SESSION 6

The Declaration of Forgiveness



In Focus:
When we are forgiven by God, we should let everyone know it.

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LOOK AT OUR WORLD

Have you ever noticed how freely we associate ourselves with our favorite sports teams?

At my brother's church in Kentucky, I've heard many conversations about the Wildcats or Cardinals. They love their college basketball in Kentucky.

I have a couple of friends who get along great every day of the year except on the Saturday when the Alabama Crimson Tide plays the LSU Tigers. These guys are serious about their college football.

Recently I used an opening sermon illustration about enduring through trials that featured Dave Dravecky, a former San Francisco Giants pitcher who lost his pitching arm to cancer. I was not sure how well the illustration would work in the Southern California church that's located ten miles from Dodger Stadium. I began by smiling and apologizing for speaking favorably about their division rival.

How did I know there were Dodgers fans present? I've seen them wear Dodgers jerseys and caps when I've preached there before. People can often be identified by the clothing they wear.

For the Christian, there's a more important form of identification; it's called baptism. Baptism is the way those who are forgiven show their affiliation to Jesus Christ.



What are some ways you like to boast about people or things that are important to you?

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LEARN GOD'S WAY

Baptism is an outward demonstration of God's forgiveness.

Acts 10:44-48

44 While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came down on all those who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and declaring the greatness of God. Then Peter responded, 47 "Can anyone withhold water and prevent these people from being baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" 48 He commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to stay for a few days.

As a companion to his Gospel, Luke authored the book of Acts to show how the gospel expanded from Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria "and to the ends of the earth" and was not hindered by the forces that opposed it (Acts 1:8; see 28:31). On the day of Pentecost, God's Spirit descended upon the people and the disciples boldly shared the gospel. Miraculously, the people were able to hear their message in the particular dialect of their own language (2:1-11).

Whenever people are filled with the Holy Spirit, they speak the gospel with boldness. This pattern continues throughout Luke's account of the early church. Sometimes the message is spoken in one language and understood in another, but not every time. For instance:

- Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, testified before the rulers who arrested him for preaching the gospel (Acts 4:1-13).
- Believers prayed for boldness, were filled with the Holy Spirit, and boldly shared the gospel (Acts 4:23-31).
- Saul of Tarsus, filled with the Holy Spirit, began a lifestyle of boldly proclaiming the gospel—even when outside forces opposed him and tried to stop him (Acts 9:17–28:31).
- Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, rebuked a false prophet and proclaimed the true gospel (Acts 13:4-12).
- The disciples, filled with the Holy Spirit, spread the gospel among the Gentiles (Acts 13:48-52).

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However, in Acts 10, like in Acts 2 and Acts 19, miraculous communication occurred during the cross-cultural communication of the gospel message. Peter was preaching to Gentiles, and the Holy Spirit fell upon them and many of them believed. The "speaking in tongues" (10:46) connected this outpouring of the Spirit to the day of Pentecost but, as we just saw, was not part of every occurrence when people were filled with the Spirit. What each of these occurrences has in common is the bold proclamation of the gospel.

Luke used the phrase "speaking in tongues" to refer to the miraculous communication that occurred among the Gentiles (10:46), just as it had among the Jews on the day of Pentecost (2:1-11) as a reason for baptizing the believing Gentiles.

The great divide between Jews and Gentiles could not hinder the gospel message. While they were from distinct cultures, had different heritages, and spoke different languages, the unifying work of the Holy Spirit was present, and Peter did not want to withhold baptism when the Holy Spirit was working in them.

To the modern reader, this may seem obvious, but at the time it was a major development. Christianity had emerged from the Jewish faith and initially spread among the Jewish people. The gospel expansion to the Gentiles began to occur in the opening pages of chapter 10 and culminated when the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles.

Peter did not argue that baptism was necessary for their salvation. His argument was that since they were now believers they should be baptized just like the three thousand believing Jews were on the day of Pentecost (2:41). They should not be excluded.

Baptism is an important part of the Christian experience. From the early days of the church those who confessed Jesus as Lord were baptized. In being baptized, they were:

- Following Jesus's example (Luke 3:21-22).
- Being consistent with the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20).
- Demonstrating that they had become new creations in Christ (Col. 2:12; 2 Cor. 5:17).
- Doing what other new believers were doing. Baptism after conversion was the pattern in the book of Acts of those who believed (Acts 2:41; 8:12-13,38; 9:18; 10:48; 16:15,33; 18:8; 19:5).

While baptism does not save a person—we are saved by grace through faith and not by any works—after confessing Jesus as their Lord, new believers associate themselves with Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection through baptism as an outward demonstration of God's forgiveness (Rom. 6:4).

- ***Why is baptism so important for the Christian?***

- ***How would you describe the meaning and method of baptism?***

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Baptism has an impact on others around us.

Acts 16:30-34

30 He escorted them out and said, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" 31 They said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." 32 And they spoke the word of the Lord to him along with everyone in his house. 33 He took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds. Right away he and all his family were baptized. 34 He brought them into his house, set a meal before them, and rejoiced because he had come to believe in God with his entire household.

While baptism is the normative response for those who experience Christ's forgiveness, speaking in tongues is not. In other instances, where people came to faith in Christ, there was no miraculous communication, just a Spirit-filled witness who proclaimed the gospel with boldness. Notable examples are the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8:26-40 and the Philippian jailer in Acts 16:23-34.

As Paul and his team ministered to the Gentiles in Philippi, they were accosted by a young slave "who had a spirit by which she predicted the future" (Acts 16:16), who repeatedly said, "These men, who are proclaiming to you a way of salvation, are the servants of the Most High God" (v. 17). What she said was true. They were God's servants, and they were proclaiming the way of salvation. For some reason, this annoyed Paul and he cast the demons out of her in Jesus's name.

The owners of the demon-possessed girl became angry at Paul when he cast the evil spirit out of her, because their potential to profit from her fortune-telling abilities disappeared with the demons. In short, she was no longer a source of income for them (v. 19).

They seized Paul and Silas, brought them before the authorities and lodged a complaint against them, claiming they were outside agitators trying to change Roman culture. They asked the authorities not to tolerate Paul and Silas's opposing viewpoint. The authorities and those in the crowd rushed to judgment. They beat Paul and Silas, threw them into jail, and ordered the guards to keep a close eye on them. The jailers took special precautions to secure them, putting them in a high security location and shackling their feet together—they were not going anywhere.

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Instead of complaining, they chose to praise (v. 25). As they sang, the prisoners were listening intently to them, but not the jailer; he was getting some sleep.

About midnight, an earthquake hit, the prison doors opened, and the chains were loosened. The guard awoke from his sleep, and because he assumed that everyone had escaped, he prepared to kill himself. Paul stopped him from harming himself. They had not escaped.

Having escaped physical death, the prison guard was now interested in escaping spiritual death, so he brought Paul and Silas out of the prison to speak to them about his own salvation. In an act of kindness, he washed their wounds; in an act of obedience, he and his household believed and were baptized immediately.

As a young girl, Lorena Garlington accepted Christ, but she was not baptized until a couple of months before her 100th birthday. She always knew she was supposed to be baptized but never got around to it. "I've struggled with this for so long," Garlington told her pastor, ". . . because I know the Bible says you should be baptized." When she emerged from the water, she said, "This is the greatest day! It's the best thing that's happened to me in years."[1]

Lorena regretted the delay and experienced immense joy when she was finally obedient. Experiencing the joy of obedience is one reason not to delay your baptism—another is that your baptism will influence others to believe.

While the jailer could only make the decision to follow Christ for himself, when he chose to surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ and follow Him in believer's baptism, his act of obedience influenced the other members of his household, and they followed his example. The same thing happened with Cornelius, Lydia, and Crispus. Not only did they believe, but so did their entire household (11:14; 16:15; 18:8).

When we confess Jesus as our Lord and are obedient to follow Him in believer's baptism, we influence others to do the same.

- ***When have you witnessed a particularly meaningful baptism service?***

- ***What impact have you seen a baptism have on family members?***

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ENGAGE

For or Against?

Some people who genuinely trust Jesus as Savior delay or decline when it comes to baptism. In the first column are several reasons someone might use against being baptized. In the second column, list how you would respond to the person's need for baptism.

Against	For
Social stigma	_____
Fear of water, crowds, and so forth	_____
Unclear about meaning	_____
Previous baptism as an infant	_____
Just not a priority	_____

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Baptism must be centered in Christ.

Acts 19:1-5

1 While Apollos was in Corinth, Paul traveled through the interior regions and came to Ephesus. He found some disciples 2 and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" "No," they told him, "we haven't even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." 3 "Into what then were you baptized?" he asked them. "Into John's baptism," they replied. 4 Paul said, "John baptized with a baptism of repentance, telling the people that they should believe in the one who would come after him, that is, in Jesus." 5 When they heard this, they were baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus.

As Paul came into Ephesus, he met some believers who had not heard of the Holy Spirit, so Paul wanted to know more about their baptism. Specifically, he wanted to know if they had experienced the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised to His disciples (John 14:16-17).

It is important that baptism be biblical. Christian baptism is:

- Done after a person believes, not before, as an act of obedience.
- Done by immersion, not by sprinkling or pouring. Since baptism symbolizes the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the person goes into the water, then under the water, and then out of the water (Acts 8:38).
- A prerequisite for church membership. On the day of Pentecost, those who were baptized were added to the church (2:41).
- Centered in Christ.

Paul questioned the belief system they were being baptized into. In other words, a person could be immersed after their conversion and received into the membership of a local church, but if the one doing the baptism had an inadequate or incomplete belief system, if the baptism was not Christ-centered, then it would not be biblical baptism.

Their baptism was inadequate. To be the type of baptism practiced in the New Testament, it must be centered in Christ.

When I was a young pastor, a man with a Mormon background wanted to become a member of the church I served.

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I presented the gospel to him, but he said that he had already accepted Christ as his Savior—that's why he was leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. At the time, I had no reason to doubt what he was saying. When I told him that we would require him to be baptized to become a member, he refused, saying that his previous Mormon baptism was sufficient.

While we did not extend membership to him, I invited him to continue attending our church. After a few more months under the preaching of the Word, he made a genuine profession of faith and gladly followed the Lord in believer's baptism.

It made a difference to our church that this man's first baptism was Mormon. There was a theological chasm the size of the Grand Canyon between the Mormon church that baptized him and the Baptist church I served. Among the differences is our understanding of who God is, the nature and authority of Scripture, the person and work of Jesus Christ, and the way of salvation.

In the church I served, all the members had been baptized by that church, or a church of "like faith and order." We could not accept someone with a Mormon baptism into the membership of the church.

Sometimes whether or not to rebaptize is a judgment call, but other times it is not.

Paul wanted these disciples to be baptized into Christ because all they had was John's baptism. He explained that John's baptism was in anticipation of something to come. His message was one of repentance from sin—an important message, but an incomplete one. People not only need to repent from sins but also need to turn to Christ. John's message was incomplete. It was more like a movie trailer than the feature presentation.

The complete gospel message includes the repentance that John preached, but it also includes the surrender to Christ that Paul preached and results in the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that Jesus promised (John 14:16).

Though these followers of John the Baptist had been baptized, their baptism was not Christian baptism because it was not centered in Christ. Baptism follows salvation and testifies to what Jesus has done in our lives.

- ***How did Paul differentiate between John the Baptist's baptism and faith in Jesus?***

- ***What is the relationship between repentance, faith, and baptism?***

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LIVE IT OUT

While baptism does not save us, it is important. It is the first act of obedience for us as believers. We are commanded to declare God's work of forgiveness in our lives. One way we do that is through baptism.

VIEW OF GOD

If you have trusted in Christ but haven't yet been baptized, make an appointment with your pastor or someone on your church staff to discuss this crucial step of obedience.

VIEW OF SELF

When the church schedules your baptism, post the event on social media and/or invite your friends, family, and coworkers to attend.

VIEW OF OTHERS

If you've already been baptized, share your salvation experience with someone else this week.



REMEMBER

"Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." Acts 16:31

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