

The Righteousness of God as Revealed in the Baptism of Jesus

by Art Katz

The sermon explores the concept of the righteousness of God, which is demonstrated through Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, where He identifies with Israel in her sinful condition and fulfills all righteousness.

Scripture: Matthew 3:17, Matthew 25:34

Topics: "Righteousness", "Identification with Sinners"

Description

Art Katz emphasizes the significance of Jesus' baptism as a profound act of identification with the sin of Israel, despite His sinlessness. This act fulfilled all righteousness, demonstrating God's mercy and the essence of true righteousness, which is rooted in community and covenant. Katz contrasts the righteousness of Jesus with the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, highlighting that true righteousness involves a deep compassion and identification with the suffering of others. He calls the church to replicate this righteousness by fully engaging with the plight of Israel, especially in its sinfulness, as a reflection of Christ's own actions. Ultimately, the sermon challenges believers to embody the righteousness of God through acts of mercy and love, transcending mere doctrinal adherence.

Transcript

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What are the implications for the church?

At the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist, the heavens were opened and the voice of the Father was heard, "This is My beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased."

I have always appreciated that episode. It was a significant event at the very commencement of the wilderness trials of Jesus. The voice of the Father was heard and the heavens were opened, and the Spirit came down as a dove and abode and dwelt upon Him. Like two mighty manifestations of God, both by His Spirit and by His voice, to attest that this Jesus was the Son of God. It was an age that was punctuated

and characterized by a great messianic expectation. A number of false messiahs had already come. But the thing that distinguished Jesus from all the others was His being sent by the Father. The voice of the Father and the Spirit came to attest that "this was the beloved Son." It came when Jesus was baptized by John in the Jordan. As a baptism for sinners, it was a profound call to repentance for the nation of Israel.

The author, Adolph Schlatter*, takes up the question as to why Jesus insisted that He be baptized, when John himself was reluctant, "I have more need to be baptized by You, because this is a baptism of sinners and You are clearly not a sinner." To which Jesus replied, "Allow this to be done, because it fulfills all righteousness" [paraphrased].

So there is something in this voluntary act of Jesus to be identified with the sin of Israel that is at the heart of the righteousness of God. I have always loved the word righteousness. We should all desire to know what the righteousness of God is, because everything is summed up in that word. The Son displayed it fully in that identification, and here we have a remarkable insight and revelation about the Lord and what His Sonship meant. It was a willingness to put Himself into the place of baptism as a sinner--though not a sinner.

I culled out some quotes on righteousness from the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, where it speaks of New Testament righteousness as having to do with 'Covenant fulfillment.' Anything that promotes and supports the covenant of God is the issue of God's righteousness. Nor is the issue of covenant a personal thing. But one of the evidences of having entered into that covenant is the new relationship with others who have equally entered it. Covenant means coming into covenant community. Anything that fosters and facilitates the community of God, which is like a foretaste of the Kingdom of God, is itself also the issue of righteousness. When Jesus entered the waters of baptism, He was identifying Himself with the community of God in Israel--a sinful community. He was identifying Himself with its sin, though He Himself was without sin.

This identification is at the heart of the righteousness of God. It is a picture of the Last Days in Psalm 102, when,

Thou wilt arise and have compassion on Zion; for it is time to be gracious to her, for the appointed time has come. Surely Thy servants find pleasure in her stones, and feel pity for her dust.

That is a remarkably pregnant and poetic statement that has not to do with archaeology, but with a people mysteriously called servants who identify with Israel. Israel has been reduced to rubble. Stones and dust are the statement of a judgment that has come devastatingly upon Israel so as to leave its cities in ruins and the Land desolate. It is a judgment that is deserved. And it is a judgment in exact proportion to Her sins, which sins are mounting.

When the entire world will be gloating and delighting in Israel's soon-coming misfortune, the scriptures suggest that there will be a small segment of servants that are identified with Israel by their mercy upon her dust and compassion upon Her stones. This is more than standing aside at a distance. It is identifying with their misfortune as if you yourself are deserving of it. You are joining Israel in Her sin. When God sees that in His servant people, the set time to favor Zion has come. Then the Deliverer comes out of Zion and saves Israel from her transgressions, restores her, and restores the cities that are devastated and laid waste. As I have said many times, the issue of Israel is not Israel, but the church. It is the church that has come into the call of servanthood, and is doing in the Last Days what Jesus did at the first.

This is the first act of Jesus, and therefore critically important. His public ministry had not yet begun. It waited on His attestation from the Father that He is the Messiah, the Son of God. In Scripture, the beginning is a statement of the end. The way Jesus began is the way we are to end. We become fully "en-Christened" when we will do what He did, which is to say, when we will enter the baptism of the sufferings of Israel for her sin as if we ourselves are sinners with them. This means we do not hold ourselves aloof and at a distance lest our spirituality be jeopardized by this identification and merging. We enter the waters.

Who can enter those waters without holding their skirts up thinking that their own righteousness might be subverted, or that their spirituality might be put under question? Jesus had a supreme confidence in His knowledge of God and the knowledge of Himself in God. It did not negate His spirituality, but rather it was the statement of it--and so too with us.

Going into those waters was entering into the full identification with Israel at her worst time--in her most flagrant sinful condition. That is what Jesus did in His baptism at the Jordan. Israel was in a despicable condition. Its High Priest, its priesthood, and its temple worship were totally corrupt. The Pharisees were instrumental in His own crucifixion, and even said that He got His power from Beelzebub. Wherever you looked, the whole of Israel was corrupt. It was Israel in her worst apostasy. And at that point Jesus identified Himself with Israel in that condition, for righteousness sake, "Allow this because it fulfills all righteousness."

Jesus is righteous because He acted for the benefit of others by identifying with the others, with Israel in their sin³⁴in baptism. He did not seek His own will, but that of the Father. Therefore His judgment was righteous. There was no unrighteousness in Jesus because He sought not His glory, but the glory of the One who sent Him. God's righteous acts are acts of mercy independent of the worth of the individual recipient, and so must ours be. What makes it righteous is that the mercy of God expressed by Jesus in His identification had nothing to do with the merit of the people to whom the mercy was being extended. They had no merit; they had no qualification. It was just the purest act of God, independent of, and contrary to, those to whom the mercy is being extended. That is what makes it the righteousness of God. It is the purest righteousness because it has not to do with the qualifications or deservedness of those to whom the mercy is extended. It is simply God being God. And what Jesus did in the Jordan was to show God to Israel, "This is what God is; He is with you in your sin. And because I am joining you in this, I will also be the instrument for your benefit to bring you out of it. And My sinlessness is not going to be compromised by this identification." Righteousness is an act. It is not a theoretical position, or a mental attitude, or even a moral disposition. It is an act that communicates what God is--and God is merciful.

Those who extend mercy to the undeserving, and give them clothing, food, water, when all the rest of the world is either ignoring them, or heaping abuse and scorn upon them, are called righteous by God. They "inherit the kingdom prepared for them." The gift of righteousness is called the gift of eternal life. But eternal life is also the gift of the Kingdom, because the Kingdom itself is not provisional, or temporal, but eternal. So when you are given the gift of life, you are given the gift of the Kingdom. It is one and the same. The Kingdom is only reserved for the righteous. In Matthew chapter 25, those who demonstrate that righteousness are those who come to Israel in her final debilitation. Here are people who extend themselves in a complete identification. And that qualifies them for the Kingdom. The only other alternative to the righteousness of God is the pharisaic righteousness. Their righteousness, which is their righteousness, does not require an identification with the sinner, but an aloofness and a distance. They hold themselves up as lofty exemplars of moral virtue. But the righteousness of God is an 'immersion into.'

It is the complete opposite, because the motive for the Pharisee is his own elevation, whereas the motive of Jesus is the glorification of the Father.

Side-by-side, we see these two forms of righteousness--the one always persecuting the other. Jesus' crucifixion was made inevitable right from His very first act in the Jordan, because it set in motion something completely antithetical to the righteousness of the Pharisees. Either the Pharisees had to repent of their form of righteousness and adopt His, or, blot out and remove from their sight this One whose example and presence offered an alternative to what they were about. Men will kill to maintain self-righteousness. It is amazing. Either by word or by deed, there is something so powerful in the necessity to establish ourselves in our own righteousness. And we will sanctify and justify the murder of Jesus on the basis of self-righteousness--"for the nation's sake." These two forms of righteousness are continually in conflict. Do we, as the church, recognize the difference? To what extent are we suffering persecution, in one form or another, for the sake of the righteousness of God?

One way to identify which righteousness we live by is our relationship to Israel. How will it stand when Israel will visibly become a sinful nation and will be suffering judgment for its sins? Many who are currently celebrating Israel for the wrong reasons do so because they see Israel heroically and romantically. But when that is shot down, will they continue to be identified? Jesus had no fear of being contaminated by sinners. One of the great rebukes against Him by the Jews of His time was His free association with sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors--as if that was the clearest evidence that He could not be the Son of God!

Jesus freely identified with the sinner, and therefore contradicted a false concept of righteousness. But He could do it without loss, because He knew He was from the Father, and that everything He received was of the Father. We, too, are in the righteousness of God when we have a supreme confidence that we are in God and of God, and that there is not going to be a loss suffered by our identification with sin, or with sinners. While we ourselves are scrupulous to avoid sin, we do not avoid sinners. And except that your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the Pharisees you cannot enter the Kingdom. In a certain sense you do not wait to inherit it, you are already in it. It brings its own reward, which is the Kingdom, because what you are exhibiting is something so beyond what is humanly possible. It is the exhibition of the very essence of what God is in Himself, which is righteousness.

There was a wonderful unselfconsciousness about Jesus. He did not have to effect or try to maintain His spirituality. He simply was. This was God in the person of the Son of God. He expressed the Father continually. It is a remarkable picture to compare the Pharisees who came to the Jordan to rebuke John and to say to him, "By what authority... Are you the prophet...?" They were sent to investigate, but they never once entered those waters. They never saw themselves as needing a baptism of repentance because they saw themselves as already righteous. And then came the Son of God, who was impeccable from His birth, and had never sinned, and immediately goes into those waters and compels John to baptize Him. So we see the contrast between Jesus with the righteousness of God, and the Pharisees and their own righteousness, coming to the brink but not entering, coming to criticize, to rebuke, to hold up for derision, rather than to receive the benefit.

If the Pharisees had entered those waters the whole of the subsequent history of Israel might have been altered. The judgment that came in 70 AD, with the destruction of the temple, and later, the destruction of the city, and the destruction of the nation could conceivably have been altered had the nation repented. One of the things that Schlatter makes clear is that the Pharisees were not just a religious party, they were

the predominant rabbinical influence over the entire nation. So as they went, so went the nation. Had they repented, the nation would have followed. But no, it came only to interrogate rather than to avail themselves. That is when John called them vipers, and called them to show forth the fruits of repentance. He really let them have it, with great invective, which was deserved because of what they represented. Seeing the provision of God in baptism, they withheld themselves, and even condemned it.

Schlatter writes (paraphrased):

"The righteous man identifies with community, because he sees righteousness in the whole context of covenant community. The unrighteous man, however, withdraws himself from it...Jesus did not merely speak of love, He had it. He saw people's need as clearly as the Baptist. He saw the necessity of repentance and God's readiness to hear the repentant person's request for forgiveness, and to redeem it with the regal working of His grace...He saw with entire clarity that He acted differently than other people, wherefore they took offense at His behavior. He was slandered for His friendly dealings with sinners, but could not desert them, though He did not find the reproach pleasant to bear, for He had been given rapport with sinners by God."

He makes the issue of identification, the issue of love. Love for the Father, and love for the people, even in that condition. And He identified with them, being fully aware of what was represented in their sin. The Son of God is also the Son of Man. So there is a supreme awareness of His own relationship with the Father, but from the Son of Man's side, it was a supreme realization of His identification with man, and with sin. It is not only a picture of the Lord; it is a picture of us, who are called to be the sons of God. That we are aware of our humanity, but we are aware also, so to speak, of our divinity, or our identification with God. And it is in that tension that our obedience is called for.

Schlatter continues:

"The baptism possessed for Him unconditional, ethical necessity. The term righteousness denotes unconditional endorsement so that a coherent, complete will is demanded of what is called righteous. Jesus, by reckoning His baptism as part of His righteousness, counted it as part of His duty towards God and the people. Thus He accomplished all righteousness. When He entered the waters, all righteousness was fulfilled, because of that perfect identification of Himself in what was represented in that water with the nation. He would not have done His entire duty toward God and the community, if He had preserved Himself pure, [but] distanced from sinners. Now, however, He did it completely when He united Himself with them and made their need His."

What a statement! That is exactly what Psalm 102 is speaking about; exactly what Matthew 25 is speaking about, and exactly what Matthew 5 is speaking about, in the righteousness that exceeds that of the Pharisees. Righteousness is identification. Think of the Father's response to this act. It is not an act that was compelled. It was an act that came out of the sonship of Jesus, of what He was inwardly and authentically in Himself. Jesus could have had more reason to stand at the banks of the Jordan than the Pharisees, and not enter lest His spirituality be compromised. Because if His spirituality was compromised, how could He then lead Israel, how could He then be their Messiah. He had more reason than the Pharisees did to keep His skirts clean. But He went into those waters and insisted, though John himself was reluctant, that it was to "fulfill all righteousness." Then came the voice of the Father, "This is My beloved Son."

There is only one other occasion in the history of the Holy faith where I believe the voice of God has rung out over an individual, and that was at the mount of Transfiguration. So this is an enormously significant thing, because John the Baptist himself had no natural identification by which he could recognize Jesus as the Messiah of Israel. The fact that they were cousins, the fact that he might have heard about the circumstances, both of his own birth and Jesus, was not for him the conclusive proof. "It was necessary that I be baptizing in water, that I might identify the Messiah of Israel."

It had to take place in the water. And the voice ringing out with, "This is My beloved Son," is more than the Father pointing out a fact. He was saying that in this act, this that Jesus has performed, what He has done now in this identification, has really revealed Me in My righteousness. The whole function of the Son is to make the Father known, and fulfill His purposes and glorify Him. First the attestation, and then the enablement to fulfill the call of sonship and messiahship through the Holy Spirit coming down and abiding upon Him.

Jesus' baptism began outside the city in the Jordan in the wilderness; it ended outside the city near the dung heap, being crucified between criminals--being made sin. The identification that began at the commencement ends now in the full register of sin, in His own being, to the point where the Father has to forsake Him. This identification is not ceremonial, but an actual immersion. Just as Jesus was immersed in the waters of the Jordan, He was immersed in sin at the Cross. He became it.

I think the church, like Jesus, will have the issue put before them through the crisis coming to Israel. Israel is for the church in the Last Days the issue of its true righteousness. How it relates, how it identifies, how it withholds itself, how it seeks to defend Israel rather than recognize the apparent sinfulness of the nation, has everything to do with itself. The Kingdom will have come when the church replicates the righteousness of Jesus in a baptism of complete identification with Israel in her sin. We will have obtained sonship in that same moment^{3/4}and maybe even a bride adorned for the bridegroom, just like the bridegroom in His own righteousness.

And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith (Phil. 3:9).

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

It is clear that any other righteousness than God's is a pharisaic, self-righteousness and falls short of God's glory. And it is, therefore, only a self-serving religious instrumentality. The only righteousness that is righteous is the righteousness of God--and that is a gift.

Schlatter continues,

"The Kingdom will have come when the church replicates the righteousness of Jesus in a baptism of complete identification with Israel in her sin. It will have obtained sonship."

In other words, identification is uniting. It is not just acknowledging, it's joining in, it's becoming one with. The point I would like to make is that we are not any more capable of uniting with the sins of man than we are in uniting with God. If we are only identified with God theoretically, or doctrinally, by subscribing to correct doctrines, we will not have any capacity to be united with the sins of man. Uniting with God is the key to uniting with man. Being one with Him in His righteousness enables us to be one with them in their

sin. In his aloofness, the Pharisee is indicating that he is not only alienated from man and his sin, but from God and His righteousness. The issue, in the last analysis, is union with God. That is why Jesus was the Son of God. He was in union with the Father, and acted out of that union.

In Matthew 25, the righteous, on being rewarded with the Kingdom, say, "When did we see You hungry and thirsty?" They didn't even realize that in doing it for them, they were doing it for Him. They were righteous through and through, and could not do otherwise. They were in union with God, and acted as God--without any thought of the consequence, or the reward. That is righteousness. The Pharisee will always think in terms of, "What is the consequence for me? How will this affect my spirituality and the way I am perceived by men? True righteousness has no regard or consideration for oneself.

All of Jesus' subsequent ministry, right to the point of His crucifixion, was acted out of the same righteousness by which it commenced. The thing that the Father approved from the beginning was the way that Jesus consistently continued throughout the three and half years. That is why the Spirit of God abided and dwelt upon Him, and never had to leave again. Love, when it seeks to enter into such a communion with sinners, must possess power not to defile itself by the corruption of others, and beyond that, to bring them help and to overcome their evil. He was upheld in communion with the people, right up until the Cross, by the brave assurance that He would conquer, and not be conquered. There was no fear of a loss of spirituality, righteousness, or integrity. How can you lose if you are in communion with the Father? The one who can be like that is not afraid of being corrupted, because he realizes that his spirituality is not the result of his own attainment. If it is only your own attainment, you can lose it as easily as you have gotten it. But if it is something that has come to you by your union with God, it can never be lost--because God Himself is eternal and enduring. That is freedom. Hallelujah. O, for the righteousness of God!

*From different works by Adolph Schlatter, a little known Swiss German theologian, who was a lonely voice for truth amidst the liberal theological world at the turn of the 20th century.

Scripture quotes from the New American Standard Bible, (The Lockman Foundation).

Acknowledgments: Grant Williams, New Zealand for faithful transcription work

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/art-katz/the-righteousness-of-god-as-revealed-in-the-baptism-of-jesus/>

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