

## **“Atonement”**

March 8, 2026

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Romans 5: 1-8

This week I found myself doing a disordinate amount of reading about our Scripture passage. Now don't get me wrong, every week I listen to podcasts from seminary professors, read articles and commentaries and try to dive deep into the passage, but this week I found myself reading more and more. But no matter how much I read, the passage refused to come into focus. It wasn't until Thursday that I realized why. This passage from the 5th chapter of Romans is filled with big, loaded, theological words which simply overwhelm the reading. Look at these. In the first verse alone we have justification, faith and peace. Then we move to grace and hope. Then suddenly we find ourselves with afflictions or suffering, endurance and character building. Then right back to loaded words like hope and shame, ungodly and righteous, love, sinners and death. Any one of those words could spark a sermon series all by itself. So the only logical response is to add another one; but I am getting ahead of myself.

Let's start with our focus verse, verse 6 and following. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person— though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” It is a central core of the Christian faith, that Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of sin – not just sin, but my sin. I have heard that since I was a lad and believe it is true, but how does that work? How does Jesus dying on the cross take away my sin?

The big church word we use for Jesus' sacrifice on the cross somehow cleansing us and earning our forgiveness, is atonement. And there are at least 7 theories of atonement which have gained significant buy-in, and they all revolve around the idea that Jesus paid for all our sin and wrong doing. That Jesus was the offering or payment. But who was the payment to? Some of those theories have that payment being made to the devil who takes ownership of our soul when we follow him instead of God, but that doesn't work for me because if you become the devil's by following him, don't you become God's when you turn and start following Him? The devil didn't make a payment to get you, why would God need to make a payment to retrieve you? Besides, Jesus commanded evil spirits and they had to obey. In my book that puts God's power way up here, and the devil's way down here. When Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, we can choose to obey or not. We can choose not to obey. The devil and evil spirits cannot. That puts us higher on the power scale than the devil. So why would the devil need to be paid off? Other atonement theories have the death of Jesus paying off God's wrath or God's sense of righteousness that needs to be satisfied. Our sins deserve punishment, and that punishment must be carried out for righteousness to be satisfied. So does that mean

God is paying God so God will forgive us? That is a really small circle where nothing changes hand. More modern theories have said when we take Jesus as our Lord and Savior, we place our sins and shortcomings onto Jesus and they are paid for by Him on the cross. I like that one but it still doesn't define who is being paid and why payment needs to be made.

The different theories have small differences and nuances that separate them from one another, but for me, what makes the most sense is starting with God and who God is. Try not to let your mind wander through this next part, or I will lose you. God is a promise keeper. If God makes a promise, you can depend on it. Remember Abraham was counted as righteous because he believed God could and would do what God promised. And God did. It is the basis of our faith. If God just changes Gods' mind willy-nilly and breaks promises right and left, we have nothing to stand on. God is a promise keeper. It is the basis of our faith and our starting place to understand atonement. And since Exodus 20, when God wrote the 10 Commandments on stone tablets and sent them down the mountain with Moses, punishment has been part of the covenant. Not only did God promise to bless the descendant of Abraham when they did well, but also promised to punish them when they went chasing after other gods, trusting themselves, and disobeying God. God reckoned righteousness to Abraham without a sacrifice because the punishment clauses were not yet part of the covenant in Abraham's time. The generations which followed Abraham proved that positive affirmation alone was not working, so God had to promise punishment for sin. The whole sacrificial system was then created to offset that punishment by allowing the offering of an animal in one's place, but the punishment had to be or else God's promise of punishment was invalid. You still with me? God promised punishment for sin, and God keeps God's promises, so there must be punishment. Fast forward to Jesus' time. God knew we needed forgiveness, and the sacrificial system of bring the same offerings over and over again was getting to be a racket and just not getting the job done. But to simply skip any form of punishment and go straight to forgiveness would mean God wasn't keeping God's promise when God promised punishment for sin. Therefore, punishment had to happen, but Jesus took that punishment. Verse 6, "While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly." Verse 8, "God proves His love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." Atonement is God taking seriously our turning away from God, our listening to the voice of our selfish desires over God's voice of service and sacrifice, our wanting to be god and have things done our way – treasonous behavior that deserves punishment. We are all guilty of that. Romans 3, "No one is righteous... For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glory." And because of that we all deserve punishment. Romans 6, "the wages of sin is death". But God so desperately wants us to come home again, that God is willing to take the punishment onto Himself, satisfying the need for punishment, "While we were still sinners, Christ dies for us." Atonement is God's forgiveness that allows us to come home to God again.

Theologians will differ on if Christ's sacrifice on the cross covers everyone's sin and therefore all people have been saved and go to heaven or if the cross is only applied to those who belong

to Jesus, who have taken Him as their Lord and Savior and thereby accepted the plea deal. When taken by itself, atonement theory can easily be applied to all people – Jesus died for all people for all of time – but when taken in light of the rest of the New Testament, especially Romans, I believe one still has to recognize God in our midst and respond positively to it in order to have Christ’s suffering applied to their debt and be brought into God family. Such as we talked about last week, we are saved by grace (or atonement) through faith.

Adding atonement to all our other big, loaded, theological words brings them together and gives them life. We are justified by faith, says verse 1, because our faith, our believing God’s promises in such a way that they become the basis on which we build our lives, that faith allows Jesus’ sacrifice to be applied to us. And once atonement is applied to us, we don’t have to be afraid of God anymore, but can rather find peace in God and through God. It was while we were still sinners that Christ came to us, and died for us – that is the grace verse 2 speaks of. Verses 2, 4, and 5 all speak of hope. We have unshakable hope because our future is no longer defined by us and what circumstances may come, but on the promises of God which God will not break. We get to approach God not with the shame of ungodly people, but as righteous people, because when God looks at us, God sees Jesus, and welcomes us home. Atonement makes all those big, loaded, theological words come together.

But this grace that comes through faith, this forgiveness that takes our guilt and shame is not just for the next world. It changes things today. Starting in verse 3, “And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions (or suffering), knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Without God’s forgiveness, without God’s grace that comes through faith in Jesus; that does not happen. Afflictions and suffering don’t lead to endurance by themselves. When you think you deserve that suffering, when you recognize it as just rewards for hurting others in order to help yourself; suffering and affliction is where it ends. That is justice. But when you know Jesus, when you know you are forgiven, when you have peace with God and are set free; you know suffering and affliction are not the end. It is not punishment because that has already been taken care of. You can endure it because you know it is not the final verdict. You have been made right and therefore punishment is not your destiny. So those afflictions or sufferings produce endurance because you know they are just temporary, and you learn from those failures and are enlightened – you build character. And when you get through them, you’re amazed again at what God can do in you. You are stronger than you thought. Which even makes you look back and rejoice in those afflictions, because they have made you stronger, you endured because you knew they were not the end. They built your character and now you know more than ever if God could bring you through that, God can bring you through anything. We call that hope. “And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces

hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." Even in the midst of struggles and suffering there is peace, because you and God are okay which means you know this is not how your story ends. Even in the struggles that lead to death, which can include pain, suffering and affliction, it is not the end of your story. Because Jesus died to take away your sin and bring you to God forever.

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