

*The Scandal of Christmas: Submitted*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*January 3, 2015*  
*Psalm 7:8-9; Hebrews 5:7-9; Matthew 3:14-17*

Friends, our final Scripture reading this evening comes from Matthew 3:14-17. I invite you to turn there in your Bibles and to pull out the bulletin insert to follow along. Let's listen to the Word of God. "Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

WWJD? We might remember that acronym popular about twenty years ago. It stands for "What Would Jesus Do?" People put it on bracelets and T-shirts. It was meant as a way to live life. The thought was, if we would ask "what would Jesus do" before we did anything, we would become more like Him. WWJD was championed in an influential novel called **In His Steps** in 1896, but it's rooted in the ancient concept of *imitatio dei* – the imitation of Christ.

Imitating Christ is good, but I've always had problems with "What Would Jesus Do?" For one, we can't practice it literally. He lived two millennia ago in a very different place and time. He was a carpenter who taught for three years wandering around Judea and Galilee. He angered kings and confused religious leaders. We aren't called to do those exact same things.

Even figuratively, I'm often stymied how to apply Jesus' actions to my own life. The best question really is, "what has Jesus done?" He saved us from sin and death; He opened the way for all who believe and trust Him to inherit the Kingdom of God. His sacrifice for us on the cross paid the penalty for our sins. What we do for God's Kingdom is worthwhile, but it's far less important than knowing what Jesus has already done.

If we are to live like Jesus, the most helpful question is, "What was Jesus thinking?" What was on His mind that led Him to do the things He did? That will get us a lot farther to imitating Him. But honestly, we rarely get insight into why He did what He did. He taught how to live as members of the Kingdom, He lived that way Himself, but the "why?" is often left out. Today's passage is one of the few places we find out, and the "why" is life-changing.

Jesus' baptism is super important, one of only a handful of events in Jesus' life mentioned in all four gospels. That repetition proves its significance. But His baptism is also surprising and confusing. Why is it happening? John is down in the Judean wilderness; Jesus traveled two or three days to reach Him. John brought crowds from a distance, but Galilee was far.

But it's not the distance that's scandalous. It's that Jesus comes for baptism at all. John freaks out. Our translation this morning says John "tried to deter Him," but it's far stronger than that. The King James got closer when it said that John "forbad" it. John wanted to stop Him.

John doesn't get it. God commanded John to baptize His people into *metanoia*, a change of heart and mind and a confession of sin, and not to rely on their heritage as Jews to save them. But Jesus doesn't need that. He is the perfect one, the spotless lamb, the Son of God. Jesus cannot be the true Messiah if He has to repent. If Jesus *needs* John's baptism, he is disqualified. No wonder John freaks out! As he says, "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?"

But Jesus is insistent. "Let it be so," Jesus commands John. And in that moment, He tells John why He wants to be baptized. "It is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." This is profound. In His baptism, Jesus reconciles His perfect person with the imperfect people that He came to save. He isn't confessing personal sin; He has none to confess. Instead, at this moment, He identifies with fallen humanity and our corporate rejection of God.

It's not dissimilar from the way we have a corporate prayer of confession each week. When I was a kid, I balked at the prayer of confession. I didn't harm the earth this week! I didn't forget to forgive someone this week! Why should I pray that? I only got it when I grew up, when I realized that we together as the people of God confess that we are sinners; we confess the sins of the group even though we may not have personal responsibility for them.

When Isaiah has a vision of the throne room of God in Isaiah 6, his response is, "Woe is me; I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty." When Jesus submits to baptism, He does not have personal sin, but He lives among that people of unclean lips, and He identifies with our confession. This is the beginning of the journey of defeating sin that ends with the cross.

But even more important is that Jesus says it is "proper" to "fulfill all righteousness." He isn't baptized because He must be; it's "proper" but not "necessary." He gives us a richer view of righteousness. Righteousness is not merely avoiding sin and hewing to the letter of the Law. The Pharisees attempted that, and Jesus criticized them because their hearts were far from God. Righteousness isn't a matter of what's necessary alone.

There was a running joke in seminary. Do you know seminary math?  $C=M.Div$ . You don't have to ace every test to graduate. Life happens. You can't be perfect. As long as you get a C average, you get your diploma. Your congregants won't know your GPA. That's true. But does anybody want a C pastor? A C average is one thing if you go through seminary while you're pastoring 300 people; it's another if you just won't put forth the effort to do well.

Righteousness is about submitting to what God wants and loves because we love Him, not because we must but because we desire to do so. Jesus wanted to be baptized for the simple fact that it made the Father happy. It brought joy to the Father's heart. Jesus wasn't making some profound theological statement in His baptism; the Bible never explains His baptism that way. It does, however, record the response of the Father to what Jesus does.

As Jesus rises from the water, the Holy Spirit descends on Him like a dove. Then a voice from above them in the clouds speaks – "This is my Son, whom I love; in Him I am well pleased." Different people heard different things; Jesus heard the voice speak to Him personally, while some of those around heard it describe the Father's relationship with Jesus.

This is a monumental event in history. For the first time ever, in public, the Trinity appears to humanity. We have never seen all three clearly represented before at one time and place. Each one is unique; the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father. But all of them are unified, and this portrait tells the world of their relationship. This is the beginning of the doctrine that will change the world, the truth that God is one and yet in community. We cannot fully understand it, but we experience it.

And what does the Father say? “This is my Son, whom I love; in Him I am well pleased.” Why does the Father say this now? In baptism, in which Jesus fully identifies with our plight as human beings, the Father identifies Jesus as divine. Jesus is not one or the other; He’s fully God and fully man. And the Father is pleased with Him. The Greek language emphasizes that the Father is eternally and permanently pleased with the Son. It’s not just because of Jesus’ submission to baptism. Yet the timing shows that the Father finds joy that His Son loves Him so much that He would be baptized not out of any need but simply to please His Father.

We all get this. When we get a gift from our kids not because it’s Christmas or birthday or because a teacher said to but just because they wanted to make us happy, is there anything better? Christmas presents are great, but the greatest gift is one that is perfect for us that’s given to us just because of love. That’s what this submission of Jesus is – pure love for the Father and pure love for us, those the Father has given to Him.

Three thoughts came to my mind this week about how this affects our lives today. First is this: *Jesus’ submission to the Father brings us salvation.* The crucifixion was the means by which salvation was obtained for us. The Father established sacrifice as a way of appeasing His wrath and atoning for sins we had committed. Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross paid the penalty for us and shifted God’s wrath from us to Him.

But the crucifixion, our means of salvation, was only available because of Jesus’ submission to the Father in all things. He submitted when it was most difficult. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see His humanity crying out against death, yet He submits to the Father’s will. As our passage from Hebrews told us, Jesus’ prayers were heard due to His reverent submission. He still faced death, but He overcame it, and through the resurrection we have proof.

Jesus’ baptism is the public start of His submission to the Father, and that submission runs all the way through the gospel accounts of His life and death. In John 8:29, Jesus says, “And He who sent Me is with Me; He has not left Me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.” Jesus is certain of the Father’s care for Him and presence in His life because He is submitted. He does the things that please the Father.

If we want to thank Jesus for all He accomplished for us, we should praise Him for submitting to the Father. It all works together. The crucifixion, the resurrection...none of that would have been possible if He hadn’t submitted. John 10:18 tells us that Jesus had authority to lay down His life and authority to take it up again. It was not that Jesus had to do it; He chose to do it. His baptism is proof positive that Jesus was totally obedient, doing that which pleased the Father beyond what merely had to be done. The salvation we claim today is dependent on His submission, and He submitted of His own accord freely.

That brings me to the second thought: *our submission to God is not an absolute obligation but a privilege that brings joy when we know God's love for us.* How extraordinary is it that the Son of God would die for us! How extraordinary that He would submit to being an infant, going through the humbling of human life, for the purpose of dying for us! Salvation is not a deal; it's a gift.

And maybe part of the problem is how we feel we must reciprocate. Have you ever gotten a Christmas card or a gift from someone and scrambled to get them something in return? We feel obligated, right, and a little guilty we skipped them. Sometimes, we feel we have to reciprocate Jesus' gift. There's a hint of truth in that. In Romans 8, Paul says we have an obligation to the Holy Spirit, but no obligation to sin. Throughout the Old Testament, God ties the obligation of the Israelites to obey Him to His rescuing them out of Egypt.

But far more often, we see joy as the reason to submit to God. Hebrews 12:2 encourages us to set our eyes on Jesus who did what He did for us for the joy set before Him. Romans 14:17 states that righteousness, joy, and peace are centerpieces of God's Kingdom. 1 Peter 1:8 says that believers have inexpressible and glorious joy in Jesus. John says in his letters that he finds great joy when he hears of others following Jesus.

Submitting to God includes obeying God's laws, but it's not primarily about that. It's about doing what makes God happy and finding joy in that. Jesus said the greatest command was to love the LORD your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and the second was to love your neighbor as yourself. No mention of the Ten Commandments. Why is that? If we love God and others first above everything else, the rest will fall into place. We'll follow God's laws because we recognize they are the best way to love. Submitting to God is abandoning those things that won't bring us joy in God for the things that will really bring us joy in Him.

Putting that submission into practice isn't supposed to be an obligation with set rules but a joy of doing what God loves. I have always struggled with some things we're told we must do to be "good" Christians. "Good" Christians have daily disciplines of prayer, worship, and Bible study. "Good" Christians do this before anything else in the day. We're pointed to folks like Martin Luther, who once said something about having so much to do some days that he couldn't get it done without three hours of prayer. Martin Luther didn't pray three hours a day every day, but that standard sticks in our heads. I felt very guilty because I have never been fantastically disciplined in doing those things. Being a pastor makes the guilt all the heavier.

But you know what? Scripture never sets limits. It doesn't say to study Scripture every day for one minute or five hours. It tells us to bind Scripture to our hearts and minds, but it doesn't give us a formula. It doesn't say that on-your-knees prayer has to take hours; Jesus' prayer for us takes less than a minute or two to pray, even if you really think through it rather than just recite it. We're told by Paul to "pray without ceasing," but Paul had to take a break from praying to write all those letters! We're to serve others, but we're not told how we must do it, just that we shall do it as the Spirit directs us.

Am I saying we don't study our Bibles or pray or serve? Not at all! But what I found was this – the more I thought was expected of me, that I was obligated to do, the more I felt guilty...*and the less I started even trying*. If you know a goal is impossible to reach, it's a waste of time to try. But if the goal is to enjoy God and that goal is always achieved – that our joy will expand if we do a little or a lot, and that doing more simply increases the joy – then not only is it doable, we'll find that we want to do more.

I encourage us this New Year to submit ourselves to God in those ways that will bring God pleasure in us and bring us pleasure in God. Not because we must, but because we want to. It will make all we do take on a far greater shine. Jesus submitted to baptism because it made the Father happy. We can submit to God's desires for us because God's overwhelming love, when we recognize its incredibly power to change us, makes it possible.

Final thought today: *the more submitted we are, the more we will see the fullness of God in our lives*. It's no accident that it's at this moment in history that the very nature of God as the Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – becomes apparent to us. As Jesus begins His public ministry, submitted to His Father and submitted to us as the Lamb of God given for our sins, the Father and Spirit make a deliberate appearance. It's a confirmation for us as much as it is for Jesus that He is the Messiah. But it also clarifies for us that God is communal in His very being and is relational at His core.

As we submit to God in the small things, in the things that seem insignificant to us, He comes ever nearer. We begin to see God more clearly. Sometimes when I'm driving down the road, when something's very far away, it looks very different from when I've gotten close. We get to see all the details when we are close-up. If anything, that's the key difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. It's not that God has changed in any way; it's that He's come even closer to us so we can see His fullness more clearly. When we start narrowing the gap even further through simple acts of obedience, the beauty of who God is becomes more and more apparent.

There are times that God is not obvious to us. He hid His face from Christ on the cross; faithful people throughout their lives go through times when God is not evident. But those exceptions prove the rule that James 4:8 teaches: "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you." We will never see God very clearly through the lenses of duty and obligation. But through the lenses of faith and trust, of desiring joy in our God, we will see Him as He truly is.

Submission is a scandal in our culture. That Jesus would submit to something not totally necessary out of love is even more scandalous. But in His submission, He shows us the beauty of the Trinity and the joy of turning to God in everything. May we submit to our LORD in the small things this year, and find His love and our enjoyment of Him in the big things growing and growing.