

The Story of God and Us: Atonement

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Luke 23:32-43; 1 John 2:1-2

Two others also, who were criminals, were led away to be put to death with him. When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews." One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise." Luke 23:32-43 (NRSV)

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 2:1-2 (NRSV)

Let's pray together. *O God open us up, open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O Lord, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

When I was a youth pastor, I used to teach the confirmation classes. The thing about middle schoolers when you're teaching confirmation is they don't let you off the hook like an adult will. If you're in a conversation with an adult - or at least most adults - if you try and explain something and it's clear that you can't explain it as well as you thought you could, ultimately,

they'll just let you off the hook. They'll just say, "Uh- huh..." and you can all move on. But a 13-year-old won't do that. They'll stay at it till they get it. They'll keep asking the questions.

So, when I was teaching confirmation, and we came to talk about the atonement and what it means. We ask, "How did God restore our relationship with him through Jesus?" And I explained that Jesus had died on the cross for our sins. One particular precocious 13-year-old just didn't get it. He said, "I don't understand how Jesus dying made up for our sins. That makes no sense. How is that fair? I thought God was a fair God. This isn't fair." Then he went on to say, "Didn't God make the rules? Did Jesus have to die? Can't God just say, 'Okay, everybody, you're forgiven!' Doesn't he make the rules?" I kept trying to explain and explain, and it was hard for me to get three.

Here's what I have come to understand. Over the years, there are lots of us who don't quite get it. Now I want to be clear. We're going to be talking about the doctrine of atonement that says that in the cross, in the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, God restored the relationship that had been broken through sin. That the barriers between God and us are broken down, and our relationship is reconciled. So that's the doctrine of the atonement.

There are many theories, sort of subcategories, or sub-levels of that and those are the language we use to explain how that happened. And all of them are simply ways of trying to use concepts that we might understand to explain something that is a divine experience. That's something beyond our limited understanding. The Scripture uses a number of different metaphors and pictures and images and stories for us to try and get hold of this fact that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our relationship with God has been restored.

I want to share with you five different words that you'll see that are different theories of the atonement or different ways of understanding atonement - or *at-one-ment* - how our relationship with God is restored through Jesus.

The first word is the word *sacrifice*. Remember that during the time of Jesus, the Jewish religion operated by sacrifice. One would make a sacrifice to restore one's relationship with God. It was called a sin sacrifice. So, sacrifices would be offered. There were many other types of sacrifices, too, like thanksgiving sacrifices and many other kinds. But a sin sacrifice was descended to appease the wrath of God for sin.

The passage we read a few moments ago from 1 John 2 says that "Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not just ours but for the sins of the whole world."

The word for *atonement sacrifice* is more technically translated as *propitiation*. That means that it's a gift, a sacrifice that's made to appease the anger of someone, of God.

Let me give you an example. When I do something wrong at home, and I came home from work with flowers for my wife or I decide I'll do something really nice for her, that's my *propitiation* to appease the anger and restore relationship. One of the images is that of sacrifice. And any time you see language like the Lamb of God, that's a picture of Jesus as a sacrifice.

The second word is *penalty*. About the time of the Reformation, this theory of the atonement, this way of understanding the atonement, became more prevalent. And it's probably the one you hear most today, honestly. That the image of God is a judge and that God has set the rules and the laws. And the rule is that the penalty of sin is death. So how in the world if God has made those rules and is a just judge how in the world could God give us mercy? The only way God could give us mercy is for his Son to step forward and say, "I'll pay the price. I'll be the one to accept the penalty for these people that you love." And this is probably the one that most of us grew up with and the one that I learned first in my life.

The third word that might be helpful for you is the word *debt*. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say in the Methodist church, "Forgive us our trespasses," that's the word that's used in the Gospel of Mark. But in the Gospel of Matthew and many of the other denominations have chosen to say, "Forgive us our *debts* as we forgive our *debtors*." The Gospel of Luke uses the word *sins*. So, if indeed our sin is a debt. At the time of Jesus, if you did something wrong, you literally paid for it. There was restitution that had to be paid if you did something that was a sin. And someone else could pay that for you, could pay that debt.

Sometimes it's helpful for me to understand that if we forgive a debt - if God says, "I forgive your debt," what that's saying is I'm actually paying the debt. When I forgive a debt I just can't say, "Oh, your debt is forgiven." I'm saying, "Look, I'll be the one to absorb the loss. I'll pay the debt." And that's what God did with Jesus.

So those first three words are words that all focus on what we call the substitutionary theories of the atonement or the satisfaction theory that the death of Jesus was a payment to God to satisfy payment for our sins.

The challenge I have with this is twofold. One is that the picture of God as this just judge makes sense except that how is it just if someone else pays the penalty? That doesn't seem just. I struggle to find the love in that part of the story. Don't misunderstand me - I'm not saying that

those images aren't in Scripture because I do see them there all the time. But I'm reminding you that these are metaphors for us to use to take hold of how this doctrine of the atonement, the deepest truth of Christianity that in Jesus our relationship is restored, comes to be.

Let's move on - there are two other words that I think might be helpful or may resonate with you more. The fourth word is the word *example*, and this is often called the *moral example theory*. It's where Jesus comes to show us what the perfect, sinless life looks like. So that because of our sin, we have distorted the image, and we can't really know or understand what it means to live this sinless life. And Jesus shows us what that perfect life is like, and demonstrates what perfect love is like when he dies for us on the cross. "Greater has no one than he lays down his life for his friends."

What's more, is that it continues when we understand that in the resurrection of Christ, we have the Christ that can live within us and allow us to live that perfect life.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer says it this way as he talks about temptation. I'm paraphrasing him now as he's talking about how Paul says that "It's no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." Bonhoeffer says, "So when temptation comes knocking at the door, I send Christ to answer it." The Christ that can live within us can transform us. That we might be in the words of John Wesley, "Perfected in love." So, the moral example theory is the fourth one.

The fifth theory is usually called the *classic theory*, the word I want you to remember is the word *victory*. And this is the oldest - for the early church for the first thousand years of the church - this classic theory is the theory that the theologians adopted and spoke about most of the time. In its earliest form, it used the image of *ransom*. In this theory, it isn't that God is demanding a payment; it's that Satan is demanding a payment. That in the fall, Adam and Eve brought us into bondage. When you see the word bondage to sin, that's language that speaks to this particular image. That we were brought into the bondage of sin and Satan demanded a ransom. That God gave Jesus as that ransom to redeem us. The *redeem* means *to buy back*. Through Jesus, we are bought back by God.

Now the great news is that on Easter morning, God confounded the devil and brought Jesus back to life. So here we have the picture that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, evil is defeated on the cross. Sometimes this theory is called the *Christos victor* or *Christ as victor* theory. I have to say that in many ways, this is the theory that resonates most with me. Not so much because I think of Satan as the little red guy with horns, but when I think about my own

life, when I think about our world, I sure see us in this bondage to evil. And that in the death and resurrection of Christ, the downfall of evil has been assured. And we're going to talk about that more next week when we talk about resurrection. Charles Wesley has a marvelous hymn where he speaks about this. We sing "O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing," where he says, "He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free." So that the atonement is not just about being relieved of the guilt of our sin, canceled sin, but also, about being sanctified, about being relieved of the power of sin over our lives. And so, atonement is that whole story.

So those five words - *sacrifice, penalty, debt, example, and victory* are just images. Now look, you may have written those down and want to remember all that, but when you go home today, I hope that's not what I hope you remember most. There are two things I really hope you'll remember because they're the essence of this.

The first is that atonement is not something *you* do it's something *God* does. Atonement is not something you do, it's something God does.

This week I received a devotional, and it just spoke to me so well about this. Emily Turner writes: "And in the cross suddenly the entire picture is reversed. It is not that we are striving to reach God; it is that God is striving to reach us --grace. It is not that we use Jesus to attain God's mercy; it is that God sends Jesus to enact the mercy that God has intended from the beginning of time."

John Hall Buchanan, Jr. was a U.S. Congressman from Alabama, and when he came back from serving in World War II, he immediately went back to college and then to seminary. There are actually a lot of pastors who came out of the Second World War. And he said that the reason was that when he was serving, he had an experience that just made the essence of the Gospel so clear to him. He said that he was with his platoon, and someone threw a grenade into the middle of the platoon, and one of his friends jumped on top of the grenade to absorb the explosion. He said, "That moment just made clear to me what God had done for me. That greater love has no one than they lay down their life for their friends. My life was changed when I was able to see that."

Every Good Friday, we read the Seven Last Words of Jesus at our service of Tenebrae. And in the Gospel of Luke, we have the words that Jesus speaks from the cross. He says, "Father, forgive them, they know not what they're doing." I imagine him looking all down through history at me. "Father, forgive them." There was no one around the cross, asking for forgiveness. He

wasn't waiting on me to ask for forgiveness. But even before I was born, he initiated that forgiving grace into my life. Atonement is not something we do; it's not a religious hoop we've got to jump through. It's something God does.

The second thing I hope you'll go home with is to understand that really the only thing that's necessary is to know that you need forgiveness. To recognize that in fact, it's only by God's grace that you're forgiven.

I had never noticed it before until I was studying for this message. It's that in the Gospel of Luke, these two stories are right next to each other - the words from the cross where Jesus says, "Father, forgive them they don't know what they're doing." Then on the cross, the thief says to him, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus says, "Truly, you will be with me in Paradise." That on the cross, this thief had this incredible realization of his sin and his need for forgiveness. I don't know if you've ever had those moments.

I love the works of Christian writer Flannery O'Connor. She wrote about the Old South, which I guess is the way to put it, and she was Catholic and wrote about the hypocrisy of the time. She also dealt with the prejudice that came against Catholics in those days. In one of her stories, she talks about this man who is taking care of his nephew, I think it was. I can't remember if it's his grandson or his nephew, but his name was Nelson. He takes him on a trip to the city, and they get lost. The man is so prideful, and he wants Nelson to think that he knows everything. But as he goes through this experience, he realizes he doesn't know everything. I want to read you a piece from the short story. She writes: "He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it. He had never thought himself a great sinner before, but he saw now that his true depravity had been hidden from him lest it cause him despair. He realized that he was forgiven for sins from the beginning of time, when he had conceived in his own heart the sin of Adam, until the present, when he had denied poor Nelson. He saw that no sin was too monstrous for him to claim as his own, and since God loved in proportion as He forgave, he felt ready at that instant to enter Paradise."

This moment of understanding our sin.

I've told this story before, but it was really one of the most meaningful moments of my ministry. I was visiting with a man in our church who was dying, and he knew it. He'd been through rough times; he'd had a difficult life and made a lot of mistakes. He'd lost his marriage of

many years, his kids weren't speaking to him anymore, and he lost a lot of money. He'd stolen some things, some money and deceived some other people. He'd just done a lot of things he wasn't proud of.

And in the midst of our last conversation he asked, "Is there anything I can do to make it right with God? Is there anything I can do before I die to make this right with God?"

I just said, "No, there's nothing you can do to make it right with God. But God has made it right with you, and you just need to know that."

And you just need to know that's the only way it can happen. That you can't do anything, you can't fix it. But God can, and God has. I just hope you go home with that realization that atonement says that out of God's incredible love for you, even while you're a sinner, God has chosen to extend his grace and love.

Let's pray together. *Most gracious and loving God, sometimes we're just overwhelmed with how much you love us. When we step back and see how we've fallen short, how we've fallen away from you, and how you chose through the incredible love of your Son Jesus to come and get us, and to restore that relationship at great cost to you. We thank you, God. We pray that you would continue to set us free from the powers of evil and sin in our lives. And everything we do might honor you. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*