

To Fulfill All Righteousness

In the name of the beloved Son, with whom the Father is well pleased, dear friends in Christ: John most emphatically did not want to baptize Jesus. He is the one of whom John said, "I am not worthy to loosen his sandals". That is to say, I am not fit to perform even the lowliest task for him. He's holy and perfect and good; and I am but a miserable sinner. That's why John said, "It's not right for me to baptize you; I need to be baptized *by* you.

Besides, in John's mind it didn't make any sense at all that Jesus would even *want* to be baptized. John's baptism was for sinners. John preached fiery sermons that warned people to flee from the wrath of God to be revealed when he comes in judgment; flee it by confessing one's offenses, repenting of them with contrite tears, and as John had been instructed by a prophetic Word from God himself, by joining the baptizer in the Jordan River and receiving from him the merciful, sin-cleansing washing away of guilt and shame.

This baptism was something new that the Lord had given John to do. Prior to his ministry, there was no command of God to baptize anyone. No, the way a person became an heir of the covenant of God's grace was to be born into it; born specifically after having been conceived of a father who was a circumcised Israelite and therefore part of the covenant that God gave to Abraham and to his offspring after him. You didn't choose to become part of this covenant any more than you got to choose who your father is. Or, to say it another way, God chose you to become part of the covenant in the moment he created you. *He made you* part of his chosen people Israel.

And that was well and fine for those who were fortunate enough to be born sons and daughters of Israel. But what about the rest of humanity, those who weren't born Israelites, those whom God's people looked down upon with loathing and called "Gentile dogs"? What if one of them were exposed to the truth of God's Word and by his grace became a believer? What if he or she gave up their idols and their false religion and wanted to worship the one true God of Israel? There are plenty of Scriptural examples of this happening: Rahab the harlot in the time of Joshua, Naaman the Syrian in the time of Elisha, Cornelius the centurion in the early days of the Christian era, to name but a few. And there are doubtless hundreds or thousands more cases that aren't recorded for us. What about them?

That's who baptism was for. Following the example of ritual cleansings that the Lord had commanded to consecrate the priests who served at his temple, God's people "borrowed the idea", so to speak, and applied it Gentiles who wanted to unite themselves to Israel and so become one of God's chosen people. Baptism became the ritual of initiation, marking the symbolic rebirth of a person who was born a Gentile but who by washing and confession of faith now became an Israelite.

John, in his ministry, co-opted the procedure and applied it to people who were born Israelites – which was a pretty bold move to make in that it was meant to be offensive and humiliating. What an Israelite who was baptized by John was saying is that even though I was born one of God's chosen people, a child of the covenant, I have not been living that way. Like Esau, who sold his great birthright for a cheap meal, I have sold out to sin and to carnal pleasures. I have forsaken the Lord God and served the idols of this world. I am not fit to be called a child of God. I am no better than the godless Gentiles who in my pride I have looked

down upon with disdain. Therefore treat me as one of them. Do for me what you do for them when they come to their senses and want to be incorporated into the covenant of God's grace.

Understanding this about John's baptism, we see all the more why John was reluctant to baptize Jesus. He rightly saw that Jesus didn't deserve that kind of humiliation. He had no sins to confess. If anyone in the world had a right to be called a perfect child of God and a true son of the covenant, it was Jesus. Jesus, John thought, this baptism doesn't make sense for you.

But Jesus sees things differently. He gently corrects John: "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill *all* righteousness." This statement is often misunderstood. Many take it to mean that since God requires baptism, Jesus had to be baptized in order to fulfill the requirements of the law. But we've already seen that baptism was not a requirement for anyone born one of God's people. It wasn't even a divinely commanded requirement for Gentiles. It was a ritual they came up with on their own; a useful ritual to be sure, but God didn't command it before Christ founded his Church. So, in what way does Jesus being baptized fulfill all righteousness?

Good question. The answer is that it doesn't fulfill *his* righteousness. Jesus isn't baptized in order to keep a command. He is righteous. He doesn't need to be cleansed. But we do. Jesus isn't baptized to fulfill his righteousness; he is baptized to fulfill *ours*. What we see here is the great exchange taking place. Sinners go into the water to wash away their sins and so become righteous in the sight of God. Jesus goes into the water to take those sins on himself and to put his righteousness that covers sinners in the water. John did not understand this at first; but later, after the baptism of Jesus, he did – as we hear him say when he points to Jesus and says, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." John understood that by his baptism Jesus became the bearer of all our sins.

And that, as we heard, is what his heavenly Father finds so pleasing. It's not just that Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life; but it is at the moment that he identifies himself as the bearer of our sins that the Father looks down from above and says, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." It's was for this purpose that the Father sent his Son into the world. That Jesus takes the burden on himself willingly, knowing what is to come – how the Father will later pour out the fullness of his wrath against all the accumulated sins of mankind on him and him alone – in this perfect act of sacrificial love the Father takes great delight.

Thus in his baptism and in his death for our sins on the cross – what he called his second baptism – he fulfilled for us all righteousness. More than that, he took what had been up until that time a merely symbolic cleansing and made it something real and powerful. Jesus entered into baptism, but he didn't leave it. He is still there. And now when one of us enters baptism, we enter into Christ. We transfer to him our sin and we enter into his righteous life; his whole life, as Paul explains in today's Epistle, to include his death for sin, his burial in the tomb, and his resurrection to new and everlasting life. All this is ours in Christian baptism by which we died to sin that we might live like Christ in sacrificial love for God and for one another. And in this our Father is very well pleased. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!