

“Foundations: Salvation and Atonement”
Romans 3:20-27

March 15, 2015

Rev. David Williams

Scripture: Romans 3:20-27

Sermon:

Introduction

Imagine with me that you're a child again. Imagine that you're about 9 or 10 years old. One day, you're outside playing with your friends. In fact, imagine that you're playing in the parking lot of a beautiful church. Perhaps you're playing ball hockey, or Frisbee or another game. We're in Canada, so let's pretend you're playing ball hockey. [pic] I know not everybody played ball hockey as a child, but we're using our imaginations.

Suppose that the ball comes to you and you wind up for a shot on goal. Channelling your inner Wayne Gretzky, you let fly with a tremendous shot! The ball zips through the air... and flies right over the net... and keeps going... across the edge of the parking lot... across the grass... oh no! It's headed for... *CRASH* ... the enormous stained glass window on the side of the church!!! [pic]

Your friends stand and gape at the broken window. Then they turn and look at you. Then they turn and run. Filled with fear, you run too. You run all the way home, as fast as your feet will carry you. You get home, rush in the front door, close it behind you and burst into tears. Your mom hears you and comes to see what's wrong.

Slowly, through trembling lips, you let her know that you broke the window at the church... the stained glass window with all the colours. Your mom asks you how it happened, and you explain that it was an accident, that you were playing all hockey and the ball just seemed to soar upwards on its own and right through the window.

Your mom comforts you and you slowly calm down. She tells you to go wait in your room and you hear her pick up the phone. She calls the church and speaks to someone. You can kind of hear her talking. A little while later, she comes up to your room and tells you that you're going to have a visitor in a little while. The pastor of the church is going to come over. You recoil a bit at the thought of that, but your mom reassures you that she will be there with you the whole time.

You spend the next hour feeling anxious, and, although you wouldn't admit it to anyone, a little bit sick to your stomach. When the doorbell rings, your stomach positively flips over inside you. You hear your mom answer the door, welcome somebody in and then, the moment you've been dreading, she calls you downstairs.

There you see the pastor of the church. He's already sitting in the arm chair in the living room. You've never met him before. He's a grey haired man in a dark suit. He sees you coming and gives a faint smile. Your mom introduces you to him as you sit down on the couch. She asks you if you have anything to say to the pastor. Murmuring quietly, you say, "Yes, I do." Then, slowly, as you look at the floor beneath your feet, you tell the pastor the story you told you mom, about how you and your friends were playing ball hockey in the church parking lot and that it was you who sent the ball through the window.

"I see," says the pastor. "You know, that's a very special window, don't you?"

"Yes, I do," you reply.

"It's going to be very difficult and expensive to fix that window, you know," the pastor says.

"Yes, I know."

"Do you have any thoughts on how we can fix the window?" He asks.

You look up at him for the first time and, with genuine and heartfelt sincerity, you say, "I get an allowance each week. I can save that up and give it to you. And I can do extra chores around the house, or around the church, if that will help."

The pastor smiles warmly. He seems pleased at your offer. "That is very generous of you, but I don't think your allowance is big enough to fix such an expensive window. Not for a very long time."

A little deflated, you look down at the floor again beneath your feet. "Oh," is all you can manage.

At that point, your mom speaks up for the first time since you sat down. "Reverend," she says, "please let me know how much it is going to cost. I will pay the bill myself." You notice that your mom has her purse on

her lap and she is pulling out her cheque book.

Context

Today, we are going to continue our look at the Christian understanding of salvation. Last week, we looked at grace: that we are saved by grace, not by any of our own doing. This week we are looking at the Atonement. That is, we are exploring the Christian understanding that Jesus “atoned” for our sins. What does that mean? **The word “atonement” means to appease a person who has been offended.** [George Ladd, *NT Theology*, p. 470] **The idea is making amends.**

In the Old Testament, Israel was given an entire system of sacrifices and religious rituals through which they would appease God. There was a system of atonement sacrifices that they had to perform every year. “The aim was that the sacrifice should turn aside the punishment that should fall upon the one who had broken the law.” [William Barclay, *Romans*, p. 68] **The idea behind an atonement sacrifice is to turn aside punishment onto the sacrifice.**

In our text today, taken from Romans, Paul is talking about the fact that everybody is under the curse of sin, Jew and Gentile alike. The laws of the OT could not make Israelites righteous. Even if they performed all of the sacrifices and followed every law perfectly, including the atonement sacrifices, they still would not be made righteous. Bearing this in mind, let’s read our text together.

Text

Read Romans 3:20-27

Observations

There’s a lot happening in this passage. You hopefully noticed the word “grace” in verse 24. Since we are talking about salvation in general, it makes sense that there will be a degree of overlap in the sermons on this topic. This week, we are zeroing in on the Atonement, but because that is just one faced of the Christian understanding of salvation, whenever we come across a discussion of the Atonement we should expect to also find discussed such topics as grace, faith and righteousness.

Now, one of the stated goals of this series is to help those who have little or no Christian background to understand the foundations of Christianity. This means that we need to clarify a number of the terms Paul uses in this passage. There is a fair amount of “Christianese” in these verses, terms that we use in Christian circles that are important and rich in meaning, but since they’re not used in secular language, their rich meanings are easily missed.

First, what does it mean for God to declare us righteous in verse 20? Literally, Paul says nobody will be declared righteous through the law, but what does that mean? **Righteous means to be in a right relationship with God.** Notice that it is up to God to declare us righteous. It is God’s decision, or God’s evaluation not ours. We cannot decide that since we have nothing against God we must be in a right relationship with him. No, not at all. It is up to God to determine if our relationship with him is ok because God is the one offended by our sin.

Another word that comes up in these verses several times is “justified.” Sometimes we use the word justified to mean that something we did was reasonable, or ok, even though at first it may look like it was wrong. For instance, in court we speak of “justifiable homicide.” It is ok to kill somebody if they attack you first and are trying to kill you. In cases of self-defense, it is justified if you kill somebody. If a criminal points a gun at a police officer, the police officer is justified in shooting the criminal. Normally, shooting somebody or killing somebody is wrong. Under certain circumstances, though, a person who does this is deemed “justified” and treated as innocent of a crime. Being justified doesn’t mean you didn’t do it, it means you are treated as innocent in spite of doing something.

In Christian terms, justification, or being justified, has to do with God’s evaluation of us. It has to do with God saying we are ok. Think about that meaning for a moment. To be justified means that God says we are ok. It means God says we are innocent even though we’ve done something wrong. To be righteous means that God says we are in a right relationship with him. Sound similar? I hope so! In Greek righteous and justified come from the same word. In English, there isn’t one word that can take all the forms of this one Greek word, so we have to use two, justified and righteous. It comes down to issues of verbs, adjectives and nouns in Greek and English. For instance, justification is the process by which we are made righteous. Justification is a process describing being made just or being justified. **To be justified, though, means to be righteous.** If there was

such a word as righteousness, meaning the process by which we are made righteous, then we could use one English word for all of this, but that doesn't exist. So we are stuck using two words that look very different in English, but are the same in Greek.

Why does this matter? Because if you look at the beginning of our passage, Paul uses the word "righteous." "No one will be declared righteous in [God's] sight by observing the law...." In the next two verses he speaks of a new righteousness that comes from God through faith in Jesus Christ. Throughout the rest of the passage, though, we see the words justified, justice and just. We are justified by God's grace. He shows his justice. He is just and he justifies those who have faith in Jesus. We must remember that these are all different forms of the same word in Greek. Throughout this passage, Paul is talking about righteousness and justification and, in Paul's mind and in his words in Greek, they are the same thing. **So this whole passage, then, is about being put in a right relationship with God.**

So what does Paul say about this new way of being put in a right relationship with God? The first thing he says is that the Law and the Prophets, that is the Old Testament, testify to this new way of being reconciled to God. So this new righteousness is in continuity with the Old Testament, not a break from it.

Second, Paul says that this new righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ. That is in contrast with following all of the laws in the OT. It is in contrast with doing all the good things God says we should do. Doing good things is good, but it doesn't fix our relationship with God. Rather, doing good things is supposed to be the result on our part of God having already fixed our relationship with him.

Verses 23-24 summarizes the Christian view of salvation nicely. It says, "**For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.**" Verse 23 lays out the problem. Last week, we talked about this problem in terms of being stuck in a cave. Paul says that all have sinned and "fallen short of the glory of God."

Notice that second part. We may think that our sins are not that bad. We may think we're a whole lot better than a lot of other people. That may be true. But even the best of us fall short of God's glory! And that's the standard! We don't get to set the standard for a right relationship with God. Only God gets to set that standard. (That's one of the perks of being God.) And God's standard is his own glory. Since none of us live up to that, since we all have at least a little bit of sin in our hearts, we are all in trouble with God. None of us are in a right relationship with him on our own terms.

Verse 24, like our lesson last week, says we are saved by grace. Furthermore, it tells us the shape of that grace- the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. How did Jesus bring redemption? Look at the next verse, "God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement." Remember, we're talking about the atonement today. So we see here that **God presented Jesus as a sacrifice designed to turn aside punishment, to appease God who has been offended by our sin.**

The Greek in the next phrase is tricky, and the NIV has actually updated it in recent years. It is best to understand "sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood" to mean "sacrifice of atonement through his blood to be received by faith." That is how the most up to date NIV renders it. The key, though, is that **God is the one who has made the sacrifice of atonement, that God is the one turning aside punishment, it happened through Christ's blood being shed and we participate in the atonement only through faith.**

God did this for two reasons. First, he needed to show that he is a just God. That is, he didn't take our sin lightly. He didn't just blow it off as "no big deal." He had to find a way to deal with our sin without condoning it. [R. Kent Hughes, *Romans*, p. 85] He had to be a fair God, a just God, and not just let the sin of humanity slide.

Second, though, God wanted to show his love for us. Without this second part, God would have just obliterated us all. He would have been fully justified in not saving any of us and just letting us all reap the consequences of sin. But God is not only a just God, he is also a loving God. So he **found a way to be both just and forgiving. [includes pic]** He did that by sending the Son, Jesus Christ, to earth. Jesus willingly and voluntarily "came under the blight of sin, entered into its deepest gloom, and shared with humanity its awful weight and penalty...." [Ladd, p. 468] Christ's unique sinless life means his death is unique too. He didn't die for his own guilt or sin, so he was able to pay for our guilt and sin. He was a sacrifice able to turn aside the punishment we deserve, he was a sacrifice or offering able to appease the legitimate wrath of God who is so offended by sin.

Just like last week, Paul concludes by reminding us that we have nothing to boast about in this process. This entire system is put together and carried out by God and by God alone. He does this for us, not with us. We are only the recipients of a tremendous gift. We are not contributors to the gift. So we have nothing to be proud of in and of ourselves. We are only to be proud of the loving nature of the God we belong to.

Interpretation

If this is what Paul is saying in this passage, what does it mean? How do we interpret this? How do we interpret the Atonement? This is pretty deep stuff. It's not easy for us to grasp how this works, and Paul understands this. That is why in this passage he actually uses three different images. [3 pics] Paul uses the image of the law court, the image of sacrifice and the image of slavery. All three of these images go together to form our understanding of salvation. All three are important dynamics at work in the Christian doctrine of salvation, they are all different facets of the same jewel.

The word “justify” is a legal word having to do with an objective standard. [incl pic] This is the image of the law court. Justify means to reckon someone or to account someone as innocent. It doesn't mean you “make” them innocent, just that you “count” them as innocent. [Barclay, p. 67] Remember our example of justified shootings? It means counting somebody as innocent. God justifies the ungodly. He treats, reckons or counts sinful people as being innocent.

The second image is that of sacrifice. [Barclay, p. 68] **The word “atonement” is about religious sacrifice.** [incl pic] In the OT system, the atonement sacrifice was designed to point forward to Christ. The meaning of the annual sacrifice was that the sins of the people were put on the animals to be sacrificed. Some of the blood of the sacrifices was sprinkled on the Ark of the Covenant in the centre of the Tabernacle and later the Temple. It was literally sprinkled on the spot on the top of the ark, a large box, where God was said to sit. That seat was called the “mercy seat” and represented the presence of God with Israel. Beneath the seat the two tablets with the 10 Commandments were kept. (Lev 16:13ff) So the image was that the blood of the sacrifice came between God and the commandments that the people had broken and the blood appeased God for the next year until the sacrifice had to be made again. [F F Bruce, cited in Hughes, p. 84]

The third image is that of slavery, or, more precisely, that of a slave being freed. Paul says that we are justified (legal image) freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ. **Redemption is the word used for the ransoming of a slave, the liberating of a slave from captivity.** [incl pic] [Barclay, p. 69] When a slave had accumulated enough wealth, he or she could buy their freedom back. Or, if another person came along and paid the slave's owner the appropriate price, the slave would be freed.

These three images, that of a law court, religious sacrifices of atonement, and the freeing of slaves are all different facets, or different factors in how God went about providing salvation for us through Christ. Specifically, we are zeroing in on the second one, the atonement, but all three shape our understanding of how salvation works.

What do these images tell us? What do we learn from them about salvation? First, we must remember (like we saw last week) that **God's wrath and God's love are not mutually exclusive.** [Ladd, p. 466] The consequences of sin are not about an impersonal legal principle but are about a personal God who will not be mocked by wrongdoing. [Ladd, p. 466; cf Gal 6:7] We have repeatedly and consistently offended a personal God by our continued rebellion and defiance of him and his standards. We haven't just broken the law, we've spat in God's eye doing it!

So God's wrath is legitimate. God's wrath is justified. God's wrath is reasonable. This means that if we are to live, something must be done to appease that wrath. Something must be done to appease God, the offended party in our sin. If we are to survive judgment, something must be done to turn aside the punishment headed towards us that we so richly deserve. [pic] We are the nail. God's judgment is the hammer. We should fully expect to be hammered down.

This is where Jesus steps in. He interposes himself between us and the hammer. He places himself between us and God's judgment. Being sinless, he doesn't deserve death. He isn't a nail, so he doesn't deserve the hammer. But he slides himself between us and death, taking death upon himself, turning it aside from us, while still satisfying justice that a life has been given in payment for sin.

But, lest we think that Jesus somehow outsmarted God, or tricked God, we have to remember that Jesus

himself is God! This is not a case of God trying to punish us and Jesus messing it up. Jesus is God. So **God has taken his own punishment upon himself.** Why? Because God is love. God is divine, self-giving love primarily concerned with our well-being, in particular our spiritual well-being. The whole atonement is motivated by God's love. [Ladd, p. 464]

We must not fall into the faulty thinking that the Atonement somehow turns God's wrath into love. Even in the OT sacrificial system, never is the Atonement about changing God's wrath to love. Rather, the fact that atonement can be made in the first place is because God's love is primary, even to his wrath. "**God's love is itself the source of atonement.**" [Ladd, p. 465]

In Christ, "God found a way to forgive us and maintain his moral integrity. He forgave us without condoning our sin." [Hughes, p. 85] The irresistible force of God's love met the immovable object of God's justice. And the miraculous result is that God's beloved Son took the punishment we deserve upon himself, knowing that it would have obliterated us, but that although he would suffer and die himself, the Spirit would raise him from the dead, defeating death, justifying us and vindicating Christ. That's what happens when an irresistible force meets an immovable object! Death is defeated, sin is overcome and God is glorified!

Now Apply It

So how do we apply this? What are we to do in order to make use of our new, or deeper understanding of the Atonement?

First, let me address some objections that have been raised to the Christian doctrine of the Atonement. Perhaps you've had some of these objections rolling around in your own head. Perhaps you never would have thought of them. But likely you know somebody who has thought of them. And part of our goal in this series is to be able to address questions from non-believers about what Christians actually believe.

There are some who object to this understanding of the atonement. Some find this doctrine "repulsive because it is wrought entirely outside of and apart from ourselves so that we have nothing to do but to accept its benefits." [Ladd, p. 469] How can we be saved if we have nothing to do with it? But this is the very point! That is what it means to be saved by grace. That is the very core of Paul's argument. We cannot contribute to our own salvation!

Some object because they see in this some form of "diving child abuse." They think of it as a vengeful God taking out his anger on his own son. But, if I might graciously say, I suspect this objection is more likely shaped by people's experiences with their own sinful, fallen, earthly fathers than their experience with our Heavenly Father. We must remember that the very atonement itself is motivated out of God's love, not his wrath. He must exercise appropriate justice and judgment. He chooses to rescue us, to redeem us out of his love for us. Jesus didn't go to the cross kicking and screaming. He went willingly and knowingly, which, we will see in a minute, is a key part of the Atonement satisfying justice and fairness.

Some object that it is patently unfair for one person to pay for the sins of another. They object on the grounds of justice and fairness. While it is true that it is "unfair" that we are saved by grace, we do not get what we deserve, it is not automatically unfair for one person to pay the debts of another.

Think back to our opening example of breaking an expensive stained glass window when you are only a child and have no resources to pay for the repairs. Is it fair for your mother to pay for the repairs? I think we can all agree that it was at the same time both generous and fair. But **under what criteria is it fair for another person to pay your debts?**

First, **for another to pay our debts we must be repentant ourselves.** If, in the opening example, you were wilful and obstinate, if you refused to apologize or take responsibility for the broken window, then it would not be just or fair or even right for your mom to pay for the damages. That would be what we call "enabling." It would mean inappropriately shielding you from the natural consequences of your actions, even if those actions were an accident.

Second, **it must be a debt we are unable to pay but the other person is able to pay.** If it is a debt we can pay, but another steps in to pay for us, that's also a kind of enabling. If, in our example, instead of being a 10 year old with no income, you were a wealthy stock broker, it would be completely inappropriate for your mom to pay for the window! Similarly, if you were 10 and had no resources, but your mom was broke too, it would not be any better for her to assume the debt herself if she is unable to pay it either.

In connection with Jesus, that is why it is so significant that Jesus was sinless. Had he sinned, had he rebelled against God at some point during his lifetime, then he would have no longer been able to pay for our sin. The sinlessness of Jesus is central to the Atonement because otherwise he would be dying for his own sin and not be able to pay for ours! Yet, Jesus was obedient to the Father, humbling himself even to death on the cross. [Phil 2:8]

In this sense, Christianity is completely different than all other religions. In every other religion, there is a fundamental belief that we are able to pay our own debts. In Islam, we are able to accumulate enough good deeds to outweigh our bad deeds. In Judaism, we are able to observe the Law sufficiently to be saved. In Karmic systems, we not only atone for our own debts in this life, but in previous lives as well. You can't pay for somebody else's karma. Nobody can give you their good karma. It's all up to you. In Buddhism, seeking enlightenment, we are able to overcome our sin through meditation. Only in Christianity is the problem of sin understood to be so deep that we cannot overcome it ourselves. Only in Christianity is our debt paid by another. In no other belief system, in no other religion, does God pay for our rebellion himself.

Last, for the atonement to be fair, for it to be just for another to pay our debts, all the parties involved must accept it willingly. That is, **the one paying the debt must do so voluntarily and the recipient must accept their payment willingly**. Of course, the guilty party must also accept the situation. If, as the person in debt, the person who caused the offense, the person who broke the window, you don't accept the third party's intervention, if you don't accept the other person's offer to pay for your sins and debts, then you can't really partake of the forgiveness can you? If you refuse to accept their offer to pay for your debts, then you are going to eternally be in debt to the primary, offended party. If you don't let your mom pay for the window, you're going to be in debt for it forever. That offense, that sin, that debt is going to be hanging over your head forever.

That is one of the toughest parts of Christianity. We have to let go and let Jesus pay for our sins. We have to admit we are sinners, that we have the debt in the first place. Then we have to admit that we can't pay that debt, we can't overcome our sin ourselves. We are powerless to do so. We are slaves to sin who cannot free themselves. That can be tough to admit for so called "good" people, for successful people, for religious people. But once we recognize our sin, once we recognize our debt and our inability to pay it, we have to humble ourselves to allow Jesus to pay that debt for us. **We have to allow him to take over payment of our debt and then live a life of gratitude to him for doing so**. Sometimes, for some people, we are so spiteful that we refuse to accept Jesus' payment for our debts because we don't want to be in his debt. And in these cases, we miss out on having our debts paid, we miss out on being set free, and we wind up bearing the brunt of our punishment ourselves.

This is the trap that Mormons and JW's fall into. They both pay lip service to salvation by grace and the atonement, but in both cases they add to the equation. They both believe and teach that while Christ's atonement opened the way of salvation, we have to work to take hold of it. The Mormons believe we must not only have faith, but also we must be baptised and live a life of enduring obedience. Jesus' death guarantees our resurrection, but not our reconciliation with God. That requires our work. [Walter Martin, *Kingdom of the Cults*, p. 221-222] For JW's the belief is that the atonement is not completed, it is not fulfilled until after Armageddon and the faithful return to God of their own free will and submit to the earthly rule of Jehovah. [Martin, p. 99] In both cases, their view of Jesus' atonement for our sins is partial or incomplete. These two mistaken beliefs are particularly dangerous because they do speak of God's grace and even the Atonement, it's just that their understanding of them smuggle in our need to pay for our own sins or work for our reconciliation with God.

So **understand that your sins have been paid for**. You have been justified, you have been treated as innocent even though you are guilty. You have been redeemed. You have been set free. Another has taken your punishment on himself. He took that "bullet" for you. He willingly threw himself on the grenade of your sin to save you from the inevitable explosion. The work has been done. You just have to accept it and recognize that he who redeemed your life asks that you spend that life demonstrating his kindness to others.

That is the nature of the Atonement. That is one of the unique features of Christianity. Jesus paid your debt, took your punishment and felt your pain. **Why? So that you would know just how much God loves you and the lengths to which He would go to reconcile you to Himself in order to be in a right relationship with Him**. It is up to you to accept those terms of payment or not, but be assured they are the only terms you will ever get that end in your salvation. All other systems and beliefs lay the burden of payment on you, and that burden is

greater than you can bear. So choose, but choose wisely, and live the with consequences either way. Amen.