves you. It forgives your sins. It gives the Holy Spirit. It drowns your sinful flesh. By it you are born again as a child of God. It unites you with Jesus Christ. It unites you with one another. And it guarantees that you will be raised with Christ on the Last Day. Amen.

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