

Scripture Readings for July 3rd 2022

Romans 6: 1-11

¹What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ²By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— ⁷because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.

⁸Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

¹¹In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Gal 3:26-28¹

²⁶So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Matthew 28:18-20

¹⁸Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

¹ See also Col 3:10-11.

Sermon: “We Acknowledge One Baptism”

People inside and outside of the church find the idea and meaning of baptism to be very confusing. It’s made worse by the fact that different Christian denominations *practice* baptism differently. Some churches will only baptise adults; we baptise all ages here! Some practice baptism by full immersion, others only sprinkle a tiny amount of water as if it were being rationed. But as a friend of mine joked, it doesn’t matter how much water is used as long as the head get wet! In addition to those obvious differences in the *practice* of baptism, it’s easy to be muddled as to what baptism *means* or *does*. That’s what I want to talk about today.

You will have noticed that the Nicene Creed has up until now started every major clause with the phrase “We believe.” Those statements are not only something that we commit to with our *minds*, but with our *hearts* – indeed, *all* of our very being.² Today we come to the line that states: “*We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.*” Notice that the Creed uses a different word, namely “confess” or “acknowledge,” for this phrase concerning baptism. This implies that baptism is important, but it doesn’t call for the same degree of commitment. The principal reason being is that baptism is about the *inner life* and *practices* of the church, rather than statements concerning God and the nature of the church, as discussed in previous weeks.

One of the things that has surprised me as I have prepared this sermon series on the Creed is how its authors were repeatedly quoting the Scriptures. I have therefore stressed that fact, and again we see the same thing here. Mark’s gospel states, “John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”³ We can therefore see that the Creed’s authors were citing Mark. I have a problem with this statement, and I think its seriously mistaken as it stands. Allow me to explain why. In the very next chapter of Mark, Jesus is accused of blasphemy for stating he as authority to forgive sins.⁴ His critics rightly understood that forgiveness of sin comes from God alone and was through offering sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem. Jesus is therefore challenging the authority of the temple itself and soon afterwards, according to Mark, he’s a man marked out for death for saying such things.⁵ Now, had John the Baptist been actually claiming that his baptism was one of repentance *for the forgiveness of sins*, then he too would have been condemned as a blasphemer; yet Mark and the other Gospel writers make absolutely no reference to that. Matthew, who had Mark’s Gospel in front of him when he wrote his own, omits the reference linking John’s baptism with forgiveness and states it was a ritual washing that only signifies repentance.⁶ And the word “repent” means a deliberate U-turn and coming back to diligently follow God’s ways. At the end of Matthew’s

² See Mark 12:30-31; Matt 22:37-39; Deut 6:4-5.

³ Mark 1:4. See also Luke 3:3; 24:47; Acts 2:38-39 and compare them to Acts 19:3-4 where Luke agrees with Matt 3:11a.

⁴ See Mark 2:1-2, esp. 5-7, 10. See also: <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Whole-Bodied-Salvation.pdf> .

⁵ See Mark 3:6.

⁶ Matt 3:11a; see also [3].

Gospel, he explicitly links forgiveness with the crucifixion using the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. It was there that he instituted the practice of Holy Communion saying: “Drink from [this cup], all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many *for the forgiveness of sins.*”⁷ My point, then, is that our forgiveness arises *not* from the act of baptism, but *through Jesus’ death on the cross*. As we read in Ephesians, “In [Jesus] we have redemption *through his blood, the forgiveness of sins*, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace.”⁸ As I hope you can now see, it’s an important and confusing distinction that needs to be cleaned up!

That *doesn’t* mean baptism *isn’t* important! As we heard earlier, the risen Jesus himself *commands* his disciples to baptise in the name of the Trinity in the Great Commission.⁹ But, as we will see in a moment, Christian baptism is *more than* John’s baptism,¹⁰ although it incorporates John’s ritual washing as a public sign of repentance and an embracing of a new ethical orientation as part of the first step in Christian discipleship.¹¹ Having mentioned that, let’s now explore the *additional richness* of Christian baptism.

There are many images in the New Testament for baptism and *all* of them are important.¹² We are, after all, using metaphors to describe a profound mystery! I will simply mention two of them, and both are just as relevant for us today as they were in the 1st century. As we heard in our reading from Romans, baptism is described as a *dying and rising with Christ*.¹³ The descent *into* water signifies the Christian’s identification with the suffering and death of Jesus the Messiah, whereby the power that sin has in the old way of life is broken, and the ascent *from* the water signifies participation in the new life in the Spirit based on the power of the resurrection. This was enacted by the person taking off their old clothing and being baptised naked and, as they came out of the river or lake, by putting on new clothing symbolizing the leaving the old self behind and taking on our new identity in the image of Christ. As Paul writes “All of you who were baptized into Christ *have clothed yourselves with Christ.*”¹⁴ Now we obviously don’t practice naked baptism today! Nevertheless, baptism vividly symbolizes that we are now a new creation in Christ, the old has gone and the new life has begun.¹⁵ Of course that *doesn’t* mean we become instantly perfect nor that our future sins don’t matter. Rather that God now sees us as part of the new people of God,¹⁶ *not* because of any good deeds we have done and *not* by following

⁷ Matt 26:27–28; emphasis mine. The death of Jesus replaces the Jewish sacrificial system based at the temple.

⁸ Eph 1:7; see also Col 1:13–14. In John 20:23, the risen Jesus commissions the church with the responsibility to forgive sin.

⁹ Matt 28:18–20. Incidentally, the phrase “I am with you always, to the end of the age” needs to be compared with the parting words of Moses: “For the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you,” Deut 31:6; see also Josh 1:9. The key difference being Jesus substituting “the LORD” with *himself*, which only makes sense in light of the earlier sentence: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”

¹⁰ See also Acts 19:3–4.

¹¹ 1 Cor 6:11. Repentance (Greek *metanoia*) means changing direction, or U-turn, toward God (cf. John’s baptism).

¹² See also the summary in *Living Faith* 7.6.

¹³ Rom 6:3–4; Col 2:11–13. Some also argue that Christ was naked on the cross as a feature of Roman humiliation/shaming.

¹⁴ See Gal 3:27.

¹⁵ See 2 Cor 5:17.

¹⁶ Or the new people “in the Messiah” or “in Christ,”

a series of rules, but because of the *faithfulness of Jesus himself*.¹⁷ In other words, we are right with God because we trust in the significance of the cross; it's all a matter of God's grace revealed in Jesus the Messiah.

In addition to baptism linking us to our dying and rising with Christ, it's also portrayed as a *rebirth* by the Holy Spirit into the family of God.¹⁸ This is most vividly expressed in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus when he says that he must be "born again" or "born from above" or "born of the Spirit."¹⁹ Jesus explains that entry into God's kingdom does *not* arise by intellectual *illumination*, but through *regeneration* by the Holy Spirit. God's unpredictable and mysterious Spirit gives rise to creative acts, including new life, new creation. And so again we see that means this new birth is an act of God's grace and not something we can achieve by human effort. Baptism is, as St. Augustine it, "a visible sign of God's invisible grace." Through this public act we are being welcomed into a new community of promise, becoming adopted members of a new family and citizens of God's new society.²⁰

One of Paul's major theological contributions was to realize that God's new family was to be *inclusive*. It wasn't just for Jews, but for *everyone*. He writes: "In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith . . . [For in baptism] there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are *all one* in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you *are* Abraham's family, and heirs according to the promise."²¹ The shocking power of those all-embracing words cannot be understated! Baptism unites or reconciles whatever society tries to separate by whatever labels we choose. As it says in Ephesians, "There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."²² And the Nicene Creed cites this passage in its affirmation, "We acknowledge *one* baptism . . ." Because we believe in *one* baptism, there's a radical *equality* amongst the faithful. Among other things, it means the minister is more Christian than anybody else!

Those two features of Christian baptism are what we are celebrating today. John's baptism of repentance is about *our* initiative and intentions. Christian baptism is about *God's* initiative revealed in our Savior Jesus Christ and the life-giving Holy Spirit. We baptise in the name of – or in the authority of – God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and we celebrate divine grace. That being the case, the effectiveness of baptism does not depend upon the holiness of the minister but only on the faithfulness of God. And note that because we baptise in the name of the Trinity, the person is being initiated into the World-wide Church, not simply the Presbyterian Church in Canada.

¹⁷ See Gal 2:16, 20; Rom 3:22; Eph 3:12; Phil 3:9 in the NET or NTE translation.

¹⁸ John 3:5; Acts 2:38.

¹⁹ See John 3:1-17 and <https://standrews-amherstburg.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/A-Confusing-Conversation-with-Nicodemus.pdf>.

²⁰ Eph 2:19; Gal 3:28; 4:6-7; 1 Pet 1:3.

²¹ Gal 3:26-29.

²² Eph 4:4-6.

Baptism is, however, *not* the end of the story but the *beginning* of Christian discipleship that lasts a whole lifetime. It's a commission that's not only personal but as part of the community of God. This is a commitment to a spiritual journey that moves constantly and progressively from slavery to freedom, from fear to boldness, from death to life, from darkness to light, from selfishness to generous love, following the example of our living Lord Jesus and guided by the Holy Spirit. And as we grow in the Spirit, we get a deeper understanding of what we have received from Jesus the Messiah. As it says in Colossians 2:6-7: "Therefore, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and firm in your faith just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness."²³

All this is what baptism *means* and *does*. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! Amen.

²³ See also Eph 4:11-13.