

Most of us have had the experience of taking some kind of test. It’s hard to imagine going through our school system without ever taking a test—and when you think of it that way, you might feel you’ve taken more tests than you could count. Now, some tests are more important than others, and in some cases, an awful lot rides on a single test. I have vivid memories of two tests at the seminary level—a Greek exam that would determine if I got in the rest of the program, and a theological interview with two professors that determined if I got out. You don’t forget the feelings of those major tests, even if you forget some of the precise questions over time.

During the church year season of Epiphany, we rapidly fast forward through the life of our Lord Jesus. This is because the Gospels are nearly silent when it comes to Jesus’ childhood and formative years. So when we meet Jesus in today’s Gospel Lesson he is a fully grown man, ready to step into His role as the anointed Savior. You probably know that as Savior, he has come to offer His life as a sacrificial payment for sin. That is essential to the good news of the Bible. But in order to make that payment, there is a test for Jesus to take. It’s the most important test of all time, and I say that with no exaggeration. What is that test? Jesus talks about it with John the Baptist in today’s reading from Matthew. When John hesitates to baptize Jesus, our Lord responds, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”

What did Jesus mean? Fulfilling all righteousness meant, at least in part, that a test had to be taken. It was a test that had never been passed, not in the history of humankind. The test? Live by God’s Law. Keep it perfectly in both spirit and letter. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. All the time; every time; no exceptions. No one had ever come near to passing this test. Jesus’ mission depended on Him not only passing this test but “acing” it. Do you see how incredible this is? The test everyone else had failed, Jesus is supposed to come pass with flying colors; get an A +, 100% grade. Fulfill all righteousness. And according to Jesus, this involves a baptism.

But why? Why the perfect score, and why the baptism? The answer is phenomenal. The answer is that Jesus came to do things He didn’t have to do, for people like us, who could not do them. Jesus came to do things He didn’t have to do, for people like us, who could not do them. When we talk about the good news of the Bible, this is what we mean.

If you’ve ever really tried to love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and your neighbor as yourself, you know why this is of crucial importance. If you’ve ever tried to sincerely keep the commandments of God, such as “no other gods before me,” “remember the Sabbath day,” “You shall not kill, steal, commit adultery, or destroy your neighbor’s reputation,” you know what your score is. It’s a test you can’t pass. And if you can’t pass it, the way to God is blocked.

But seeing our helpless condition, Jesus came into the world to do things we could not. He came to fulfill all righteousness, to take the test and ace it, but not for himself. Do you understand? He was taking the test for you—as your substitute test-taker. He created a perfect record not for himself—he had no need of it, Jesus is God from the beginning—but the perfect record he created is for us. The perfect grade He earned, is the perfect grade that goes in your file. It is credited to your account. God the Father sees you through the same lens that He sees His Son. And do you realize how this was credited to your account?

Again, Jesus came to do things he didn't have to do, for people like us, who could not do them. Jesus did not have to be baptized for forgiveness. There was no need for him to repent, no sin He needed to personally turn away from. But what was needed was a delivery system, a way to transmit his perfect record to individual people, a way to convey the credit of his perfect score, and that way was and is baptism. In baptism, a person who cannot pass the test of Law is covered with the perfection of Jesus, the Law Filler. The baptized are draped in a spiritual robe bought and paid for by Jesus perfect performance. By the way, this is the deep truth behind the tradition of dressing a baptized person in a white garment. In some cases, that garment has been kept in the family for generations, a beautiful outward sign of the spiritual reality that they baptized are clothed with the purity and perfection of Christ Jesus, God's Son and our Savior.

And here is the mystery and wonder of God's love on full display, because Jesus took that perfectly fulfilled righteousness and made an exchange. On the cross, He was treated as if he had utterly failed the test. He took that from you and me, to satisfy divine justice, and in the exchange give you all the benefits of His perfect record, so that you are treated as if you had aced God's test. When the full impact of this exchange breaks through to a person, it is the ultimate relief, the greatest good news, because all the pressure is released, and life with God becomes a joy. The believer's eyes are opened to see how backwards this is from how humanity looks at religion. It's just this simple. Human religion says: Save Yourself! The Way of Jesus says: You Can't! But He can. And He does. By doing what He doesn't have to do, for people like us, who cannot. To fulfill all righteousness, He submitted to baptism, so that a connection to you could be created, a baptismal connection by which He makes His exchange with you.

Take this to heart, you who are baptized, today, by faith, you can take Jesus by the hand, and stand with Him in the water, and hear the Father's voice, saying to both of you, "You are my beloved...with you I am well pleased." Believe it. Believe these words with all your heart. All the time. Every time you are tested. You are beloved of the Father and well pleasing to Him, because everything that is true of His Son is now true of you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.