

6. We believe in the substitutionary atonement.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on April 17, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God, through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Romans 5:6-11).

There is a lack of personal accountability in our nation today. In a classic line from the musical “West Side Story,” a character says, “I’m depraved on account of I was deprived.” People will say, “I’m a victim of my environment. I’m a victim of my circumstances. I can’t help what I’ve done because of this, that or the other.” Again, we struggle with accepting personal responsibility!

It reminds me of the golfer who was about to hit his tee shot on the first hole. He swung and missed the ball. He swung again and whiffed again. He tried a third time and still missed the ball. In frustration, he turned to his buddies and said, “Man, this is a tough course!” It may have been a tough course, but that wasn’t the problem! And your course in life may be tough, but that’s not the problem. Our real problems are on the inside, not the outside. And the problem is usually sin! But thankfully, the story doesn’t have to end there. The Bible speaks of an atonement, which makes all the difference in the world.

Webster defines the word atonement as follows: “The reconciliation of God and man through the death of Jesus Christ; compensation for an offense; satisfaction.” The only time the word actually occurs in the New Testament is in Romans 5:11. That verse is translated this way in the Authorized Version: “*And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.*” It’s an Old Testament word that literally means “a covering.” So why do we rejoice? We rejoice because Jesus Christ died for us, while we were yet sinners, and through His death He provided a covering for our sins—not to hide them, but to remove them because that covering is His very blood.

One of the things that make Christianity unique when compared to other religions is that all other religions base their claim to greatness on the life and teaching of those who founded them. The teachings of Mohammed... The teachings of Buddha... And while Christianity places great emphasis on the teachings of Christ, it places an even greater emphasis on the death of Christ. The central doctrine of Christianity is summed up this way in 1 Corinthians 15:3, when Paul writes, “... *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.*” The central event and central doctrine of the New Testament is summed up in these words. Christ died (the event—Calvary) for our sins (the doctrine—atonement). In other words, our pitiful condition required priceless compassion which resulted in a powerful conversion.

Our Pitiful Condition

Verse 6 of Romans 5 says, “*For when we were still without strength...*” We are then described as “ungodly” and “sinners” and “enemies.” That’s the condition of all men who are lost in sin—ungodly sinners, enemies of God, who are without strength. The word “ungodly” refers to someone who has no reverence or fear of God. It literally means to “live your life as if God did not exist.” And that’s exactly what the adversary wants man to believe. The word “sinner,” as we’ve already learned, means to miss the mark or to come up short. And the word “enemy” means that until we come to Christ, we’ve set up our tent in the camp of the adversary. It may be by default, but it’s still true, nevertheless. As the old Bob Dylan song of the 70s said, “You gotta serve somebody... It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord. But you’re still gonna serve somebody.”

That’s what Paul says in Romans 6:16. He says, “*Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness.*” You choose your master! You choose life or you choose death. You choose to be a friend of God or you choose to be an enemy of God. So beloved, until we come to Christ this is our portrait: We are ungodly sinners, enemies of God, who are without strength. We can’t change who we are because we don’t have the power to change our heart! The Bible says that our heart isn’t just wicked, but it’s “desperately wicked.” We can change our mind, but we can’t change our heart. We are absolutely powerless to escape sin, to escape death, to resist the devil, to please God. In our own strength, we just can’t do it! Regardless of what we do, we “fall short.” That’s our condition without Christ, without His Spirit; and it’s pretty pitiful!

Our Pitiful Condition Required Priceless Compassion

In his book, “Written in Blood,” Robert Coleman tells the story of a little boy whose sister needed a blood transfusion. The doctor explained that she had the same disease the boy had recovered from two years earlier and that her only chance of recovery was a transfusion from someone who had previously conquered the disease. And since the two children shared a very rare blood type, he was the ideal donor. So the doctor asked little Johnny if he would give his blood for his sister, Mary. But Johnny hesitated and then his lower lip started to tremble. But even so, he said, “Sure, I’ll do that for my sister.” Soon the two children were wheeled into an operating room. Johnny and Mary looked at each other, but neither said a word. Then the nurse inserted the needle into Johnny’s arm and the blood began to flow through the tube. He watched the blood for several minutes and then his shaky little voice broke the

silence. He said, “Doctor, when do I die?” Only then did the doctor realize why Johnny had hesitated and why his lips had trembled when he agreed to donate his blood to his sister. He thought that giving his blood for his sister also meant giving his life for his sister. But of course, Johnny didn’t have to die to save his sister. But our disease was far greater than Mary’s. It required someone to die. It required priceless compassion. Jesus had to give more than His blood; He had to give His life.

Consider the measure, the magnitude, the scope of Jesus’ compassion. Would you give your life in order that Jeffrey Dahmer could live? What about Adolf Hitler? What about Osama bin Laden? What about a child molester, a rapist, or even a thief or liar for that matter? Paul says that you wouldn’t and he’s right. Verse 7 of Romans 5 says, “*For scarcely for a righteous man will one die...*” I think I’d give my life for a loved one, but beyond that circle, I can’t be so sure, can you?

A man by the name of James Kidd of Wheaton, Illinois, was visiting his son who was stationed at Fort Bragg. While they were enjoying dinner at a nearby Italian restaurant a gunman entered the building and began firing in all directions. When the massacre came to an end, 11 people were dead, including James Kidd. His son lived, only because his father used his own body as a shield and thereby saved the life of his son. I’ve heard many stories of soldiers who have given their lives for their comrades—a grenade is thrown into a foxhole and one man falls on the grenade and absorbs the blast with his body, saving the lives of his brothers. And every time we hear such stories they move us to the core, and rightfully so, because they are examples of true courage and sacrifice. However, most of the time they all have a common denominator—they demonstrate this incredible sacrifice for people they love. But what about someone that hates them? What about the enemy? But Jesus did; that’s the scope of His love. It says, “...*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*” While we were “ungodly sinners and enemies of God,” Christ absorbed the grenade in order to save us.

I can’t remember a sermon that the late Pope, Pope John Paul II, ever gave. But I remember that he went to prison to visit a man that tried to assassinate him and let that man know that he was forgiven. Long after his speeches are forgotten, that picture will live on. And the reason is because we don’t see that kind of compassion very often. Someone abuses us—our natural reaction is revenge. Someone steals from us—our natural reaction is the need for restitution. But Jesus went far beyond the Pope’s act of compassion; He went to our prison not only to tell us we were forgiven, He went to our prison to take our place so that we could be freed. He became the “guilty one” in our stead.

In Colossians 2:13-14, Paul explains what happened at Calvary this way: “*And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*” What does the “handwriting of requirements” mean? In the days of ancient Rome, whenever a criminal was convicted of a crime the courts demanded that something called a “Certificate of Debt” be written. On this certificate the criminal’s unlawful deeds would be listed, one by one, and the penalty that was assessed for each deed. He would then be sent to prison and this “Certificate of Debt” would be nailed to the outside of his prison cell. It would hang there until the man had served his time, thereby paying for each penalty that was listed. This is what Paul was speaking of when he talked about the “handwriting of requirements” that were against us. Each of us, before we came to Christ, had our own “Certificate of Debt.”

Now we go to the Cross...It’s 9:00 a.m. on Friday and Jesus will stay on the cross for six hours. The first three hours He will suffer the wrath of man, the last three hours He will suffer the wrath of God. At 12:00 noon darkness covers the earth. Historians have found the writing of a Greek scientist who was in Egypt at this very time. We are told this piece of information is dated around 30A.D. at 12:00 noon and it says: “There was a solar happening of such that either Deity Himself suffered or sympathized with one that had.” Both statements are true.

Having already been beaten almost to the point of death; having a crown of thorns pierce His brow; having been nailed to a wooden cross with spikes through His hands and feet; His body would soon begin to dehydrate and He would slowly die the death of suffocation. But before He died, Jesus made some profound statements. First, He prayed for those who nailed Him to the cross. “*Father forgive them, they don’t know what they are doing.*” Secondly, He made provision for His mother. “*John, behold thy mother.*” Thirdly, He forgave a criminal hanging next to Him. “*Today you will be with me in paradise.*” Fourthly, He would cry out, “*My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?*” The weight of the moment goes beyond any human description I have ever heard. For in that moment, my certificate of debt and your certificate of debt and those of all humanity were nailed to Jesus’ cross. Suddenly, He became the guilty one, He became the One responsible for what Paul calls the “handwriting of requirements” that were against us. And then, fifthly, just before He gives up His earthly life, He shouts, “*Tetelestai.*” In most of our bibles the word is translated, “*It is finished,*” but it literally means “Paid in full.” And it’s the very same word that a Roman judge would write across a released prisoner’s certificate of debt when that criminal had paid his penalties and was freed. This is what atonement is all about. He covered our sins by shedding His blood and set us free!

The atoning process began in Genesis 4, when Abel offered a lamb as a sacrifice to God. There we saw the picture of the “lamb for one man.” Move forward to Exodus 12 and the atoning process continues as the blood of one lamb is shed over the doorpost of a home causing the “death angel” to pass over that home. There we saw the picture of the “lamb for one family.” Then we move on to the book of Leviticus. Here we find the sacrificial lamb atoning the sins of Israel. There we saw the picture of the “lamb for one nation.” And then we come to the Gospels, and we find “*the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*” Jesus fulfills the need for one lamb for a man, one lamb for a family, one lamb for a nation...His blood covers it all! The hymn writer was right. “Calvary covers it all, my past with its sin and stain; my guilt and despair Jesus took on Him there, and Calvary covers it all.” That’s why 1 John 2:2 says, “*And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.*” Or as it says in the NIV, “*He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only ours but also for the sins of the whole world.*”

The word “propitiation” means “turning away wrath by sacrifice.” The idea of the wrath of God is deeply rooted in both the Old and New Testament. Some 585 times in the Old Testament the wrath of God is referred to, as well as many times in the New

Testament. For instance, John 3:36 says, "...he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Verse 9 of Romans 5 tells us that Jesus literally turned away the wrath of God due us by His atonement at Calvary. It says, "*Much more then, having been justified by His own blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him.*"

I love those MasterCard commercials, don't you? "Coke—\$3. Hot dog—\$4. Baseball cap—\$10. Your first trip to the ballpark with your dad—priceless." When Johnny was willing to give his life for his sister, Mary, that was special; but when Jesus willingly gave His life for us, while we were ungodly sinners and enemies of God, that was priceless. Oh, what a priceless compassion!

Our Pitiful Condition Required Priceless Compassion Which Resulted In A Powerful Conversion

Why is the principle of atonement so critical to our faith? Well, notice "our position" prior to those four words in verse 8 of Romans 5, "*Christ died for us...*" and our position after those four words. Prior, we are called: Wicked, wayward, warlike, and weak. Isn't that what "ungodly sinners, enemies of God, without strength" means? But on the other side of those four words we are called "justified" in verse 9, "reconciled" in verses 10 and 11, and "saved" in verses 9 and 10. Because of the atoning blood of Jesus, we can stand before the Creator of time and space as if we had never sinned. Now I don't know about you, but I know about me, and that's a powerful conversion!

Reconciled means: "To turn an enemy into a friend." Recently we had three young people from Israel join us and share with us their experiences growing up in that nation. It was incredible. And one of the most wonderful things was that we had the opportunity to share with them how much we cared for them and how much we loved them. Then the gentlemen who put this meeting together called me later in the week and said, "Pastor Rick, first of all I want to thank you for letting us use your church for the Israel-at-Heart meeting and secondly, I wanted you to know how much that meeting impacted those three young people. After the meeting, we went out for coffee and those young people began to cry. The people of Israel are viewed as enemies by most of mankind, but the love they felt the other night touched these three young people. They knew, at least in Houston, they had friends." Reconciliation happened that night at our church, and reconciliation happened 2,000 years ago at Calvary. God called a truce, put away the battle flags and called us "friends"—all because of the blood of His Son.

Saved means we are saved, but saved from what? Verse 9 of Romans 5 tells us from "*the wrath of God.*" And how are we saved? The next verse tells us that we are "*saved by His life.*" Not simply His life 2,000 years ago at Calvary, but also because of His life today. He is alive today and seated at the right hand of the Father! Had there been no resurrection, there could be no salvation. But because there was, you and I can shout with the hymnist, "Saved by His power divine, saved to new life sublime! Life now is sweet and my joy is complete, for I'm saved, saved, saved!" And the final verse, verse 11, essentially tells us that once we consider the ramifications of the atonement—that our pitiful condition required priceless compassion which resulted in a powerful conversion—our response should be one of praise. It says, "*...we also rejoice.*"

It's my understanding that Muslims sacrifice millions of animals each year at Mecca. It's an ancient practice. As we know, so did the children of Israel. But what the blood of dead animals could never do—wash away man's sin—the blood of Jesus has done for us. That's what we are told in Hebrews 10:11-14, which says, "*And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool. For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.*" That is why we believe in the substitutionary atonement.

In 1974, while in Bible College during Christmas break, I drove my little Ford Pinto from my school in Florida to my home in Ohio. But because I was one of the few students that had a car, I became somewhat of a taxi cab service. I'd pack six kids in the car and we would head north. I'd drop off a couple friends in Georgia, some in Tennessee, and some in Kentucky. Coming back from Christmas break, I'd just reverse the process. And on the way back to college at the conclusion of this particular Christmas holiday, the first person I picked up was a Church of God minister's daughter named Sydney. We were driving through the night and as we were about to enter Georgia, I was getting extremely tired and pulled over the side of the road, and Sydney, who had been asleep in the back seat, offered to switch places and drive. Quickly I was sound asleep until I was awakened a couple hours later by the sound of a police siren. It was 3:00 a.m. in the morning, lights were flashing, and Sydney was pulling the car over to the side of road. She had been speeding through a little city called Cartersville, Georgia. The officer took us to the police station which also happened to be the local court house.

A judge somehow appeared and told us that we had to pay a \$20 fine or spend the night in jail. Sydney had \$2 and I had \$5. As they were getting ready to lock us up for the rest of the night, I told them that I could write them a check. They said they would not accept it unless someone from the town would stand behind it. I asked them if I could make one call, not having a clue who I would call, just knowing that in the movies a criminal always get to make one call. The judge granted my request. So I looked through the phone book for a Church of God pastor. I found one and I called him at 4:00 a.m. and told him what had happened. He began to laugh and said, "Don't worry; this happens all the time here in Cartersville." Thankfully, he came down to the court house and told the judge that he would stand behind the check. To this day, I'm convinced he was an angel!

I never thought much about that until ten years later when I was reading a book by Hal Lindsey, in which he told a story about Billy Graham. The narrative told how Billy Graham was driving through a little town in Georgia in the middle of the night when he was pulled over for speeding. I could hardly believe it when I read the little town was called Cartersville. Sure enough, years before my experience in Cartersville, Billy Graham was also taken to the little police station/court house. But this is where his story became different than mine.

According to Billy Graham, the judge assessed a penalty of \$15. But as Billy Graham was reaching for his wallet, the judge said, "What a minute. I recognize you. Aren't you Billy Graham, the evangelist?" Billy said, "Yes sir, that's me." And with that, he

started to push his wallet back into his back pocket thinking that he had been spared the penalty. But the judge looked at him and said, “Mr. Graham that will be \$15.” But as Billy pulled out his wallet for the second time, but the judge stopped him. He said, “Rev. Graham, I’ve seen you many times on television and you’ve helped my family with the words you’ve said. Since you’ve done something for me, let me do something for you.” And with that he reached into his own pocket, pulled out his wallet and paid the clerk the \$15 that Billy Graham owed. The law had been broken—the penalty was assessed—the fine HAD to be paid. But, in Billy Graham’s case, a substitute came forward and paid his fine.

For all of us, the law had been broken—man sinned. Because man sinned a penalty was assessed—eternal separation from God. And because the penalty was assessed, the fine HAD to be paid. And in our case a substitute came forward (the Lamb of God) and paid our fine and took our place. But it cost Him more than a few dollars; it cost Him more than His blood; it cost Him His life! And Paul says once we realize that, once we understand the magnitude of the atonement, our natural response should be that of worship. Our response ought to be that of the hymn-writer who wrote, “Redeemed how I love to proclaim it! Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb; redeemed through His infinite mercy, His child, and forever, I am.”