

FULFILLING ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 3:12-17

The Baptism of Our Lord (Series A)

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The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 3, verses 13 through 17. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 3, beginning at verse 13, we read in Jesus' name.

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. ¹⁴ John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented. ¹⁶ And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; ¹⁷ and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

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

God is righteous. What does this mean? And what does it mean for us?

First of all, what does this mean? God is righteous. This means that God is right, and he always does what is right. It means the same as to say, "God is just, and he always does what is just." There is no injustice in him. There is no evil in him. There is no deceit in him, neither in what he is, nor in what he does. He is right, and he always does what is right.

Now, what does this mean for us? And I don't mean a sharp contrast between these two questions. What it means for us is not so much different than what it means. But I simply mean, how does this objective truth impact us personally? How does God's righteousness affect us?

Our first reaction might be fear, or at least discomfort. Perhaps you notice this when you are in the presence of a very pious person. The way you speak and behave around your grandmother or your mother-in-law may be different than the way you speak and behave around your friends. Their presence might make you uncomfortable to be who you normally are. I observe this sometimes in the way people behave around me, not because I'm more righteous, but simply because I'm a pastor. A few years ago I was talking with a man on a construction crew. He asked me what I do for a living. And when I told him that I am a pastor, he just walked away. He didn't say anything; he just walked away. And it's not like he had to get back to work. He just went and stood around doing nothing in a different spot, far away from me. I don't really know why he did that, because he did not say anything. I suppose he either hates pastors, or he was uncomfortable. Perhaps he assumed that I am either a very bad person, and he wanted nothing to do with me, or he assumed that I am a very righteous person, and it made him uncomfortable. This second one, by the way, is a wrong assumption. But we assume this about certain persons, like a pastor, or our grandmothers. And it changes the way we behave. I notice this sometimes when one of you accidentally uses one of those words that you think you're not supposed to say around the pastor, and you get a little embarrassed. And I remember that who you present yourself to be might not be very consistent with who you really are. But I do the same thing. When we are in the presence

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of someone we think is more righteous than us, it makes us uncomfortable to be who we normally are.

We do this because we are wrong, and we know that we are wrong, and somewhere in our consciences, we know that the greatest threat to the wrong is the right, just like the greatest threat to darkness is light. So when we talk about the righteousness of God, our first reaction might be fear, or at least discomfort. The righteousness of God feels like a threat to our existence.

There are a few places in the gospels where we see this reaction to Jesus. Perhaps the clearest and most profound is when Peter realized that Jesus is God. Jesus was out with Peter in his fishing boat, and he directed him to a miraculously large catch of fish. And while Peter's partners were trying to deal with all the fish, Peter felt a weightier problem. That problem was God, with all his righteousness, in his boat. It felt like a threat to his existence, but he couldn't just turn and walk away, because he was in a boat, so he fell down at Jesus' feet and said, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). This is revealing. When Peter learned that Jesus is God, his first prayer was, "Go away." Why? Because God is righteous, and we are sinful. And the greatest threat to the wrong is the right.

And this is true. The greatest threat to unrighteousness is righteousness. The greatest threat evil is good. The greatest threat to darkness is light. And the greatest threat to our sinfulness is God's righteousness. But this is not a threat we should fear. This is a threat we should crave, because this threat is our salvation.

So let's think a little more about God's righteousness. God is right, and he always does what is right. But God's righteousness extends beyond just his personality. He wills that those around him should be righteous too. And this is right. Would it be right for God to be so righteous, but then also be content with everything around him being wrong? Of course not. If you are able to do something about the wrong around you, it is not right to leave it in its wrongness. So, in his righteousness, God takes action against all unrighteousness and for all righteousness. This is where we start to feel threatened, because we know that we are wrong. But we should really crave this instead, because God does not exercise his righteousness to destroy us, but to justify us. Think about this with me: if you love righteousness, which is better, to destroy everything that is unrighteous, or to justify the unrighteous. If God destroys everything that is unrighteous, then he's just left with himself and the angels as the only righteous beings. But if, instead, he justifies the ungodly, then he also has a righteous people that he has redeemed. And this is far more righteous. So we should not think of God's righteousness as a threat to us. Rather, we should think of his righteousness as a threat to our sin, but which also brings his righteousness to us. Saving the unrighteous is far more righteous than merely destroying the unrighteous.

I'll give you an example that, I hope, will show this to be true. Consider the way a parent deals with a naughty child, or at least the way a parent should deal with a naughty child. Parents are, of course, concerned with righteousness in their homes. There are rules, and violations of those rules must be dealt with. But a parent is not merely concerned with handing out just punishments for the various offenses. A parent is also concerned with restoring a child who sins. The parent is really the one who carries the burden for dealing with the sin. Parents restore the naughty child. They bring that child back into a right relationship with their brothers or sisters. The parents bring that child back into a right relationship with themselves. This is how they establish and maintain a righteous home. The home is not made righteous by expelling the naughty child, but by restoring the naughty child. Expelling naughty children would only make it an empty home, and an empty home is not a righteous home. The righteous home is achieved by restoring the naughty children, and the burden for this justification lies on the parents, not the

children. It lies on the parents, because they are the ones with the ability and the authority to do this. The children cannot do it, so if the parents love righteousness, they must enact righteousness.

Now think of this on a grander scale with God. Compared to him, parents are unrighteous and quite weak. So God's enactment of righteousness is much greater. God came down in human flesh to deal with all sin, in order to justify all mankind (Rom. 5:18). If God dealt with our unrighteousness simply by destroying all of us, he would be keeping all his righteousness to himself. God likes to share his righteousness, and this is more righteous than keeping it all to himself. So he deals with our unrighteousness by justifying us. God's righteousness means that he is right, he does right, and he makes right. Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness.

And this is why Jesus was baptized. Jesus said to John, **“Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness”** (3:15).

This text is a continuation of last week's gospel lesson. One of the things we talked about last week is how Jesus followed a prophetic pattern that had been set by Israel in the Old Testament, especially during the Exodus from Egypt. We start to see the pattern when Joseph, the guardian of Jesus, takes Mary and Jesus to Egypt in order to escape the murderous reach of the evil and paranoid King Herod. And Matthew said this took place “to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet [Hosea], ‘Out of Egypt I called my son’ ” (2:15; Hos. 11:1). The interesting thing is that in Hosea, the LORD is speaking of the people of Israel, who fled to Egypt during a famine. There, in Egypt, they grew into a great nation. And then God brought them out of Egypt and led them back to the land of Canaan. This is the event Hosea was talking about when the LORD says, “Out of Egypt I called my son.” But the people of Israel were rebellious, so in Hosea, the LORD goes on to complain about how his son, Israel was rebellious. But Matthew takes this passage from Hosea, and he applies it to the true Son of God, Jesus Christ. So he sets up this prophetic pattern between Israel and Jesus. The pattern continues in this gospel lesson. The Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River parallels Israel crossing the Red Sea. And then the pattern becomes most clear immediately after Jesus' Baptism, when he goes out into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days. This parallels the forty years Israel spent in the wilderness after crossing the Red Sea, but before God led them into the land of Canaan. During Jesus' forty days in the wilderness, he endured three specific temptations from the devil. And all three of those temptations parallel temptations Israel faced, but failed, during their forty years in the wilderness. But Jesus succeeds brilliantly. He even resists each temptation by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, which Moses wrote in that wilderness.

So there is this pattern between Israel and Jesus. But the key distinction is that Jesus succeeds where Israel failed. We see from this that Jesus came to stand in the place of Israel and to “fulfill all righteousness” in their place. And so he is also the light to the nations that Israel was called to be, but never lived up to. And during Jesus' Baptism, the Father drives this point home when he says, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (3:17).

The curious thing about Jesus' Baptism is why he was baptized in the first place. The basic problem is that Baptism is for sinners, but Jesus is not a sinner.

Earlier in this chapter, people from all over were coming to John, “And they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins” (3:6). And we learn from Mark's and Luke's gospels that John proclaimed “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3). And there are still more passages in Scripture about Baptism forgiving sins, or

washing us, or saving us (e.g., Acts 2:38; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21). But even if we limit our focus to John's Baptism and what he taught concerning Baptism, we see quite clearly that Baptism is for sinners, because it works repentance and forgiveness of sins.

So we can understand why John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized. We can understand why he said, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" (3:14). John knew what Baptism does. He knew who it's for. He also knew who Jesus was. Jesus needed no repentance, and he needed no forgiveness. Jesus is the one of whom John said, "He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry" (3:11). And John also said of Jesus, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus can't take away the sin of the world if he is also a sinner. So John would have prevented Jesus from being baptized.

But Jesus said something to John, and this convinced John to go along with it: **"Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting to fulfill all righteousness."** And so we come back to that thing about the righteousness of God that we were talking about earlier. God's righteousness is not that he keeps himself separate from sinners. It is not that he pushes all unrighteousness away from him. Instead, he draws near to unrighteousness, like light drawing near to darkness in order to turn the darkness to light. And so Jesus comes down into Baptism in order to identify with sinners. He does not keep his distance from you and me, but he comes down and joins us. He identifies with us. We saw this, of course, at Christmas, when Jesus came down in human flesh to us. But it's not merely with our human flesh that he identifies. But he also identifies with our sin. He took his place in the muddy Jordan River because he came to stand in the place of sinners.

Now, if we're a little bit taken aback by Jesus being baptized, even though he wasn't a sinner, this scandal becomes much worse. Because, what else did Jesus do that is only supposed to be for sinners? He died! We die because we are sinners. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Every sinner dies, and we die precisely because we are sinners. If we were not sinful, we would not die. But Jesus died. This is supposed to be only for sinners. His death proved, or so it seemed, that he was a sinner. And it wasn't a normal kind of death either, but it was a criminal's execution. This proved, or again, so it seemed, that he was not merely a sinner, but he was the worst kind of sinner. And he was laid in a tomb. He was buried. This is the final place for all sinners. We are sinners; therefore, we die and return to the dust. And if we didn't know better, we would think that all of this proves that Jesus was also a sinner. All of this would seem to prove that Jesus was very unrighteous.

But the exact opposite is true. Instead of being unrighteous, he was fulfilling all righteousness. He did all of this willingly, for our sake, in order to fulfill all righteousness for us. This was proven on the third day when he rose again from the dead.

So why does Jesus die? Is it because he's a sinner? And why is the cross his path to death? Is it because he is the worst kind of sinner? No. It's because he identifies with our sin. He takes it into his own body. Jesus goes to all the places ordained for sinners. He goes to John for Baptism. He goes to the cross. He goes to the grave. And he does all of this to save us. He identifies with us, he takes up his lot with us, so that he might save us. This is the purpose of his Baptism.

And then the purpose of our Baptism is that we would be joined to him. Just as he came and identified with us, so he has also instituted Baptism as a means for us to identify with him. And not just to identify with him, but to be joined to him in his death and resurrection. This is what we heard in the epistle lesson from Romans 6:

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“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. ... For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” (Rom. 6:3-5)

This is how Baptism saves. It's not our work; it's God's work. It's not our act of obedience; it's God's means of bringing the righteous salvation of Jesus Christ to us. It's not just water. And the water is not endowed with some magical quality to forgive our sins. The water does nothing on its own. But, when connected with the words Jesus prescribed, it joins us to Christ in his death and resurrection. This is how it saves. It joins us to Jesus and his cross.

Jesus came to John. He insisted on walking down into the muddy waters of the Jordan River. He insisted on standing in the place of sinners. He went to Jerusalem and the cross. He hung in the place of sinners. And he went to the grave. He was determined to be laid to rest in the place of sinners. He identified with us and went to all the places ordained for sinners. He did this so that he might also bring us to all the places ordained for the righteous Son of God. He makes his resurrection our place. He makes his Father's house our place. He identifies with us, in order to take us up into himself. In this way, he fulfills all righteousness. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.