

The Atonement...



CONTEMPLATING
CHRIST'S GREAT
REDEMPITIVE WORK

The Atonement: Its Necessity Matthew 5:20-48; James 2:10

I finished my series *Life Together: called into the community of faith* on November 16. Lord willing we will begin the exposition of I Peter on January 18. In the meantime, I want to spend five weeks exploring and relishing the glories of the atonement with you. Certainly one reason for this is that it seems appropriate during this Advent season to focus on the very purpose for the Incarnation of Christ. More importantly, however, is the growing conviction in my soul that all of life is answered by the gospel. So we preach Christ crucified. We preach the atonement. We preach the good news with unwavering confidence that the gospel alone will work an abiding gratitude and joy in your souls.

Of all the theological definitions one might memorize this one, arguably, may be the most significant and the most comforting to the Christian. The atonement is Christ's satisfying divine justice by His sufferings and death in the place of sinners. This morning we focus on the necessity of this work of Christ. Why was such a thing necessary? Indeed, was it necessary; was it unavoidable; was it required that Christ should suffer and die? Could God not have dealt with sin some other way? Not a few throughout church history have argued against necessity. One of their common objections is that there can be no obstacle to the

free forgiveness of sin in God. God is our heavenly Father and is essentially a God of love. If men can, and often do, forgive one another without demanding and receiving satisfaction, then God surely can and will do the same (see Berkhof). Of course, this argument recognizes the love of God but fails to consider that God is perfectly just and *will by no means leave the guilty unpunished* (Ex. 34:7). And that brings us to the heart of the matter. The Bible certainly teaches that sin is guilt; and because it is guilt, it makes man subject to the wrath of God and renders him liable to divine punishment (see Berkhof). This death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us with every violation of the law of God.

Sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God. In **Romans 7:7** Paul himself admitted, *"I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "YOU SHALL NOT COVET."* In pointing out our sin and arousing us from our spiritual stupor, the Law shows us our need for a Savior. **Galatians 3:24** says, *The Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.* Nowhere is this made plainer than in Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5.

Here in **verses 20-48** Jesus speaks to six subjects: murder, adultery, divorce, vows, revenge, and love in order to demonstrate that we can in no wise achieve the righteousness prescribed by the law. He is compelled to speak to this because the Pharisees had erected a system of interpretation and oral tradition to "aid" the Jews in applying the Law. But their teaching did not clarify the Law; rather, their teaching contaminated the truth of Scripture. They had reduced the Law to make it achievable, whittled it down to make it manageable, corralled it to make it controllable, edited it to make it acceptable, externalized it to make their performance of it noticeable, distorted it to the point where it was hardly

recognizable as the eternal truth of a holy God. But here, in the words of Sinclair Ferguson, [Jesus] “let [the law] out of the cage in which the Pharisees had imprisoned it, allowing it to pounce on our secret thoughts and motives, and to tear to pieces our bland assumption that we are able to keep it in our own strength.”

Our understanding of sin and righteousness is so shallow. J. C. Ryle says, “I fear there are thousands and tens of thousands of professing Christians who know no more of the requirements of God’s law than the most ignorant Jews. They know the letter of the Ten Commandments well enough; they fancy, like the young ruler, *“all these I have kept”* (**Matthew 19:20**). They never dream that it is possible to break the sixth and seventh commandments if they do not break them by outwards acts and deeds. And so they live on satisfied with themselves, and quite content with their little bit of religion” (p. 31). My friends, the text before us speaks loudly and clearly of the need for a righteousness outside ourselves. Indeed, the point this morning is that atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own.

In **Matthew 5:20** Jesus says, *“For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.”* Few, if any of us, could entertain serious hopes of ever being as morally good as one of these religious men. “But the righteousness of which Jesus speaks does not come through a greater preoccupation with the minutiae of the law that outdoes even the Pharisees. Instead, Jesus expects ... a new and higher kind of righteousness” (Hagner, *Matthew*, p.109). Paul, who, before his conversion, had been a zealot for the Law in the tradition of the Pharisees recognized this. He says in **Romans 3:21-22**, *But now a righteousness from God, apart from the law has been made*

*known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This **righteousness from God** comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.* Let's be clear. Unless you possess this righteousness which is from God, this righteousness that is outside yourself, you shall never enter heaven.

We hear the instruction of Jesus Christ concerning murder in verses **21-26**. Here Jesus refers to the Sixth Commandment. **Exodus 20:13** says, "*You shall not murder*". The popular view was that the term "murder" meant strictly the taking of someone's life and applied only in certain situations. But Jesus makes it clear that killing someone is but one of the symptoms of a terrible disease. It is an expression of hatred and animosity that fills the heart. "Jesus explains that the commandment not only forbids the outward act but also every thought and word that seeks to destroy a man's life" (Ferguson, p.114). He supplies three examples in **verse 22**. If you are *angry with your brother*, you are a guilty lawbreaker. If you call another person a "good for nothing" you are a guilty lawbreaker. If, with indignation, you call someone a *fool* you are a guilty lawbreaker. So with every uncharitable word spoken, written or emailed; with every uncharitable thought or deed; with every failure to do good to our neighbor, death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us. Atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own.

We hear the instruction of our Lord concerning adultery in verses **27-30**. Jesus here refers to the Seventh Commandment. **Exodus 20:14** says, "*You shall not commit adultery*". The punishment for the perpetrator was plain. **Leviticus 20:10** declares, "*If there is a man who commits adultery with another man's wife, one who commits adultery with his friend's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress shall surely be put to death*". The popular view was that adultery was limited strictly to the act

of sexual union. Essentially the Word of God had been revised to say, "You shall not be *found* guilty of committing adultery." Using this rationale those who have never been with a prostitute or have never had an affair are in pretty good shape. But Jesus obliterates such pious self-righteousness. He makes it clear that adultery is but the outworking of the lust that resides in every heart. Listen to Him. "*But I say to you, that everyone who looks on a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.*" So with every immodest piece of clothing, with every impure thought or affection, with every off-color joke, with every lingering look, with every tantalizing imagination death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us. Atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own.

We hear the instruction of Jesus concerning divorce in verses **31** and **32**. It is natural and logical that those with selfish and lust-loaded hearts might see the permanence of marriage as an impediment to giving that lust full expression. Consequently, not a few see the benefit in making divorce as easy a transaction as possible. The Pharisees in Jesus' day busied themselves in searching for and creating loopholes in the laws governing marriage. It wasn't long before divorce consisted of nothing more than a simple matter of *sending one's wife away (31)*. Notwithstanding, God's intention was clear. The Father had spoken plainly in **Malachi 2:16**, "*I hate divorce,*" says the Lord, the God of Israel. The Son here makes it clear that marriage is an exclusive and permanent relationship and that there is only a single circumstance in which a concession is granted to men. The Word of God in **Genesis 2:24** stands, *For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.* After 27 ½ years I am still married to the wife of my youth. This fact alone may lead me to think that I have kept this command. I find, however, that I cannot wiggle out from under the

condemnation of any law. You see, with every failure to cherish my wife, with every failure to nourish my wife, with every failure to give myself up totally for her I have pulled up short of this command as well and death-deserving guilt, like a barnacle on an old sunken ship, once more attaches itself to me. Atonement is necessary on account of our need for a righteousness not our own.

We hear the instruction of Jesus Christ concerning the honor of God's name in verses **33-37**. Jesus refers here to the Third Commandment. **Exodus 20:7** says, *"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain."* God also said in **Leviticus 19:12**, *And you shall not swear falsely by My name, so as to profane the name of your God; I am the Lord.* The immediate reference here is to the taking of an oath or vow. Essentially, however, it has to do with the honor of God's name. While much could be said here I want to focus on a single way in which we violate the Third Commandment. Skip Ryan refers to it as "casual God-talk." In one sermon he said, "What quickly comes into view is that God is prohibiting in the Third Commandment not only the blasphemous use of His name ... but any careless or casual use of His name. It is precisely here that we Christians are sometimes more guilty than non-Christians. The Christian says, 'I don't curse or swear very much, so I guess I don't break the Third Commandment.' But it is the Christian who is in danger of using God's name too casually, without really meaning what he is saying."

Here's an example. Have you ever seen the t-shirt with "This blood's for you" written on it? The kid who wears that shirt probably thinks it's a cool way to witness for Jesus. It probably never enters his mind that he is a walking violation of the Third Commandment by such casual treatment of the precious price paid for the redemption of sinners. Our minds cannot begin to comprehend the ways

in which and the frequency with which we have violated the Third Commandment. And death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us with every transgression. Atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own.

We hear the instruction of Jesus Christ concerning our rights in verses **38-42**. *“AN EYE FOR AN EYE, AND A TOOTH FOR A TOOTH.”* This phrase appears in three OT passages - **Exodus 21:24**, **Leviticus 24:20**, and **Deuteronomy 19:21**. They are called the *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation. In Exodus it is used in the context of a civil penalty for injury suffered by a pregnant woman. It is used in Leviticus in the context of restitution for injury done to a neighbor. In Deuteronomy, it is used for a witness caught falsely testifying or accusing another. This colorful phrase, *an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*, belonged to the arena of civil laws designed to define justice, to protect the innocent, and to set limits on restitution. The Pharisees interpreted it as justification, even a command, to take revenge or retaliate. So in the hands of these men that which was intended to limit and restrain man's vengeance was used to increase and justify personal revenge. All in spite of **Leviticus 19:18** – *“You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.”*

Jesus turns the tables on us all when he says retaliation isn't even the issue. God's point is that any response to injustice done to us (**5:39-42**) other than selfless love is sin. What He is saying is that with every urge to get even, with every secret desire to see someone get what's coming to him, with every compulsion to get your way, with every rush to defend ourselves, death-

deserving guilt attaches itself to us. Atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness not our own.

Finally, we hear the instruction of Jesus Christ concerning love in verses **43-48**. God's law in **Leviticus 19:18** says, "*you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord.*" Here Jesus touches on what we know as "the sum of the Ten Commandments" (SC Q.42). The Pharisees had twisted the command to mean you shall love *only* your neighbor leaving one free to lawfully hate his enemies. This kind of thinking was behind the question which the lawyer put to Jesus in **Luke 10:29**, "*And who is my neighbor?*"

But Jesus will not tolerate our distortion of this rule of life. He declares the demand of righteousness – "*love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you.*" The law of love binds us to love those who are unlovely, to honor those who hold us in contempt, and to pray for those who inflict harm upon us. And to the degree that we fail to love all men perfectly death-deserving guilt attaches itself to us. Atonement is necessary on account of our need of a righteousness outside ourselves.

When we consider the necessity of the atonement we must remember that God is holy. He Himself is sacred, worthy of reverence. He is separate, unique and distinct from anything in His creation. He is spotless, absolutely undefiled. And because God is holy His *Law is holy and righteous and good* (**Rom. 7:12**). We are too often blind to the unflinching strictness and purity of the Commandments. We are deaf to its threatening and dulled to the eternal consequences of even the slightest violation. **James 2:10** - *For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all* – hasn't really hit home. I believe with all my

heart that our dullness at this point is the main reason why so many do not cherish the Gospel, why so many content themselves with a little formal Christianity, why our knowledge of God is so shallow, our affections for God are so cool, our commitment to God is so weak, and our fear of God so anemic.

God's requirement is perfection. In **Leviticus 19:2** God says, "*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.*" Jesus quotes His Father when He says in **Matthew 5:48**, "*Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" God has not lowered His standards to accommodate you or me. To be righteous we must be as God Himself. To enter and enjoy heaven we must be absolutely free of that guilt which has attached itself to us with every violation of God's law.

Suppose I sinned only ten times a day, or even five, or even just three. Why, I would be practically a walking angel! Imagine if no more than three times a day did I think unkind thoughts, or lose my temper, or fail to do what I ought towards God and man – I would be a pretty fine person, would I not? But even if I were this good, I would still have over 1,000 transgressions a year! If I lived to be the age of 70, I would have 70,000 violations of the law of God on my record. Think what would happen to an habitual offender in a criminal court with 70,000 transgression on his record.

Who shall stand before God and plead "not guilty?" Who will argue with God at the bar of His justice? Who will portray himself as the exception to **Romans 3:10** which says, *There is none righteous, not even one.* Who would claim "sincerity" in the face of so many violations? Shall reformation erase this record? Shall resolution cleanse the heart? Shall a bit of morality and kindness satisfy divine justice? No, beloved. For this sinner, atonement is necessary on account of the death-deserving guilt that attaches itself to me with every violation of the perfect

law of God. The atonement is necessary because I can't save myself; because I cannot withstand the withering wrath of God; because my heart is corrupt – its every inclination and tendency tainted with sin; because God's justice is unflinching; because I can never (even if given all eternity) render adequate restitution for the dishonor my sin has heaped upon the person of God.

Atonement is **Christ's** satisfying divine justice by **His** suffering and death in the place of sinners. In such an atonement the mercy of God is extended, the justice of God is satisfied, and the power and wisdom of God are displayed in such a way as to bring the most glory to Him. **Romans 11:33-36**, *Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways!* ³⁴ *For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?* ³⁵ *Or who has first given to Him that it might be paid back to him again?* ³⁶ *For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.*