

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE BAPTISM OF JESUS

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### Matthew 3:13-17

We will study today a topic that is not necessarily too popular nowadays. And this topic is about submission. Today we want to insist on equality. Equality of rights. Equality between the genders. Equality between the different races. Equality between the social classes. And thank God that by this insistence on equality, we have dealt, at least to a certain extent, with some injustice in our world. But let us not be blinded by this insistence on equality to the fact that submission is also a part of God's message for us. In fact, when I read the Bible, it seems to me that the Scriptures insist more on the matter of submission than on the matter of equality.

Submission is a Christian virtue that should characterize the relationship of the believer to God and His will, and expressed in his relationship to his spiritual family and to the civil authorities of the country.

### Submission

Now today, we want to examine this matter of submission from a passage that you might not have recognized so far as dealing with this topic of submission. And I want to draw your attention on the first words said by our Lord Jesus as recorded in the gospel of Matthew. In Matthew 3:15, Jesus says this, *Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.*

The occasion of these words is the Lord's own baptism, when Jesus came to John the Baptist and asked to be baptized by him. Let's take a closer look at this part of the Bible. Let's turn to Matthew 3:13-17.

*Matthew 3:13. Then Jesus came from Galilee to John at the Jordan to be baptized by him.  
14 And John tried to prevent Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and are You coming to me?"  
15 But Jesus answered and said to him, "Permit it to be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he allowed Him.  
16 When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him.  
17 And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."*

These words sum up in essence the spirit of the Lord Jesus in His character and in the direction of His ministry. This passage contains in it a spiritual principle of great importance. It points to a principle of spiritual power. There, we see this principle in action and as you listen to this lesson, I hope that you will begin to see why and how Jesus' ministry was so powerful.

## Why asking for baptism?

Now when we look at this passage, we immediately feel that something is not quite right. And when you think about it, the problem arises from this question: Why did Jesus need to be baptized by John? Or if He did not need to be baptized by John, why did Jesus submit Himself to John's baptism?

You see, the baptism of John was a baptism of repentance. In Luke 3:3, it says that John the Baptist *went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a **baptism of repentance for the remission of sins***. So when John baptized, it was because a person repented of his sins. And in response to John's preaching of the kingdom, that person would receive baptism as a sign of his cleansing, of his being forgiven by God. He would be cleansed from his sins by the water of baptism.

But here arises precisely the question. Jesus had no sin of which to repent. Why did He submit to this baptism? If Jesus was sinless and had no sin to repent of, why did He accept this baptism of repentance? Here we come into the deep things of God.

## Two kinds of baptism

At this point, I need to warn you of this. Don't read the Bible backward. Some have tried to answer the question about Jesus' baptism by saying that His baptism prefigures death and resurrection. According to this explanation, the Lord Jesus wanted to show at the very beginning of His ministry that His ministry will be one of death and resurrection. Therefore He submitted to the baptism.

Now, this is not satisfactory. It is not satisfactory because it is to read the significance of Christian baptism into John's baptism. And this is a serious exegetical error.

You see, John's baptism is not the same as Christian baptism. This distinction is made very clear in Acts 19. There we read that those who were baptized with John's baptism had to be baptized by Paul in the name of Jesus. And Paul explained to them that the baptism of John was of a different character. It was not equivalent to Christian baptism. Therefore, even though you have been baptized by John, you still need to be baptized again, but this time in the name of Jesus. So we must be careful not to read backwards the Christian meaning of baptism into John's baptism. It's not the same thing. To import the meaning of death and resurrection with Jesus' baptism is not proper exegesis. Any serious student of the Word of God should not make this kind of mistake.

But we are still stuck with this question. Why did Jesus accept this baptism? The key word to answer this question is found in the word 'us'. *It is fitting for us*. Jesus accepted John's baptism in order to identify Himself with sinful man. That is, I think, the best answer that we can have. So it finds its justification in the reply of the Lord Jesus when John the Baptist prevented Him from being baptized. Jesus said, *It is fitting for us*. He didn't say, 'It is fitting for Me', but, *It is fitting for us*. Us, you and I, mankind generally. In this way, by using the word 'us', the Lord Jesus identifies Himself with John the Baptist and with mankind generally. We can certainly say that He accepted this baptism as man. He had to be a human being, He had to be one of us, to die for our sins. And unless He identified Himself with us, He could not die for our sins. That is why in Hebrews 2:17, we read that *in all things He (Jesus) had to be made like His brethren ... Why? ...in order to make appropriation for the sins of the people*. Jesus had to become a human being in order to die for mankind. That is why Jesus accepted this baptism, for the very purpose of identifying Himself with sinful man.

## A question of humility

Now I want to go deeper into the text because when we study the Bible, we don't want just to look for theological explanations. But we want to enter into the spirit of what God wants to show us.

So often we are so tangled up in trying to understand each word and each sentence that we miss the spirit of the passage. And here, we want to see what is the spiritual principle that we can learn from a passage like this. I want to introduce this principle with a question. And it is this. Could not Jesus be identified with us all the same without going through the baptism? What do you think? Could not Jesus be identified with us all the same without going through the baptism?

The answer is 'Yes, certainly'. For identifying Himself with us does not necessarily mean that He had to be baptized. Jesus didn't need to be baptized in the sense of a legal obligation, yet He submitted to baptism. Because it is an ordinance of God, He submitted to baptism. Do you begin to see the spirit that is revealed here?

Think of the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, born into this world to die for us. The only way He can do this is Himself to be without sin. So He comes into this world, now about thirty years of age, without sin. At the same time, there is His cousin, John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness the baptism of repentance. John the Baptist confessed that he was not the Messiah. He confessed that he was unworthy even to be a slave of the Messiah. His mission was simply to prepare the way for the Messiah. Then when he sees Jesus, he recognizes someone whose righteousness was far greater than his own. When Jesus comes to him, John says, 'I should not be baptizing You. You should not be submitting to my baptism, to my ministry. I should be submitting to Your ministry.' He himself recognizes that Jesus is far greater than himself.

And Jesus says, 'No John. Suffer it now, tolerate it, even if you don't like the idea of My submitting to your baptism. Please accept it all the same.' Do you see the spirit that is revealed here? Can you see the beauty of it? The greater submits and pleads to be accepted into the ministry of the inferior.

That is a pattern of Jesus' ministry. The greater submits to the lesser. He could have easily said, 'Well, this is a baptism of repentance. Which of you convinces Me of sin? I have no sin. Therefore I don't need this baptism.' No, the spirit of Christ in this passage is one of humility and of submission. 'Suffer it now, John. Tolerate it. Accept me into your baptism.'

This humility of Christ, we find it again when Jesus washed the feet of His disciples towards the end of His ministry. And what was Peter's response? Much like John the Baptist. Peter said, *Never shall you wash my feet* (John 13:9). Jesus' humility has a shocking effect on people. How can the Son of God do the job of a slave?

## **Jesus emptied Himself**

Oh, that touches my heart. I pray to God that He helps us to have this attitude of Christ in every aspect of our walk with Him. If we can learn this spirit, we will begin to understand the spirit of Philippians 2. The second chapter of Philippians is of the essence of the Christian life and I would like to spend a few moments to read to you some of its verses. Philippians 2, starting with verse 5.

*Philippians 2:5. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus. Have this way of thinking and behaving in you which was in Christ. And what is this attitude that Paul is talking about? Humility. The spirit of humility which was in Christ Jesus. Listen to this.*

*6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,*

*7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Remember, that's the only Jesus could die for our sins, to be made in the likeness of men, so that He can identify Himself with us.*

8 *And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. That is why Jesus' ministry was so powerful. He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. And look at what God does with this attitude of humility.*

9 *Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name,*

10 *that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth,*

11 *and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Do you see the principle of spiritual power here? Why did Jesus receive the name above every name? Why did God invest Him with such glory? Precisely because He refused to take any glory to Himself. *He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death ... and therefore God highly exalted Him.* That was the extent of His humility. That touches my heart. Does that touch your heart? The Master, pleading with the servant that He might have a place in the ministry of the servant by being baptized by John the Baptist.

### **A risky request**

This humility of the Lord Jesus was expressed in His obedience to His Father. And you know, this humility was not without a cost. Do you realize that in being baptized by John publicly, the Lord Jesus let Himself open to a very serious misunderstanding that could have crippled His ministry. In doing this very thing, the Lord Jesus opened Himself to the misunderstanding that He was confessing Himself to be a sinner like all the other sinners who were coming to John the Baptist to receive the baptism of repentance.

‘Ah, ah, so you accept John's baptism. So you confess that you are a sinner just like any of us. Why should we follow you then? We might as well continue to follow John the Baptist since we know that he is a true prophet of God.’ But Jesus was not afraid of misunderstanding. For Him, it was more important to obey an ordinance of God than to avoid a misunderstanding. That is humility. *Have this attitude, have this humility in yourself which was also in Christ Jesus.*

I'm stressing this point because in witnessing for the Lord, be prepared to be misunderstood. As we share about God, as we live by our convictions, and as we stand for the truth, we are going to be misunderstood again and again. Our greatest and purest motive will not be recognized. Even when we speak with the purest motive, our words will be misinterpreted. What we do out of the purest motive, people might twist it and even bring it against you. But don't let that worry you. Don't let that discourage you. Do your part to try to clarify all misunderstanding. And above all, trust God to sort out all the misunderstanding. As you walk with God, trust Him to work it out. That is precisely what God does. Notice what happens when the Lord Jesus is baptized and comes out of the water.

Matthew 3:17: *And suddenly, a voice came from heavens, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.'* Can it be clearer than that? Anyone who heard this voice had to recognize that the Jesus who is being baptized by John could not be just like any sinner asking for the forgiveness of his sins. Heaven has spoken. Jesus is the Son of God, who is beginning His ministry on earth. And that was confirmed and endorsed by a direct revelation from God.

## Jesus as an example

Notice this other thing. The Lord Jesus never asked anybody to do anything that He Himself did not do. When Jesus called people to repentance, He had submitted Himself to a baptism of repentance. The word repentance basically means a total change of mind. In the case of Jesus, obviously He didn't need to change His mind in regard to sin. But He did make a fundamental change at this point in His life. From this point on, he was no longer a carpenter. He left His home and went forth to preach the gospel. The time had come. The Lord Jesus was embarking on his salvation mission, with the endorsement of His Father. From that time on, as we read in Matthew 4:17, Jesus began His ministry by preaching and saying, *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*

Jesus submitted Himself to every institution and ordinance of God. And this spirit of submission will mark the whole of His ministry. He preached it not so much merely in words but also by His life in submitting Himself to a servant of God far inferior to Himself. And His central concern was righteousness. Jesus submitted Himself to John the Baptist in order to fulfill all righteousness. *It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness,* Jesus said to John the Baptist. How do you fulfill all righteousness? Through a total submission to God and to all His ordinances, to His church, to His people, to His servants.

It is not something that we necessarily like because our whole nature tends to rebel against it. We want to stand up for ourselves. We don't like the idea of being under someone else. We want to be number one in this world. But that is not the teaching of Christ. Jesus submitted Himself to the will of His Father, even at the risk of serious misunderstanding.

So let us learn this spiritual principle. Practice this principle of submission in your life. *Submit to one another in the fear of God,* Paul says in Ephesians 5:21. You will experience a new joy, a new power, a new fellowship with God. You will walk with God in a deeper way. Everyday, yield your life afresh and more fully to Him. And as you do that, you will find that there will be power in your life, there will be a renewed joy of fellowship with God. God will become so real to you that you will feel His presence so close to you.