

To Fulfill All Righteousness  
Matthew 3:1-17

“It doesn’t make any sense.” That’s probably what the Roman soldiers thought as they saw all those people from Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside trooping down to the Jordan River. I mean, why would anyone want to take a bath down there in such a big crowd of people? Everyone who was anyone went to a proper bathhouse, for goodness’ sake.

And what could those deplorable people possibly hope to gain from listening to the ravings of a man like John? He wore such coarse clothes. He scrounged in the desert for his food. He had no social standing, no influence with anyone who mattered. And in the days when Caesar ruled the world, influence with Caesar was all that mattered.

You know, many powerful people are just as dismissive of Christian gatherings today. After all, some of the same governors and mayors that have actively discouraged church attendance, for fear of spreading sickness, have been just as enthusiastic in endorsing mass protests in our streets. And just on Friday, the Supreme Court upheld the right of the state of Nevada to limit religious gatherings to 50 worshippers, even while allowing casinos and indoor amusement parks to operate at 50% capacity.

And for those who place their faith in the state to solve all their problems, such worldly priorities are only natural. After all, marches and riots are an attempt to get the government to change its policies – and what the government does is all that matters to them. To devotees of the state, movie theaters, restaurants and bars are supporting the public treasury with their taxes, while the public worship of God in tax-exempt congregations of any kind, well, that’s simply an unnecessary risk, an optional luxury.

Of course, John had a different point of view, one that was focused on God. In fact, that was the essence of his preaching – that the Kingdom of Heaven was coming. It’s no wonder that he didn’t care about currying favor with the Romans – his primary allegiance was to a much higher king than Caesar. John insisted that the coming King would be much mightier than any human being could hope to be. For the King of Kings would come in the divine power of the Holy Spirit.

And when Jesus showed up on the banks of the Jordan River, John saw the fulfillment of everything he had been preaching. For he saw the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descending on Jesus in the form of a dove. And he heard a voice from heaven, declaring, “This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I am well pleased.” What merely human ruler could ever claim such an authoritative endorsement? In fact, what political system could command such power and might?

And if all that’s true, if Jesus really is the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, if He really does reign with the Holy Spirit and the Father forever and ever, if all power in Heaven and on Earth really has been given into His hands, well then gathering in His presence in public worship, coming together to appeal to Him is in fact the most practical, the most reasonable way to deal with all our problems, isn’t it?

For think about it. If you’re really worried about race hatred, why protest in the streets, trying to get the attention of merely human officials, begging them to shift a few dollars here and there in their city and state budgets? Why not instead gather at the footstool of the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords? After all, He’s the only One Who has the power to change human hearts, the only One Who can replace hatred with love. For the only One Who can bring true justice to the world is the One described in Psalm 97, the One Whose throne is founded on justice.

Yes, the only One Who can purge society of wickedness in the way the protesters desire is the One Who sends forth fire and burns up all His enemies, including the greed, hatred and envy hidden deep within human hearts. And that's the sort of judgment John said that Jesus would render one day, gathering and protecting His wheat even while He burns up the useless chaff with unquenchable fire.

Oh, yes, on the day that Jesus returns to judge the world, all those who serve graven images, all those who place their faith in anything made by man, from gold and silver statues to political power or racial purity, will be ashamed. For on that day Jesus will be exalted above all the gods of the earth, all the rulers and systems and programs in which we have been tempted to place our faith. On that day, all Caesar's pride and pretense will be swept away, along with all those who have trusted in him.

But it wasn't just the proud Roman soldiers who wondered why in the world those crowds would bother to go down to the Jordan to see John the Baptist. The Sadducees probably had a similarly disdainful reaction. After all, they prided themselves on carefully observing all the ceremonies prescribed by the Law of Moses. And they knew good and well that going down to the Jordan to be baptized wasn't any part of any of those feasts or festivals – the important thing was to go up to the Temple, the place where they were in charge.

And the Pharisees wouldn't have been any more impressed. Oh, sure, because they thought they knew everything there was to know about God's Law, they understood that certain cleansing rituals were required for all sorts of reasons. They knew, for example, that it was necessary to wash when you had lost blood or bodily fluids, or when you had touched an unclean animal. And by John's time, they had prescribed even more personal cleansing rituals than the Law of Moses did, such as requiring people to wash their hands before meals. But none of their elaborate rules or rituals included the sort of baptism to which John was calling everyone.

So, because of all the rules they followed, and because of all the ceremonies they observed, neither the Pharisees nor the Sadducees thought they needed to come to John to be washed one more time. For they had convinced themselves that all their outward obedience to God would make them acceptable in His sight, and thus that they would be glad at His coming, just as Psalm 97 says.

So, what about us? We oh-so-respectable Presbyterians might be tempted to follow their smug example. After all, like our Scots ancestors who rebelled against the crown, we tend to be as skeptical of the government's promises as we are loath to follow its directions – no Caesar worshippers here. But at the same time, we are not active lawbreakers. We tend to avoid the sorts of spectacular sins that would get our pictures plastered on post office walls or our names included in police roundups.

Moreover, don't we also tend to be proud that we are members of the church, that we come to worship when we can, or that we give our time, talent, or treasure to support Christian ministry and mission? Oh, sure, we might need a little spiritual touching up here and there, but compared to all those riotous ruffians burning police stations and attacking Federal Courthouses we're pretty sure we are pretty good people when you get right down to it.

But that's not at all what John taught. After all, in verse 2, he called everyone to repent, to turn away from their sins. And remember, he was talking to Jews, people who already believed in God, who as children of Abraham already considered themselves part of God's covenant family. Moreover, when he looked at the Pharisees and Sadducees, those who went the extra mile to try to follow God's law to the letter, he said they were nothing more than a bunch of snakes. He said their self-righteousness actually put them lower on the spiritual ladder than the rest of the Jewish people.

But here's something even more shocking. For when Jesus showed up at the Jordan, and when John recognized that Jesus was in fact the promised Messiah, John confessed his own need of baptism.

For even though John was a true prophet of the One True God, when he stood in the presence of Christ, the One Who is perfectly holy and righteous, John's own sins became painfully obvious to him. Standing next to Jesus, John knew his own need to be washed clean of his sins.

So, could our need be any less great than John's? After all, he had given up all physical comfort to devote himself to his ministry, wearing the simplest, most durable thing he could find, regardless of how scratchy or smelly it might have been. He had sacrificed any claim to financial prosperity, eating bugs and raiding wild beehives to keep himself alive. You can't be any more devoted to God, you can't be any more sold out for God than John was. And yet John knew he wasn't good enough. John knew he needed Jesus to wash him clean of his sins. So, how much more do all of us?

But why did Jesus need to be baptized? After all, as the Father made clear, He was already the beloved Son of God. He was already completely pure and sinless – in fact, He was the only person who ever lived who didn't need to be cleansed of sin. Moreover, in verse 16, when Jesus was anointed with the power of the Holy Spirit, He experienced the greater reality to which John said that his baptism pointed. So, why did Jesus insist that John baptize Him with water?

Well, what reason did He give? A reason that should fill all of us with the greatest comfort and assurance that we could possibly have – so that He could fulfill all righteousness.

But what does that mean? It couldn't possibly mean that Jesus somehow needed to increase His own righteousness, to improve His own standing in God's sight – for He was already the Beloved Son of God. No, in taking upon Himself the sign and seal of baptism that we all need, in doing what all of us need to do, Jesus was demonstrating the essence of His ministry – His identification with His people.

For what did Jesus do at the end of His life? Once again, He stood in our place, absorbing the judgment of God that John described so vividly, laying down His life on the cross so that we might not be punished for our sins. Instead of all of us being cut down and thrown into the fire, Jesus gave Himself as a perfect sacrifice so that we might be saved, gathered into His garner to live with Him for all eternity.

But Jesus' baptism proves that this ministry of substitution began much earlier than the cross. For He not only took the punishment that our lawbreaking deserves – all His life He also kept the Law of God perfectly on our behalf. He alone fulfilled all the righteous requirements of God's Law without a single exception or lapse, loving His neighbors enough to die for us, and loving God enough to obey the Father even to the point of death on the cross.

So, as Jesus submitted Himself to baptism, a ritual for which He had no personal spiritual need, He was identifying Himself completely with His people. And that means that just as God announced His pleasure with His spotless, perfectly obedient son as He emerged from the waters of baptism, God has the same reaction to all those who trust in Him.

For when we trust in Christ, we become part of Him, members of His very body. So that means that when God looks at us, He sees Christ. Instead of our sins, the Father sees the righteousness of Christ. Because Christ has paid the death penalty for all who are in Him, God no longer sees our guilt. Instead, God sees all who are in Christ as washed clean of our sin, perfect in holiness.

No, that doesn't mean that once we've received the waters of baptism we are unable to break God's law. Yes, we still need to do what John calls us to do, to put the remnants of sin to death in our lives each and every day, to turn away from ourselves and turn to God more consistently each and every day, to bear as much of the fruit of true love for God and for other people each and every day.

But while we are busy about living as more obedient, more loyal subjects of the King of Kings, the baptism of Jesus means we don't have to worry about measuring up to God's expectations. We don't have to try to earn His favor. For He has already shown us His love so clearly in giving His beloved

Son to die for us. So as we trust in Christ, as we are joined to Christ by faith, God is already well-pleased with us. For the blood of Christ has already washed us clean of sin's scarlet stains, making us as clean in God's sight as newfallen snow.