

**St Paul's Lutheran Church (Latimer, IA)**  
**Baptism of Our Lord – January 7, 2024**  
**Matthew 3:13-17 – Zeal and Mercy**  
**Rev Peter Wagner**

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.

God the Father says, "Behold my servant, whom I uphold." Behold means: Look and pay attention! This is life and death, this is crucial! Behold Jesus, the servant of the Father. The Son obeys his Father's will and humbles himself, obedient unto death. Though he is God, the Son does not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but takes on a servant's nature.

Behold my servant, says your God. "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." Here is the King of kings and Lord of lords, but look! Today he is not coming to rule with a rod of iron! Behold my servant, says your God, coming to be your servant. To take your place and make you a lord. As he says in Luke 22:27, one of the most beautiful sentences in the whole Bible, "I am among you as the one who serves."

So behold! Look! Your servant, the Son, is coming to the Jordan River to be baptized by John. Even though it should have been the other way around. For John has plenty sin of his own, John needs to be baptized by Jesus. Yet Jesus comes to be baptized anyway, for you. Behold your servant, the Son, who has no sin. He needs no repentance and no washing of regeneration. He needs nothing, but he comes to be baptized, so he can give baptism the power to save you.

Think about what your baptism did for you. And think how different your baptism was from his baptism. When you were baptized, you entered the water dirty, covered in the filth of original sin. Covered also in the filth of your own evil and negligent thoughts and deeds. You entered the water dirty. But you came out clean and pure, sins washed away. Because this holy Son, this servant of sinners, this perfect Lord, he entered the water clean, and he came out dirty. He took all the dirt of the world out from the baptismal water onto his own body. He exchanged his cleanness for your filth, to bear your sin to the cross. He entered the water to sanctify the water, and make it holy, by touching it with his holy body. So he made it a lifegiving water, rich in grace, and a washing of rebirth and renewal in the Holy Spirit.

So behold the Lord of all, who has come to be the servant of all, to make you a lord in him. The Father anoints him with the Holy Spirit, to serve you with all his righteous. And to pour out the Holy Spirit upon all who are baptized with him.

Today I want to focus on the zeal and mercy of Christ, revealed in his baptism. When Jesus came to be baptized he was full of zeal, refusing to even let John stop him. But he also had mercy, explaining his reason with all gentleness. It was mercy and zeal for you, to save you. In the same way, today's Old Testament reading from Isaiah 42 reveals two ways that Jesus is your servant. He serves with zeal, and he serves with mercy, both born out of love.

First, zeal. "He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law." Jesus loves his people so much that he is zealous for them, to redeem them. He doesn't grow faint or give up. He fights for God's house, he overturns the tables and drive out the moneychangers. He fights for those being led astray by false shepherds, denouncing them as wolves. He's zealous for God's law, so that his people might have justice, so everyone would truly repent and turn and be saved. Tireless in his energy, undaunted by his opponents, his zeal will soon bring him to the cross to lay down his life gladly for the world. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Second, mercy. "He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice." Jesus comes without trumpet or fanfare, in quiet humility, to bring justice to the oppressed. Not to snuff out or destroy, but to plant and nourish. He goes about Galilee and Judea with tender mercy and compassion, to heal, restore, and comfort. His zeal is against the false shepherds, but his gentleness is for the sheep. He tends and kindles the dying embers. He comes to you, who were dead in your trespasses and sins. And he kindles faith in you, to bring you to his baptismal font, anoint you as his own, and forgive everything.

Now, how does this apply to you?

First, rejoice that your servant Jesus has come to you in such love! Give thanks for how richly your Lord has blessed you. Bless the Lord, who defends you from all evil with such zeal, who forgives you with such mercy.

Second, this all means you should imitate Christ, your suffering servant, in his zeal and mercy. Jesus said, “The greatest among you shall be your servant.” To be a servant means to be ready to lay down your life for one another, as he did for you. Set aside your demands, set aside your selfishness. Seek the good of everyone Christ died to save. “A Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is most dutiful servant of all, subject to everyone.”

So like your Lord, be zealous servants. Be zealous for God’s law. Speak out and call the world to repentance. Fight for your children and families, against the lies of the false prophets of this world. Denounce the wolves who lead people astray. Defend families and congregations from false doctrine and sin. Reject the lies of the idolatry of this age, of sexuality and inclusivity. Protect the child who is deceived into thinking she should transition her gender. Protect the mother who is deceived into disposing of her baby, because her conscience will never excuse her.

And be zealous for your brothers and sisters in Christ. Encourage one another in good works, rebuke one another in all love and gentleness. Be zealous for yourself also. Root out sin and hypocrisy from your life. Seek the things of God and his mercy in the church.

And be zealous for the church, that nothing done in the name of Christ would ever bring her slander. Devote your zeal to Christ, and to nothing else. This has become a big problem lately. Many Christians in America are zealous for things that have little or nothing to do with the church. They devote their energy to national politics, or vaccine theories, or speculation about world news. And so they betray that even though they are Christians, their deeper zeal and interest lies elsewhere than in Christ. Especially in this election year, put your zeal not in princes or elected leaders. Put it in God alone.

However, remember that your Lord, came not only with tireless zeal for salvation, but also with great mercy, unwilling to snuff out even the faintly burning wick. So serve one another with zeal, but also serve one another with mercy. And let mercy prevail. Let your life be patterned after the cross of Christ. Suffer injustice instead of correcting wrong. For the sake of your brothers, do not demand perfection. Overlook their faults. Be patient. Put them first. Be gentle and filled with love toward your weaker brethren. Do not judge weak faith. Do not exclude the sinner. Never snuff out the smoldering wick, but love your fellow Christians, and pray for them that the Holy Spirit would strengthen their faith. Pray even for your enemies, that they might also come into the church in repentance and faith.

Be patient with all, whether they lack zeal or they lack mercy. And examine yourself. Do you lack zeal, or mercy, or both? Pray that the Father would fill you up with what is lacking. That he would anoint you with his Holy Spirit, through Christ his perfect servant. Pray that the Holy Spirit would work in you to create you as good and faithful servants of the Lord. Trust in the Triune God, that he will care for you in the church, and you do not need to be in control.

Finally, remember whose zeal saves. Not yours. The zeal of the Lord. As Isaiah 9 declares, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.”

And remember whose mercy saves. Not yours. The mercy of the Lord. As Ephesians 2 declares, “God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.” Trust God’s rich mercy, mercy to forgive all your iniquity, all your shortcomings, and all your lack. For this is the baptismal in life him. Finding all mercy in the Son of God, in whom he is well pleased. Amen.

Now may the peace of God which passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, unto life everlasting. Amen.