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All Righteousness Fulfilled

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John would have hindered Him, saying, I have need to be baptized of Thee, and comest Thou to me? But Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffereth Him" (Matt. 3:13-15).

"Thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness."

If you look at all the accounts of John's ministry in the four Gospels, you will find that the baptism of John is specially related to the judgment of sin. You will remember how the people came and were baptized, confessing their sin, and when the Pharisees and the Sadducees came John flamed out at them - "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance; and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father" - implying, I think, that they did not come with a sense of sin, but rather as righteous ones who were fleeing from the wrath to come, standing upon their religious and traditional ground: Abraham was their father. So that John, in his baptism, is particularly dealing with the matter of the judgment of sin, and that, of course, is the meaning of baptism, baptism being, as we know, an outward form expressing or setting forth death, a dying, being buried, being brought down to death.

This baptism, or death as represented thereby, is a matter of all righteousness in the sense of the judgment of sin. Now, sin is an intrusion of a foreign element into the kingdom of God. I think we may say that this world as created by God before sin entered was in a very real sense the kingdom of God, and sin entering was an intrusion of something altogether foreign and inimical to God and

His nature. The presence of that which is foreign to God intruding itself and invading the kingdom of God raises the whole question of righteousness. What right has sin in the kingdom of God? What right has sin in God's world, in God's presence, in God's creation? It has no right, it is a false thing, a foreign, alien thing, a thing altogether contrary to God, which God does not countenance. The attitude of God towards sin is rightly - "You have no right here, you are an intruder, you are a false thing, you do not belong here!" It is like a burglar having broken in, "What right have you here, you do not belong here, this is not your place!" That is the meaning of the presence of sin. It is therefore unrighteous.

And seeing that sin is never regarded as merely an abstract thing in God's universe, but always as bound up with the sinner, that the sinner and sin are one, God does not cut in between them; they are one. Such a thing as a sinful man or a sinful woman has no right in the presence of God, has no place or standing in the kingdom of God. They are a foreign element in God's universe, an intrusion, without any rightful ground at all. God meets that and says, "All unrighteousness must go out, I cannot have any unrighteous elements in My kingdom!" So it is met and it is judged and the judgment of sin and the sinner, is death. And then if there is the kingdom of God, John's word is - "*Repent*, for the kingdom is at hand, is here, is imminent!" The word of the Lord Jesus was the same - "*Repent*, for the kingdom is imminent, the kingdom is at hand, the kingdom has come!" - if there is a kingdom and in that kingdom no unrighteous element or person can have a place, the unrighteous person must have been completely put out through death and we are now regarded as through faith in the kingdom, in the presence of God.

Righteousness Fulfilled Once for All

Now, all this is very simple and familiar ground, but it is just a word of re-emphasis upon one particular point. Beloved, if you and I did ever come to the place where we saw Christ's death as being our death, where we testified to that fact in baptism, then in His death He fulfilled all righteousness. And that means, for one thing, that He put out all unrighteousness in Himself, all the unrighteousness of man, your unrighteousness and my unrighteousness, our unrighteous state and condition - all that about us which is an intrusion into God's kingdom, God's universe and has no right, no standing, no place at all. He put all that out in His own death, which death was the judgment upon unrighteousness in God's world. If we have by faith taken our place in the death of Christ, that death was a once and for all death, and you and I are not going to be baptized afresh every time we are conscious of how unrighteous we are in ourselves, because that would simply be crucifying Christ afresh and the Lord Jesus died once for all.

And the point is this: that you and I, if we did ever definitely and deliberately come to that place of accepting Christ's death as our death and testifying thereto in baptism, we, with all our unrighteousness in the sight of God, went out at that time. And in our risen union with Christ we have a place in His presence, in His kingdom, on rightful ground without a challenge, or a question, or an interrogation, or anything that need trouble our consciences. Our consciences can and should be washed, purged, cleansed, once and for all in this matter because in Christ's death all that intrusion into God's universe where you and where I were concerned, went out under judgment. He fulfilled all righteousness; He put out all unrighteousness.

You see, the thing that is the righteous thing, the righteous thing for God and to God and with God, is that things which are false and wrong and unrighteous should be slain. That is due to God. Righteousness first of all is towards God. What is God's due? God has got to be satisfied in this matter of righteousness. First of all it is not God being righteous to us - there is that about it - but first of all and primarily, it is righteousness towards God. God is the One who has been sinned

against, God is the One who has been offended, God is the One against whom all this has been done. It is against God. It is unrighteousness God-ward.

God created a world which satisfied Him. Now then, you do something in this world for your own pleasure and satisfaction, you set up a home, you decorate it and furnish it and make it something beautiful and good, possessing treasures which are of value to you and there is your home to your delight and satisfaction. And then the thief, the burglar, comes and breaks in and begins to smash up everything in your home and destroy and spoil and mar. What is the position? He has no right, no standing, and this is unrighteousness. You say, "What right have you to do this?" If he had the right to do it, the whole position would be changed. "What right have you here doing this? You have none!" Therefore you call in the law because it is a question of righteousness. The penalty is against not just the whim of this person, but the downright unrighteousness.

That is what has happened to God, so God has met sin and the sinner on the question of righteousness to Himself, and the Lord Jesus entered into that position and satisfied God on the matter of all righteousness. And that which is right and righteous towards God is that He should have what is according to Himself, His own mind and nature, and nothing to the contrary. The Lord Jesus has, on the one hand, brought all that is unrighteous to God under the penalty and judgment of death, and on the other hand, has provided God with a state of perfect righteousness.

You and I, in the very initial act of our Christian lives, have taken our position in Christ in that twofold way so that we are no longer an intrusion into the presence of God. The whole weight of the Word is that we have the right, we have access, we have an open way: "Let us come boldly, let us have confidence, let us have peace with God". We have a standing in the very presence of God and a place in the kingdom of God without any question whatsoever from God's side as to our rightfulness of being in that position if we are in Christ. Yes, "The sons of ignorance and night may dwell in the Eternal Light".

Now my special emphasis is here. It did happen, it has happened. If we have at any time come to that place where we saw Christ as our representative dealing with the whole matter of righteousness towards God and unrighteousness in man and in God's world, and we by faith took our place in Him and bore our testimony to that position, it happened from God's side and you and I ought to recognize that it is an act once and for all. We ought never to allow the question to arise as to whether we are an intrusion into the presence of God, into the kingdom of God, whether we have any right, whether we dare. You see, God is not glorified by any kind of hesitancy in those who profess to be in the Lord Jesus. I believe this is the meaning of all that there is in the Word, both in the Old and New Testaments, about praise. If you look at it, you will see that that is the secret foundation and basis of praise.

Righteousness Fulfilled the Ground of Praise

What is praise? Praise springs from this consciousness, this realization, that there is no question whatever between yourself and God on the matter of righteousness. There is no way through until we get onto that ground. The tribes of Israel when setting off on a journey through the land, were headed by the tribe of Judah, and Judah had a banner inscribed with a lion's head, 'The Lion of the Tribe of Judah'. Judah led the way, and Judah means praise. The Lord put praise in the forefront of the host to lead them through the land of their enemies. You know how, more than once, that truth is brought out in the Old Testament. They put singers in the front, but the singers were the priests, the priests and the Levites. When they began to sing and to praise, the Lord set ambushments; it was victory (2 Chron. 20:22). Well, why the priests? Simply because the whole matter of sin is dealt

with in priesthood, the whole question of righteousness is finished, and therefore, if it is, well, praise goes before and there is victory.

You come to the letter to the Hebrews. You know how in chapter 2 the Lord Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, is heard saying, "In the midst of the congregation will I sing Thy praise." Yes, praise on the ground of priesthood, and the whole question of praise springs from the consciousness that this question of our rightfulness to be in the presence of God is settled; not a right in our own title, it is the right which is in the Lord Jesus by faith. We will never get anywhere on the journey through the wilderness or in the realm of the powers of evil until we have learned to sing praise - I do not mean that literally only, but till there is the joy of the Lord in our lives springing from the question being once and for all settled that we are not an alien element in the presence of God, we are not foreigners with the Lord, we are not intruders, but we are there by title, by right, through grace.

I know what you are thinking - but what about all these ups and downs and ins and outs and all these chequered experiences where sin and unrighteousness still abound in our case - and it is just there that our thinking and conception and apprehension is so confused. If only we would get it disentangled and straightened out and cleared up, we should be saved from so much of the misery which dishonours God. There is all the difference between these two things. How can I put it? I am tempted to take an illustration from something that perhaps you might not agree with.

Charles Dickens wrote a book called "Oliver Twist". In that book there is a character, a girl called Nancy, and Nancy had a very bad and unfortunate history and a very evil set of associations and connections in her life. The day came when an opportunity was presented to Nancy to break with that whole thing by being brought into touch with something altogether different, and the other person pleaded with her to leave that whole association and come and be taken care of and helped to live differently. It was the great crisis for Nancy and she said, "No, I cannot, this is my life, I am too wedded to this, it has become too much a part of me; really, I love it in a sense, while I hate it!" and so she went back. Now, if Nancy had yielded to the appeal and taken refuge with these new friends, do you think for a moment that Nancy would never have had another wrong thought, never again had an evil feeling, that right throughout her whole constitution she would have been another being, that whole thing would have fallen away at once, none of its effect, none of its influence, none of its power would ever have touched her, it would have been at once as though she had never been in that home at all? I do not think so. I do think this, that the new relationship would have become a new power by which Nancy would have been tremendously helped and changed from day to day, but the whole point would have turned upon the new relationship.

Now, turn that inwardly in the spiritual life and it is this. You see, it is not that we shed once and for all all traces of our old unrighteous life, but there is a new inward relationship which represents an attitude that has been taken. All that Nancy needed to have done was to say, "Yes, I hate that and I turn from it and I accept this which I love!" That would have been the new connection, the new relationship. It would have been a new power in her life, and in our case it is not that we once and for all shed everything of that old unrighteous state, but we have get a new relationship to One who is holy, who is righteous, and our attitude is the turning-point, not what we become in ourselves, but our attitude.

Now, let us recognise this. It is our daily attitude. Are we hungering after that? Are we saying, "Oh no, I cannot give that up, I must have it!" If so, then, beloved, it certainly is a big question as to whether the real work has been done, but if this is our position - "Oh, I hate that, I loathe that, I am against that and I am for the Lord, I am with the Lord; by His grace, as He enables me, I am going on with

Him!" - it is on that ground that we abide in His presence and are accepted. There has been a passing over in heart and a new relationship brought about within, and that new relationship is going to do the work as we go on, while we are repudiating.

That was Israel in the wilderness. The trouble with Israel in the wilderness was this - they were still harking back to Egypt in their hearts, they kept a heart longing for Egypt, and the Lord could not get them through. But do believe this, that if your heart is towards the Lord, if you have repudiated in the death of the Lord Jesus all that unrighteousness, if you have turned in that death and accepted God's verdict upon the unrighteous things in your life that you are and you have through that death, if you have turned to the Lord and are daily, in spite of weaknesses and failures still in that attitude - "No, no, I still hate that and I hate it more and more, and this I cleave to more and more" - the heart attitude on the basis of a new relationship results in two things - our standing and abiding in the presence of the Lord, no question, we have a right there. We are on the ground of His Son and it provides the Lord with the ground for doing whatever is going to be done in us, to conform us to His own image, and to deal with unrighteousness.

But do remember that we paralyze the hand of the Lord in changing us while we have any question at all as to our right of relationship with Him, our right in His presence, while there remains the slightest suggestion in our hearts that we are an intrusion into the kingdom of God, into the presence of the Lord. While there is any question whatever, we simply paralyze the Lord's hand in doing any work in us.

Oh, may the Lord enable us to see that really when we took that position, turned from this and said, "Yes, I see and I embrace what the Cross offers through His death and I take my place in that judgment!" - if we have taken that position, oh may the Lord help us to see that something happened then which is once for all, which is altogether another thing from the process. The process of sanctification is another thing. It is not to overlap, it is not to touch this matter of the initial once and for all position. So today we ought to rejoice in this fact.

Yes, there is lots of unrighteousness about us still, still a lot that has to be dealt with, nevertheless, however much there is of that, it does not affect this basic thing which has been made good to us in the day that we took our position by faith in the death of the Lord Jesus. So that whatever I am today that I would not be, whatever I am not that I would be, in Christ by faith I am not a stranger to God, I am not a foreigner, an alien, an intruder, I am not in the category of the robber. I am there in His presence, in His house, accepted.

I know how very elementary that is in the matter of the gospel, but I do feel that the getting clear on these matters has a great deal to do with the joy in our lives and you and I are not going to get very far without that basic joy of the Lord springing from the settled assurance that through that one act of faith in the Lord Jesus in His dealing with the question of all righteousness, we are accepted in the Beloved and have a right in the presence of God. And there is no question whatever with God, there is no suspicion on His part, no eyeing us with doubt at all. We are welcome in His presence.