

"To wash off the Not Human"

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There is a line in one of William Blake's [poems](#) that I remembered while studying Paul's words about baptism in Galatians. The apostle says that to be baptized is to be clothed in Christ. Blake writes this: "To bathe in the Waters of Life, to wash off the Not Human."

Is there a better definition for baptism than "to wash off the not human"? The old law separated Paul's Jewish readers from outsiders. Hiding behind the old law, the Jews felt a superiority as God's chosen. The law divided them from most of the human race. Yet Paul says that when we are clothed in Christ—when we are washed in the waters of baptism—a strange thing begins to happen. All the old categories, like Jew and Greek and slave and free and male and female, just fall away. To be baptized is to wash off the not human—all the walls that separate us from our brothers and sisters everywhere.

In the film [Tender Mercies](#), Robert Duvall plays an old cowboy who has lived a hard life. He's an alcoholic, can't keep a job and is estranged from his ex-wife and daughter. But he meets this woman who has a son of about 12. Slowly they take the cowboy in and begin to love him. They invite him to the tiny clapboard church where they worship, and he reluctantly goes.

One Sunday he and the boy join the church and are baptized. Driving home in his truck, the woman's son says to the cowboy, "So we got baptized."

"Yeah," the man says.

"Do you feel any different?" the boy asks.

"Nah," the cowboy replies, and they ride along in silence.

But he's wrong—the day is a turning point in his life. He dries out. He begins to reconcile with his estranged daughter and ex-wife. He opens up his heart and takes in this woman and her son. Paul would say that though baptism is not a magical rite,

its power can begin to change one's life in ways no law could ever do.