

I'm probably not alone in this, but one of my favorite recent memories was Christmas morning. We woke up a little bit early, made a delicious breakfast, and then sat in our living room and let Hudson open up his presents. I brought you a picture so you can see what it was like. Nothing too crazy. Our entire family of course was wearing matching pajamas. (My willingness to do that was actually my Christmas present to Keren – and it made her unbelievably happy.) We know that Christmas is about Jesus, but it has become a wonderful season for people across the entire world, even who are not Christians, to give gifts and receive gifts. Isn't there something special that happens in your heart when someone hands you a gift? You are humbled that they gave you something. You are excited to open it and find out what it is. And often the person who gave it to you is just as excited as you are to watch you open it and enjoy it!

We are in a series called "What's Next," and we are talking about the different steps that God might be calling us to take to really grow in our relationship with him. Last week we talked about following Jesus, and this week the step we are going to talk about is baptism. For some people, the next step that God is calling you to take in your faith is to be baptized. And when we hear the word *baptism*, there are a lot of different images that might come to our mind. Some people think about it as a religious duty they have to fulfill, others think of it as a box to check off a list, and others think of it as kind of a graduation from the elementary years of the faith - something they do once they get their life in order.

But I want us to think about baptism as a *gift* that is being given to us by God. And just like when someone in your life gives you a gift, and we are typically honored and excited and we can't wait to open it - that is the response we should have when we think about baptism! Humility, joy, honor, and excitement. And we know that God, as the gift giver, is watching and waiting, filled with anticipation to see us receive the gift, open the gift, and enjoy the gift.

Let's begin by defining the word baptism. Baptism is *immersion in water in dedication to God*.

Let me break this down into two parts. Baptism is *immersion in water*. The word baptism in Greek (*baptidzo*) actually means to immerse, to submerge. It was used in ancient literature to refer to a ship sinking, going beneath the surface and being entirely covered with water. I know there are some denominations and traditions that sprinkle a child or pour water over an infant's head and call it baptism. And I do not want to be unkind or disrespectful to others within Christianity who practice baptism in that way, but just biblically speaking, sprinkling water on someone or pouring water over them isn't baptism the way it is taught in Scripture. Baptism *always* means complete immersion in water.

But it's not just any kind of immersion in water, it is immersion in water *in dedication to God*. Taking a bath isn't baptism, jumping off a diving board into a swimming pool isn't baptism. But when you are immersed in water *as a sign that your life is now dedicated to God*, you are baptized. You are wanting to leave your old life behind, become a new creation, and from now on, live entirely for him.

Now when I talk about baptism, and opening up this gift that God is offering to you, most people are in one of three camps as you hear this. The first camp, and this probably represents the majority, is those who have already made the decision to be baptized, you've been immersed in water and dedicated your life to the Lord. I hope that as you hear this message, it does not seem irrelevant for you, but rather that it reminds you of that precious commitment you made. Keren and I have been married for 5 ½ years, and whenever we attend a wedding together and we hear the minister talk about God's vision for marriage, and we witness the bride and the groom make take their vows, we are reminded of our wedding, of the vows that we have made, and we are filled with a renewed commitment to honor God in our marriage. I hope that's what this can be like for you. And not just today, but every time you see someone make the decision to be baptized.

Second camp: Those who have been consciously evaluating the decision to follow Jesus. You are trying to decide if you really believe in him and if you are ready and willing to follow him. If the answer is yes, if from the bottom of your heart you can say, "I believe in Jesus, I want to trust him and the Lord and leader of my life," then baptism is the next step to take! That is the step God tells us to take to become a follower of Jesus, to have our sins washed away, and to experience spiritual renewal.

Third camp: Those who have already made the decision to follow Jesus. You placed your faith in him and have trusted him for a long time. And you've honestly been trying to honor him with your life since that point. But you've never taken the step of being baptized. You believe. But for some reason or another, and it's probably different for each person, you've not followed through with baptism. You've not yet taken this specific step. And if you are in that camp, I want to challenge you very specifically and very directly, to make that decision today. There's no reason to come up with any more excuses! Why put it off any longer? This is a gift that God has been setting in front of you, and today is the day to receive that gift, to open that gift, as a way of honoring God, who has given you this gift.

When you think about baptism, don't think of it primarily as a religious ritual you have to perform. Don't think of it as a box you need to check off as you grow in the faith. Think of it as *a gift that God is setting in front of you*. A gift he wants you to open, receive, to experience, to enjoy. And when you receive and open this gift, it communicates something. Just like when a young man gets on one knee, pulls out a ring, and asks the woman he loves to marry him, if she takes that box, pulls out the ring, and puts it on her finger, receiving that gift communicates a great deal about her intentions. It comes with a commitment - the commitment of a lifetime spent with the man who gave her that ring. The same is true for baptism. So here's the question I want us to answer today: When someone decides to be baptized, to receive that gift from God, what are they communicating? What are they committing to? I want to look at several different passages from Scripture and share at least 4 commitments that a person is making when they decide to be baptized.

Here's the first commitment: *I am placing my faith in Jesus*. We see this in Acts 2. In this passage, the gospel message has just been preached to people who were hearing it for the first time. Peter, one of Jesus' followers, stood up and told a large crowd that God sent his one and only son, Jesus Christ, into the world. Jesus lived a perfect life, filled with truth, truth, kindness,

and miracles. Eventually, even though he did nothing wrong, he was nailed to a cross, and laid in a tomb. But God raised him back to life, “Because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” When Jesus rose from the dead, that was God’s ultimate sign that Jesus is the Messiah, he is the Lord of all the earth, he is the one sent from heaven to restore our souls and restore everything that is broken in all the world.

Take a look at what we read in Acts 2:37: “When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” They wanted to respond to the gospel and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior. So what did Peter tell them to do? “Peter replied, ‘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.’” When people in the Bible wanted to respond to the gospel and receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior, they weren’t told to walk down the aisle and stand in front of the church, they weren’t told to repeat a prayer after someone (although there is nothing wrong with doing those things), but in the Bible, when someone wanted to place their faith in Jesus, they made the decision to be baptized.

Let me give you one other example. In Acts 16, the man who put the apostle Paul in prison watched God send an earthquake, shake the foundation of the prison, and break every prisoner's chains. The guard knew that God had caused this, so he cried out to Paul and Silas and asked them: (Acts 16:30) “What must I do to be saved?” He became undeniably aware that God was real; he knew God was working all around him. And he knew he had to respond. What did Paul tell him? Acts 16:31: “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved - you and your household. And then look at verse 33. “Then immediately he and all his household were baptized.”

So, when someone decides to be baptized, what are they committing to? *I am placing my faith in Jesus*. But it’s more than just that. There’s a second commitment: *I am following the example of Jesus*. One of the reasons we are baptized is because we are called to be his followers and to do what he did. When Jesus was about 30 years old, right before he began his public ministry, this is what we read in Mark 1:9-10: “At that time Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. Just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw heaven being torn open and the Spirit descending on him like a dove. And a voice came from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’” When a person is baptized, you are not only accepting Jesus as your Lord, but you are also following the example he himself set.

And one of the things I love to tell people when I have the privilege of being in the water with them, is that when you are baptized, the same words that God the Father spoke over Jesus, you know for certain he now speaks over you. Look at those words: “You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.” He speaks words of identity, love, and delight. No matter what other voices might be spoken in your life, the voice of your parents, the voice of your boss or your coach or your friends, the voice of our spiritual enemy who is always accusing and condemning, God speaks, and his words are the definitive statement about what is true of us. God says, “You are my child. I love you. I take great delight in your life.” This declarative statement by God becomes the foundational reality of our life that shapes and reorients our identity and our self-understanding.

This is a place where God has really met me. In my teenage years and into my twenties, I had some pretty deep insecurities. I cared so much about the acceptance of friends and the approval of authorities figures in my life. I thought my value and self-worth was dependent on my grades and achievements. It was pretty miserable. And it was coming to this passage and realizing the truth about what God says about me that radically changed my entire self-understanding. Now I live out of what God says about me, not what others say about me or even what I say about me. And it's all connected to following Jesus in baptism.

When someone decides to be baptized, they are saying: *I am placing my faith in Jesus, I am following the example of Jesus*, and also, *I am obeying the commands of Jesus*. We see this in Matthew 28:18-20. After Jesus had risen from the dead and gathered his disciples around him, he said this to them: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." This was the last thing Jesus said to his followers in the gospel of Matthew before he ascended into heaven. He told his followers to take everything that he had invested into them and entrusted to them and share it to the world in need. What did he tell them to do? *Baptize them*. One of the reasons we are baptized and we open this gift is because Jesus has commanded us to. Do you remember last week when we looked at Peter's response to Jesus? He declared, "Because you say so, I will." (Luke 5:5.) Jesus has told us, his followers, to be baptized. And part of placing our faith in him and trusting him is to look to Jesus and declare, "Because you say so, I will."

I know a decent amount of people who have been in the faith for a long time. They have been coming to church for a long time. But they have not made the decision to be baptized. They are in that third camp that we talked about. I don't want to be heavy handed here at all. But I want to ask you: If you knew that God wanted you to do something, if you knew he had commanded you to do something, wouldn't you want to do it? Don't you want to obey him and honor him? The answer is, of course, yes! God *wants* you to be baptized, he has *commanded* you to be baptized! There is no debate or question about it. It's right here in Scripture. And you might have picked up on this, but when we baptize people, we baptize them, "Into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." We do that not only because it symbolizes the presence and the blessing of each member of the Trinity, we do that because that is how Jesus told us to baptize people, right in God's word.

When we decide to be baptized, it means *I want to obey the commands of Jesus*. And here's one more message it communicates: *I want to join Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection*. We see this in Romans 6:3-4: "Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We 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." Did you see that? When we are baptized and we go under the water, we join Jesus in his death, in his burial, and in his new life. Baptisms by sprinkling with water or pouring with water are done by some, but when we are *immersed* in water it symbolizes that we dying to our old life, we are going into the grave, our old sin nature is left there, and when we come back up, we are a new creation, and we share in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is what Paul talks about in Galatians 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” When you come up out of the water your old life is gone, Christ is now living inside of you, and everything you do from this point forward is done for the glory and honor of God.

When a person decides to be baptized, when they decide to receive and open this gift that God is giving them, that’s what they are saying. A woman puts on an engagement ring, she is saying, “I want to marry you and spend the rest of my life with you.” When we open this gift and are baptized, we are saying, “I am placing my faith in Jesus. I am following the example of Jesus. I am obeying the commands of Jesus. And I am joining Jesus in his death, burial, and resurrection.” God is offering us such an incredible gift, and it brings him untold joy when we receive it, we open it, and we respond to it.

I told this story here a while back - I am good friends with a couple in this church who were brought up in a different denomination. A denomination that baptized infants through sprinkling, not adults through immersion. They were absolutely convinced that the way they were raised was right (as most of us are). They were so convinced that they got into a debate with a Christian they knew, and they went over to his house to have an in-depth bible study on it. They were certain that they were right and were going to change this guy’s mind. But as they went through every single example of baptism in the bible, they realized that they had it wrong. And they told their friend, “We see it, it’s right there, we want to respond. We want to be baptized!” He said, “Great, let’s find a day on the calendar and set it up.” They said, “No, this is what God wants us to do, and we want to do it now!” It was fall. There was a pool in the backyard with cold, stagnant water. But that very night, in their street clothes, they followed the example of Jesus and were baptized. As soon as they became convinced it was what God wanted them to do, they didn’t want to wait a single moment longer.

It’s a lot like the Apostle Paul. He didn’t start out as an apostle. He started out opposing Jesus, persecuting Christians. But then Jesus revealed himself to Paul. Paul knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Jesus was real, and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life following him. And so after a few days, a fellow Christian spoke to him and said this: (Acts 22:16) “And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.” Look at those words, “What are you waiting for? Get up and be baptized, wash away your sins, and call on his name.”

And that’s what I want to say to anyone today who has not made that decision. Whether you are ready to decide to draw a line in the sand and for the first time, truly trust Jesus to be the Lord and Savior of your life, or whether you have made that decision before but have not opened this gift, what are you waiting for? Friends, now is the time.