**January 7th 2024 Epiphany Sunday**

**Text: Matthew 3:13-17** 0697

**Theme: To Fulfill All Righteousness.**

May the grace of God in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Substitute ever bring you the joy of the Gospel. Amen. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ: Throughout the early books of the Old Testament, particularly four of the first five books of Moses, there is very minute descriptions concerning all the sacrifices, cleansings, and rituals of the tabernacle, and later the Temple. For many Christians reading these books is rather difficult, for each verse and chapter presents to us, in quite vivid detail, pictures and symbols of something far greater to come. Not one of those Old Testament ceremonies, festivals, feasts, or sacrifices, were in and of themselves what took away sin or cleansed the filthy, spotted soul of man. No amount of animal blood was the required payment for the transgression of man. When God had given the Moral Law, not once did He say that if a man breaks that Law, He need only offer a lamb as sacrifice and the guilt of his sin would be taken away. Rather, the Jews of the Old Testament knew well of the truth concerning each and every one: the blood of animals and cleansing rituals was a picture of actual accomplishment of those very things by the Messiah who was to come. If the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy were nothing else that a Law by which man may purchase heaven then the Old and New Testaments are in direct and eternal conflict with one another, for then would the Gospel teach of free salvation by the work of Christ, and the Old Testament would teach of salvation by the works of the Law. This cannot be! In truth the Scriptures, as a whole, both Old and New Testaments teach one and the same thing: Man was dead in trespasses and sins by their transgression of God’s Law, and therefore God promised and sent the Savior who would fulfill the Law in man’s stead, and sacrifice Himself to pay the guilt of their sin.

Just a passing glance at the book of Hebrews shows this very thing, and remember that this book was written to Jews. Let us turn to chapter 9 of the book of Hebrews, reading verses 1-15: **read passages here.** You see what Moses and the Israelites performed daily in the Tabernacle, was never an end or means in and of itself, but rather was a picture of that which was to be accomplished by the God-Man Jesus Christ, as we hear again in Hebrews: *“For the Law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect.” (Heb. 10:1)* Now there are passages in the Old Testament, particularly in the Pentateuch , that declare these things to be performed and accomplished for “perpetual generations” and “forever.” Would this not mean then that we must observe each and every feast, sacrifice, cleansing ritual, Sabbath Day, Etc.? Again the book of Hebrews clears up any misunderstanding, for the book of Hebrews was written to Jews who were still insisting that all of the ceremonial law be followed. In the Psalms we have a prophecy about Christ, which Psalm is quoted in Hebrews and explained: *“Then said He, Lo, I come to do Thy will, O God. He taketh away the first (covenant), that He may establish the second (covenant).” (Heb. 10:9)* Here we see that the ushering in of the New covenant or Testament, the Old was done away with, or rather, fulfilled in its entirety. This is easily understood when we consider, for example, a photograph of a distant loved one. We have the picture to remind us of that person, but when we are in the presence of that same loved one, do we then ignore the actual person in favor of holding to a simple picture of them? Of course not! In like manner the pictures of the Savior and of His sacrifice are still held to in the celebration of the actual fulfillment of them. And it is this very fulfillment, the very commencement of the New Testament that we have presented to us in our text for today which is found in the third chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew beginning at verse thirteen.

**Quote text here.**

Let us pray, O Lord God almighty, it is truly a privilege to stand before Thee this day and each day of our lives, for Thou hast imparted to us Thy precious Word which teaches to us the Way of salvation, the fulfillment of the Law, and the opening of the Gospel to poor souls. Grant to us thi9s day such a knowledge and faith in Thee, that we no longer sell ourselves under the curse of the Law from which we could not set ourselves free, but ever send us Thy Holy Spirit that we may remain in Thy grace all our days. Teach us today by the Baptism of Thy Son Jesus Christ that we here witness today that Baptism is indeed for sinners, a Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. By this truth help us to see that though He was Baptized it was not for His own sin, but to fulfill all righteousness. Being our Substitute, O Jesus, it was the will of Thy Father that all righteousness be fulfilled so that the sins of all men be forgiven, and that many, by faith, be saved. Keep us from the worldly thoughts of our flesh, and let sin no longer reign over us. Direct our hearts heavenward in every deed Thou didst accomplish upon earth, and let us see in them, Thy substitutionary work in our behalf by which we are forgiven and saved. Grant all these things, O Lord, to each of us here this day. Amen.

Guided then by the Spirit of God let us learn that Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness, learning first that:

1. **Baptism is for sinners.** We read verses thirteen through fifteen of our text: **Read verses here.** Many a man, throughout the New Testament era of the church, has been offended by our text, many have stumbled at this event in the life of Jesus and this because they see no reason for Jesus being Baptized. Due to this stumbling many have surmised that John’s baptism was a different baptism than that instituted by Jesus later in His ministry, others have made the assumption that Jesus must have had some sin in Himself from His early years that made it necessary for Him to be Baptized, and yet others have made of Baptism nothing more that a sign or a symbol which holds no actual power to convert, forgive, or save a person. Each one of these is entirely contrary to Scripture and foreign to the person of Christ. John, indeed, seemed to struggle with this same point asking incredulously of Christ: **“I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me?”** Yet John’s very words shed some light on this matter, for he knew that the Baptism of repentance, that is of contrition over sin and faith in the Gospel, is for sinners and further if that is the case and John recognized his own need for it then Baptism must actually have sone power to accomplish that very thing. In fact, Peter declares plainly: *“Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a-preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water. The like figure whereunto even Baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh…*As were the Old Testament sacrifices according to Hebrews…*but the answer of a good conscience before God.” (1 Pet. 3:20-21)* now this is where the difficulty lies is it not? Why did Jesus need to be baptized if He had no sin of His own? Now to answer this question we need not disparage one of Christ’s means of grace, we need not imagine teachings repugnant to the person of God, nor do we need to resort to word gymnastics, but rather simply let Jesus’ answer to John suffice: **“It becometh us to fulfill all righteousness.”**

Letting Jesus’ words stand we see a couple of truths therefrom: first, Jesus’ baptism was to fulfill all righteousness, meaning that Jesus was here bridging the gap, so to speak, between the Old Testament of pictures, like circumcision, and the actual bringing forth of those same things like Baptism. It was the ushering in, in the eyes of the people, the fulfillment of all those former ways of the Old Testament. You see, the New Testament or the Gospel had always been in effect pointing forward in time to the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into the flesh of sinful men, but here in our text its manifestation had been fulfilled in their ears and eyes. The people that were there, including John the Baptist, and all who hear the telling of this event in Scripture are blessed with the knowledge that Christ came to fulfill all righteousness. Doing so means that Christ came to show forth and accomplish the fulfillment of the Old Testament, both the Law and the prophets, to declare His righteousness and the righteousness which is by faith in Jesus Christ. It is therefore, that Jesus Christ was Baptized to fulfill all righteousness, and though Baptism is for sinners:

1. **The Substitute was Baptized.** We read verses thirteen through sixteen of our text: **read verses here.** It must always be in our remembrance that the life, suffering, and death of Jesus was not done for Himself, He did not come for His own benefit, but for our benefit, He came to be a Substitute for us. When we have this in the forefront of our minds, each word and action take from us blasphemous thoughts such as we saw earlier, but invoke in our hearts and minds the understanding that they were done in our stead. It was God’s will that the Savior at John’s hand be baptized to show the necessity of Baptism for the Christian. Listen to Jesus’ words to Nicodemus shortly after this very event: *“Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God…Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3, 6)* These words of Jesus show the initiatory nature of Baptism. In it is given the power, by the Gospel connected with it, to forgive sin, to deliver from death and the devil, to engender faith by which these blessings are imparted. For this reason Baptism is called the sacrament of initiation because it initiates people into the faith. And so here in our text Baptism initiates the public ministry of Jesus, wherein He would preach the Gospel to the poor, keep the whole Law perfectly in every point, and die to pay the penalty of our guilt. Now it so happens that many Christians, though not despising the Sacrament of Baptism, have been deprived the opportunity of receiving Baptism. Examples of this include all the still born children, all aborted children, all children whose parents have not brought them to the waters of Baptism, to all who have been converted on their deathbed, among many others. One example in Scripture of such an one is the thief who hung on the cross next to Jesus and who, though having no opportunity to receive Baptism, was saved nonetheless. One may safely assume that the Substitute was thus Baptized for each of these, for any who never had the opportunity to be baptized. The entirety of our theme is [proven in our text in what took place immediately following His Baptism. The Holy Spirit descends upon Him in the form of a dove and His Father in heaven speaks, declaring Him to be His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. These actions show to us that the Baptism of Jesus pleased His Father who had sent Him, and the Spirit lighting upon Him shows that He was full of the Spirit of might and of power.

Now a few words must be said with regard to John’s role here at Jesus’ Baptism. John was sent as the forerunner of Christ, to make a people prepared for the Lord, and so He came with a message of repentance, and despite what many think concerning the term repentance, it does not only mean to be contrite over sin, but also is faith in the sacrifice of Christ. John’s Baptism, though predating the institution of Baptism by Jesus, was one and the same Baptism. John had come with a special call to do this very thing, whose work was to prepare hearts, and Jesus then gave Baptism to His Church to do the same thing throughout the New Testament until the last day. Thus Jesus came to fulfill all righteousness and did so by being Baptized as the Substitute for sinners. Let us then not come again under the yoke and bondage of the Law, but look to Christ who is the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel. Let us give thanks for our Savior, a Savior for all people, including the Gentiles, or the heathen among whose number we are. *“At midnight I will rise to give thanks unto Thee because of Thy righteous judgments.” (Ps. 119:62)* Amen.