

Some things must be taken care of. Ignoring them brings great harm. The person who is severely sick needs to see a doctor. Otherwise the fever, the cancer will lead to worse troubles or death. Such illnesses cannot be ignored; they must be dealt with by a physician. Sin, likewise, cannot be ignored without great harm. Sin needs to be cured, just as surely as disease needs a cure. Sin needs to be cleansed by the waters of baptism. For these waters do just that: they take away sin and restore righteousness to the one baptized.

All of which makes Jesus' baptism seem out of place. At first glance and consideration, it seems unnecessary. Recall what leads up to this baptism. John the Baptist preaches in the wilderness. Repent! He calls to the children of Israel. Turn away from sin. Put away all idolatry and return to the Lord, your God. Straighten out all that is amiss in your spiritual life, and so prepare the way of the Lord. Renew, rededicate yourself to the Lord completely, casting off and cutting off whatever does not conform to God's law. And to that end, John baptizes.

His baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Those who came to the Jordan, those who stood in its water by John that he might baptize them—these people came confessing their sins. They came in repentance, admitting that they had done wrong and seeking forgiveness for those wrongs. They received that very forgiveness as John cleansed them in his baptism.

Among the great crowds coming to hear John and be baptized by him, not all is well. Among these crowds come hypocrites and self-righteous. John will have none of this. John is preaching and looking for true repentance, not hypocritical play. Where he meets hypocrisy and not genuine repentance, John protests. Out! He tells such Pharisees—repent truly, or face the wrath of the coming Lord.

But in today's Gospel, a new problem arrives. Here is not a hypocrite, but Jesus. And he comes not to baptize, as John and we might expect; no, Jesus comes to be baptized. Here is a new issue, a curve ball thrown at John. This man is no hypocrite, hiding his sin and faking repentance. This man is holy and righteous. This man is greater than John. And yet, there He stands, waiting for John to baptize Him.

No, no, no says John. This is backwards. Jesus, I need to be baptized by you. Why are you here to be baptized by me? Shouldn't we switch places here; wouldn't it work better for you, Jesus to baptize me? John does not chastise Jesus for hypocrisy, for feigning repentance. John questions Jesus for coming to a baptism He, in John's mind, did not need. There was no sin for Jesus to repent of; there was nothing in Him needing forgiveness. This man was already holy and righteous. He needed no part in a baptism for sinners. So John's thinking goes; so goes his plea: I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?

John was right—this WAS wrong. Jesus had no need of this baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus acknowledges that John is right. He does not rebuke John nor contradict him. He simply says: Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness. Implied is the thought: Yes, this is backwards, but it is necessary. Jesus' whole life is backwards: the innocent punished for the guilty; the holy one counted a sinner in life and in death. And so now, as part of this backwards life, the innocent one comes to baptism to fulfill all righteousness.

This righteousness is God's righteousness—His doing right by granting man forgiveness and life. This righteousness is God's grace, His love for man bestowed upon us. This righteousness is the Lord entering our world to win salvation for us. To fulfill this righteousness,

to win forgiveness for us, it is fitting and right; it is necessary that Jesus step into the Jordan and receive the baptism of John.

By doing so, Jesus first identifies Himself with sinners. He joins Himself to the likes of us men and our sins. Baptism joins and unites the individual to greater realities, to others outside of himself. Our baptisms join and unite us to Christ Himself, to His death and resurrection. Our epistle lesson spells this out for us: by baptism we are buried with Christ; by baptism we rise to new life with and in Him. So here, in Jesus' baptism, there is unity—but this time it is Christ uniting Himself to sinful men. It is Jesus taking the place of sinners; Jesus walking into the sinner's baptism that He might take all sin upon Himself. Here is our substitute, our sacrificial lamb, bearing our load of sin, that He might later die for that sin. Here is the Messiah, who came that He might be cursed, hung on a tree, to take away the curse of our sin. Here He stands, even now counted as a sinner.

Jesus' baptism fulfills all righteousness by granting to Him the anointing of the Spirit. Messiah—this is the one the Jews sought; the anointed one, the one set apart to redeem them. Christ; this is how we know Him—the anointed one, the one given the Holy Spirit to place Him into the office of our Redeemer. From this point, from the shores of the Jordan river, Jesus will enter His public ministry. From this time He will be led by the Spirit, led into the wilderness to face and overcome temptation. From this time He will be led by the Spirit in proclaiming the Gospel and peace, in healing the sick, giving sight to the blind. Here, at His Baptism, Jesus is anointed as the Christ, that He might fulfill all righteousness.

Jesus' baptism fulfills all righteousness by sanctifying, by setting apart all water for baptism. Jesus' baptism shows us the blessings that flow from baptism. Here we see the Savior, present in the water, to join Himself to us; here we see great miracles—the heavens opened

above Him, the Spirit descending on Him, the voice of the Father declaring: This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased. As Luther observes in the Large Catechism, God here honors baptism by word and deed; He confirms it by miracles from heaven, showered down upon His beloved Son. This paves the way for our baptism, revealing the great promises and blessings God grants to us in water and Word.

What comfort we find in our baptism; for with John, all of us can say: Jesus, I need to be baptized by you; or rather, Jesus, lead me back to my baptism daily. Remind me of that washing, when you cleansed me from sin. Take me back to the font, making me your child anew this day and every day. Such need for baptism; such need for return to our baptism arises because of our sin. That sin cannot be ignored or wished away; it cannot be excused or tolerated. We would be foolish to do so! Such sin needs forgiveness; it needs the cleansing and washing that God alone provides.

And in baptism Jesus gives such cleansing. This water, as it flows over us, carries our sin with it. This washing does not just get the dirt out of our hair, but removes the far greater stain and corruption of sin and guilt. This baptism makes us God's new-born children; it places us into His family that we might live ever with Him. And yet, our old sinful flesh lives on, and pulls us back towards sin daily. The temptations surrounding us too often lure us into something against God's law—and we find ourselves needing forgiveness anew, needing to return to our baptism.

Such a baptism is to be lived, daily. This is lived by daily repentance—daily confessing our sins, daily seeking God's forgiveness, daily receiving that very forgiveness. Baptism is lived by putting sin away, by turning to the Lord. Baptism is lived through daily devotion, for that is where the Lord is found—in His Word. That is where we meet our God, hearing Him speak to

us, hearing Him declare His love and forgiveness to us. Baptism is lived by gathering weekly with the Lord's people, our baptized brothers and sister, that together we might praise Him, together we might ask for His mercy in prayer. In Jesus' church, in His Word we meet Him that we might abide as His baptized children. In these places we come to abide in Christ and His forgiveness. Here we come that we might dwell within the safety and sanctity of our Messiah's love.

What a treasure you have in your baptism! In this washing Christ has made you His child and opened heaven to you. In this blessed flood Christ shares His holiness with you and removes your sin. In this water you are born anew as God's own child. What blessings are yours, for you are baptized.

Praise be to Jesus, for giving us this Baptism. Praise be to Him for fulfilling all righteousness. Ponder anew His love this day, as you consider how He was counted with sinners, how He came that John would baptize Him. Thanks be to Christ for His baptism, that He took up His office of Messiah, giving Himself to death that we might rise to new life in Him. Amen.