

Baptismal Righteousness

We faithful gathered here today know and firmly believe what Scripture tells us regarding our salvation; namely, that we are saved through faith alone in God's grace alone, which He freely shows to us because of the all-atoning work and person of Jesus Christ alone. We are **not** saved by our works. No one is saved by the righteousness of the Law. The Law can't save you. ***If we could atone for even one single sin by "working it off," then that means that Jesus didn't have to die.*** It means that we just have to work harder if we expect to pay for all our sins. After all, if you can pay for one sin, then you can pay for all of them. But, like I said, we know what God tells us about all this. We are saved through faith, and not by works. Faith alone, grace alone, Christ alone.

And yet...you can't help but notice that today's lessons are weighted heavily in the Law. The Ten Commandments (OT lesson) is a no-brainer. We also hear Jesus Himself say that He hasn't come to abolish the Law, but rather to fulfill it. Even Jesus was all about "doing the Law," right down to the last jot and tittle. I can't do that. I don't even come close. Perhaps even more unsettling is the fact that Jesus immediately follows this up with a warning, ***"Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."***

Well...now we have a real problem. What exactly is Jesus saying here? We're saved through faith, not works, and yet Jesus is telling us that our righteousness must **exceed** that of the Pharisees, the kings of works-righteousness? Folks: Don't over-think this. It's actually quite simple. Think like a 3-year old. ***Whose righteousness saves us? Answer: Jesus' righteousness!*** Look to this cross! Here is the righteousness that far exceeds the righteousness of any child of Adam. In fact, here is the **ONLY** righteousness that saves you. Any other righteousness is no righteousness at all! Here is the ***perfect*** righteousness of almighty God, and it is this perfect righteousness—the righteousness of Christ Jesus—that is ***freely given and applied to us***, not because we've earned it, but because God is so loving and gracious and merciful to us.

And how does God give to us and apply to us Christ's redemptive righteousness? Again, it's all so very simple. St. Paul tells us very clearly that it is through Holy Baptism that this perfect, all-availing righteousness of Christ becomes our life-saving righteousness. Baptized into Christ's victorious death and resurrection, we are made heirs of the Almighty, co-heirs of eternal life. It is in and through our baptism into Christ that our righteousness far exceeds that of the Pharisees.

Now...this life-saving, life-giving baptismal grace *should* mean something, shouldn't it? After all, we didn't do anything to earn this amazing gift of grace. Contrary to popular belief, baptism isn't what we do for God in order to earn/merit His grace. If that were the case, then grace wouldn't be a gift. It would be a wage that we've earned; a wage we deserve, and yet Scripture is very clear in telling us the *only* wage we sinful children of Adam justly deserve—*temporal and eternal punishment*. Baptism isn't our gift to God. It's His gift to us. Baptism is what He does in order to resurrect us from our justly-deserved sinful death sentence. Baptism is His unmerited and unconditional work/gift of grace.

So...as baptized children of God, does this mean, then, that we're now free to go out and do whatever we want? Are we able to now go out and live the life of hedonism that our Old Adam hearts desire by nature? *"It's okay. I'm forgiven. I'm saved by grace! I can do whatever I please, because it's all been forgiven by God's grace."* Folks: That's not the thankful praise of God's grace. *That's the selfish confession of cheap grace*. That's the voice of someone who understand neither the deadly reality of their sin nor God's life-saving gift that is baptismal grace.

Folks: The Law is still written on our hearts. God has not *abolished* the Law. Again, the Law doesn't *save* us, but, as children of the heavenly Father, do you not want to keep your Father's precepts? You are free to do whatever you please...*but what pleases a baptized child of God?* Answer: That which pleases our heavenly Father. And I know that you can all beat me to the punch. You've heard it a million times over these past ten years, but you can hear it again. *Baptized children of God want to keep God's Law, not in order to be saved, but out of the joy that we are saved.*

Out of faithful thanksgiving, we don't want any other gods. We truly want to trust in God above all things, and it truly *bothers us and grieves us* when the Law shows us the ugly truth that we haven't. As children of grace, we want *nothing more* than to keep His name holy; the very name He has put on us in Baptism. Baptismal grace compels us, in faith, to honor the gift that is His Sabbath; that special time when He comes to us to feed us, nourish us, and serve us with His divine gifts of grace. *Where else would I be?!*

Those who truly understand God's gift of baptismal grace also truly desire to *honor, love, and obey* those authorities that He Himself has put over us for *our care, our well-being, and our safety*. We don't have to like them, but out of faithful fear and love of God, we serve, honor, and obey them. Knowing that Christ died for all children of Adam, children of the heavenly Father who've been *borne from above by water and the Spirit* truly desire to love their neighbor. Tearing down a person with murderous words or thoughts is not only unacceptable,

but *sinful*. Christ died for them too. The same can be said for adultery, theft, slander, and covetousness. Those who truly believe and trust what God says about *justly-deserved death and graciously-gifted forgiveness and eternal life* want nothing more than to offer up to God our sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving for all His gracious benefits to us.

Folks: I'm not going to go on and on now and give you a whole long laundry list on all the many ways you can henceforth begin to rightly keep Law in your daily life. The fact is that I can't. The ability to keep God's Law in a good and God-pleasing manner is *also a free and gracious gift*. It's not an agenda item or a chore that we need to work at and get done. The sanctified life is the working of the Holy Spirit, who creates and sustains saving faith in God's Word. The God-pleasing works you will do in your daily vocations will be *effortless, dare I say "natural," responses* to the joy of your justification; the joy of your salvation. Just like the faithful lambs on Judgment Day, who had no idea that they were doing such good and God-pleasing works and serving Christ by serving the least of their brothers, so too will your faith, *grounded in God's baptismal grace*, naturally and effortlessly bear good and God-pleasing fruit in your daily vocations; in all that you say, think, and do.

So...with all this in mind, I'm not going to point you to the Law and tell you "*Here's what you now need to do, O baptized child of God!*" *That's not faithful proclamation*. That makes me no different than the scribes and Pharisees, holding up the Law as a goal; as a means to attain God's righteousness and favor (which can't be done). Instead, I'm going to point you to God and His undeserved and unconditional means of grace. I'm going to point you to Christ Jesus and His all-atoning righteousness; righteousness that has victoriously declared, "*It is finished!*" *And finished it is, once and for all...for you*. I point you to your baptism, because it is here in the waters of Holy Baptism that God Himself has brought Christ's victory over sin, death, and the grave to you and made it your own. It is here in these life-giving waters of grace that God Himself has put to death the justly-deserved death sentence of your sin, and has instead clothed you and covered over you with Christ's perfect righteousness.

Dearly beloved; beloved and baptized by God Himself, *here is your righteousness...your life everlasting*. If all this doesn't move you to repent of your sin and amend your ways and give thanks to God for all that you are by virtue of your baptism into Him, *then you just don't get it*. May this grace—God's baptismal grace (not cheap grace)—may this grace, mercy, and peace of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ be and remain with you always. In the name that you were so graciously baptized into—the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...**AMEN**.