**Christ Cleanses the Water**

Based on [Luke 3:15-22](http://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk3.15-22)

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Epiphany 1- The Baptism of Our Lord

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Baptism is the most important moment in a person’s life. Acts 2:38 says, “**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**.” Two things are promised here in Baptism, (1) the forgiveness of sins, and (2) the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Today Jesus is baptized. And what is baptism? It is the washing of renewal and rebirth in the Holy Spirit. **It is not a removal of dirt from the body, but the pledge of a good conscience before God, to be able to stand before him blameless as his Child washed in the blood of the lamb.**

When Jesus is baptized, the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form, like a dove. In baptism, Jesus received the Holy Spirit. **But why does the son of God need the Holy Spirit?** Doesn’t he have the Holy Spirit already? And what about the other promise of Baptism…the forgiveness of sins? Why does Jesus need to be baptized? It's not as if he has any sin that needs to be forgiven, or any transgression that needs to be washed away.

This question is not a new one. John the Baptist is also confused when Jesus comes to him for baptism. John even tries to deter him, to prevent Jesus from receiving baptism for this very reason. He says, “**I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?**” It is confusing. **What need does the perfect, eternal, holy Son of God have for the things that Baptism gives?...things** like repentance, forgiveness, the Holy Spirit? Does he not already have these things without measure? (John 3:34).

So why does Jesus receive baptism? **Well it’s not to be cleansed from sin. He’s not dirty. His stuff don’t stink.** **His works are not filthy rags like ours are.** His works are a righteous garment. **When we are baptized into Christ, Galatians 3:27 says, we are clothed and covered with Him**. His righteousness covers our filth. His cleaness covers our sin. He is in fact the cleaning agent, and you don’t wash soap. You don’t soak water. You don’t clean Jesus, he cleans you.

All of this is to set the stage for understanding the purpose of Jesus’ baptism. Because it’s not just a show. Jesus’ baptism actually does something, it actually makes a difference when it happens. **Your baptism was not just a mere symbol, or plain water, neither was Jesus’s.** In Baptism God gave something to Jesus. In Baptism, God give Jesus his vocation, his calling, his threefold office of prophet, priest and king; and he also numbers Jesus with fallen humanity, to ultimately be our substitute and the one who in bathing with us, makes us clean.

Last time, we talked about the doctrine of the humiliation of Jesus. Jesus was, is, and always will be God. But when he took on human flesh, as Philippians 2 says, “**Though he was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be seized, but humbled himself taking on the form of a servant.**” Jesus became man and did not use his godliness to seize earthly power and glory, but instead humbled himself.

When I was in Law School, I remember hearing about other students, once they had completed their research assignment in the library, would rip out the page from the book they used. This was so that others in the class wouldn’t be able to complete the assignment and they would get a worse grade. **You see if you're trying to win to seize success and glory, you have to assert yourself, exalt yourself as better and more qualified than others. One way of doing that is to bring others down, humiliate them, cause them to fail so that you stand taller in comparison.** That is what it means to exalt *yourself*, using your power, your skill, your craftiness, whatever means are at your disposal to elevate yourself above others.

When Jesus took on our flesh, he did not exalt himself or elevate himself above others. **He had, at the means to do so at his disposal. He had the whole arsenal of the knowledge, and the wisdom, and the might, and the power and the glory of Almighty God.** He wouldn’t even have to cheat; he had the power to raise himself above all men without tripping up the competition. But here’s the thing. Humility means not exalting yourself, but waiting for the Lord to exalt you.

I did a quick study this morning on the Word "laugh" in the bible and how it is used. God only laughs a handful of times, but it is not joyful laughter. God laughs at those who try to exalt themselves. Psalm 2 speaks of kings that try to exalt themselves as god and against God, it says, “**He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision**” (v. 4). And again, Psalm 37 says, “**The wicked plots against the righteous and gnashes his teeth at him, but the Lord laughs at the wicked for he sees that his day is coming**.”

In the bible, laugh is what you do when someone tries to do something that's impossible. They laugh at the ridiculousness of it. When Abraham and Sarah hear from God that they're going to have a son in their ridiculously old age, they laugh. Sarah says, “**After I am worn out and my lord is old, will I now have this pleasure?** (Genesis 18:12)” So her son is named, Isaac, which means "to laugh."

For what it’s worth, joy is rarely if ever the cause for laughter in the bible. God laughs and people laugh when they see someone striving to do what can’t be done. Futility and failure, that is what arouses laughter. A "C" student saying he’s going to apply to Harvard, or an overweight smoker trying out for the Olympic Decathlon…you hear about it and you laugh, because it’s not going to happen until pigs fly, or hell freezes over. We laugh at the ridiculous.

And so when it comes to salvation, Jesus says, “**With man it is impossible, but not with God. With God all things are possible**.” And that, dear friends in Christ, is the humility of faith; that **those who wait on the Lord will never be put to shame** (Psalm 25:3). Faith knows that with God all things are possible and is content to wait on Him to be exalted, but those who oppose God and exalt themselves will be destroyed. God will always have the last laugh.

After all, the very idea of opposing God is absurd, laughable. **You hear of people who say they hate God because of all the suffering in the world…that he is a lousy God.** How can people say such ridiculous things? You can picket God all you want, but you’ll be doing so from outside the pearly gates, and you’ll lose your motivation and your righteous indignation pretty darn fast once you feel the unquenchable fires of hell. To oppose God? It’s laughable--not that I or anyone would take joy in knowing the rebellious will spend eternity in the unquenchable fire. I wouldn’t wish that upon my worst enemy. **I would never laugh for joy at their misfortune**. But the fact remains, it is ridiculous, laughable, for anyone to think they can oppose the almighty and eternal God and prevail.

The humility of faith is knowing that it is God who exalts and God who humbles. And so when Jesus submits to baptism, he is humbling himself to God’s call. Jesus says to answer John's doubt, "**Let it be so now, for it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness**." Jesus must completely humble himself, subject himself to all things. He must become a servant of all and thus wait upon the Lord to exalt him, and wait upon God to deliver him. **Even though the Son of God had the Holy Spirit from eternity and even before his baptism, Jesus did not presume to make himself the Christ**.

Jesus received the Holy Spirit in baptism, because the Holy Spirit is the one who Calls people to God. And this Call of the Holy Spirit is not some internal feeling in the heart, though that may be a symptom of it. But the calling of the Holy Spirit is an external calling through the Word of God in Baptism. And Jesus was called into his threefold office of prophet, priest and king. He did not *make himself* a prophet, he humbled himself and let God choose him and anoint him prophet to speak his Word to his people. He did not *make himself* our priest; he was baptized and the Holy Spirit anointed him our great high priest. He did not *make himself* king, he was chosen by his heavenly Father, the eternal God who laughs at self made kings casting them down from their thrones, and anoints the humble of heart.

When King Saul disobeyed God's call, God brought him low; and anointed a teenage shepherd boy named David to be king of Israel. **So too Jesus, did not crown himself, but subjected himself to baptism, and God chose him to be the messiah who would be the priest, the substitute for sinful mankind in standing before the wrath of God on the cross**, to bear your punishment, to suffer your reproach, to stand in your place before **the baptism of unquenchable fire of God's wrath against sin** and to quench it for you, by offering his own perfect and unblemished life and his own innocent and suffering death. And then, when death could not hold him, God raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted him to heaven, to his right hand to rule all things in heaven and on earth. Jesus Christ anointed king of kings and lord of lords.

There's a false teaching within Christianity that if your not aware of, you should be. Most all of protestant Christianity teaches that Baptism is just plain water. That when you are Baptized it is just a symbolic washing, like an object lesson, an outward act that doesn't do anything but show your obedience to Christ. But the Lutheran Small Catechism says, "Baptism is not just plain water, but the water included in God's command, and combined with his word." How can water do such great things? Certainly not *just water*, but the word of God in and with the water does these things as giving forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.

Throughout human history, mankind has invented rites of baptism, that is of purification with water. **The bible says the Pharisees and the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they baptize. And there are many other traditions they observe, such as the baptizing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches**." These were ceremonial washings, not just like you wash your hands to clean the germs off before dinner. They were to clean you before God. But the problem with man-made washings is they can't clean you.

When you wash your hands for dinner, you don't just use plain water. Yes water can wash away dirt, but water cannot kill the germs, and the bacteria and all the things that will make you sick. You need soap with the water to do that. When Jesus was baptized, it wasn't to wash away his sins; no he entered the water as the soap, the cleaning agent that purifies the water that we are baptized with. He is the word of God added to the water that kills the bacteria of sin and makes us clean.

Jesus was baptized for the forgiveness of sins; not for his own, but for the sin of the whole world. The whole world was corrupted with sin, such that all of creation was dirtied and needed to be cleaned. Malachi 3:2-3 says of the coming of Christ, "**But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like a fullers' soap.**" And he is a fuller's soap. In baptism, you were washed with Jesus Christ so that you are in him and he is in you.

Baptism is not just plain water. Our epistle says that in baptism we were crucified with Christ, buried with Christ, raised with Christ, walk in the newness of life with Christ. Baptism unites us to Christ, who is our substitute before the wrath of God, our advocate before the judgment seat. And the verdict he declared upon Jesus that day, is the judgment he has of each and every one of you at your baptism, when he through the washing of water and the word, added his family Name to you and because you are united with Christ said, "You are my beloved child; with you I am well pleased."

God ordained salvation to happen in this way, that he would anoint his only begotten son to be our substitute, to take upon our sin, to share our baptismal waters and be numbered among us sinners. To die in our place, and to rise again and bring us with him. **All of these works and merits of Christ are applied to us in baptism through faith**. Anyone who would presume to storm the gates of heaven without baptism, who would approach God without being washed in the water of his son, God laughs in derision. It is futile to get to heaven without christ; it's not just unlikely or a long row to hoe, it's laughable. Laughable to try to please God on our own when all we have to offer him is our sin. Laughable as a blind man taking a driver's test; or a politician trying to tell the truth. With man salvation is impossible, but with God all things are possible. He made a way to save sinners and even now we have salvation, for we have already been counted dead to sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus our Lord.