

## The King Who Is Faithful to God the Father

Matthew 3:13-17

As humans one of the things we dread most is guilt by association. In other words, we don't want to be identified with or associated with someone in the wrong, or with those whom we seriously disagree with. You're sitting at a restaurant and somebody at the next table says something really loud and obnoxious, and everyone around turns and looks at them, and then they're kind of looking at you too—what do you do? “We're not with them” Our first reaction is to distance ourselves from the guilty, to vindicate ourselves and assure everybody that we're not with them.

Being from Nebraska, I am often asked whether I'm a fan of Husker football. (That's generally the one thing somebody else knows about the state.) And depending on how someone asks that question, I typically answer in one of two ways. If it's a very casual, “So do you like the Huskers?” I answer, “Yeah, I like the Huskers. It's fun,” and that's about it. But if the question is more like, “You're not a Husker fan are you?” I know there's a back story there. Either this person comes from a rival school, or (more likely) they've met some obnoxious fanatic (and there are a few of them—it's not without reason we call it the state religion) and they're trying to discern whether I'm one of them. In that context I usually answer something like, “Yeah, I like the Huskers. But I'm more of a social fan really; it's a good excuse to hang out with others and watch the games. There are some people who are just crazy about it, but *I'm not one of them.*” I don't want to be associated with the guilty and whatever beef this guy's got with them. We all naturally try to avoid guilt by association.

And so it's shocking when we come to Matthew 3:13-17 and see the one whom John the Baptist said was coming, who would baptize with the Holy Spirit, giving life, and with fire, bringing judgment on sin—it's shocking to see this one come and *his first public act of ministry is to associate himself with unworthy sinners*. Sinners who need to be baptized for repentance because of God's coming kingdom.

That didn't make sense to John, and it doesn't make sense to us. You would think that Jesus, who alone was faithful to God his Father, who had no need to repent, to turn away from sin, because *he had no sin*—you would think that when he, the faithful Son, comes on the scene he would want to distance himself from the unfaithful sons and daughters, lest he be guilty by association. But instead, what we see in our passage this morning is that Jesus is the faithful Son who launches his kingdom ministry by identifying with unfaithful sinners . . . like us.

The Gospel of Matthew, if you're just joining us, is the first book of the New Testament, and along with the other three Gospels (Mark, Luke, and John) tells the story of Jesus Christ—his life and ministry, his death and resurrection, his ascension to the Father and commission to his

followers. And it's through this person, Jesus, that God is establishing his kingdom, his rule and reign, on earth. Jesus is the king of heaven and earth; all authority has been given to him.

Our passage this morning shows us the launch of his kingdom work and earthly ministry. So far we saw in chapters 1-2 who Jesus is as God's eternal Son who took on human flesh, in order to fulfill all God's promises to ancient Israel and spread God's glory among all nations as the long-awaited King. We saw two weeks ago in the ministry of John the Baptist that in Jesus the Kingdom of Heaven is coming near; it's at hand. God's rule and reign (that's what we mean by "kingdom of heaven") is coming down to earth in a new way. The kingdom that we have been waiting for at the end of time, when God will put down his foes and judge all unrighteousness and make everything new, delivering his people and putting this broken world back—that future kingdom is now breaking into the present world, in part, through Jesus Christ. He is launching, inaugurating God's heavenly kingdom on earth, the redemptive rule of God.

This is good news. God is going to make right all that is wrong in this world. He is going to establish his rule on earth as it is in heaven. But if you're not right with God personally, then it's bad news. The arrival of a king is only good news if you're a loyal subject. And according to the story of Scripture, there are no loyal subjects. There are no faithful children. Only rebels against the crown.

### **The Unfaithful Son**

In the Old Testament, Israel is often described as God's son (e.g. Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). God had chosen this ancient people group to be his special people, his covenant people, his children. But he says in Isaiah 1:

Hear, O heavens! Listen, O earth! For the LORD has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." Ah, sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him. (Isaiah 1:2-4)

Israel, God's special people, chosen to be his son, became an unfaithful son through rebellion. They turned their back on God, broke their covenant with him, and brought his holy judgment on them, the judgment of exile from their land (cf. Jer. 25).

But lest those of us from non-Jewish blood think we're any better, listen to the apostle Paul in Romans 3:

... We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Rom. 3:9-12)

The story of human history is a story of rebellion against the God who made us to be his children. We were made in his image, to know and love and serve him as our Father. But through our rebellion we became wayward sons and daughters, unfaithful to our King. And so therefore we too, left to ourselves, are cut off and estranged from God in judgment.

When we looked at Matthew 3:1-12 a couple weeks ago, Bruce described how this charge offends the deepest sensibilities of our modern western world—the charge that we are sinners deserving of judgment. And he’s right. Whether you’re a Christian or a non-Christian, there’s something in all of us that bristles at the idea that there could be something so desperately wrong with us, something so dreadful and deserving of punishment.

But then again, I know my own my heart, and if I’m honest, it’s exactly what the Bible describes it to be: foolish and wicked. I don’t have to dig too far back for examples either. I would be so embarrassed for any of you to have heard the way I spoke to my wife yesterday—the arrogance and condescension in my words. There are so many parts of my life, so many things I done, or left undone; things I’ve said or not said, that whenever for whatever reason something triggers their memory, my stomach drops in a shame that is too deep for words. You hold up God’s standard of holiness against any of that, there is no question in my mind that I am deserving of judgment.

The charge that we are sinners deserving of judgment may be offensive, but if it’s true, then we need to think about it honestly. You may be offended at a doctor’s suggestion that your current lifestyle is going to put you into an early grave. But if it’s true, you better heed his words. So we need to hear what God has to say about this. Because until we are willing to acknowledge that there is bad news, we won’t be able to grasp the marvel and the wonder of the good news. And that’s what John came preaching (cf. Lk. 3:18); that’s what Jesus came to accomplish: *good news*. And that’s what God himself announces from heaven in this passage, the good news that Jesus is the faithful Son.

### **The Faithful Son**

In contrast to unfaithful Israel, and unfaithful humanity, Jesus came as *the Son who is faithful to God the Father*. One of the things that the Gospel of Matthew teaches us throughout is that everything that Adam and Israel were to be and to do but failed to be and to do, Jesus is and did. He is a New Adam; he is True Israel. Jesus is the faithful Son who does everything according to the Father’s will, because he is one with the Father and the Spirit. John says he’s not even worthy to carry Jesus’ sandals. You don’t get a more lowly or menial task than to have to carry somebody’s dirty shoes around. His dirty sandals are more holy than our most righteous deeds. He is the faithful Son.

Which is what makes his actions so shocking when he arrives in v. 13: “Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John.” Now if we look back at v. 11, where John said, “I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire”—what we expect is for Jesus to come and do the baptizing. Instead he asks John to baptize him. That would be a little like having the opening act at a John Mayer concert introduce John and then watching him come out and sit in the front row to listen the opener perform again. And again, John’s just as confused as we are. Verse 14: “But John tried to deter him, saying, ‘I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?’”

But what’s most shocking is that John’s baptism is a “baptism of *repentance*.” It’s a little different than the baptism that Jesus institutes later. John is calling a rebellious nation, an unfaithful son, to confess their sins and turn away from them in repentance to God who is coming back to them (cf. Isa. 40:1-4). And this repentance is marked by baptism—a picture of

being cleansed from their sin. It is a *baptism of repentance* (cf. Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3). But Jesus had nothing to repent of. He had no sin to turn away from. John's right to ask the question, "What are you talking about?" But listen to what Jesus says.

Verse 15: "Jesus replied, 'Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.' Then John consented." How is it that Jesus' being baptized by John will "fulfill all righteousness"? Why is that the right thing to do now? What does that mean?

It's not that being baptized fulfills some sort of requirement of the Law, as though this is one of the boxes Jesus has to check off in order to keep all of God's commandments, or that all his commandments were wrapped up in being baptized. Rather, it's that *taking a posture of humility and associating himself with unfaithful sinners is necessary for Jesus to accomplish the righteous work God sent him to do*. The mission of the faithful Son is to bring back unfaithful sons and daughters to God. As the Lord says in Isaiah 49:6, "It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth."

To do this, the faithful Son Jesus, must become like the unfaithful children. He must associate with them, identify with them, stand in their place in order to rescue them. As Hebrews 2:14 says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity . . ." And v. 17, "For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people."

And so his ministry begins by identifying himself, through John's baptism, "with the people who are themselves facing . . . judgment and needing to repent."<sup>1</sup> Jesus begins his ministry by saying, "I'm with them." He doesn't avoid 'guilt by association'; rather he becomes guilty by association, making our guilt his guilt, that he might free us from it.

The fact that Jesus' first act of public ministry was to identify with unfaithful sinners says something about his followers. No matter how put together we look; no matter how much Bible we know or don't know; no matter what our family dynamic looks like; no matter where we live or where we come from, the most basic, unifying reality of all Jesus' followers is that we are sinners in need of a Savior.

That Jesus begins his ministry by identifying with a sinful nation also tells us quite a bit about him—his compassion, his humility, his love, his grace, his redeeming purpose. I so need this message. I so need to hear again and again that Jesus came for sinners.

But what breaks all categories for me, is that it's in this very act of identifying with unfaithful sinners that God anoints Jesus for his kingdom work and affirms his approval of him as the faithful Son. Look at vv. 16-17:

"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.'"

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<sup>1</sup> N. T. Wright, *Matthew for Everyone, Part One* (Louisville: WJK, 2002, 2004), 21.

It is necessary for Jesus to associate with unfaithful sinners in order to accomplish the righteous work God sent him to do—to rescue those unfaithful sinners. So necessary, notice here how the whole Trinity shows up. The Son is anointed by the Spirit and commended by the Father.

It's go time for Jesus, and so the Spirit of God descends on him, appearing like a dove, and anoints and equips him for his kingdom ministry. Even though Jesus is God in the flesh, he is still led by the Spirit throughout the Gospels. And then we hear the Father's announcement of approval: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." And in that announcement we hear echoes of two key Old Testament passages. The first is Psalm 2:7, where God says of his anointed or messianic king: "You are my Son; today I have become your Father." The second is Isaiah 42, where God describes his love and delight for his Servant—the same servant who later suffers on behalf of God's people in Isaiah 53. Isaiah 42:1 reads: "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one *in whom I delight*; I will put my Spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations" (Isa. 42:1). The Father announces his approval on Jesus as his faithful Son, who is at the same time the King who will sit on David's throne, and the Suffering Servant who will give his life as a ransom for many. He comes to bring justice—to do what is right and make right what is wrong. To accomplish all God's kingdom purposes, and bring back unfaithful children to the Father.

So how will he do it? How will he establish God's Kingdom and rescue unfaithful sinners, bringing them back to God? Well that's really the rest of the Gospel of Matthew, which we'll be looking at for several months ahead. But we need to say a few things about it this morning.

Just as the faithful Son begins by identifying himself with unfaithful sinners, so he will carry out his ministry in the same way. Jesus lives his righteous life in the presence of unrighteous sinners, not fearing to associate with the guilty. And he becomes guilty by association. He hangs out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners, and consequently gets labeled a drunkard and a glutton by the religious leaders of the day (e.g. Matt. 11:19). He also calls sin *sin*; he doesn't adjust the Father's standards of holiness. Rather, he lives the faithful and holy life that we couldn't—the life that God requires but that we failed to give him. Jesus lives it in our place, that his righteous life might be credited to us.

But not only does he live our life, he also dies our death. Unfaithfulness still has to be punished. God cannot turn a blind eye to human sin, nor would we want him to if it's justice and peace that we're really longing for. So not only does the faithful Son credit his faithfulness to us, *he takes our unfaithfulness on himself* and bears the punishment for it with his own life. The separation from God we deserve is what Jesus experienced on the cross in our place, when he cried out to the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). The full weight of hell and all God's holy anger against *our* sin was laid on *him*, so that through faith in him we might be forgiven and reconciled with God.

Jesus did all of this to bring unfaithful sinners into right relationship with God. He launched his ministry by saying, "I'm with them," so that at the end of his ministry he could stand before the Father and say, "They're with me." They were purchased with my blood; they now belong to you, just as we planned.

Jesus is the faithful Son who identifies with unfaithful sinners in order to bring us to God. This is the liberating, life-changing message and power of the gospel.

### **Union with the Faithful Son**

So how do we respond to this truth? What do we do with it?

First, we stop trying to approach the Father as though we can make up for our unfaithfulness, and instead we look to Jesus. Like the child who kicks a goal in the soccer game and immediately looks to the sideline to see if Dad saw it, we are so desperate for our Heavenly Father's approval. All of us want to hear the words that the Father spoke over Jesus: "This is my son, this is my daughter, whom I love. With them I am well pleased." In fact we were made to hear those words and our hearts will be restless until we do. But we're often confused about how we find his approval.

When I mess up, my default mode is to try to perform for God in order to clear my guilty conscience and win back his approval of me. Or else I beat myself up and think things like, "I shouldn't even ask of that in prayer, because I so messed up and who am I that he should give anything to me?" And I don't think I'm alone in that mode. We think that if we're just religious enough, or good enough, or if I really beat myself up when I mess up, then God will be pleased.

But as author Jerry Bridges reminds us, "One of the best kept secrets among Christians today is this: *Jesus paid it all. I mean all. He not only purchased your forgiveness of sins and your ticket to heaven, He purchased every blessing and every answer to prayer you will ever receive.* Every one of them no exceptions."<sup>2</sup> As unfaithful sons and daughters, we can never make it up on our own. But the liberating beauty of the gospel is that we don't have to! Because King Jesus is the faithful Son. And when we place our faith in Jesus, the pleasure that God has in his eternal Son becomes the pleasure that he has in all who are united with his Son by faith, who themselves become children of the Heavenly Father.

A second and proper response to this passage deals with *our own willingness to associate with the guilty in the ministry and vision God has given us as a church.* Again, Jesus launched his ministry by identifying with unfaithful sinners. He conducted his ministry among unfaithful sinners. And he concluded his earthly ministry by commissioning his followers to help unfaithful sinners become followers of Jesus to the very ends of the earth.

It's hard for a lot of Christians to know how to navigate this tension. On the one hand, we recognize that God is a holy God and he calls his people to live holy, set apart lives. That's one of the results of having been saved by Christ—we're set apart unto the Lord. We honor Christ by reflecting his holiness. We are not of this world.

But we are *in* it. Just as Jesus was not of this world, but lived and walked and shared life with people in it (cf. John 17:6-19). The holiness God calls his people to was never designed to be expressed in cloistered separation, but to be a light shining into the darkness, like a city on a hill (Matt. 5:14-16). Which means that we have to share life with "sinners," just like Jesus did, never

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<sup>2</sup> Jerry Bridges. *Transforming Grace: Living Confidently in God's Unfailing Love* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991, 2008), 18, italics his. Kindle Edition.

forgetting that apart from Christ, that's what we are too. We need the gospel of Jesus just as much as everyone else. And so we must associate with the guilty *and* risk becoming guilty by association.

There are no doubt reasons to avoid certain associations. If you are particularly tempted toward drunkenness, ministering at the local tavern is not a good idea. If every time you hang out with a certain person or friend group you find yourself doing things that dishonor God and defame Christ's name, you might need to change who you spend time with.

But most of the time, what keeps us from these associations is fear of becoming guilty through them. Fear of what others will say or think. The reality is, if that happened to Jesus, we better expect that it will happen to us. And if no one is accusing us of pushing the envelope, or criticizing our association with 'sinners,' then it's at least worth asking the question whether we are really taking seriously God's commission to bring the gospel to bear on the lives of the lost.

Jesus is the faithful Son who launched his kingdom work by identifying with unfaithful sinners, that he might bring them to God. May we find our favor before the Father in him, and follow his pattern of association, that others might come to the Father too.