

Baptismal Righteousness

We faithful children of God 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.

Think about that for a moment. You wanna talk about unfair?! You wanna talk about some bad accounting?! Our heavenly Father **imputes** Christ's righteousness to us, doing so right here at the baptismal font. Here is where/how God gives us Christ's perfect righteousness. "Baptism now saves you." We are baptized into His death and resurrection. His victory is made to be our victory. Our sins and our guilt; our justly-deserved death sentence and holy wrath, ***all imputed to Christ***, while His righteous suffering and fulfillment of this justly-deserved death sentence is imputed and applied to us. We are saved by grace—

God's grace—which He freely bestows and imputes to us for Christ's sake. We are saved through faith alone in God's grace alone, which is ours because of Christ alone. Unless your righteousness exceeds the Pharisees' righteousness; that is, ***unless your righteousness is Christ's righteousness***, you don't stand a chance. If the Pharisees aren't getting into heaven with all their exemplary good works and righteousness—good works and righteousness that would leave every single person here in the dust—***then you don't stand a chance***. Salvation through faith alone in Christ alone. It really is so simple, and praise God that it is.

But...what does this mean for us in terms of everyday life? I know we're all very familiar with our Lord's warnings here about murder, and how if we even call our brother—someone whom Christ loved enough to die for—"fool," we've murdered him, and we're liable to the hell of fire. That's a prime example of what it is to **NOT** show forth the righteousness of Christ in our daily lives. We know this. We don't always live it out, but we know it. We know that Christians are to love others as they've been loved... by Christ. They are to forgive others just as they've been forgiven... by Christ. We also know our own sinful reality. We know all the sinful, murderous skeletons in our closet. God knows 'em all too. We know (and give thanks for the fact) that God loved us so much that He willingly died for each and every one of those sins. His blood-bought righteousness covered over each and every one of those sins.

Okay... so what does this mean for us in terms of everyday life? ***What does it mean for us in terms of our worship life, right here and right now?*** Well... look here at this communion rail. This is ***exactly*** what your Lord is referring to when He speaks of bringing your gift to the altar. This language of gifts and altars is the language of ***priesthood and sacrifice***. What is one of the primary jobs of a priest of God? Answer: To make sacrifice. Well...what remains to be sacrificed if Christ says in His all-atoning sacrifice, "***It is finished***"? Answer: **Nothing**. Now, does this mean that the vocation of the priest is no longer in effect? ***That's not what God says, is it?*** In fact, God is very clear in telling us that we are, indeed, a priesthood of all believers.

So, my fellow priests, what sacrifice is left for us to make? What sacrifice do we, as priests, bring to this altar? Answer: ***We offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving***. That means we come to this altar empty-handed. We bring nothing to this altar and feast table...nothing but faithful thanksgiving for the all-atoning sacrifice of Christ our Lord and Savior.

And it is right here where your Lord brings this all together (and all this talk of righteousness, judgment, hypocrisy, and gifts does go together; this isn't a series of un-related bullet points or sound bites of advice). Just think about what your Lord is saying here. You know where righteousness—***true, saving***

righteousness—is found. You know the **only** place to find it—Jesus Christ. Here is God’s perfect righteousness in the flesh, freely holding out to you His unconditional grace, mercy, and peace; His perfect righteousness, for you to take and eat, take and drink, for the full and complete forgiveness of all your sin and for the peace—His peace—that surpasses all human understanding. Ask yourself: Can you honestly, rightly, and faithfully come here—come before Him—offering up your sacrifices of repentant thanksgiving to Him for such undeserved grace, mercy, and imputed life-saving righteousness, **and still go about your daily life at enmity with those whom Christ Himself died for?** With the blood of Christ on your breath, can you be okay with continuing to breathe out murder against someone created in His image; someone Christ shed that very blood for? Not according to Jesus you can’t!

So...how do we “fix” this? What’s the prescription? “*Tell me what I need to do!*” What you need to do? **How Pharisaical of you.** It’s not about what you need to do. It’s **never** been about what you need to do. It’s all about what Jesus has **already** done for you. It’s all about what God has already done for you. You are baptized. Christ’s perfect righteousness has been made your righteousness. It’s all so simple. This is why I will simply end today by pointing you to Jesus Christ; to His perfect, all-atoning, completely free and unmerited perfect righteousness. Here is Christ, for you, for me, and for each and every sinner descended from Adam. It is finished, in Him and because of Him.

May this blessed, undeserved righteousness give you peace, and may this same righteous peace take root in your heart, mind, and soul, and may it spring up and bear abundant, God-pleasing fruits of humility and repentance in all that you say and do, now and into all eternity.

In Christ’s Name...

AMEN