

To Fulfill All Righteousness

Matthew 3:15

[Phil Johnson](#)

I want to look at a text that we typically pass over without giving it much thought. It's the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3. We'll focus mostly on verse 15, but let me describe the setting, and we'll read the surrounding verses, so we can consider the context properly.

This is the starting point of Jesus' public ministry. John the Baptist is baptizing "**in the wilderness of Judea.**" This is a desert region at a low elevation south and east of Jerusalem, close to where the Jordan river flows into the Dead Sea. If you have ever visited Jericho, you know the region. These are rolling badlands, chalky, desert terrain—totally barren except for the rocks. The only greenery is a thin strip of trees that grow on the banks of the Jordan river—and as you travel south even that little strip of life turns to scrub brush and begins to diminish. The Jordan is mud-colored at that point. The last traces of vegetation finally disappear about two miles north of the Dead Sea. In the heart of that desolate region is where John the Baptist was baptizing people.

We can pretty well pinpoint the spot. John 1:28 says, "**These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.**" That's not the same Bethany where Lazarus, Mary, and Martha lived. It was a smaller town on

the east bank of the Jordan River, about five miles north of the Dead Sea, where there was a ford in the river. There's a baptismal site and an Eastern Orthodox church there today. Other than that, it's still a totally barren region. It's five miles east-southeast from Jericho and at least two days' journey to get there from Jerusalem in Jesus' time.

But John the Baptist was drawing huge crowds to hear him preach and be baptized. Matthew 3:5-6 say, "**Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.**"

So this was a baptism of repentance. John himself says so in verse 11: "**I baptize you with water for repentance.**" Verse 6: those who came were "**confessing their sins,**" and John the Baptist required convincing evidence of genuine repentance. Matthew 3:7-12 is where we have that famous incident where a team of Pharisees came to be baptized. Remember, Jesus' complaint against the Pharisees (Matthew 23:5) was that "**They do all their deeds to be seen by others.**" This is where the crowds were, so naturally, this was a good place for Pharisees who wanted to be seen doing penance (or whatever).

John refuses them and rebukes them (v. 7): "**You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?**" And then he preaches a sermon full of damnation and hell fire,

aimed at these phony religious virtuosos. But notice: the central point of John's sermon is that Jesus is coming. John is merely the forerunner, **"the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said"** [John 1:23]. And John understands his role, because he says in verse 11: **"He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire."**

By the way, the fire John mentions is not a Pentecostal outpouring of strange phenomena. It's not a *good* thing at all. Fire is used repeatedly by John the Baptist in this immediate context to refer to judgment. Verse 10: **"Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."** It's the same fire he's still speaking about in the very next verse (v. 12)—a fire that burns up **"the chaff"** with flames that will never be quenched. In other words, verse 11 means that Christ will baptize His elect with the Holy Spirit, and the rest (including any Pharisees that haven't truly repented) He will baptize with fire (v. 12): He will **"gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."** He is warning these phony Pharisees about a baptism of judgment that is coming on unrepentant people.

That's where our text comes in. Right after John rebukes the Pharisees, through the end of Matthew 3, we're given this

brief vignette about the baptism of Jesus. So let me read the text, starting in verse 13:

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him.

14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented.

16 And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him;

17 and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

I love this story. It's tied forever in my mind to my first Sunday at Grace Community Church, back in 1983. Darlene and I had just moved from Chicago with two small boys and a third on the way. Our eldest was just three and a half years old, and we came from a small church where the nursery was just one big room that housed all children up to age 4—with beds for the infants and toys on the floor for toddlers.

So that first Sunday we were at Grace was the first time Jeremiah had ever been to a Sunday-School class with a

Bible story and lesson. And this story about Jesus' baptism was the lesson for that week.

So we picked him up after Sunday school, and he came out waving this paper he had colored, and I asked him what he learned. I really wasn't expecting a profound theological treatise. I figured he would say something like, "We should be kind to one another," or something really basic like that.

But he said, "We learned about when Jesus' was baptized."

So I said, "Tell me about it."

And he said, "Well, John the Baptist was this guy who dressed funny and ate bugs, and he baptized people in the desert."

And I thought, *Wow! That's a lot for a three-year-old to absorb.* So I said, "Yes, that's right! What else?"

Jeremiah said, "Well, Jesus came to John to be baptized, and John the Baptist said, 'I can't baptize you. You should baptize me.' But Jesus said, 'Do it anyway,' and so he did."

And I just thought, *Amazing! They're actually teaching these three-year-olds the Bible.* And I was mentally congratulating myself that my son was such a good listener.

But then Jeremiah lowered his voice in a kind of dramatic whisper, and said, "*And then—a very strange thing happened!*"

And I said, "What?"

He said, "This big duck came down . . . "

And I looked at the paper he colored. He had drawn a big duck bill on the dove.

So I had to straighten his understanding of this passage a little bit. And that had the beneficial effect of provoking me to look at the passage to try to get a clear and careful understanding of it for myself.

It's an *important* passage. R. C. Sproul says "there's [no] more important text in all the New Testament that defines the work of Jesus than this one."

And I have to admit that this passage had mystified me ever since I first read it as a young Christian. I found myself trying to explain something to a three-year-old that I didn't fully grasp myself. Why *did* Jesus insist on being baptized? Baptism wasn't required or even mentioned in Moses' law, so this is not a matter of legal obedience.

Furthermore, John's baptism signified *repentance*, and it was usually accompanied by a public confession of sin. Jesus had no need for such a sacrament. He was "**full of grace and truth**" [*John 1:14*]. Hebrews 7:26 says He was "**holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens.**" So what's going on here, and why was getting baptized with a baptism of repentance so important to the mission of Jesus [*Luke 19:10*]"—"**to seek and to save the lost**"?

Even John the Baptist was shocked and confounded when Jesus came to be baptized. John has just refused these Pharisees, demanding "**fruit in keeping with repentance**" (v. 8). Now He tries to refuse Jesus, *but for the opposite reason*. John is not like any Baptist I ever met. He has no interest in inflated statistics or evangelistic numbers. He will baptize only those who genuinely repent and confess their sin. And here's the problem: Jesus has no need to confess sin or demonstrate repentance, and somehow John understands that. So this little drama unfolds, and it sheds great light on what Jesus was doing to insure the justification of His people, from the moment He began His public ministry.

Notice, in the span of the five verses I just read to you, three different voices speak, and each one expresses a distinctive opinion about the baptism of Jesus. Here are the three voices in this three-part drama: you have John the Baptist in verse 14; Jesus in verse 15; and "a voice from heaven" in verse 17 (that, of course, is God the Father). As I said, each voice expresses an opinion about what's happening. John objects to it; Jesus insists on it; and all heaven adds a blessing to it.

So let's look at those three voices one at a time, and we'll consider what each one says and what it all means. Three voices, each expressing an opinion about Jesus at his baptism. First—

1. JOHN OBJECTS TO IT

This whole event comes as a great surprise to John. Jesus shows up where he is baptizing people from "**Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan.**" That's what it says in verse 5. Now, it wasn't an easy journey for any of these people to get where John was baptizing. But *Jesus* comes from further yet. Verse 13: "**Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John [who is clearly caught off guard by this] would have prevented him, saying, 'I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?'"**

John instantly grasps the impropriety of this situation. How can he, a fallen man, baptize God incarnate? And clearly, John understood something of Jesus' divine perfection. "*You ought to be baptizing me instead of the other way around.*" This was not an artificial statement of deference or humility. He had just said (v. 11), "**He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry.**" In Mark 1:7, John says it like this: "**The strap of [His] sandals I am not worthy to stoop down and untie.**"

Did John the Baptist fully recognize Jesus' deity? *Perhaps.* He was, after all, a prophet. In fact, according to Jesus, "**A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet . . . Among those born of women there has arisen no one greater than John the Baptist**" (Matthew 11:9, 11).

Now, sometimes people read a lot into the fact that Jesus and John the Baptist were related to one another, and they were born about six months apart. Sometimes you'll hear someone speculate that they must have grown up together. They didn't. This might well have been the first time they ever met face to face.

It's true that according to Luke 1:36, Mary (the mother of Jesus) was related to Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist). The expression used suggests they were cousins. That's how it is translated in the King James Version. Literally, the word means "kinswomen," but they could not have been closer kin than cousins—or (more likely) cousins once removed, or perhaps even second cousins. For one thing, according to Luke 1:36, they were from different generations. Elizabeth was already advanced in age when she bore John the Baptist. Even more significantly, Luke 1:5 says Elizabeth was one of "**the daughters of Aaron**"—meaning she was from the priestly tribe. And Hebrews 7:14 says, "**It is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah.**" So Mary and Elizabeth must have been related through their maternal lines of descent, which would mean the closest possible relationship between Jesus and John the Baptist would be if they were second cousins.

And remember that Mary visited Elizabeth when they were both pregnant. According Luke 1:39, in order to do

that, Mary had to travel **"into the hill country, to a town in Judah."** The hill country is south of Jerusalem, overlooking the southern end of the Dead Sea—a desert wilderness. So Jesus, growing up poor in Nazareth, and John the Baptist, growing up in the desert wilderness of the hill country of Judah, certainly weren't geographically close when they were children. The last verse in Luke 1 settles the issue for us. This is the biblical description of John the Baptist's childhood: **"The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day of his public appearance to Israel."** So there's no reason to think Jesus or John the Baptist had ever even met.

That's why in John 1:31, 33 John the Baptist twice says of Jesus, **"I myself did not know him."** However, John, because he was a prophet, recognized Jesus as the One **"who baptizes with the Holy Spirit."** That's what he says in John 1:33: **"I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'"**

Therefore by prophetic means, John knew that Jesus was greater than him, and by a miraculous sign at Jesus' baptism, Jesus' identity was confirmed to John. He says in John 1:32: **"I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him."**

Also, Remember that even as an infant, when Mary greeted Elizabeth, According to Luke 1:41-42, "**When Elizabeth heard the greeting of Mary, the baby leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit, and she exclaimed with a loud cry . . .**" a kind of prophetic blessing for Mary. It's as if there was hard-wired into John the Baptist the ability to recognize Jesus instantly. That makes perfect sense, given the role John the Baptist was called to.

So now, as Jesus comes for baptism, John the Baptist immediately recognizes (by some prophetic means) that this is the One for whom He has been preparing the way.

And he correctly assesses the awkwardness of the situation. John is a fallen man. Although John was filled with the Holy Spirit from infancy, and by Jesus' own testimony, he was the greatest man ever born—he was a sinner. Baptism is more suited for someone like Him than for Jesus.

In fact, John freely acknowledges his own need for a baptism of repentance (v. 14). He says to Jesus: "**I need to be baptized by you.**"

Jesus is not only more qualified to perform a baptism than John the Baptist; John the Baptist has been prophesying that Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit. John wants that baptism. John knew (and freely testified) that "**[Jesus] must increase, but [John] must decrease**" [*John 3:30*]. So although our text says, "**John would have prevented him,**" there is

nothing in John's response that is doctrinally erroneous, motivated by pride, sinfully presumptuous, or otherwise blameworthy. It's hard to fault John the Baptist for this. In fact, this may be the *only time ever* when someone tried to refuse Jesus but didn't sin in doing so.

It's tempting to compare this to John 13:8, where Peter tells Jesus, "**You shall never wash my feet.**" But we know Peter was struggling with pride and a desire to be first. There's no hint of that in what John does here.

Theologically, John is spot on, according to everything he knew to be true at that time. John's Baptism was a public demonstration of repentance. Jesus had nothing whatsoever to repent of. If one of them should be baptizing the other, by all rights it should have been John repenting and Jesus performing the baptism. It speaks well of John's humility and his spiritual insight that he raised this objection (v. 14): "**I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?**"

That's the first voice in this mini-drama, and it's the voice of John the Baptist. His response to the proposal that he should baptize Jesus: John objects to it. But John's objection is answered conclusively by voice number two. This is the voice of Jesus. Here's our Lord's own opinion of this event:

2. JESUS INSISTS ON IT

Verse 15: "**But Jesus answered him.**" I should pause here and point out that these are the first words ever recorded out of the mouth of Jesus as an adult. Luke 2 gives that little vignette where Jesus as a child gets left behind in Jerusalem, and they find him in the Temple among the teachers. They've been anxiously looking for him, and when they find him, he says, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?**" He's about 12 years old at that point.

The biblical record on Jesus' life is totally silent for the next 17 or 18 years, and then here, in our text, we have only the second time ever that the actual words of Jesus are recorded. This is the very first statement He makes as He launches His public ministry.

Notice: He didn't *scold* or *argue* with John the Baptist—or even suggest that John was out of line or wrong. John *wasn't* wrong, given the facts he was working with. And Jesus himself tacitly affirms that John's rationale is valid. But he quietly turns to John and gives him a reason why he should "**Let it be so [for] now**"—in other words, *Do it just this once*. "**Then [John the Baptist] consented.**"

Why? the simple reason Jesus gives is laden with significance: "**For thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**" Christ has work to do. It His whole life's

calling to render perfect obedience to the Father. John 4:34: **"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work."** John 6:38: **"I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."** John 8:29: **"I always do the things that are pleasing to [the Father]."**

Everything Jesus ever did was in obedience to the will of His Father. John 5:30: **"I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me."** Hebrews 10:7 quotes Psalm 40 as a Messianic prophecy: **"Behold, I have come to do your will, O God."** So Jesus' whole life was one long work of obedience, and what we have here at His baptism is the first public act of obedience rendered to the Father. And Jesus clearly explains why He is doing this: **"It is fitting . . . to fulfill all righteousness."**

Now think about that statement for a moment. Why would Jesus need to do anything **"to fulfill all righteousness"**? He is God incarnate. He innately possesses the most perfect righteousness you could ever conceive. His righteousness is the very righteousness of God—the fulness of all that is truly righteous. So there was no *lack* of righteousness in Jesus' character or His person; He was perfect in every way, from the very start. In and of Himself, He was fully and consummately righteous before he ever obeyed one jot or tittle of the law.

Furthermore, as God, He is the Lawgiver. By definition, He is above the law. **"The Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath"** (Mark 2:28). According to Matthew 9:6, He had **"authority on earth to forgive sins."** He is the rightful object of all true worship. Hebrews 1:6-8 says He is the object of angelic worship and the recipient of the very highest divine blessing. He did not need any new obedience to procure righteousness for Himself. In Hebrews 1:8, God the Father speaks to the Son, and this is what He says, **"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of [righteousness] is the scepter of your kingdom."**

So Christ by His very character defines what righteousness is. He didn't *become* righteous (or somehow gain *more* righteousness) by becoming human. It was impossible for Him in and of Himself to be more righteous than He is innately. That's the nature of divine righteousness: it is absolutely perfect—impeccable. Deuteronomy 32:4: **"The Rock, his work is perfect, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness and without iniquity, just and upright is he."**

Christ, even as a man, did not need to prove anything for His own sake, or for His Father's sake. That was not the point of His obedience. This was not a test of Jesus' character. He had absolutely nothing to prove or demonstrate for His own sake. When the voice from heaven says in verse 17, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"** that expresses

the eternal verdict of the Father with respect to the Son. It's not a statement about this one act of baptism. It's not contingent on the Son's obedience. This was the Father's appraisal of the Son before He ever rendered one act of obedience in the execution of His earthly ministry.

So do you see how amazing this is? By His very nature Jesus is above the law, not under it. His righteousness is the impeccably perfect righteousness of the divine Godhead. His glory, concealed under robes of human flesh, is "**glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth**" (John 1:14). He is perfect in every way.

What aspect of righteousness remains to be fulfilled? Why in the plan of God was it necessary for Jesus, the Lawgiver, "**lord of the Sabbath,**" to be subject to the law? And why would He "**who knew no sin**" submit to the ritual of John's baptism? Why did Jesus *insist* on undergoing this ritual, which wasn't even prescribed by Moses' law, and served only as a public testimony of repentance—a ritual suited only for contrite sinners? What is the point?

The answer is clear from Scripture. Galatians 4:4-5 says Jesus was "**born *under the law,* to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons." In other words, His subjection to the law was not for His own sake, but for others. His obedience to God was rendered for the sake of His people. Romans 5:19: "**For as by the one man's****

disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous." He obeyed not to make *Himself* more righteous, but to procure a perfect human righteousness under the law for the justification of His people. He was doing for us what Adam failed to do. His obedience counts on our behalf. His whole life of obedience was essential to make full propitiation. Hebrews 2:17: "**He had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people."**

And the obedience He rendered included even the symbol of our repentance. That's why He insisted on being baptized. It was obviously not for His own sake. It cannot signify His own repentance, because He never had anything to repent for. And in the words of John Owen, *If He wasn't doing this for Himself, it must be for us, or be useless.* There is no other reasonable possibility: He is doing this as a proxy for His people. He is fulfilling all righteousness for our sake, on our behalf. He is already standing in the place of sinners.

Jesus is doing this for His church. Scripture is clear: we are obliged to perfect obedience. We are in urgent need of perfect righteousness. In Matthew 5:20, Jesus Himself said, "**For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of**

heaven." How perfect must our righteousness be? Matthew 5:48: "**You . . . must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.**" The idea is not that we must work harder than the Pharisees worked. The point is that no amount of human work rendered by fallen people will ever be sufficient to please God.

The demand for Godlike perfection automatically would seem to relegate every sinner to a hopeless state of eternal doom, because considered by ourselves, outside of Christ, we are already hopelessly imperfect. But the righteousness we need is imputed to us, in the very same manner that our sins were imputed to Christ. Second Corinthians 5:21: "**For our sake [God the Father] made [Christ] to be sin [though He] knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**" We who lack righteousness are made perfectly righteous by imputation, through our union with Christ. Romans 4:6: "**God imputes righteousness apart from works.**" Apart from any work or merit or legal obedience of our own, "**God imputes righteousness**"—transfers an alien righteousness to our account. That's what Paul spoke of in Philippians 3, where he speaks of tossing a lifetime of fastidious religious work on the dung-heap—in order to "**be found in [Christ], not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith.**"

That's the righteousness of Christ—and it is replete with all the merit we will ever need—not merely the forgiveness of our sins (that would give us nothing more than a clean slate). But the law of God doesn't demand either obedience or punishment; it demands both. Suffering is not righteousness; obedience is. Deuteronomy 6:25: "**It will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.**" So the righteousness of Christ includes a lifetime of meticulous obedience to the will of God—not only all the demands of the law, but even the baptism of John—a public symbol and expression of repentance from sin.

Reformed theologians sometimes make a distinction between the *active* and *passive* obedience of Christ. His passive obedience would be His death on the cross. That's what made atonement for our sins and purchased our forgiveness. That (of course) fulfilled the penal demands of the law. But His active obedience speaks of the fact that He also positively fulfilled all the moral, civil, and ceremonial demands of the law on our behalf. Remission of our sins bought us escape from hell; perfect obedience to all the commandments gave us title to heaven. So both the life and the death of Christ were essential to the atonement. To quote R. C. Sproul: "*Jesus not only had to die for our sins, but He had to live for our righteousness.*"

Here's how Wayne Grudem says it: *"If Christ had only earned forgiveness of sins for us, then we would not merit heaven. Our guilt would have been removed, but we would simply be in the position of Adam and Eve before they had done anything good or bad."* I don't need a clean slate. I need a robe of perfect righteousness. And given the fact that **"we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags"** [Isaiah 64:6], no amount of virtue or work on my own can possibly add up to the righteousness God requires. That should be self-evident.

But let me add this: the distinction between Christ's active and passive obedience is merely a matter of convenience and clarity to help us understand how utterly dependant we are on the righteousness of Christ. Such a distinction is necessary only because there are those who deny the significance of Christ's obedience **"under the law."** But as you think this through, don't make the mistake of carving the obedience of Christ into two parts. Scripture always treats the obedience of Christ as a seamless garment—one whole act—a lifelong habit of unbroken obedience to the will of the father.

If you don't like the terminology of "active and passive obedience," that's OK. Neither do I. The important point is that **"the one man's obedience [by which] many will be made righteous"** is not merely what happened one Friday at

Calvary. The righteousness Christ sought to fulfill encompassed an entire lifetime of devotion to the will of the Father.

Plus, bear in mind that there was nothing "passive" about Jesus' death. He Himself said (John 10:18), "**No one takes [my life] from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.**"

But by the same token when Romans 5:19 says, "**By one Man's obedience many will be made righteous,**" we can't reduce the notion of His obedience to the single act of dying on a cross. Consider this: If the cross alone fulfilled all the demands of righteousness, Jesus' baptism would have been wholly unnecessary. When Jesus, with His dying breath, said, "**It is finished**"—*Tetelestai!* the finished work of atonement He spoke of included an entire lifetime of faithful obedience as a man under the law. Listen to Philippians 2:8: "**Being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**" The cross was simply the crown and culmination of a whole lifetime of humble obedience. And we see that fact clearly in this first public act of Jesus.

To quote John Owen once more: "*He needed no obedience for himself . . . for us it was that He fulfilled the law in obedience to God.*" And He did more than fulfill the

law perfectly. Christ became the archetype and the perfect paragon of every fruit of the Holy Spirit, every conceivable human virtue, *every one of the beatitudes*, and every expression of grace and glory that the human frame can possibly embody.

Again, the baptism of John had no warrant in Moses' law. This was in no way obligatory under the law alone. This was a true work of *supererogation*—going beyond what the law requires. And again, as a demonstration of repentance it would have been utterly worthless if Christ were doing it for His own sake alone. But He treated it as an absolute necessity "**to fulfill all righteousness**" for the sake of His church. He was already accruing a lifetime of human righteousness to be given away—*imputed*—to sinners who had no righteousness of their own. He was doing this for sinners who have no possibility of gaining the righteousness required to stand before God.

This is the central lesson of the Law: True righteousness demands consistent perfection over one's entire life. Adam illustrates what a difficult requirement that is. He had only one command to obey, and he failed at the very first temptation. That's why there needed to be a second Adam.

Christ, representing His people in the same way Adam represented the entire race, was subject to 613 distinct positive commandments spelled out in Moses' law, plus 365

negative commandments as well—and other duties such as this baptism, not even prescribed in the written law. Yet in Matthew 5:17 He said, "**Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.**" And He fulfilled every jot and tittle to absolute perfection. He accomplished as the head and representative of His people what Adam failed to accomplish as the head and representative of the entire race. "**As by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.**"

And what we see in Jesus' baptism is that He was already undoing Adam's failure at the very beginning of His public ministry; not only at the end.

Look at our text again (v. 15): "**Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.**" Why *now*? Remember, these are the first words ever recorded that were spoken publicly by the Lord Jesus. This is His first appearing in public. And thus He launches His public ministry with an act that is manifestly intended for the benefit of others. He is already acting as our substitute.

Many reasons are given by various theologians and Bible teachers for the baptism of Jesus. Though Jesus had no sins to confess or repent of, this was nevertheless a public repudiation of all sin. There's certainly truth in that. This was also an identification with His people and a public

declaration of His intention to be their sin-bearer. He thus identifies with us through John's baptism, just as we identify with His death and resurrection through Christian baptism. That is certainly true as well. But more significant than all of that is the reason Jesus Himself gave: "Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness."

Christ is weaving that perfect garment of flawless human righteousness that is required for a right standing with God. First Corinthians 1:30: "**Christ Jesus . . . became to us wisdom from God, *righteousness* and sanctification and redemption.**" He *is* our righteousness. Jeremiah 23:6: "**This is His name by which He will be called: The Lord our righteousness.**" Isaiah 54:17: "**'No weapon formed against you shall prosper, and every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is from Me,' Says the LORD.**" Remember, in Philippians 3, Paul speaks of "**the righteousness which is from God by faith.**" He says that righteousness belongs only to those who are found in Christ. Romans 3:22 says it is "**the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, [unto] all and [upon] all who believe.**" Second Corinthians 5:21 says believers "**become the righteousness of God [in Him]**"—in Christ. The only reasonable conclusion is that the righteousness imputed to

believers is a righteousness Christ provided for them—the righteousness of a perfect life.

So remember how this drama is playing out. First, John objects to it. Second, Jesus insists on it. Now, third,

3. ALL HEAVEN ADDS A BLESSING TO IT

At the end of verse 15, John the Baptist consents; Jesus is baptized; and (verse 16) as Jesus emerges from the water, a miraculous display of divine glory unfolds over Jesus. At this point a third voice is heard, and it is the voice of the Father, speaking His unqualified approval of the Son.

It intrigues me that though Jesus said John the Baptist occupied the highest position among men under the Old Covenant, we're told in John 10:41 that "**John did no sign.**" John performed no miracles. But here the baptism of Jesus is punctuated and affirmed by several heavenly miracles. The fact that people would later say of John the Baptist that he "**performed no sign**" makes clear that everyone understood these were heavenly signs—miracles wrought by God Himself apart from any human instrumentality.

"Behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him." This was the sign John the Baptist had been told to expect, so this is first of all for his benefit. And here you have for the first time all three Persons of the Trinity manifest clearly all

at once. This text is impossible for modalists and other Trinity-deniers to make good sense of. The Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, descends and comes to rest over Jesus. **"and behold [verse 17], a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'"**

I said at the start that this is the Father's eternal assessment of the Son. The same voice from heaven speaks at the transfiguration of Christ (Matthew 17:5), saying, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him."** Same verdict.

And may I say: this part of the drama, too, has great relevance to our justification. This is the very same verdict God will render in the end as His final judgment, and it encompasses not only the Son Himself, but also all who are **"in Him"**—united with Him by faith.

As a believer in Christ, **"You have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory."** That's the promise of Colossians 3:4-5. His life—His *whole* life—counts as your life, just as He in His death was a proxy for you.

That's the great truth of justification by faith. It's not merely that we are forgiven. I cringe when I hear people who should know better define justification as bare forgiveness. (You know: *"To be justified means it's just-as-if-I'd-never-sinned."*) Justification is so much more

than that. Christ not only took away our guilt; He provided us with the perfect righteousness God demands. He did far more than restore what Adam had lost; He elevated us to the highest possible position. God has **"raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus."** **"He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son"** (Colossians 1:13). All the merit of Christ's perfect righteousness is ours, and we are one with Him—so that when the Father says, **"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased,"** that verdict applies to all who believe. That is precisely what the apostle Paul has in mind in Ephesians 1:6 when he says that God **"has blessed us in the Beloved."**

Even at the baptism of Jesus, at the very outset of His public ministry, **"God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself."**

Job 9:2 asks the question, **"How can a man be in the right before God?"** Job had no clear answer to that dilemma. You and I, from a totally different time zone, can look back on the finished work of Christ and give a definitive reply: We have a God-blessed Savior who devoted His whole life **"to fulfill[ing] all righteousness"** on our behalf. Isn't that an amazing truth? Don't ever lose sight of it and don't ever be tempted to let go of it or put your faith in anything less.

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."