

Jesus' Baptism Fulfills All Righteousness

Matthew 3:13-17 (NIV84)

¹³ Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. ¹⁴ But John tried to deter him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" ¹⁵ Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented. ¹⁶ As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. ¹⁷ And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased."

How often do you think about baptism? We have the baptismal font up here in the front of church specifically to make you think about it and to remind you about what happened here for you. But God's people have not always had the sacrament of baptism. In the past, there were plenty of times when water was used to purify someone, particularly in their worship. This washing with water became even more prominent just before John came baptizing. In order for a non-Jew to convert to the Jewish faith, they washed people to convert them.

Then John came along. He received a direct revelation from God to go and baptize with water. He was preaching the message of "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." People from all over came to John to hear his message. It cut them to the heart. They confessed their sins to John. They were baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

Yet there were others who came who were standing on the sidelines. These were the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They were not cut to the heart, or if they were they weren't showing it. They were not participating in the baptism offered by John. They felt pretty confident that they were accepted by God because of their lineage as Jews, children of Father Abraham. John dug into them with his preaching, telling them that they needed to produce fruit in keeping with repentance, that the ax is already at the root of the tree, and that every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

If you were down at the Jordan River back at about 30 A.D., which group of people would you be with? How confident are you of your righteousness? Where is your confidence of your righteousness placed? Is it in what you have done? Have you balanced the scales out more to the good things you have done in life over the bad things? Is it based on your family, your membership at this church, that you are a member in good standing so God must be happy with you and your life.

None of those things meet the measurement that God has laid down for us. His bar is perfection and nothing less. A good ol' college try will not make you acceptable before him. A scale seemingly tipping to more good that you have done in life rather than bad will not impress God. Your pedigree, your heritage, your membership at a church - none of these things will make you righteous before God. God is not pleased with me or you based on anything we do or have done.

What you realize examining yourself to God's standard for righteousness before him is the same realization John himself had when "Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to be baptized by John. But John tried to deter him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'" (verse 13-14) John knew Jesus; they were related. John knew enough of Jesus to say, "I need to be baptized by you!" Jesus, you don't have any sins. You are actually righteous. I'm a sinner. I am not righteous. I am not God-pleasing. We are all sinners here except for you. You don't need the forgiveness of sins; you're perfect! Besides, if anyone should be baptized it should be me by you, the Righteous One.

Did you feel that way when you were baptized? Some of us were baptized as adults, and I'm sure, then, that you remember that day and the person who baptized you. Others of us were baptized as children, babies, infants. The only way I know that I was baptized is because there's photographic evidence and my Mom told me. Looking back on that photo as an adult, I know what my thoughts are now of that pastor who baptized me. I look at him and there is part of me that says, "He is more righteous than me." In fact, the pastor who baptized me went on to be one of our Synod presidents. Definitely more righteous than me. Probably a better pastor too.

How about for you? If you have photos of your baptism, or a video, or just your memories, did you come up to that baptismal font and think that this guy baptizing me, he's a righteous dude, that he's a holy man about to do a holy act? Even among other sinners we have a keen awareness of our lack of righteousness. We would all side with John that the more righteous person should do the baptizing. If Jesus was my pastor, he should baptize me; I should not be considered to baptize him. We too probably would have

tried to deter Jesus from being baptized by us as John did. We simply aren't righteous enough to do that for Jesus. Why, then, was Jesus, the Righteous One, being baptized by a sinful man like John? Wouldn't it make more sense that the holy guy do the baptizing instead of us who lack righteousness, that we could do better in that department?

Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." (verse 15) Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, to do everything right. This is what God the Father wanted his Son to do on his mission to save all humanity. He needed to be the righteousness that we are not, the righteousness that we are keenly aware that we do not possess. Part of this mission was to actively keep all of God's commands, to do everything right every second of every day of every year of his life. He actively lived according to God's law and was righteous before God because he did everything right.

But there is another obedience that was part of Jesus' mission to fulfill all righteousness. He also had to have things done to him. Passively, Jesus accomplished his mission to fulfill all righteousness as Mary and Joseph gave him the name Jesus, that he was born in Bethlehem, that he was circumcised on the 8th day according to God's law. Now he was being baptized by a sinful man because it would be one more thing that would go to complete his mission to fulfill all righteousness.

John saw firsthand that passive accomplishment of righteousness right after he consented and then baptized Jesus. "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'" (verses 16-17) God the Father was pleased with God the Son and his mission. The Holy Spirit came in the form of a dove, a symbol of peace, to drive the point home. This was God the Father and God the Holy Spirit giving one big stamp of approval to Jesus' work to fulfill all righteousness. Everyone there saw this. There was no doubt that God approved of the Son's mission.

At my baptism - and I'm assuming yours as well - the heavens did not open. I did not see the Holy Spirit descending on me like a dove and lighting. And I did not hear the voice of God the Father booming out, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (verse 17) I was not worthy of those words. I did not come with righteousness before God.

Instead God did an amazing thing for me and you at our baptisms. Even though we did not have any righteousness before God, Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness for us. He actively and passively did God's will throughout his whole life. God approved of what Jesus did. We see it so clearly here at his baptism. That means that although heaven did not rend open at our baptisms, it was opened to us in a different way. In our baptism, we were clothed with the righteousness of Christ. Then heaven was opened to us because we were now clothed with Christ's perfection. Eternal life was given to us as our inheritance, even while we still live here on earth. Being clothed with the righteousness of Christ by our baptisms, what God said at Jesus' baptism applies to us. We are God's children. He has adopted us into his holy family. He loves us because he loved Jesus and Jesus fulfilled all righteousness. Now God says of us too, "With you I am well pleased" because Jesus fulfilled all righteousness for us. This is why we keep the baptism font up here, so that you can look at it and remember what happened to you by your baptism.

By Christ being baptized, he was marching forward in his mission to fulfill all righteousness for all the people of the earth and to reveal himself as the Savior of the world. God gave us baptism to wash us clean and present to us the robes of Christ's righteousness. We are holy before the Lord, not because of a righteousness of our own, but because he gave his righteousness to us. Because of Christ's righteousness given to us by baptism God says of us, "You are my child, whom I love; with you I am well pleased." Let that be the message you remember every time you see the baptism font us here, every time you remember your baptism. Amen.