

Matthew 3:13-17 (Ulrich Luz translation)

Then Jesus comes from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him. But John tried to prevent him and said: “I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?” But Jesus answered and said to him: “Let it be now, for it is thus fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he permitted him. And after he was baptized, Jesus immediately went up from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and coming on him. And behold, a voice spoke from the heavens: “This one is my beloved Son in whom I have taken delight.”¹

¹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7: a Commentary on Matthew 1–7*, ed. Helmut Koester, Rev. ed., *Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 140.

Fulfilling All Righteousness

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

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Scripture: Matthew 3:13-17

So why does Jesus get baptized by John? After all, if Jesus is the Messiah, why does he have John baptize him? Doesn't John himself say that he isn't worthy to touch Jesus sandals.

Well, this is a very interesting question you have asked. It could be seen as an embarrassing situation for Christianity. It could raise the question, Was Jesus the real deal? Or, in truth, was John actually greater than Jesus was. John's disciples ask this question directly later on—are the one? At least some, if not most, of John's disciples remained with John long after Jesus came on the scene. There were some, indeed, who thought John was greater than Jesus.

The Gospel of Mark seems to be besieged by this question. In fact, Mark is so perplexed by it that he never answers the question of why John baptized Jesus. Mark has no explanation for why John baptized Jesus. For Mark that John baptized Jesus is a problem. Mark's project is to prove that even though Jesus was baptized like other ordinary citizens who came to John, Jesus was, nevertheless, the unique Messiah. Having to deal with the historical reality of John's baptism of Jesus, Mark dodges the question of why Jesus submitted to John's baptism. But it's the elephant in Mark's room. It's there. He can't ignore it. So he does his best to tell the story in a way that demonstrates that even though John baptized Jesus, Jesus is superior. The only part of the story that matters to Mark is this: And just as Jesus was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." We are to see, unmistakably, that Jesus is the real deal.

Matthew gives us a different, and in some ways more complex, story. In Matthew John already recognizes and accepts Jesus as the Messiah. Indeed, uniquely to Matthew, John protests: "I need to be baptized by you, and you come to me?" None of the other Gospels have this part of the story at all. In Matthew the question isn't, Is Jesus the real deal. Everyone seems to know that he is in Matthew. The question for Matthew is why would the real deal submit to a baptism just like all those others who came to John? The question Matthew wants to answer isn't can Jesus really be the Messiah if he was baptized by John? For Matthew the question is what does it mean that the person we know to be the Messiah would submit to a baptism by John? What sort of Son of God is this that he is baptized by a simple man, in a way no different from all the others who came out to John at the Jordan?

Another way of saying it: Mark wants to convince his audience that Jesus is the Christ even though he let John baptize him; Matthew wants to convince his audience that letting John baptize him says something essential about what kind of Messiah Jesus is. For Mark, Jesus' baptism has the hint of scandal. For Matthew, Jesus' baptism says something important about who he is and the message of his ministry.

When John resists baptizing Jesus, Jesus answers him, "Let it be now, for it is thus fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." In Matthew these are the very first recorded words of Jesus. Right away there's something interesting. Jesus says his baptism is fitting for us, for him and John, to fulfill all righteousness. Whatever Jesus means by fulfilling all righteousness, we would

have expected it to apply to Jesus, the Messiah—something like, it is fitting that for me to fulfill all righteousness. The inclusion of John is of more than a little significance.

Before we can go any further, though, what in the world does Jesus mean by it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness? There are many times that Matthew speaks of fulfilling the predictions of the prophets: He says: Jesus birth “took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’”²

But fulfilling righteousness is something else altogether. It’s not about fulfilling predictions. Chapters 5 through 7 of the Gospel of Matthew contain some of the most well known and striking passages in the Gospels. Known as the Sermon on the Mount, these four chapters are Matthew’s centerpiece and offer the way of life for those who would follow Jesus. Righteousness figures prominently in that way of life.

Matthew 5:6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Matthew 5:10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 5:20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 6:1 Beware of practicing your righteousness before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.

Matthew 6:33 But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

Matthew 21:32 For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

The Gospel as it is presented in Matthew is a Gospel about living in a righteous way. It’s no surprise that a theologian like Dietrich Bonhoeffer turned to Matthew when he wanted to point out that disciples of Jesus are called to a way of living. Bonhoeffer called it cheap grace if you think you can just sit back, do nothing, and receive it. Bonhoeffer had his fill of pious Christians who fiddled while Berlin was ablaze with atrocity.

Many Protestant theologians in history and to this day have been confused about the idea of grace. I speak of those who say that because we are saved by the grace of Jesus Christ we have no Christian obligation to actually do anything.

The Apostle Paul invented this line of thinking, but he has been severely misunderstood. Paul said we cannot earn our salvation. He was right, of course. But Paul never meant that to be license for a passive life. What Paul was actually trying to do was to get people away from worrying about their own salvation. He was trying to get rid of a religious self-centeredness that is preoccupied with, What do I have to do, for me. Paul said that the moment we do anything for the purpose of earning our own salvation, we are focused on ourselves instead of God or others. And there is no salvation in focusing on ourselves, so, by definition we can’t earn our salvation. Salvation can only come if you aren’t focused trying to get it. Focusing on trying to earn salvation means that you’re thinking all about you, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ is not about getting things for ourselves. Think of James and John who want to sit next to Jesus in heaven.

² *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Mt 1:22–23.

Jesus tells them that to think that way is to miss the point entirely. Think of those who pray or practice righteousness so that others will notice. Jesus says that's exactly the opposite of what I'm talking about. Think of his admonitions: turn the other cheek; love your enemies. Think of the rich young man who wants to earn salvation. Jesus' answer? Give everything away and follow me—not so you can earn salvation but so you can stop asking that question at all.

There's a certain irony here, a certain paradox. When you focus on others and forget about your own salvation, that's when your salvation will happen. Your salvation comes only when you don't care about it. The minute you care about it, it slips through your fingers. To be a disciple of Jesus is to hear the call to live righteously, to live for God and for others, not for ourselves. If we become disciples of Jesus, then ironically our own salvation will take care of itself.

So back the Jordan. When John tries to resist baptizing the Messiah, Jesus tells John, "Let it be now, for it is thus fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Jesus isn't making some vague theoretical statement about fulfilling righteousness. Nor is he talking about fulfilling predictions. When Jesus says that they are going to fulfill righteousness, he means that there is something important in what they are going to do in that very moment. He means that the baptism is important. You can now see why Matthew's version of the baptism of Jesus is so different from Mark's. Mark feels he needs to overcome a potential embarrassment because the Messiah submitted to ordinary baptism. But Matthew is up to something else. Matthew thinks Jesus' baptism by John is at the heart of things.

Let's look ahead to the Sermon on the Mount once more to get a few more clues. We already know that Jesus means for us to live for God and others. Inevitably, almost by definition, this means a certain level of humility. And we see that in the beatitudes.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

In Matthew wants to show us that his way is a way of humility. When he submits to John's baptism, submitting to John, in humility, is a big part of the point. It's why Jesus says, "It is thus fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness"—Jesus says not fitting for me, but for us. For Jesus it would be wrong to pull rank on John. Jesus has no desire to prove that he is better than John. Indeed, submitting to John is integral to his Gospel. Humility is a centerpiece in living for God and others.

And notice one more thing. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Actually, the Greek says, "They will be called sons of God." I don't object to the more gender neutral children of God. But here it's good to know the underlying word. In Matthew more often than in any other Gospel Jesus is called the son of God. And in Matthew more than in any other Gospel, his disciples are called sons of God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. It's not just the peacemakers. He says, Love your enemies so that you will be sons of your father in heaven. Be perfect as your Father in Heaven is perfect. Our Father who art in heaven.

Suddenly, like a puzzle coming together, we can see the picture Matthew is drawing for us. To act righteously is to act with humility, love, selflessness and generosity. In the first sentence that Jesus speaks in the Gospel, he tells us that he, along with John, will demonstrate what it means to act with these qualities. Of course, we would expect the Son of God to act with righteousness. But Jesus has a whole other project as well. He means to be an example. He means to show us the way. Like him, we are children of God, and he means to show us how

children of God are to act. As C. S. Lewis put it once, we are all called to be little Christs. Being children of God, or in the language of Genesis, fully realizing the image of God within us, is to live in the same way as the Son of God. Jesus taught us, beginning with his very first spoken words and with his baptism, how to be his followers. Even now he lights our path and shows us the way. His invitation is exactly the same as the one he suggested to John: Come and fulfill all righteousness. Come child of God. Come with humility, love, selflessness and generosity. Come, follow me. Amen.