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Gospel of John #5

Sermon Summary #5

The Lamb of God, Atonement, and Baptism in the Spirit John 1:19-34

Humility is not easy to define. It's even more difficult to experience in one's life! The apostle Paul has perhaps given us the best working definition of humility in Romans 12:3, where he writes:

“For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3).

To be humble, then, means that you do not think more highly of yourself than is proper, but that you regard yourself in accordance with the gifts and talents that God has given.

On that count, given that definition, John the Baptist would have to qualify as one of the more humble of all human beings. John knew who he was and who he wasn't. “I am not the Messiah,” he shouted to those who inquired of him. “I am simply the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord” (John 1:23).

None of us cares much for the person who constantly toots his own horn. We are sickened by TV evangelists and religious leaders, as well as political personalities, Hollywood actors, and professional athletes, who are repeatedly and loudly touting their accomplishments and basking in the spotlight of fame and self-aggrandizement.

That's what impresses me about John the Baptist. He never sought his own glory. My suspicion is that every time he hears a sermon preached about him (assuming he hears them, which is doubtful), he cringes with disappointment and frustration. It isn't because what is said about him is untrue, but simply because *anything* is said about him at all. John's entire purpose in life was to point away from himself to Jesus. His calling was to shine the spotlight of attention and praise on Jesus. This is what John the Apostle said about him earlier in John 1:6-8,

“There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light” (John 1:6-8; see v. 15).

That being said, I still want to talk a bit about John, not so that your attention is directed to him but so that you might better understand Jesus who is himself the light to which John pointed.

Our Expectations of Spiritual Leaders

We all have our expectations of what a spiritual leader should look like and how they should act. Episcopalians expect the priest to wear a clerical collar. Methodists look for a clerical robe. Roman Catholics are accustomed to seeing their leaders in priestly vestments. And even Evangelical Protestants often hope their pastors will wear a suit and tie on Sunday morning (sorry for disappointing you on this one!).

Needless to say, John the Baptist shattered everyone's expectations. He didn't visit the synagogues of his day, but remained outside of town in the wilderness. He didn't preach in gentle, sonorous tones but cried out aloud in urgent exhortation. He didn't mildly repeat the same hackneyed religious clichés, but thundered with demands for repentance and warnings of judgment. He wasn't dressed in clean, neatly pressed robes but in a garment of camel hair with a leather belt. And his diet didn't consist of sirloin steak or fried chicken but of locusts and wild honey. Far from winning friends and influencing people, John's message was distinctly offensive and off-putting. He even went so far as to call his adversaries a pack of snakes!

So, where did he come from and why did he appear on the scene? The answer was given to his father Zacharias by the angel that announced his birth.

“for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother’s womb. And he will turn away many of the children to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared” (Luke 1:15-17).

As you might expect, John was keenly aware of his role in life. Later in John 3, we read how his disciples protested and complained that the crowds were no longer following him, but had begun to flock after Jesus. John responded by saying,

“A person cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, ‘I am not the Christ, but I have been sent before him.’ The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom’s voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:27-30).

John was sent by God to play a crucial role in the Lord’s purpose. For over 400 years God had been largely silent. Four centuries had passed since the last true OT prophet had spoken or written the word of God. Finally, God sent John the Baptist to call his people to repentance and to promise the coming of someone even greater than John himself. John, then, is something of a pivot in God’s purpose: the last of the OT prophets and the first in the NT to proclaim the coming of the Messiah.

We don’t know much about John’s early life. Luke tells us that “the child [that is, John the Baptist] grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel” (Luke 1:80).

What’s really important here is to know that the way God has chosen to spread the light of Christ in this world is through human messengers, human spokesmen, human witnesses. I suppose God could have made use of the angels to do this, or he could have written it in the clouds above. But he chose to use people like John the Baptist, people like you and me. The way the good news of the light of the gospel of Jesus is made known is through people, like John, whom he sends.

The Response of the Religious Leaders to John (vv. 19-25)

It would have been irresponsible of the Jewish religious leaders to ignore John. After all, here was a man claiming to speak in the name of God. Yet, they were the religious leaders of Israel. “Who does this guy think he is, anyway?” And they couldn’t have someone stirring up the multitudes and causing a riot. So they sent a delegation to find out just who he was and what he was up to.

They essentially ask John five questions, to each of which he responds with a short answer. (1) “Are you the Messiah?” “No, I am not” (vv. 19-20). (2) “Are you Elijah?” “No, I am not” (v. 21a). (3) “Are you the Prophet?” “No.” (v. 21b). (4) “Who are you, then?” “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness.” (v. 23). (5) “What are you doing? Why are you baptizing people?” To which John answers in vv. 26-28. So let’s look at each of these interactions, one at a time.

(1) “Who are you?” (v. 19). “I am not the Christ” (v. 20). The word “Christ” is a transliteration of the Greek word which means “anointed one.” It was the standard term for the Messiah. They wondered: “Is this man claiming to be the Messiah?” “No,” said John, “I am not.”

(2) “What then? Are you Elijah?” (v. 21a). “I am not” (v. 21b), he replied. You may remember that Elijah never died physically but was taken up directly into heaven. In addition, Malachi 4:5 records God’s promise that he would send “Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord.” Since John dressed like Elijah, many thought he was the prophet sent back to earth from heaven. There is another sense, of course, in which John was in fact Elijah. Jesus said this in Matthew 11:13-14,

“For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John [the Baptist], and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come” (Matt. 11:13-14; see 17:10-12).

We saw earlier in Luke 1:17 that John was sent to Israel “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” I think John’s response to the question is simply his way of saying that he is not physically or literally Elijah. But as Jesus himself said, he would fulfill the role of Elijah.

(3) “Are you the Prophet?” (v. 21b). “No,” said John. The promise of a prophet like Moses (Deut. 18:15-18) who would speak God’s words was taken to refer to some end-time figure. John makes it clear that he is not the fulfillment of that particular Scripture passage. “I am not the Prophet: Jesus is!”

(4) “Who are you, then?” (v. 22). John answers by quoting Isaiah 40:3 – “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (v. 23). Although John was not the Messiah or Elijah or the promised Prophet, neither was he simply another itinerant evangelist. He was the fulfillment of the prophetic promise that Isaiah had declared.

(5) “Then why are you baptizing?” (v. 25). If you’re not the Messiah or Elijah or the promised Prophet, what are you doing? In asking this, they are most likely trying to determine by what authority he baptizes people.

Who, then, is John? And who is Jesus? Let’s turn first to John.

Who is John the Baptist? (vv. 26-28)

In those days, people thought that whoever appeared first in time was wiser and more important than those who came later. But John makes it clear that although Jesus appeared on the scene later, he is infinitely more important. This is what we read earlier in John 1:15 and again in John 1:30.

“John bore witness about him, and cried out, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me’” (John 1:15).

“This is he of whom I said, ‘After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me’” (John 1:30).

In saying that Jesus was “before” him John is obviously alluding to what we saw in John 1:1 where the gospel opens with the declaration: “In the beginning was the Word.” The Baptist is here affirming yet again that the Word who became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ is eternally pre-existent.

Don’t overlook the significance of v. 27 and John’s confession that he is “not worthy to untie” the strap of Jesus’ sandal. In those days there were not paved streets. After walking in the dirt and mud, the first courtesy provided upon arrival at someone’s home was to have one’s feet washed. But the host didn’t do this. It was beneath his dignity. It was reserved for the house-hold servant or slave. Yet this is precisely what John says he would have done for Jesus, but feels unworthy of it! So great is Jesus that John felt unworthy to do the most unworthy of tasks! That is humility!

Why did John Baptize Jesus?

Let me perfectly blunt: ***What in the world is Jesus doing submitting to water baptism at the hands of John, or at the hands of anyone for that matter?***

Here we need to let Matthew fill in the blanks. When Jesus approached John requesting to be baptized, John was incredulous. Matthew says that John tried to prevent it from happening. “**I** need to be baptized by **you**,” shouted John; “and do **you** come to **me**?” (Matt. 3:14). I can certainly understand his reluctance. John had made it clear that his baptism was an expression of repentance for sins committed. This repentance would issue in forgiveness. John refused to baptize the Pharisees because they were not worthy of his baptism. Now he is reluctant to baptize Jesus because his baptism is not worthy of him.

But here is Jesus, seeking and submitting to John's baptism! Why? *If Jesus was without sin and therefore had no need to repent*, what reason could he have for being baptized? Listen to our Lord's response: "But Jesus answered him, 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness'" (Matt. 3:15). Let me cite *four reasons* why Jesus submitted to the baptism of John.

(1) Jesus' submission to John's baptism was his way of putting *his stamp of approval* on the authority of John and the truth of his preaching. "If you want to know what I think of John, watch this!"

(2) Matthew says it was to "fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). But baptism is not a requirement in the OT Scriptures. How, then, is it something that "righteousness" requires? Righteousness requires that the Messiah *identify with his people and live inseparably with them*. There is a sense in which here, at his baptism, Jesus is already taking on the sin of those for whom he will die. He is stooping to our level, becoming as completely one with us in our humanity as he possibly can, identifying with us at every point. Thus Jesus submitted to baptism with the people in order to identify with their sin, not to repent of his own. He demonstrates his solidarity with them in their plight, in their need.

(3) Jesus submitted to the baptism of John to make it known publicly that a new age has dawned in God's redemptive purposes. The kingdom has come. This, then, was the inauguration of our Lord's public ministry and his declaration that a new epoch in God's saving purposes has dawned.

(4) The baptism of Jesus was a concrete, visible illustration of the goal of his life. When Jesus was submerged beneath the water and then rose up out of it, he was providing for us a picture or figure or foreshadowing of his death (see Mark 10:38-39). Jesus describes his impending death as a "baptism" in the sense that he will soon be immersed in death and buried in a tomb. Here, then, at the beginning of his ministry, the cross casts its ominous shadow across the path of our Lord.

Jesus sought baptism not from a consciousness of personal sin but from a concern for public righteousness. *Jesus didn't simply die the death you should have died; he also lived the life you should have lived!* He fulfilled the law of God both by obeying its precepts and suffering its penalty.

We read that the Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove (v. 32). But what exactly did Jesus and John and perhaps even others "see"? According to Luke 3:22 the Spirit descended "on him in bodily form, like a dove." Did the Holy Spirit literally assume the form of a dove? It's more likely that a literal dove was sent by God the Father as symbolic of the Spirit's ministry in the life of Jesus. But what did the dove symbolize? To what did it point? And why a *dove*?

- A sign of God's deep love and affection for Jesus ("beloved" Son)
- A sign of the anointing of Jesus with the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:38)
- The "dove" is bird of sacrifice in the OT; hence a preview of his atoning work
- The "dove" was also an emblem of gentleness and compassion
- The "dove" was also a symbol of creation and re-creation (see Gen. 1:2 and Gen. 8:8-12; the inauguration of a new era of grace and life).

The reason the Holy Spirit is symbolized by a dove is not to tell us something about his nature but to tell us something about *the nature of Jesus!* It is God the *Son*, not God the *Spirit*, whose qualities are expressed by the dove. The Holy Spirit assumed the form of a dove to say something about Jesus, not about himself.

Who is Jesus? (vv. 29-34)

So, that is who John the Baptist is. Now, who is Jesus whom he proclaims? Three answers are given.

First, John loudly and gladly declares that Jesus is "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (v. 29). In all likelihood, John had already baptized Jesus in the Jordan River. Here we read that he sees Jesus coming toward him and it provokes this declaration. So what does it mean to say that Jesus is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world?" Several answers are possible.

(1) Some see here an allusion to the "gentle lamb" of Jeremiah 11:19, a symbol of a righteous person being killed by the unrighteous. Jesus is harmless and does not resist the violence perpetrated against him.

- (2) Others see a reference here to the scapegoat of Leviticus 16. But in that text it is a “goat” while here it is a “lamb.”
- (3) Could John be alluding to the “guilt offering” of Leviticus 14:12, 21,24?
- (4) Some think the reference is not to a meek and gentle lamb but the triumphant lamb that we read about later in Revelation 5:6-8 and 7:9-10.
- (5) Every morning and evening a lamb was offered as a sacrifice in the Temple (Exod. 29:38-42). Could this be what John had in mind?
- (6) Others see a reference to the lamb that God provided to Abraham to take the place of Isaac in Genesis 22:7-8.
- (7) Is it the lamb of Isaiah 53:7 – “He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth” (Isa. 53:7).
- (8) Most likely this is a reference to the Passover lamb described in Exodus, a lamb without blemish that was killed and whose blood was applied to the two doorposts of one’s house (Exod. 12:3-7, 12-13). It was Paul who declared that “Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed” (1 Cor. 5:7). Peter affirms this for us when he says,

“knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

If the latter is true, and I believe it is, John is declaring that the full and final and all-sufficient sacrifice for sin is to be offered by Jesus, he who is the fulfillment of all prophetic references to the lamb that was to be slain. He is THE sacrificial lamb of God whose blood finally and forever makes atonement for the sins of men and women of every tribe and tongue and people and race.

Second, John also describes Jesus as the one “who baptizes with the Holy Spirit” (v. 33). Whereas John immersed people in water, Jesus will immerse people in the Holy Spirit. There are several things to keep in mind when it comes to Spirit baptism.

- (1) The phrase, “baptism in the Spirit” or “to be baptized in the Spirit” occurs only seven times in the NT. Six of those seven instances refer to what happened on the Day of Pentecost (see Matt. 3:11; Mark 1:8; Luke 3:16; John 1:33; Acts 1:5; 11:16. The seventh occurrence is in 1 Corinthians 12:13 to which I will return in a moment.
- (2) Jesus is himself the one who always baptizes and the Holy Spirit is himself always the one in whom we are baptized. Jesus is the baptizer; the Spirit is the element, as it were, in which we are immersed by him. No text ever says that the Holy Spirit baptizes. Thus it is incorrect to speak of being baptized “by” the Spirit into Christ. No. Christ baptizes us in the Spirit.
- (3) If you are wondering why God chose the imagery of baptism to describe our reception of the Holy Spirit, the answer is easy. To be “baptized” is to be immersed or submerged in water. The person who is baptized in water is inundated with water and saturated with water. Thus, just as a believer is immersed or baptized in water, so too is the Christian immersed in or saturated with the Holy Spirit. When we trust in Christ, we immediately receive the Holy Spirit. We are engulfed in, drenched with, and soaked thoroughly by the Holy Spirit. And there he remains within us permanently until the end.
- (4) How, then, should we define Spirit baptism? Baptism in the Spirit, as we see here in John 1:33, is the action of Jesus Christ who immerses us in the Holy Spirit and places the Holy Spirit in us.
- (5) The only place in the NT where the language of Spirit baptism is found outside those times it describes what happened on the Day of Pentecost when the Spirit was first poured out is in 1 Corinthians 12:13.

“For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:13).

Thus when Jesus baptizes or immerses us in the Spirit, the result is not only that the Spirit now indwells us permanently, but also we are incorporated into the spiritual organism called the body of Christ.

There is, however, considerable controversy surrounding this experience. Most who are part of the classical Pentecostal tradition believe that a person is baptized in the Spirit at some time *after* their conversion to Christ in faith. In other words, they argue that being baptized in the Spirit does not occur when you trust Jesus for salvation, but only comes later, at some time *separate from and subsequent to* a person’s conversion. It might only be days, but it might be years after conversion when this occurs. This is the view of the Assemblies of God and other denominations that form what we refer to as classical Pentecostalism. Those in the Assemblies also contend that the way you know you have been baptized in the Spirit is that you will speak in tongues.

Others, such as myself, believe that all Christians are baptized in the Spirit at the moment we first trust in Christ for salvation. This is confirmed clearly by this text in 1 Corinthians 12:13.

However, when I say that we receive the fullness of the Spirit at the moment of our conversion to Jesus Christ, or when I say that we are baptized in the Spirit at the time we first believe in Jesus for salvation, I’m *not* saying that there are no additional experiences with the Holy Spirit that empower us for ministry or impart spiritual gifts. The NT describes in several places how the Spirit who indwells us can also in some sense “come” to us and fill us and empower us in life-changing ways. I just wouldn’t call these experiences Spirit baptism.

I think the debate over this point is actually quite needless. Let me explain why with an illustration. Let’s suppose you come to me and say, “Sam, I have a terrible headache. Do you have an aspirin?” I say, “Sure, take these two tablets and let me know how you feel.” Later you return and say, “Wow, that aspirin is really effective. My headache is completely gone.” That’s when I tell you that I made a mistake. I thought I had given you aspirin, but in fact they were Tylenol tablets. Your response would likely be: “I don’t care. What difference does it make what you call them? The only thing that matters is that the medicine worked!”

It’s much the same with our experience of the Holy Spirit. During the course of your Christian life you may have multiple encounters with the Holy Spirit. The only thing that matters is whether or not those were genuine, life-changing experiences. What you call them is secondary. Some would call that being baptized in the Spirit. I would call it being filled or anointed or empowered by the Spirit. But the only thing that truly matters is whether or not the NT justifies our belief that such encounters with the Spirit after conversion actually occur, and whether or not they change us more and more into the image of Jesus. You call it aspirin. I call it Tylenol. You call it Spirit baptism. I call it Spirit filling. The only important question to answer is this: Did it actually happen? Did it actually change you? And I trust the answer you give will be: Yes!

Third, John also declares in v. 34 that Jesus is “the Son of God.” Some Greek manuscripts declare: “this is the Chosen One of God.” Let’s consider both.

Don’t ever think that in saying Jesus is the “Son” of God that he is less than God or that he was literally born of God. This is the Bible’s way of telling us that Jesus sustains the closest possible relationship to the Father. He has always been, is now, and always will be the Son of the Father.

That John the Baptist believed the Word who became flesh is truly God is seen in how he describes himself. He quotes from Isaiah 40:3 to identify himself – “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (v. 23). The word “Lord” in Isaiah 40 is YHWH, the God of creation, the God of Israel, the great “I am that I am” who made himself known in this way to Moses on the mountain. And here John the Baptist applies that title to Jesus. *Jesus is YHWH in human flesh!* He is God!

Thus John says clearly that the reason why Jesus is the Lamb of God whose sacrificial death takes away the sin of the world is that he is both man and God, both human and divine. He isn’t 50% human and 50% God. He is 100% both! He is the Word, eternal God. But he is the Word who became flesh. God became human in the person of Jesus without

in any way ceasing to be God. This was the message confirmed to Mary when she asked how it would be possible for her to conceive, since she was a virgin. Do you recall what Gabriel said to her in response?

“And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:31-35).

Only man *ought* to make atonement for the sins of men. Only God *can* make atonement for the sins of men. That is why our Savior had to be the God-man.

On the other hand, if the correct reading here is “the Chosen One of God” the likely reference is to Isaiah 42:1, a prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah:

“Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1).

Conclusion

We must never lose sight of the purpose for John the Baptist’s ministry. He did not come to make a name for himself. He did not come so that you and I might believe in John the Baptist. He came to direct our attention to Jesus. He came so that we might “believe [in Jesus] through him [through John]” (John 1:6-8). He did not come so that we might believe on John, but through John and his message. Jesus is the focus of John’s ministry and proclamation. He must also be the focus of ours. And in the end, the only thing that matters is whether or not you believe in Jesus. Do you? Will you?

If you will believe in him at this very moment, I can assure you of two things. First, the blood shed by the Lamb of God on the cross will wash away the guilt of your sins. You will be from this time on forever and finally and fully forgiven. And second, this Lamb of God, this Son of God, this chosen one will baptize you in the Holy Spirit. He will immerse and saturate you in the Spirit who will from this moment on live and dwell within you to empower you to live to the praise and glory of the Lamb who has taken away your sins!