



Sunday after Epiphany

1/11/2026

Matthew 3:13-18

## Identity Revealed

How do you figure out someone's identity?

If you're a police officer or a TSA agent, you could take a look at their driver's license. I suppose most people would just look the person up on Facebook. And if you take a look at those sources, might give you name, age, even general interests. But it won't tell you everything about who they are, because people are more than just a list of facts, or likes and dislikes. If you want to really get to know a person, you need to take some time. Pay attention to the things they say and do. That's how you find out who they really are.

That's basically what we are doing today.

In these verses, we take a look at the baptism of Jesus. And by looking at what happens at Jesus' baptism, we get a preview of the rest of his ministry. By paying attention to what he says and does right here, we can clearly see Jesus' identity. And our own identity too.

The first couple verses get us started with some unexpected details. [READ] Don't you think it would play out a little differently? Over the past few weeks, we've heard about angel choirs, magi from the east bearing gifts, a dramatic escape from King Herod. It's been the kind of stuff you would expect to hear about when the Jesus, the King of Kings, enters the world.

But now, when Jesus heads down to the Jordan river to see John, he doesn't tell anybody ahead of time. Sends no invites. There's no choir, no fanfare of any kind. He shows up completely unexpected, in a way that's so humble and so out of the blue that it actually throws John the Baptist off guard. In fact John tries to talk Jesus out of getting baptized in the first place. He basically says, "You're the guy we've been waiting for! I'm not worthy to untie your shoe laces, and you want me to baptize you?"

John's confusion is pretty understandable. A little bit before this we hear that John was doing a "baptism of repentance." Luke tells us he was baptizing tax collectors, soldiers. Poor people. The low lives of society.

So why would Jesus want to be baptized in the same way as all of those people? He was perfect, he had no sins to forgive. Why would he want to stand in the place sinners are standing in?

Listen again to Jesus' response. [READ] "Let it be so now." Might not sound like it, but this is actually a command. You could translate, "We're gonna do this. Right now." Jesus is almost expressing a polite impatience. Why? Because baptism is the start of his public ministry. A ministry not just of preaching and teaching, but of standing in place of sinners with everything he does.

That ministry needed to start right here. Jesus says he is going "to fulfill all righteousness". In other words Jesus' baptism was a necessary part of God's plan to win righteousness and salvation for you.

Maybe that sounds confusing. What does righteousness even mean? How can Jesus fulfill it and give it to us? Try picturing it this way. Even if you've never seen the movie Cinderella, you're probably familiar with the story. A poor peasant girl who isn't even liked by her own family gets an invite to a dance at the royal palace. But she doesn't have the right clothes. She just has the one outfit that she wears to sweep the floors and clean the dishes and scrub the toilets – there's no way she can make it to the party in the castle wearing that! So what happens? In the story, her fairy godmother shows up and magically gives her the perfect clothes to wear. She makes it into the party, is able to dance with the prince, and eventually (after a few twists and turns) happily ever after. And that fairy tale ending would not have been possible if she had not been given new clothes to wear by somebody else.

That's kind of what Jesus is doing as he starts his ministry. God wants to invite all people to heaven. The Bible sometimes even pictures heaven as a banquet, a huge celebration. The problem? All of us are sinners. We are wearing filthy rags all the time because of the things we've done, and we can't fix it ourselves. But that's where Jesus comes in. He comes into the world not just to be a nice guy, or an interesting teacher, or a good example. Instead he comes to live a perfect life for you. To give you new clothes to wear so you can actually go to the heavenly banquet. I once heard a pastor put it this way [READ]

Jesus gets to work on that robe of righteousness right away. We see that immediately after Jesus' baptism. The next thing that happens? He goes into the desert alone for 40 days, and the entire time he is tempted by the devil nonstop. None of us could perfectly stand up to temptation like that. But Jesus did.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is doing miracles. He is the Son of God, as we hear announced in Matthew 3, which means he has infinite power. But never, not even once, does Jesus use that power to his own advantage. He always uses it for the good of others as he heals diseases, gives sight to the blind, feeds thousands of hungry people. Jesus uses his power to show perfect love, something no other person has ever done.

And finally, Jesus goes to the cross. He sets his power aside completely, allows himself to be arrested, tortured and killed. All so that he can take your sins away completely. He gives up his life so he can give it to you.

With each act, he keeps weaving this beautiful white robe. Not so he can wear it himself. But so that one day he can put it on you.

At his baptism, Jesus is publicly accepting humanity from sin. He is making sure you know 100 percent for sure that he is the Messiah. And from Jesus' words to John, we see that Jesus did not start his ministry with any hesitation, that he actually couldn't wait to march to the cross. Jesus is excited to save you, to carry out his ministry, and to one day welcome you into his family on the day of your baptism.

Everything we see here, top to bottom, it's all grace, all a gift, there's nothing for us to do.

But do we always live as though that's true?

I don't know about you, but sometimes I find myself living my life as though I still have to earn God's approval. I might not be thinking it consciously, but my motivation is often: "Yes Jesus died for me. Yes he brought me into his family at my baptism. So with everything I do, I had better prove to God that he made the right choice by adopting me."

And suddenly the Christian life goes from being a joy to being a slog. Because I'm always asking myself: Am I doing enough? I shared the gospel with that person, but I could have presented it better. I improve one area of my life, and ten other areas get worse.

Nothing I do ever feels good enough!

And then it hits me. If I treat my Christian life as something I do to prove my worth to God, I'm not serving God but myself. I'm not actually loving the people around me, I'm using them to make myself feel better, to feel more righteous.

Maybe a similar realization has hit you.

So what's the solution. Try even harder? No! We need to stop looking at our own lives. We need to remember our baptisms.

Your baptism might not have looked all that spectacular. Maybe it was at a service, maybe it was a private ceremony. It was just regular looking water, and a few words from the Bible. That's what it looked on the outside. But what did it look like to God?

To God, your baptism was the moment where that perfect robe of righteousness that Jesus crafted throughout his life on earth was draped over your shoulders. The moment where the Savior gave his perfect life, his spotless clean record, to you. And so God reacted to your baptism the same way he reacted to the baptism of Jesus. [v. 17]. He looks down from heaven and says, "This one is my son. My daughter. And I am well pleased with them."

Jesus' baptism shows you who your Savior is. Your baptism shows who you are in God's eyes. You're his child, dearly loved, free from sin. A person who has been set free from a life of serving themselves, of seeking approval, so that they can truly serve God and the people around them.

What does that actually look like?

Think about a kid who knows they are loved, cared for by the people around them. They have good parents. Good friends. When this kid runs into a challenge or problem, they dive into it. Kids do that when they know they are loved by their parents. Already approved of. It gives them the confidence to explore, learn, grow.

That's the Christian life too. Through baptism, you already know who you are. Your identity is a son/daughter of the king. You already know how God feels about you. And that gives you the confidence to serve the with a clear conscience, and complete boldness. There's a quote I love from Martin Luther where he talks about this: [READ]

Venture all things. Share your faith with boldness. You might meet some people that don't like it, that reject the gospel, or even reject you. But you don't need to worry about approval from people when you live in the grace of God.

Give offerings to the Lord. There might be times where it might seem wiser, humanly speaking, to tuck that 10% or however much it is into your own savings account. But do you really need to worry about your daily needs, when your baptism has proven how much God cares about you?

Prioritize time in the Word above everything else. It might mean taking an honest look at your schedule, asking yourself, "What needs to be removed so I can worship my God on Sunday? What event could I toss to the side for now so that my family and I spend time in the Word together?" You can venture to put time in Scripture, time in worship, on the calendar before anything else. Because God has told you that his top priority is saving you.

At the start of today's sermon, we asked: How do you figure out someone's identity? How would you even go about figuring out your own identity? Allow me to give you a place to start. This is a picture of the baptismal certificate we give to every person baptized in this congregation. Take a look at that passage on the bottom. [READ]. Here's your identity: you are a person who is connected to Jesus. A person whose sins were paid for at Jesus' death. A person who has been raised with Jesus to have a brand-new life. You can have 100% confidence in your identity because you know 100% for sure Jesus is exactly who he says he is. He's the Savior. The one who takes away the sins of the world, and your sins too.