

Fitting

MOVEMENT ONE – THE WORDS MATTHEW KEPT

Matthew was not there.

He is not called until chapter 9, sitting at a tax booth some distance and some years from the Jordan. Whatever happened in the water that day reached him the way most of it reached him – from someone who had been standing on the bank.

And what he kept is an odd thing to keep.

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptised by him. John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptised by you, and do you come to me?"

That is an argument, and it embarrasses everyone in it. John is telling Jesus he has this the wrong way round. Jesus is standing in a queue of people confessing their sins. A man watching would have concluded that the wrong one of the two was in the water.

Mark records the baptism and gives us no conversation at all. Luke tells us it happened almost in passing, in a subordinate clause, while he gets on with the prayer and the dove. John's Gospel never narrates the baptism itself – only the Baptist afterwards, telling people what he saw. Matthew alone keeps the objection, and Matthew alone keeps the answer.

But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness." Then he consented.

These are the first words the adult Jesus speaks in the New Testament. Not the first words in his life – Luke has the twelve-year-old in the temple, *I must be in my Father's house* – but the first he speaks in public, the first spoken to a crowd, and the first that anybody wrote down.

You would expect a claim. An announcement, a text, something to open with. What he says instead is that something is fitting, and that it is fitting for the two of them together.

There is only one reason to preserve a scene like this. It creates a problem – why is the sinless one being baptised for the forgiveness of sins? – and the church that told this story could have solved the problem simply by not telling it. Mark nearly does. John effectively does. Matthew keeps it, difficulty and all, because of the sentence in the middle of it.

Which means the sentence is worth more than the difficulty. That is a reasonable place to start reading.

— MOVEMENT TWO — WHAT HE ACTUALLY SAID —

The English is smooth enough to walk straight past. The Greek is stranger.

| ἄφες ἄρτι, οὕτως γὰρ ἔστιν ἡμῖν πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην

Four words in that sentence are doing more than the translation lets them.

ἄφες ἄρτι. *Let it be so now.* Permit it — just now. It is a concession for this moment, and everything hangs on the word *now*. Jesus does not tell John he is wrong. He tells him he is early. John's instinct is sound; the objection will hold on any other day. Today it is set aside.

πρέπον ἐστίν. Not *we must*. Not *it is required*. *It is fitting* — becoming, seemly, proper to the occasion. It is closer to what you would say about the right clothes for a wedding than about a rule that has to be obeyed. This is why the English feels slightly off when you slow down on it. We expect obligation and are given fittingness.

ἡμῖν. Plural. *Fitting for us.* Jesus does not say it is fitting that he be baptised. He puts John inside the sentence. Whatever is being fulfilled here is not being fulfilled alone — the man doing the baptising has a part in it, and is told so. That word will matter later.

πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην. *To fulfil all righteousness.* The infinitive is aorist. Greek verbs tell you the shape of an action as well as its timing: one form says *kept on doing*, another says *did, once, whole*. This is the second. Not a programme he is beginning, but a single completed act — and *all* of it, not some part.

πληρῶ is Matthew's own word. He uses it again and again for prophecy arriving at what it was always for. Here he uses it of an action rather than a text.

And to fulfil something is not to obey it. It is to fill it up until it is finally full — like a form that has been sitting half-completed for a very long time, and someone comes along and finishes it. Whatever Jesus is doing in that water, he is not keeping a rule. He is finishing something.

Two people can perform identical conduct and only one of them be righteous.

Then there is the thing the whole scene depends on, which no amount of Greek will show you, because it is in the verses before it.

John is preaching a baptism of repentance. Every person in that river is turning around. They come confessing sins, and the word is *μετάνοια* – a change of mind, a reversal, the whole of you facing the other way.

Except one man. He has nothing to turn from.

And he gets in the water anyway.

He is not repenting. He is joining the people who are.

— MOVEMENT THREE – THE WORD UNDERNEATH THE WORD —

Righteousness is a word we have made small.

Ask most people what it means and you will get something about behaviour: being good, being upright, keeping the rules, not doing the things on the list. It is a score. You have more of it or less of it, and it belongs to you the way your height belongs to you. The word *self-righteous* survives in ordinary English precisely because that is what we think righteousness is – a possession, and therefore something a person can be smug about owning.

The Greeks thought so too, and they got there first.

Δικαιοσύνη was one of the great civic virtues. In Plato it is the ordered soul, each part doing its own work; in the courts and the marketplace it is giving each man his due. A quality. Something you have, or fail to have, and could in principle be measured on.

Then the word was conscripted.

Two or three centuries before Christ, Jewish scholars in Alexandria set about translating the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, and they needed a word for צִדְקָה, *tzedaqah*. They chose *dikaïosynē*. It was the nearest thing available and it was not near enough, because *tzedaqah* is not a quality at all.

Tzedaqah is relational. It means rightness *within a bond* – acting as the relationship you are actually standing in requires. A judge is *tzaddiq* when he judges as a judge should. A father is *tzaddiq* toward his children, a king toward his people, a friend toward his friend. The word is meaningless in isolation. You cannot be righteous by yourself with nobody there, because there is nobody for you to be righteous *toward*.

Which explains the thing that makes no sense in Greek and perfect sense in Hebrew: in the Old Testament, God's righteousness rescues people.

A righteous God and a Saviour; there is none besides me.

I bring near my righteousness; it is not far off, and my salvation will not delay.

| *My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation has gone out.*

Isaiah puts righteousness and salvation in the same breath, over and over, as though they were two words for one thing.² To a Greek that is a category error. Justice sentences people; it does not save them. But if righteousness means acting as the bond requires, and God has bound himself to this people, then of course his righteousness rescues them. Rescue is what faithfulness looks like when the other party is in trouble.

So the word arrives in the New Testament already stretched. The old sense never quite leaves – the moral colour is still in it. But underneath sits a Hebrew word meaning *acting rightly toward the one you are bound to*, and that is the sense the New Testament writers inherited.

Which gives us the sentence that changes how the rest of this reads.

Two people can perform identical conduct and only one of them be righteous, because righteousness includes who you are facing.

That is not a paradox. It is what happens to any relational word. Two men send the same amount of money to the same address on the same day; one is supporting his children and the other is paying a debt he resents. The transactions are identical. The men are not. The difference is not in the act but in the bond the act is answering.

Jesus never gives us a definition of righteousness. He does something more useful – he tells us what can be done to it and with it, and every one of them is impossible if it is a score.¹

You can be *hungry* for it. Not a standard you meet, but something you lack and want; and you do not starve for moral correctness.

You can be *persecuted* for it. It is visible enough to get you killed.

You can *fake* it – do it to be seen by others, and lose it in the doing. Which means righteousness has a direction. The same act, aimed at the watchers instead of at God, stops being the thing it was.

You can *seek* it, and it belongs to the kingdom rather than to the seeker.

You can *walk* in it. John came, he says, in the way of righteousness – a road, not a score.

And it can *exceed* the scribes and Pharisees. That is the one that settles it. By any moral audit the Pharisees were the most righteous men available; they were not pretending, and most of them were not hypocrites. If what Jesus wants is more of what they already had, the demand is hopeless. But he is not asking for more. He is asking for a different kind of thing, and the difference is not quantity. It is direction.

Which brings us back to a man standing in a river he has no need to be in.

He is not there to demonstrate a quality. He is there because of who he is standing with.

Around 2012, not long after the family work started, I was given something most people did not get. I could go into the units. Everyone else booked a professional visit and met a man in a room set aside for it; I walked in and found him where he lived.

The organisation I worked with at the time was uneasy about it. They thought I was close to breaching the regulations and taking liberties that could bring them into disrepute. I thought their concerns were misplaced. Later I did a good many things closer to the line than that, and they worked.

Then one afternoon I was walking through the medium prison and an officer stopped me and asked what I was doing there. He turned me back, and as he did it he took hold of my badge and read it. *Who are you, and what organisation do you work with?*

It is a long walk from the medium out to the church property, and it is uphill.

By the time I got to the top I was physically ill. Not because I had been caught – I had done nothing I could not account for, and I still think the access was right. It was that his hand had been on my badge. Whatever I did in there, I did in somebody else's name, and I had never once thought about what my freedom might cost them. I had been so certain I was right that it had not occurred to me to ask who I was standing in front of.

My sister opened the door, took one look at me and said, "What's wrong with you? You look terrible." I was grey and shaking.

I was totally right. I was also totally wrong. Nothing about what I had been doing changed that afternoon.

MOVEMENT FOUR – WHAT HAPPENED TO THE WORD

This is the first piece I have written on the New Testament, and it arrives where it does because that is where my reading had got to.

For a year I read the Old Testament through in Hebrew order, and the word I was following was *hesed* – the word God chooses when Moses asks to see his glory and God tells him his name instead. Steadfast love. Loyalty inside a covenant. Faithfulness to a bond the other party has already broken.

So I came to Matthew with a year of that behind me. And in the first sentence Jesus speaks, I found I was still reading the same word.

Here is why.

Tzedakah and *hesed* are the same kind of word. Both are relational; neither can be held privately. Both describe a person acting as the bond requires. The Old Testament pairs them so often that they work

almost as one word with a join in the middle – *your hesed and your tzedaqah*, love and rightness, over and over in the Psalms and the prophets. Grammarians call that a hendiadys: two words, one thing. *Bread and butter* is the everyday version. Nobody means bread, and separately butter.

The difference is angle. *Hesed* names the loyalty itself. *Tzedaqah* names what that loyalty does when it is put under pressure – when the covenant is tested and somebody has to act.

Now the crossing.

When *hesed* went into Greek, the translators mostly rendered it *eleos*, mercy – and mercy is not the same thing. Mercy is what a stronger party may extend if it chooses. *Hesed* is what a bound party owes. Take that away and the word has lost its backbone.

So the New Testament carries it in pieces. No single Greek word could hold it, and four of them share the load: *eleos* for the mercy, *charis* for the freeness of it, *pistis* for the faithfulness, *agape* for the love. One Hebrew word arrives in Greek as four, and a reader who only knows the English never sees that they belong together.

And *dikaiosynē* for what it does when it is challenged.

That is the one nobody expects, because English has drifted so far. *Righteousness* now sounds like a moral grade. Underneath it is a word about keeping faith with someone.

Which is why the hardest verse in Paul is not hard at all once you know what word he is using.

Paul spends three chapters of Romans establishing that everyone is guilty. Then he says God has put Christ forward as a propitiation *to show his righteousness* – and gives the reason: *so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*.

Read *just* as a moral quality and that sentence is a contradiction with a bridge built over it. God is good; God lets guilty people off; here is the mechanism that makes it legal.

Read it as *tzedaqah* and there is nothing to bridge. God bound himself to a people. They broke it. His righteousness is his keeping of the bond anyway – and keeping it means dealing with what they have done rather than ignoring it. The cross is not what permits God to be merciful despite being righteous. The cross is his righteousness, doing what the bond requires.

God's righteousness is not compromised by acquitting the guilty. It is displayed in it.

Paul is not inventing this. He is standing where Moses stood.

On the mountain, God gives Moses his name, and the name has a problem in the middle of it: *abounding in hesed, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and by no means clearing the guilty*. Both clauses, in one breath, in the same sentence. Exodus 34 states the difficulty and does not resolve it. Romans 3 is that sentence in Greek, with the resolution attached.

Which gives the sentence this whole article has been walking toward.

δικαιοσύνη is what happens to *hesed* when it is translated into Greek and put on trial.

It is also what Paul had against his own past, and it is worth seeing how precisely he puts it. He does not say his Pharisee righteousness was insufficient. He says it was *his own* – *not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law*. That is the objection. Not that there was too little of it, but that it was a possession rather than a relation. It was righteousness with nobody on the other end of it.

Which is exactly Matthew 5:20 arrived at from the other side. Jesus says the Pharisees' righteousness must be exceeded; Paul says his had to be thrown away. Both are saying the same thing about the same mistake.

— MOVEMENT FIVE — THE US GROWS —

Go back to the word Jesus put John inside of.

It is fitting for us.

He could have said *for me*. Nothing in the sentence needed the plural, and John had just told him he had it the wrong way round – a correction would have been the obvious reply. Instead Jesus takes the man objecting to his part in this and tells him he has one.

Matthew ends where he began.

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.

The same river, twenty-eight chapters later. What John did to Jesus, the church is now told to do to the nations. The Gospel opens with two men in the water and closes with the whole world invited into it.

*δικαιοσύνη is what happens to *hesed* when it is translated into Greek and put on trial.*

So the question is whether we are in the *us*.

Half of it, and it matters which half. There is one thing in that sentence nobody repeats: Jesus fulfils. *πληρόω* is his word and his act – the form is filled in, once, whole. We do not add to it and there is nothing left over for us to complete.

But the fulfilled thing is not kept. Paul says it exactly: *the righteous requirement of the law fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*. Fulfilled in us – passive, done to us, not by us. And then *who walk* – active, ours, ongoing.

That order never reverses. We are brought inside a righteousness already finished, and then we walk in the way of it. Get it the other way round and you are building a righteousness of your own, which is the exact thing Paul threw away and the exact thing Jesus said had to be exceeded.

What it looks like, if we take his own descriptions as the picture:

Standing in the queue with people who need something you don't. That is the first thing he ever did in public, before he taught anything or healed anyone.

Hungry rather than full. A man who is satisfied with his own righteousness has no room left to be given any.

Unwatched. Aim it at the people looking on and it stops being what it was.

Walking, not scoring. A road you are on, not a total you have reached.

None of that is measurable, which is the point. It has no units, because it was never a quantity. It is a way of standing toward God and toward the people you are bound to – which is what the word meant before we shrank it, and what it still means underneath the English.

He said it was fitting.

Not required, not owed, not deserved – fitting. The right thing to do given who was there and what they needed, which is the only kind of rightness the word ever meant.

And the first recorded words of his public life are not about himself. They are about the two of them, and then about all of us: *it is fitting for us*. He walked into a river full of people turning around, having nothing to turn from, and stood where they were standing.

That is what righteousness looks like when it has somebody on the other end of it.

¹ Matthew 5:6 (hunger), 5:10 (persecution), 6:1 (performed to be seen), 6:33 (sought), 21:32 (the way of righteousness). The exceeding is 5:20.

² Isaiah 45:21; 46:13; 51:5.

This article did not begin with artificial intelligence. It began with years of ministry, reading, prayer, suffering, and conversation.

During the development of this article, AI became a conversation partner. It challenged assumptions, tested arguments, suggested structures, and helped refine expression. Many of the words that follow emerged through that dialogue.

The experiences, convictions, interpretations, and conclusions remain my own.