

First things First
[Matthew 3:13-17](#)
Rev. Curtis Bablitz
January 11, 2026

On Christmas Eve in the year 800 AD, Charlemagne, the ruler of most of modern France, Germany and Italy, went to Rome to meet with the Pope, and while he was there, the Pope crowned him as the first Holy Roman Emperor, giving him authority over most of Western Europe, founding an empire that would last for over a thousand years. And obviously this was a good thing for Charlemagne – he got a fancy new crown and a fancy new title, and he could claim to be the rightful successor to the old Roman Empire, the most powerful man in Europe. But this was also a great thing for the Pope, because he was the one who put the crown on Charlemagne's head, which meant that no matter how powerful Charlemagne became, the Pope could still claim to be more powerful, because he was the one giving out the crown. And clearly people remembered this, because over a thousand years later, in 1804 Napoleon, the man who defeated the last Holy Roman Emperor and claimed the title of Emperor himself, Napoleon summoned the Pope to Paris so that he could be crowned Emperor with the Crown of Charlemagne, but this time, Napoleon didn't want any doubt over who was actually the most powerful man in Europe, so he took the crown out of the Pope's hands and put it on his own head, so that everyone watching would know who was really in control.

And maybe that seems like a kind of a petty move for an Emperor to make, but when power is all that you care about, the little things tend to bother you. If you've ever watched children playing on a playground, you've seen what that desire for power looks like – the competition to be in charge, to set the rules for the game, to be the king of the castle, to tell everyone around that you are not the boss of me, I do what I want. And this doesn't stay on the playground. We don't all grow out of that obsession with power and prestige, with being in charge. There is no logical explanation for billionaires and their obsession with wealth – once you've got enough money to live in comfort, the only reason to keep piling up more and more and more is so that you can have more than the person next to you, a higher spot on the lists of the wealthiest people on the planet. We measure success through numbers, the higher the better – bank account balances, number of advanced degrees you've earned, number of Nobel and/or FIFA Peace prizes won, by any means necessary, it's all one big competition over who is the strongest, the brightest, the biggest, the best, who is the winner, who comes first.

And that's what makes Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus so interesting. All four Gospels tell the story of Jesus being baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist, and when you think about it, that is a strange way to start a story. In this world, if you are the one doing the baptism, then you are the one in charge, you are the one with the power and authority and prestige, and the person you are baptizing is weaker, less

important, less prestigious than you are. So if you're writing a story trying to persuade the world that Jesus is exceptional, one of a kind, the only begotten Son of God, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, starting that story with him as a follower of another low level teacher-preacher-miracle worker, that doesn't make a lot of sense. In fact, this is excellent evidence for the historical accuracy of the gospel accounts, because if the gospel writers were just making this story about Jesus up, they would've never started here, with this story that makes Jesus look kind of small, just one of the crowd of onlookers and followers coming to be baptized by John. And of all the gospels, Matthew is the one that takes pains to make it absolutely clear what the relationship between John and Jesus really is. Mark and Luke just tell the story straight – Jesus comes to the river Jordan and John baptizes him, done. The Gospel of John doesn't show the baptism itself, just John the Baptist telling the story about how he baptized Jesus. Matthew is the only gospel that includes the conversation between Jesus and John while they're down in the water – John is out in the Jordan, dunking people one after another, and he looks up and the next man in line is Jesus, and John doesn't want to do it. John tries to talk Jesus out of being baptized – “I'm the one who needs to be baptized by YOU – I'm nothing compared to you, you can't ask me to do this!” Matthew makes it very, very clear that John isn't more important than Jesus, that even John recognizes this, John tries to weasel out of performing this ritual just in case someone might think John is claiming authority over Jesus. And it's interesting that Matthew, of all the

gospels, Matthew is the one that goes the extra mile to show John's hesitation there in the water, because one of the things we know about the church that Matthew was writing this gospel for is that it was a very wealthy church, a church with a lot of powerful people who were used to caring about prestige and reputation and precedence and all that, and maybe they would've felt a little embarrassed to be following someone who started out as John the Baptist's junior apprentice. Matthew includes this detail to make it absolutely clear to anyone reading that being baptized by John doesn't make Jesus less important, less prestigious, or less powerful.

But what's really interesting is that while John is clearly worried about giving this impression to the people watching on the riverside, and Matthew is clearly worried about giving this impression to anyone reading the gospel he's writing, the only person here who doesn't seem to care anything about Jesus' reputation is Jesus himself. Jesus doesn't care what anybody watching thinks of him – he doesn't care what being baptized by John might mean for his ranking or privilege or prestige. Jesus comes to be baptized, and when John objects, Jesus insists – Let's do this, John – this is the right way to do things. This is how it's meant to be. The very first action Jesus takes at the very beginning of his ministry is an act of submission, making himself less important, lowering himself in the eyes of the world in order to make John look more important, giving John a chance to shine. And Jesus can do this because he knows who he is. As he comes out of the water, Jesus hears the voice of God telling him – You are my son, the beloved, with

you I am well pleased. Jesus already knows exactly who he is, he already knows his worth, his value, he already knows exactly how important he truly is, and so he doesn't need any external validation, any recognition from John or the rest of the people watching in the Jordan that day. Jesus' identity does not depend on being better than John, being perceived as more important than John, because he knows that his identity is rooted not in what the crowds think of him, not even in what John thinks of him – what matters is what God thinks of him. Instead of insisting on protecting his reputation, insisting on baptizing himself so that there's no doubt that he's bigger and better than John, instead Jesus lowers himself to lift others up, he sets aside his power and authority, his reputation and prestige, because he already knows who he truly is – the Beloved, the Son of God, and that identity is all that matters.

And I have to say, I find it strangely reassuring that we know this was something Matthew's church in particular needed to hear – to know that this wealthy church struggled setting aside their ideas of power and prestige in order to follow a man of sorrows, the crucified Son of God. Because if we are honest with ourselves, we still struggle to set aside our ideas of what makes us great. We still fall into the old lie of thinking that money and fame and prestige make someone more worthy of our respect, that respectability in the eyes of the world directly translates to moral virtue. We still can be too easily dazzled by reputation and precedence, we still seek to crown ourselves with titles and honours as if these things have some intrinsic

value, as if they can make us holier, more loving, more fit for the kingdom of God. We need to be reminded that we follow a peasant King, a King who lowered himself so that others could shine, a King who endured humiliation and disgrace on the cross for our sakes, a King whose only crown was made of thorns, whose only title was Beloved Son of God. And if that is the King we follow, then what is true for Jesus Christ must be true for us as well. We are called to see the people around us the way Christ sees them, the way Christ sees us – to stop seeking after crowns and wealth, honour and prestige, and learn to value ahead of everything else the title we have been given by our creator and King, the title we received at the moment of our baptism – we too are beloved children of God, that is the only identity that we carry that actually matters, that is the only crown that we wear that will endure when everything else in the universe has faded away. We are beloved children of God, and when we are secure in that knowledge, when we know that to be true, then we can learn to let everything else go, to allow ourselves to take the lower places and the less important paths so that others can be lifted up, so that others can have an opportunity to shine. Our lives are defined first and foremost by the way God sees us, and compared to that, nothing else matters. So we can let it all go: all the praise and condemnation of the world is meaningless compared with the voice of God that speaks into our lives and calls us to define our identity by who God knows us to be – beloved children of God, disciples of Jesus Christ. Today and every day, may we cast down every other crown and seek only to be

who Jesus Christ knows us to be. Today and every day, may Christ be pleased in all we say and do. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!