

Looking Back at Baptism

Romans 6:1-14

July 14, 2019

We are now just a week away from the baptism service that we have planned out at Lake Marquette next Sunday. In addition to all the plans being made for the service and for the picnic, we have also been working on preparing our hearts for what will take place out at the beach. For those who are seeking to be baptized, we have offered classes to help provide a bit of orientation. We have also paused our summer sermon series on the Psalms to help focus our attention as a congregation on what the Bible teaches us about baptism.

Last Sunday, Pastor Jerry introduced our three-part series on baptism by walking us through the question, “Who should be baptized and why?” If you were not able to join us last Sunday, let me remind you that each week the sermon transcript is made available on our church website as well as an audio and video recording of that message. We saw from our look at the Scriptures last week that baptism is the natural next step of obedience to Christ, following an individual's response of faith to God's gift of saving grace through Jesus Christ. The New Testament pattern is that of believers seeking to be baptized in water after expressing their repentance from sin and their profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

This morning, we want to go from the *who* and *why* of baptism and dig a bit deeper into the question of *what* is baptism. In particular, we want to turn again to the Scriptures and ask questions like “What is the meaning of baptism,” and “What does baptism do?” To help us answer those questions we are going to turn to the passage that was read for us a moment ago, to Romans chapter 6. I would encourage you to look at the text with me as I walk through it, so be sure to have your Bible open to Romans 6, or if you are using one of the blue church Bibles, open to page 1751.

Maybe as those verses were being read, you wondered why *this* passage was chosen to help us think about baptism. Of the fourteen verses that were read, only two of them explicitly mention baptism, and on the surface, it's somewhat difficult to see why the Apostle Paul even brought up the topic of baptism in this passage. The title that I have given this sermon is *Looking Back at Baptism*, and that is exactly what I believe this passage helps us do as we explore this topic together. While the main point of Romans 6 isn't to teach us *about* baptism, it is by pointing

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believers back to their baptism that Paul is able to make his main point about who we are in Jesus Christ.

However, there are some of you here this morning who cannot look *back* to your baptism because instead, you are looking *forward* to your baptism scheduled for next Sunday. Perhaps you have July 21st circled on your calendar with the words 'Baptism Sunday' written in on the date. We want you to know that your church family is eagerly awaiting this special day with you as you look forward to your baptism.

But we should notice that in verse 3 of our passage, that Paul was speaking about baptism in the *past tense*. For the believers in Rome that Paul was writing to, their baptism was an event that had already happened. And so, for a number of people here this morning, myself included, our baptism is a part of our history. But when was the last time you stopped and looked back at your baptism?

As we unpack these verses out of Romans 6, I believe that looking back at our baptism will help us to do three things. First, looking back at our baptism will help us mark the events of our conversion on our spiritual timeline. We're not only going to explore the meaning of baptism together, but we are also going to take a closer look at what it means when we talk about our conversion.

Second, looking back at our baptism will help us see that there has been a decisive change in our relationship with sin. We will see that sin is not just the evil things that we do, but that sin is also a power that rules over all who do not belong to Jesus Christ.

Finally, by looking back at our baptism we will be reminded that we are now called to walk in newness of life as those who now live under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

If we're going to try and think through these things together, we had better seek God's help as we dig into His word together. So let's pray and ask for the Lord's help this morning.

Father, whether we are looking back at our baptism, or we are looking forward to baptism, or even if baptism is something we have not yet considered, the truth of Your word still stands. Teach

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us from Your word not only about the meaning of baptism, but even more so about what it means to die to sin, and to be made alive in Jesus Christ. Speak to us, Lord, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

The disadvantage of looking at just one section out of one chapter from the book of Romans is that we have not looked together at what has come before these verses that we are exploring today. Romans 6 builds on the argument that Paul laid out in chapters 1-5. And we see this build up in verse 1 of Romans 6 as the chapter opens with a question, "What shall we say, then?" Even if we didn't know what the first five chapters were about, we get a hint about their content here in verse 1: we're talking about sin and grace. In particular, we're talking about the problem of our sin against God and the solution of God's grace in Jesus Christ shown to sinners like us.

The question that Paul throws out is this: if God's gift of free grace through Christ is so abundant, does it matter if we Christians continue to live in sin? Now, look at Paul's answer to his own question in verse 2: He says, "Absolutely not! Continuing to live in sin is incompatible with someone who has died to sin."

Pause. Here's why it's so important to bring your Bible and have it open on Sunday morning. I want you to look at the text with your own eyes. I want you to mark that phrase "died to sin" in your Bible. This whole passage hinges on this phrase. Understanding what Paul says about those three words is going to help us get to the answer we are looking for in the question "What is baptism?" After marking the phrase "died to sin" in verse 2, consider marking every reference to sin in this passage. The word shows up 10 times in this text. Then as we go, consider marking every occurrence of the word *dead*, *died*, or *death*, and every time you see the word *live*, *life*, or *alive*.

Now, turn your attention to verse 3 where Paul addresses the conflict in verses 1 and 2 with the phrase "don't you know." I've only lived in Bemidji for about a year now, but I can't help but hear Paul speak this phrase with a thick Minnesota accent. If we were reading from the New Scandinavian Version, verse 3 might read something like,

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“All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death, DONTCHA KNOW?”

It's pretty clear that Paul *does* expect his readers to know this. Paul expects them to know this not just intellectually, but experientially. And here is where baptism comes into the story. In verse 3 Paul refers to these Roman Christians as “all of us who were baptized” referring of course to their individual experiences of water baptism. And yet Paul also says of their baptism that they were “baptized into Christ Jesus,” and that this also means that they were “baptized into [Jesus’] death.” In fact, in verse 4 Paul goes on to say that “through baptism” Christians are “buried with [Christ]...into death.”

If we want to understand what Paul was saying to these believers, we need to look at baptism through the eyes of a first-century Christian. In those days, when someone came to faith in Christ, that is, when they responded to the message of the gospel with repentance and faith, almost immediately these new believers were baptized. They were initiated into a new saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The term that we use to describe the event of moving from sinful rebellion and unbelief to repentance and faith in Christ is the word *conversion*. Because of the immediacy of their baptism following conversion, Paul and the early church saw these as one collective event or experience.

Let me be clear though. I’m not suggesting that water baptism was the completion of the conversion process. Baptism doesn’t make someone more of a Christian than a believer who hasn’t been baptized. We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But for Paul and these Roman Christians, baptism was so closely tied to the occasion of their conversion that these words nearly became synonymous.

It’s not a perfect analogy, but perhaps thinking about a wedding might help us understand the relationship between baptism and conversion. This August Lindsay and I will celebrate our 20th anniversary, August 14th to be exact. Thinking back to our wedding day, when we hopped into the car to head over to our reception, there wasn’t a sign on the back of the vehicle that read, “Just Married (at exactly 1:42 pm).” I suppose we could timestamp the moment we said “I do” or the precise second that the pastor pronounced us man and wife. I suppose in the eyes of God that

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was the moment we became husband and wife. But that's not how we think when we talk about when we were married. When we talk about getting married, we refer to the whole ceremony or even the whole wedding day. Sometimes we talk about that summer or even that year in terms of when we got married.

One of the things that this passage teaches us is that **looking back at our baptism will help us mark the events of our conversion on our spiritual timeline.** If I were to ask you to draw the timeline of your life you would start with your birthday and then add the dates of significant events to that timeline. That might even be a fun exercise to do with your family sometime not so that there is an accurate historical record, but so they can hear from you about what events you consider to be most significant.

But where would the events of your spiritual life fall on that timeline? What significant events mark your spiritual journey? Where would you mark on that timeline your conversion? I've heard some of your stories and know that some of you could definitively mark a day or even the time of day when you responded to God's gospel call, repented of your sins, and placed your faith in Christ. It makes me think of the words of Charles Wesley's testimony which became the hymn *And Can it Be*:

*Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quick'ning ray,
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free;
I rose, went forth and followed Thee.*

Others of you cannot be so accurate in pinpointing the time of your conversion. My own story of coming faith is one where I cannot definitively tell you the day I became a follower of Jesus Christ. I can't even tell you the year. But I know that I have been converted. And even though some time elapsed between when I came to faith in Christ and when I was baptized, looking back at my own baptism reminds me that somewhere on my spiritual timeline is the event of my conversion. And even if I cannot say *when* it happened, I know without a doubt *that* it happened.

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Before we move on, let me ask you very plainly, have you been converted? Sometimes we use the word “convert” to describe a switch in church attendance, or a change in denominational affiliation, or even moving from one religion to another. That’s not what I mean by conversion. Those things might be a part of your story, but true conversion takes place when we by faith, as Paul says in this passage, die to sin and are made alive to God in Christ Jesus. Looking back at our baptism will help us mark the events of our conversion on our spiritual timeline.

Let’s quickly consider two other things that help us as believers by looking back at our baptism. The second thing that happens **when we look back at our baptism is that we see that there has been a decisive change in our relationship with sin.**

You might find it strange that we talk about having a *relationship* with sin. It’s easier to think about a person having a relationship with Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord. But take a look at how Paul describes the power of sin in these verses. In verse 6 Paul describes sin as having the power to rule and to enslave. In verse 12 sin has the power to reign. And in verse 14 sin is described as a master. In fact, that word “master” is the same word that we translate as “Lord” when used in reference to Jesus Christ.

When a believer is converted, when he or she, as Paul says in verse 3 is “baptized into Christ Jesus,” and therefore “baptized into his death,” that relationship with sin is brought to an end. In union with Christ, we die to sin and are buried with Christ. Of course, sin still can influence us and call us to submit to its power. But in Christ, we have a new relationship are we are under the authority of a new master. We no longer have to obey sin as our master, rather we now serve the Lord Jesus. In verse 6 Paul notes that for those who are now in Christ, our old relationship with sin as our master has been crucified with Christ. Sin’s rule over us has been done away with and the power of sin no longer enslaves us. We are no longer governed by sin, now we are governed by Christ the Sovereign Lord.

I hope you are starting to see why it is so good for a believer to be baptized. But It’s not the immersion in water that we are freed from the

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power of sin. It's not baptism itself that ends the relationship with sin. But as our baptism points us to our conversion, looking back at our baptism reminds us that we are not who we once were. Looking back at our baptism, we know that there has been a decisive change in our relationship with sin.

But Paul wanted these Roman Christians to know that not only had they died to sin, but in union with Christ and his resurrection, believers have also been made alive to God in Christ Jesus. New life, according to verse 4, is the end goal brought about by our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ. We who are in Christ are promised in verse 5 that "we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his." We experience that new resurrection life in part here and now, but one day we will know the full extent of our glorious resurrection with Christ. So, Paul says in verse 11, we are to "count [ourselves] dead to sin but alive in Christ."

The final thing we need to see in this passage is that by looking back at our baptism we will be reminded that we are now called to walk in newness of life as those who now live under the lordship of Jesus Christ.

I'm sure that most of us have experienced a move at various points in our lives. Even if you still live in the same city that you were born in, you probably have moved at least once. A crosstown move or even a move within the state is not a big deal. But some of us have had to move from another state or even from another country. Once you cross a border the rules change. State laws differ. Nations differ in how they govern.

If you are a Christian, if you have come to faith in Christ, if you are converted, then you have made a move. Paul describes this move in verse 13 as having been "been brought from death to life." He's not just describing this move in terms of our state being, that we were once dead but not have been made alive. That's true, but here Paul is describing death and life more in terms of realms. We once belonged to the realm of death where sin ruled and we were enslaved. But now, in Christ, we belong to the realm of life where Christ rules and we are under grace.

Looking back at our baptism, we are reminded that we are to live as those who have been set free from sin and empowered for obedience to God. In

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fact, we are commanded to live this way, not allowing any part of us, as it says in verse 13, to live in obedience to sin, but offering all of who we are to God as an instrument of righteousness. You might feel you are in a rut and that old habit of sin that was formed in you is still pulling you back toward the land of disobedience. But if you can look back to your baptism, back to your conversion, you will see that you've had an address change, that you no longer reside in the realm of sin and death, and that you are alive and living out your days under the lordship of Christ and belonging to his kingdom.

There are three kinds of people in this room this morning and I want to close by extending an invitation to each of you. First, to you who are looking forward to your baptism, to you who will take part in our baptism service next week. Take some time this week to reflect on how your upcoming baptism points to your conversion. You will have an opportunity to share your story, what we sometimes call a "testimony." Regardless of *how* it happened and *when* it happened, tell us *that* it happened and that now you count yourself as dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Tell us your story.

But for you who are able to look back to your baptism, if you are able, don't waste the opportunity that is yours next Sunday. Don't just come to watch the service, don't just come to the picnic in support of those being baptized, come and join your church family as you look back to your baptism and reflect on your own conversion. As you do, don't be afraid to share your story as well. Share with one another how you came to faith and what Christ is doing in you now that you have been made alive in him.

Finally, to those of you who perhaps through the course of this sermon have come to realize that you have not yet been converted, let me simply offer you this invitation: come. Come to Jesus. Be set free from the power of sin and come find freedom in Christ. We can talk about following that up with baptism when you are ready, but for now, just come. Come and live. If I'm talking about you this morning, would you come and visit with me after the service?

Let's pray.