

“Words You Should Know: Atonement”

Deuteronomy 16:11-16, 20-22 • Hebrews 9:11-14, 24-28

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • July 24, 2022

This summer we’ve been learning theology together – one word at a time. We are in this series called “Words You Should Know.”

These are theological words and concepts that we hear often and that everyone really should understand. We have talked about grace and faith and sin. A few weeks ago we talked about being created in the image of God, and last week we learned about revelation. Today we’re going to the deep end of the theology pool and diving in. This morning we’re talking about atonement.

The first question we need to ask is what the word atonement even means. I know that none of you has ever hurt or offended someone, but have YOU ever had someone else hurt you? Has someone you were close to done something you that damaged your relationship? Maybe they lied to you or lied about you or gossiped about you. Maybe they took credit for something you did or stole from you. Whatever it is, it’s going to be very difficult for you to trust again. That person is going to have to do some work to restore the relationship and it’s going to be costly. Well you and I are in the same situation with God. We are the offending parties who have damaged our relationship with Him. Every one of us is guilty. As Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The word atonement is the noun form of the verb atone, which means “to make amends or reparation for an offense or crime.” Another way to say that is to atone is to make up for a wrong. The word atone actually comes from the Middle English phrase “at one.” If you are “at one” with someone, it means you have a healthy relationship. You are in agreement. Any differences have been reconciled.

Because God is holy and perfect and just, He cannot stand sin. The breaking of God’s law must be punished. So the question we must deal with is “How can sinful humans be

reconciled to a holy God?” And since we are the offenders here we don’t get to decide the terms for reconciliation. God does. Thankfully, because God loves us so much He has always provided a way to atone for our sin.

In the Old Testament, the book of Leviticus goes into great detail about God’s laws on a number of subjects. In each case, God also tells us the process of atonement for breaking the law. In each case it involved some kind of sacrifice. Some of them involved a sacrifice of grain or wine or money, but most of them required bringing an animal without any blemish – a perfect animal – and symbolically transferring the sin to the animal. Then the priest would sacrifice that animal on the altar. The idea is that the animal took the punishment that the sinner deserved.

Our reading from Leviticus 16 describes God’s commandment for the Day of Atonement that was to take place once a year. God commanded them to keep this day of sacrifice to cover all the sins the people had missed during the year. The priest had to begin by making atonement for himself and his family, then for the tabernacle (and later the Temple), and finally for all the people. This is what John the Baptist’s father Zechariah was doing when the angel appeared to him.

Hebrews 10:4, though, tells us what everyone knew all along. “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” The only real solution to the problem of sin that separates us from God is the death of Jesus on the cross. Because he is fully human *and* fully God, he is the only perfect sacrifice. All of the means of atonement that God provided in the Old Testament are only meant to point us to the need for Jesus. Our reading from Hebrews calls the Temple sacrifices, even the Temple itself, “copies of the true things.” Jesus, by his death on the cross, is the complete, perfect atonement for our sins.

What we don't know yet is how his death atones for our sins. The Bible actually gives us a number of different descriptions of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. As a result, there has never been a doctrine of the atonement. The Church has never come up with a statement or creed on how atonement works. What we have instead are what are called "theories of the atonement," although they are not theoretical. Each one is based on Scripture. It's just that none of them encompasses everything the Bible teaches about the atonement, although one is more complete than the others. So let's look at some of the better recognized ones. There are lots of these different theories but this morning I want to talk about four of them in order of increasing usefulness.

First is what is known as the "Moral Influence" theory, also called the "Subjective View" of atonement. This theory emphasizes the importance of the crucifixion in motivating us to be better. The Moral Influence theory says that Jesus willingly dying on the cross is the supreme expression of love and that it should move us to love others as a response. Ephesians 5:2 says, "walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us," and 1 John 3:16 says, "By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers."

The problem with this understanding of the atonement is not that it's wrong so much as it's just insufficient. If Jesus' death on the cross was only an example of love, it's powerless and was just for show. If you were drowning in a fast-moving river and someone jumped in to save you, and in the process lost his life, you could recognize the love and sacrifice involved. But if you were sitting safely on land and someone jumped in to show his love, you would see it as a senseless act. In the same way, unless the death of Jesus really accomplishes something it's senseless and not actually a demonstration of love.

The second theory I want to talk about is known as the "Ransom" theory. The idea here is like a kidnap ransom. Through sin you and I are held captive by Satan. Adam and Eve sold us all into bondage with their sin. According to the Ransom theory, Jesus offers his life as payment to redeem His people. Jesus basically said so in Mark 10 when he says, "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many," and 1 Corinthians 6 says, "You are not your own, for you were bought with a price."

The problem here is that it seems to involve some trickery on God's part because apparently Satan didn't realize that death could not hold Jesus. This theory is illustrated in C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* where Aslan makes a deal with the witch to exchange his life for Edmond's.

The third theory of the atonement that I think is important for us to know is what's called the "Christus Victor" theory. This understanding emphasizes the victory of Jesus over sin and death and evil. As the conqueror, Jesus frees humanity from bondage. 1 Corinthians 15 says, "When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is also the message of Revelation 20. But this theory still doesn't adequately deal with sin and its punishment.

Since the Reformation, though, the dominant way of understanding the atonement of Christ most fully is what's known as "Penal Substitution," or substitutionary atonement. In regular English it means that Jesus took our place. You and I deserve the punishment of the cross. Jesus didn't. Romans 6:23 teaches us, "the wages of sin is death." We need to take what the Bible says about the wrath of God

against sin seriously. But as Isaiah 53 teaches, looking ahead to Jesus, “he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned—every one—to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. The whole system of sacrifices in the Old Testament ultimately points to Jesus taking our place.

So how *can* sinful humans be reconciled to a holy God? In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we read, “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” If you have trusted in

Christ alone for salvation, you *are* reconciled to God because Jesus took our sinfulness and in exchange gave us his righteousness. As a result, your relationship with God is restored. His wrath is satisfied. Justice has been served. Christ has conquered sin and death so you don’t have to be afraid of it or carry that guilt any more. You can be “at one” with God through faith in Jesus Christ. You are not your own, you were bought with a price. Our chains are gone, we’ve been set free. Sin’s curse has lost its grip on us. And now for the rest of your life you should live to tell Jesus thank you and share your story with others.

Amen.