

(mis)Understanding Jesus (Part 3)

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back for a few minutes to Matthew chapter 3. In our morning services just now, we are doing a series that's got two titles. The main title is understanding Jesus and we are looking at some of the key moments in the Gospels in order to better understand who Jesus is and why he's come. But the other title is misunderstanding Jesus.

And we're, as we, what we're hoping to highlight with their second title is the fact that there's loads of ways in which Jesus has been misunderstood, both by people in his own time and by people today. And so we want to try and avoid the misunderstandings and we want to try and grow in our own understanding. I want to start by getting you to think about some of the biggest moments in history. When I talk about that, the pivotal events in the history of the world, what kind of stuff comes to mind? Maybe it's something very high profile and very often the biggest turning points in history are seen by everyone or by nearly everyone. You think of the first moon landing, the whole world was watching. You think of the first person to climb Mount Everest successfully. You think of the coronation of a king or a queen in history. These events change the course of the world and their very high profile.

But alongside these big events, it's important to recognize that many of the biggest turning points in history have happened in obscurity. A seemingly insignificant event can change the world. So let me give you some examples. 25 years ago there were two students in America, one was called Larry and the other was called Sergi and they invented a computer program called Backrub. And Backrub basically worked by using internet links to determine which websites were the most important. So that if you did a search using Backrub, the most popular and most important sites would be what would come up first. And this proved to be a very useful and very successful computer program and as I'm sure you've already guessed, they quickly changed the name from Backrub to Google. 250 years ago there was a chap called Edward Jenner. One day he grabbed a small boy and he inserted some pus that he had taken from a cow that was infected with cowpox and he put it into a cut into this wee boy's arm. As a result, that boy became immune to smallpox, one of the most deadly diseases at the time. And the first vaccine was invented. And I did not know this until a few days ago that the reason it's called a vaccine was because that's what Edward Jenner called it and he called it a vaccine because VACAP is the Latin word for cow. I did not know that until a few days ago. 500 years ago, a monk in Germany who hardly anyone knew whose name was Martin Luther put 95 discussion points on the door of a church and these were questioning some of the practices of the Roman Catholic Church at the time and it sparked the reformation. All of these events, if you'd seen them happen at the moment they took place, would have seemed pretty insignificant and yet all of them have changed history. 2000 years ago, a carpenter walked out into the wilderness of Judea to the Jordan River to be baptised by a preacher known as John the Baptist. At that moment, history changed forever.

And that's what we're going to think about today. As it says in Matthew 3:13, Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptised by him. This is a pivotal moment in world history and yet again it's really easy to misunderstand. And today I want to think about two ways in which it's been misunderstood and so our headings are our view of Jesus isn't high enough and our view of Jesus isn't low enough. These are two common misunderstandings and what I hope that we'll see is that all too often our view of Jesus is far too median. So first of all, our view of Jesus isn't high enough. If you'd been in the crowd at the Jordan River on the day that is described for us in Matthew chapter 3, if you'd been watching John and Jesus from a distance, I don't think you would have thought very much of it. Jesus would not have looked very different to anybody else.

[5 : 09] That's confirmed if you look in John's Gospel because there it tells us that John the Baptist had to point out Jesus to those who were with him. It wasn't, Jesus wasn't kind of glowing or shining

or anything like that as we might sometimes have depicted in artwork. So most people probably wouldn't have realised that that's something historic and pivotal was about to take place.

The only question he seems to have known something was John the Baptist. He knew there was something special about Jesus. He knew that his own role was to prepare the way for the one who was coming and as verse 11 says, he emphasized that the one who's coming after me is mightier than I am.

I'm not worried to carry his sandals. He's going to baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. John is the only one anywhere close to recognising that there's something special about Jesus.

For everyone else standing at the Jordan that day, it just looked a pretty normal day in many ways. Now at that point, I don't think that many of the people who were observing this event would have been opposing Jesus. That opposition didn't really begin until later in his ministry. Right now Jesus just looks like a faithful Jew. He's heard about John the Baptist and he wants to come and be baptised by this man who everyone's talking about, who's telling everyone about the importance of repentance and forgiveness. All of this means that at this moment the majority view would have been that Jesus was just pretty medium. He was like everyone else. And the same thing is repeated throughout history.

So yes, Jesus has had some very fierce opponents throughout history, but for so many people, the view of Jesus isn't particularly negative, it's just very medium. So over the years Jesus has been admired as a good teacher or as he's been praised because of his acts of kindness. He's been highlighted as a noble example for people to follow and I'm pretty sure that that in many places in the Western world is still the majority view. Often we can think today that the gospel faces huge opposition and that there are places where that's true, but I don't know about you, but I don't know many people who think that Jesus is awful. So people might deny that he worked miracles, people might be skeptical as to how accurate a gospel record like Matthew is, and most people probably don't believe that the resurrection actually happened, but they still think Jesus is okay.

[7 : 43] And even Islam would very much revere Jesus as a prophet. I'm sure that in Scotland and in Carlisleway that is the majority position. I do not know many Jesus haters. I'm sure that there's people who hardly think about him. There's many people who I'm sure are respectful and some might even admire him. The key point is that all of these viewpoints are far too medium. And the ironic thing is that medium is really the one option that you don't have when it comes to Jesus.

And some of you may have heard of Rabbi Duncan, Israeli name was John Duncan. He was a missionary and a professor in the free church about 160 years ago. And he's got a very famous, well, actually not a very, he's got a very, a sort of famous quotation. He's got a famous quotation because somebody else said it about 80 years later. C.S. Lewis made a similar argument, but as with all moments of genius in the 20th century, their roots are really in the free church.

John Rabbi Duncan said, Christ either deceived mankind by conscious fraud. He was himself deluded and self deceived. Or he was divine. There's no getting out of this trial. Now, what what Rabbi Duncan means there and what C.S. Lewis later emphasized in the last century was that if you look at the stuff that Jesus said, he was either off his head, deluded, or he was lying and deceiving people. Or he actually is the Son of God himself. In other words, medium is impossible. It makes no sense at all. But even for us as Christians, we can easily have a view of Jesus that's pretty medium. So on a Sunday, we might acknowledge that Jesus is our savior. But maybe through the rest of the week, we don't really think that much about the impact that that should have on our lives.

We might come in body to worship him today, but our minds can be elsewhere. We might pray to him, and yet often we're niggled by the thought that it probably won't make much difference.

And even for those of you who are maybe not yet a Christian or not sure where you stand before God, maybe you think yourself, well, I hope one day, you know, I'll become a Christian, but just not right now, all of these kind of thoughts are far too medium. They're all examples of when our view of Jesus is not high enough. So what should our view of Jesus be? Well, verses 16 and 17 tell us.

[10 : 44] These verses are crucial for showing us who Jesus really is. They're making a huge statement about his identity. And when you come to Jesus baptism, that word identity is a really important word to remember. Verse 16 tells us that the heavens were opened. Now that immediately makes this a pivotal moment in history. One of the challenges that we face and that people in the world around us face is that because the world is so beautifully balanced, because the world is sustained, you know, so magnificently in the providence of God, because everything keeps

going so well, we can so often forget that it's all part of something bigger. And we can jump to the conclusion that, you know, the world is all that it is, all that there is. And so it's a wee bit like being in a theater where, you know, you imagine everything on stage is so impressive and so captivating and so well ordered that you forget that behind the curtain is a writer and a director on whom the whole thing depends for its existence. It's exactly the same with the universe. It's so orderly, so impressive, so captivating that it's so easy to forget that beyond what we see right in front of us is a creator and sustainer on whom everything depends for its existence. But occasionally,

God opens the curtains for a brief moment. And this is one of those moments where heaven and earth, time and eternity, God and humanity all meet with the curtain opened. And it's reminding us that the whole universe is in the hands of God, our creator. All of time is just a moment in something bigger called eternity. And all of humanity is under the watching eye of God.

So Jesus comes up from his baptism, the heavens open, and two massive things happen. First thing is that the Holy Spirit descends on Jesus like a dove, as you can see there in verse 16. So the Holy Spirit comes to rest on him. In this moment, Jesus is being identified as God's chosen servant. And through the indwelling of the Spirit coming upon him, Jesus is being empowered to go and do all that needs that God needs him to do. That's why it's from this moment onwards that Jesus is able to perform miracles, cast out demons and do all the stuff that the Gospels record. He does all that in the power of the Holy Spirit. So that makes this a huge turning point. From this moment onwards, Jesus is about to become the most influential figure in all of history.

And the fact that it's a massive moment is confirmed by that tiny reword in verse 17, dove. The fact that the Holy Spirit descends like a dove. Now that dove, like so many things in these early chapters of the Gospels, is pointing us backwards. It's pointing us back to the Old Testament. The dove definitely points us back as far as Genesis 8 to the flood. When the floods are subsiding and Noah sends out a dove to find out if it's time to leave the ark. And it's, it's, the dove has a key role in this fresh start, a pivotal moment in history. But I think that the dove is actually pointing us back even further, even though you don't have the word dove in Genesis 1. It says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void and darkness was over the face of the deep and the spirit of God was what? Hovering over the face of the water. And that dove imagery, that hovering imagery, I think is all being linked together. The key point is that Genesis 1 and Genesis 8 were turning points in history. So is

Matthew chapter 3. Jesus is about to begin his ministry and as he does, God pulls back the curtains. He opens the heavens and God, the Holy Spirit himself, comes to rest on Jesus and a mighty work begins. The second massive thing that happens is that God speaks. And so I want us to recognize what's happening here. This is a pivotal moment in history. Heaven and earth and time and eternity are all colliding. This is the point when the Messiah's ministry is beginning. This is where the battle really starts. The waiting is over. The time has come. John is no longer going to say he's coming. John is going to say he's come. In many ways, this is the moment when the Old Testament becomes the New Testament. The turning point is taking place. This is where it all kicks off.

[15 : 45] It's what everyone has been waiting for. So at this pivotal moment, what does God, the Father, want us to know? Does he want us to know that the battle has begun, that victory is certain, that the devil is doomed, that God is almighty? All of that's true, but that's not what God wants to tell us. At this pivotal moment in history, God wants us to know that he loves his Son and that he's absolutely delighted with him.

And that tells us that our view of Jesus has got to be at that highest possible level. He's not some good teacher or some impressive leader or some noble example. He is the treasured, beautiful, beloved Son of God. In other words, to God the Father, Jesus is indescribably precious.

And that means that if you pull back the curtain of heaven, if you ask the question, you know, what's God really like? And you think, well, let's go and have a look. Let's pull back the curtain of heaven. Let's take all the layers off. Let's get down to the very core of who God is.

Let's get to the heart of the being and purpose of God. If you dig into God as far as you can find, as far as you can go, what are you going to find? You are going to find that at the foundation of all reality, at the core of the being of God himself, at the heart of the whole of Christian theology is a Father who utterly loves his Son. That is the foundation on which everything else is built. And the Holy Spirit Himself is the one who carries that love between the Father and the Son.

It is such a beautiful relationship. And this is where everything makes perfect sense. The Bible is telling us that you go to the very core of the being of God as the source of all reality. You go to the very heart of who God is, what do you find? You find that at the heart of who God is, is love.

[18:07] And then you go out to any part of the world. You walk up to any person, anywhere in the world, and you go up to them and say to them, is love important? They're all going to say, of course it is. It's the most important thing.

And that makes perfect sense because we bear the image of God. That's why you don't have to persuade anyone that love matters. It's at the core of who God is. It's at the core of who we are. And at this moment we are being reviewed. It's been shown to us just how much God the Father loves his precious Son. And if that's true, then a medium view of Jesus is blasphemy.

It's unthinkable. All too often, every view of Jesus is not high enough.

From this moment on, we are starting to see who Jesus really is. But at the same time, we're also being shown here what Jesus has come to do.

[19:28] And that brings us to our second misunderstanding. Our view of Jesus isn't low enough. Now that might sound like a strange thing to say to you, but you might be thinking, okay Thomas, what are you saying now? Especially after everything I've just said, I've said your view of Jesus can't be high enough and yet I'm saying your view of Jesus all too often isn't low enough. Well I hope that you see what I mean and I hope you'll see that it's a very easy mistake to make because John the Baptist made this mistake. In verse 14, when Jesus came to be baptized, John said, no, no, I need to be baptized by you and you're coming to me.

John knew that he wasn't worthy even to carry Jesus' sandals. And so in his mind, it's like there's no way it's appropriate for me to baptize Jesus. Now I just want to note incidentally there that this is one of the many moments in scripture where God's plans involve him coming to somebody and that person says there is no way that I'm worthy or capable of doing this and God says I know you're still doing it. And that's a policy that God has used throughout the whole of the building of his church.

The key point I want to notice just now though is that this in John the Baptist is an example of somebody whose view of Jesus wasn't low enough. Now when I say that I don't mean that you know we're looking down on Jesus in criticism, that's obviously not what I mean. What I mean is this, it's incredibly easy to think that Jesus would never stoop down to our level. And so many people fall into this misunderstanding. So we recognize that Jesus is remarkable and special and then we're immediately confronted by the fact that we don't match up.

And so if Jesus is here, we are absolutely down there. And we can so easily think that you know if we're going to meet Jesus then we need to get our act together. We need to work our way up at least if not to his same standard but at least closer than we are. And that manifests itself in so many ways. We can think that our prayers are rubbish and that there's no way God's going to bother listening.

We can look at other people and think that they are far more worthy and impressive than we are and that we just do not fall into that category. We can think that on the whole Jesus is just disappointed and rather fed up with us. We can even think that Jesus has given up on us.

That our chance is gone and that we're just too far gone now for him to reach us. It's so easy to think that Jesus has only come for the mediums. For the people who aren't as bad as you, but you're just not on that level yourself. And if you think like that, this is where it is absolutely crucial that we understand why Jesus came to John in order to be baptized by him.

[22:28] This can be a bit of a confusing question because as we've read in this passage, John preached a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. So John's basically said to people, if you want to repent of your sin, if you want to acknowledge your need of forgiveness, in other words, if you want to acknowledge the fact that you're broken, then come and be baptized. It's a baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Jesus needed neither. He had no sin to repent of, no sin to be forgiven for. So why did he come to be baptized? The reason he came to be baptized was because he was identifying himself with the people that he has come to save. And so these two words, when you come to the baptism of Jesus, have the word identity and have the word identifying in your mind. We're showing the identity of Jesus, the Son of God, but we're also seeing that he is identifying himself with the people that he's come to save. And this is a crucial aspect of how God's whole plan of salvation works. Jesus is not just above us. He's not come for us to look up to him. He's not even come to be near to us. He has come to be right alongside us. In fact, he has come to take our place. And there's a word that we use to describe that. We say that Jesus's work of

salvation is vicarious. Now, vicarious means in the place of another. So we often talk about aspects of salvation to say that Jesus's mission and his work was vicarious. He has come to receive this baptism of repentance and forgiveness of sins, because in doing so, he is making it absolutely clear that he has come to turn us back to God and to secure the forgiveness of sins that all of us so desperately, urgently need. He's come alongside us.

He's come to represent us. And that vicarious work of salvation is going to take him all the way to the cross, where he will die as our substitute in order to save us from our sins. And that's the work of salvation. It's going to fulfill all righteousness. And the public stage of that journey starts right here at his baptism. And all of that means that no matter how low you are, Jesus will meet you there.

And that is why so often our view of Jesus isn't low enough. We think that we need to improve for him to like us, or that he's only looking for the best kind of people, or that we're just never going to be good enough for him. If you ever think like that, then your view of Jesus is nowhere near low enough, because Jesus has not come as some medium religious snob who's just looking for the holy middle class. Jesus is the vicarious savior who will meet us at our lowest point. The people who went to John for baptism did so, because they realized that they were broken and that they needed forgiveness. Jesus joins them in baptism, because that's exactly the kind of people he's come to save. So these two misunderstandings are so easy to fall into. All too often our view of Jesus isn't high enough. All too often our view of Jesus isn't low enough. And I want you to think about these things, because it's absolutely crucial that we recognize these two misunderstandings and the implications of them.

If your view of Jesus isn't high enough, then you will end up thinking that you don't need to bother with him. If your view of Jesus isn't low enough, then you will think that he won't ever bother with you. Both of those conclusions are totally wrong. And both of them will take you to hell. And it's all reminding us that our view of Jesus must never ever be medium. We need to understand how high he is and how low he is. And this is what makes Jesus so amazing and so worth following. Because if you look up, if you look up to the very heights of theological truth, what do you see? You see the beloved Son of God in all his beauty and majesty and glory. And if you look down into the depths of all your failures and mistakes, what do you see? You see his open arms. They are ready to catch you and ready to bring you home. This moment then is a turning point in history.

After this baptism, Jesus began his ministry and the world was never the same again. It can be a turning point in your history too. If anyone's maybe not getting a Christian or not sure of where you stand before the Lord, do you ever look at your life and think to yourself, I'm so glad I've not become a Christian?

[28 : 50] Do you ever think like that? I know you don't think like that. And so if you don't think like that, then make today a turning point. Make today the day that you follow him. And so I want you to ask yourself, what is the next step for you? Jesus had to take the next step into baptism and then the next step beyond that into his temptation, into his public ministry and onwards. What's the next step for you? Is it to pray for the first time?

Who for the first time in years? Is that the next step for you? If it is, do it. Just pray and just talk to God, pour your heart out to him. Is it to take a step and to come along and join us in the middle of the week to pray together at our prayer meeting? Is that maybe that's something you thought of it for years, maybe you thought I'd love to come, but just do it. Go for it. Take that next step. Is it to profess your faith? Do it. Go for it. Take that next step.

And even if you're not sure, just talk to me. Tell me, talk to one of the elders, text me, whatever. I don't mind. Let's just talk about it. Is it to serve him and to become more involved? Is it to be a clearer witness in your life? Whatever it is, think to yourself, what is the next step that I should take and then take it with your eyes on Jesus? And if not, if you're like, well, no, I'm not going to go, why not? Why not? Is it because your view of Jesus isn't high enough?

Or is it because your view of Jesus isn't low enough? No. Whatever it is, the Son of God who reigns over every square inch of the universe has come right down to meet you today. And his hands are open for you right now.

Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we praise you as the one who is higher than any other, King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the beloved Son of God. And Lord Jesus, we praise you that you have come far lower than we ever dreamed. And we thank you that that's what you meet us.

[31 : 28] Please keep us from ever falling into the trap of our view of you being not being high enough or not being low enough. Amen.