

FULFILLING ALL RIGHTEOUSNESS

Matthew 3:13-17

Today we celebrate the Baptism of Jesus. In Titus 3, as we might remember from the Catechism, we are told:

God saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior.

The “washing of regeneration and renewal by the Holy Spirit” is baptism. But Jesus was not lost in sin as we were. He did not need the gift of new life and faith. In fact, when Jesus comes to the Jordan River where John the Baptist is, the baptisms John has been doing is not a baptism for new life, but a baptism of repentance. It is being given to people who already have the faith of the Old Testament. The baptism moves people to repent, to turn around from evil ways. Jesus has no evil ways to turn from, no need for repentance. That is why John is shocked when Jesus comes and asks to be baptized. He replies to Jesus, “I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?”

Jesus answers, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness.”

What does Jesus mean by this? How does this “fulfill all righteousness.”

We have been given a great gift from God by all the people throughout the centuries who have studied the Scriptures and helped us to understand them. Yes, there are many who twist the truth of Scriptures, but if we look as those who let Scripture speak for itself and do good scholarship, not to get an advanced degree or to sell books, then they can really help us. One of those people is Dr. Jeff Gibbs, a retired professor at our seminary in St. Louis who became quite an expert on Matthew’s Gospel. I went to school before his time, but I am blessed that Pastor Dave did and shared with me the three volumes of Gibbs’ commentary on Matthew. As we look at what Gibbs says about the story of Jesus’ baptism from Matthew 3, we see how great it is for us that Jesus was baptized.

Jesus tells John that they should “allow” this to happen, that is Jesus’ baptism by John. This is a concession; it shows Jesus in His humiliation, Jesus, who as God could determine anything, is giving up control to allow Him to receive what is happening. And what is happening? The sinless Son of God is bearing the sins of the world. The innocent are in the process of being condemned and punished for your sins and mine.

Jesus says this baptism is to occur “at this time.” Jesus is affirming the importance— “at this time”—of John’s ministry. He is preparing for what He will do on the last day, but “at this time” is very key to that. But by having to say this, Jesus shows John’s misunderstanding of

how Jesus is saving the world by His humiliation as sin-bearer. John doesn't realize that what Jesus will have to do is suffer on the cross to bring that about.

Jesus says that it is fitting "for us" to go ahead with the baptism. This is in what is called the "dative," which means this is not what they are determining to do, but what is the will of God the Father. "Us" shows that the Father has chosen both Jesus and John for this.

Jesus says being baptized by John is "fitting." Fitting for what? For "all righteousness." "Righteousness" can mean so much, but at the core of it is the One who determines what is righteous—God Almighty. And righteousness is not some vague concept; it is God in action as Psalm 71:19 tells us, "Your righteousness, God, reaches to the heavens, You who have done great things." God's greatest deed is seen in His Son, Christ Jesus, who has come to fulfill God's plan of saving us.

"Fulfill" is to participate in the divine plan. Matthew's Gospel, written to Jews and to those very familiar with the Old Testament, puts special emphasis on how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament. In the Old Testament God's plan is seen to work through His people Israel. But now Jesus is taking on the role of Israel, to be God's means to save the world.

All of this is enough to show us that Jesus is the one to fulfill all righteousness. Yet, God gives us more. The heavens open wide, the Holy Spirit comes on Jesus in the form of a dove, and the Father proclaims, "This My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

What we see in this is how thoroughly and carefully God worked our salvation in Christ Jesus. Almost 40 years ago many witnessed on live television the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger which killed all seven crew members. The crash was caused by the failure of the primary and secondary O-ring seals in a joint in the right space shuttle solid rocket booster due to lower temperatures than normal. It was a very minor detail, but it led to disaster. But God left nothing to chance. He made all that happened in Jesus to bring about our complete restoration to Him.

And note how He did it. As God almighty we might expect Him to use His power and might to accomplish that. It is the way we like things to get done. Our military likes to use overwhelming force, "shock and awe" to completely and quickly demoralize our enemies. We like to take a pill or get an injection to relieve our ills in minutes. We want the repairman to come quickly and get our heat going again in an hour. We want our coffee to be brewed in seconds. We want to spend a few minutes on a computer and make a complex task simple. In that kind of thinking we'd expect an almighty God to snap His fingers, and the problems go away.

But God did not choose to do it that way. He could by His might remove all the sin in us, but it would be by force. It would result in either our complete destruction or turning us into obedient puppets or robots. We would obey God but never love Him. No, we could truly never receive His love.

Instead, God the Father sent His Son into this world to save us by humiliation and sacrifice. It is not what John expected. Later he wondered about Jesus when Jesus did not bring about the revolution that Jesus' followers were expecting would happen. John had talked about how Jesus would bring "a winnowing fork to thrash the people" and divide the good from the evil. They did not see that as the angel told both Mary and Joseph how to name God's Son. His name would be "Jesus." Why? Because he would save God's people "from their sins." That would happen by His sacrifice on the cross.

Jesus fulfilled all righteousness, but it happened in a way contrary to what people thought. God continues to do that in our lives today. So many things that happen seem to show that God has it all wrong or that He doesn't care. While the news is dominated by struggles in Ukraine and Gaza, many more people are killed by violence in African countries like Sudan, South Sudan, and Congo. Our technological answers to problems create new problems. We have the medical knowledge to provide so much, but how do we pay for it?

In the midst of that we look to Jesus' baptism, when He took on the public ministry of becoming the sacrifice for our sins. That leads us to the cross where we see Him fulfilling righteousness with the words, "It is finished." And we look into the open tomb and know indeed, in Jesus "It has been fulfilled."