

Keeping Covenant through Baptism

Luke 9:18-25, Matthew 7:13-14, Romans 6:1-14

(Sermon summary – July 14, 2024)

Introduction: Baptism in context: Jesus began His ministry by being baptized Himself – to fulfill all righteousness, He said, meaning He was identifying fully with us sinners. Later His disciples were also baptizing in the same style as John the Baptist. But it was all in connection with the inauguration of His ministry. We don't hear about baptisms later, but only about the teaching, healing, and miraculous spiritual power at work in Jesus, and His calling others to follow Him. That's the meaning of discipleship: learning about life from Jesus as your primary Authority.

2) The curious thing is that at the height of Jesus' ministry, He began reinforcing the disciples' sense of who He was – it was so important that they identify Him correctly: “Who do the people say I am?” Of course, then He turned the question to them: “Who do YOU say I am?” And as they affirmed their belief in Him as Messiah, even though He warned them to keep it under their hats, He privately began to tell them about how He was going to be arrested and made to suffer terrible things at the hands of the authorities, finally being crucified. The disciples always went catatonic when He started one of these announcements. It simply did not compute with the narrative about Messiah in their heads, so they went into denial and missed the amazing promise of resurrection.

3) Then He started speaking to them about the cost of discipleship: denying yourself, taking up your cross, losing your life for Christ's sake; He was teaching them about the broad way vs. the narrow way, only one of which has a good ending. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “Salvation is free, but discipleship will cost you your life.” Those disciples were a bundle of nerves trying to capture Jesus' meaning: so excited that Messiah had come, so amazed by His teaching, so impacted by His power over nature and disease and evil spirits, so enamored by the compassion they witnessed in Him, so proud of how He stood up to His accusers, so eager for Him to start an uprising and revolt against Rome, but confused by His foot-dragging pace, unnerved by His love for Samaritans and other unworthies. They were a bundle of nerves trying to figure Him out, trying to grasp “Who is this man, and when is He going to fulfill our expectations – our way?” They were no different from us! So it's also important to consider carefully the cost of non-discipleship, where the implication is that what ultimately matters is just matter!

4) We're all a bundle of nerves, aren't we? Our neurons control so much of how we think and act. We're sinners just like those disciples, at the mercy of our neurons from the top of our heads to the soles of our feet. We don't love God above everything, but only ourselves, so we don't love our neighbor either, because we're constantly being manipulated by the prince of this dark world! Yet Jesus would fulfill His own teaching by laying down His life in the face of our rebellion, loving God with all His being under the worst possible circumstances, and loving us with His last breath, down to His last drop of blood. So *that's* what He was doing on that cross! And three days later He rose from the dead! Doesn't that make **Jesus the ultimate Authority** on life? (And on death?!) His description of life and how to experience it is the only one in history that makes sense of *all* the evidence – our instinct to exercise dominion and achieve greatness, our record of brokenness and murderous tendencies, our longing for love. We're so full of contradictions! One person's neurons lead him to throw himself into partying every weekend or getting stone drunk (and calling it “the life he always wanted.”) Another's neurons get him into intellectual pursuits, smoking pot or online gaming – what a thrill! Still another's neurons take her on a shopping spree every time she gets depressed and it has this fantastic uplifting effect on her spirit – for a little while. Someone else's neurons drive them into the business world, with genius for making money and boosting the economy, while another's neurons give him panic attacks under pressure, or drive them to violence or to steal things. Another guy's neurons tell him he's “a woman trapped in a man's body,” while someone else's neurons tell him that he's sexually attracted to other males, and his only satisfaction in life will come from pursuing that attraction. Another says she's “a man trapped in a woman's body,” and she's got to get her exterior lined up with her interior in order to find true happiness. In fact, our neurons are very susceptible to our environment, our genes and family upbringing, the educational system, social conditioning, etc. They can be so influenced by what's going on around them – molded and shaped by music, movies, Internet, virtual reality, or a strong-willed person in your life, and especially by a particular social narrative that becomes popular. Just like in marketing, where people's buying habits are terrifically influenced by what products are being advertised and how cleverly they're packaged! Do we realize how vulnerable we are to our neurons, and our neurons to their habitat?! But some of these neurological susceptibilities and conditions are more serious than others. The tricky part is that you are responsible for your neurons and what you do with them! So how do we know which ones are fatal? Where do we turn? What authority can give us a definitive answer?

5) In the story of Genesis 3, humans decided that *what God said was good* was NOT the last word, because there are other good things to be discovered, enjoyed, and savored! This is where humanity got off track, lost our way, rejected God's authority in favor of our own, and find ourselves slaves to powers we do not understand or control. From that point on, humanity "missed the target" (this is the basic meaning of "sin" in both Hebrew and Greek); the whole mission of our existence was tossed to the winds: called to have dominion over the earth under God's supervision, but now at the mercy of our neurons and the prince of this world, the ruler of darkness, who so easily manipulates us through our neurons, and he's dedicated to making this life as miserable as possible for the greatest number possible. How deep is our need for a Savior! And this is precisely why Jesus came to share our brokenness and rescue us.

6) God's Word says that when you just let your neurons control your life, your patterns and habits, you're on the road to death. The proverbialist says, "There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death!" (Prov. 14:12). Jesus says there are two ways or options that confront every human: the wide gate and broad way (it leads to destruction), and the small gate and narrow way (it leads to life). That's why the Gospel is called "Good News": it's about a Savior who announced that we don't have to live at the mercy of our neurons, because He wants to rescue us from ourselves and all our other enemies! And we *all* need this! No exception! When we choose to follow Jesus, we seal our participation in this new covenant through baptism – a voluntary decision that every individual must make on their own, to identify publicly with **Jesus' death and resurrection** as your **pattern for living**: baptized into His death (death to your neurons!), raised with Him to walk in the newness of His Spirit (the true Life-giver)! He's the One who wants to accompany you on that narrow path, teach you your true life mission, and enable you to fulfill it!