

Series: Reign of Grace: A Study Through Romans

Message: Christ Our Mercy Seat / Jeff Kennedy 8-7-22

Romans 3:21–22 “But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets. ²² The righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe, since there is no distinction.”

Isa 53:4–5 “Yet he himself bore our sicknesses, and he carried our pains; but we in turn regarded him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced because of our rebellion, crushed because of our iniquities; punishment for our peace was on him, and we are healed by his wounds.”

These powerful words are the most lifechanging sentences in the Bible.

Today we’re going to look at the doctrine of Christ’s atonement—its necessity, nature, and our response it.

1. The necessity of the atonement (Isa 53; Rom 1:18–3:20).

Recap: Up until this point...

Paul has built a compelling case against any personal display of our self-righteousness. Rom 3:9 he reminds the reader “We have already made the case that both Jew and Gentile alike are held under the dominion and power of sin, there is no one who is righteous, not even one.”

Paul has told us clearly what the human dilemma is, and that God has, now, apart from self-justifying sin, moralism, and religious works—God has now revealed his righteousness.

We learned that God’s righteousness (3:21–24) is: (1) the quality, or characteristic of being “in the right.” God’s ethical and legal standard. (2) Righteousness is apart from the works of the law—that is, in contrast to the self-justifying pursuit of religious works; (3) And it is anticipated by the Hebrew Scriptures “Attested by the law and the prophets.”

Last week Daniel took us back to the law and the prophets—the main passage in the OT (Isa 53) which prophesied the coming of a righteous branch who would inaugurate his Kingdom and accede to his throne—but in a manner, as Daniel explained, that left his audience bewildered and just stunned.

- Instead of arriving with the pomp and fanfare that accompanied ancient tyrants, this victorious King’s upbringing is unexceptional and unremarkable.
- Furthermore, this king is rejected and despised and disfigured such that he is unrecognizable. Instead of crushing his enemies with the iron fist of military power—the unremarkable servant is himself beaten black and blue, lanced through, and pierced, and finally executed and assigned a grave with rebels. What kind of sense does that make?
- And Daniel reminded us that the prophet himself predicted that hardly anyone—in fact no one could believe that this is the way God’s righteous king would arrive.
- It was God’s will to crush him for our sake, it was according to the predestined plan of God that this righteous, innocent servant be rejected, despised, be put to death for our sins.

Pastor Daniel reminded us that the story doesn’t end there...he sees the light of life and inherit the spoils of his victory.

Isa 53:10 “the Lord makes his life an offering for sin.”

Sin requires justice. Through his suffering and death, the servant pays the penalty that was due sin and rises from the dead to the inheritance of many justified and forgiven saints who are pardoned, their sins no longer counted against them.

God's righteousness was attested by the law and the prophets...

2. The Nature of the Atonement (Rom 3:25) “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”

Now there is a reason why this is translated variously, depending on what version you’re reading. Let me put these translations up on the screen...

NET (CSB) “God publicly displayed him at his death as the mercy seat (*hilasterion*) accessible through faith.”

ESV (KJV, ASV, NASB) “whom God put forward as a propitiation (*hilasterion*) by his blood,”

NIV (NRSV) “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement (*hilasterion*), through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.”

The Greek word *hilasterion* means “mercy seat; or sacrifice of atonement.” Some translations use the word propitiation to encapsulate the whole idea.

Propitiation: to propitiate means to appease or assuage a judge’s wrath toward wrongdoing; to meet/satisfy the demands of God’s justice (condemnation) for sin.” So this is what Christ does for us.

The term is translated in **concrete-literate terms** or in **figurative-conceptual terms**.

The mercy seat was literally the cover or the lid of the Ark of the Covenant.

It’s called a “seat,” but it doesn’t look like a chair? Why is that? That’s because it’s a metaphorical “seat of authority”—meaning, it’s sacred space from which the deity rules his realm. It’s his command center. In Star Trek terms, the holy of holies is the bridge and the mercy seat is the captain’s chair. And only authorized personnel may come and go. Only two people are approved to enter that inner sanctum, the High Priest and Moses.

Among other things, the Ark of the Covenant was the place where God’s cloud of glory appeared (Lev 16:2) where Moses spoke with God (Exod 25; 39; 40). On the day of Atonement, the lid of the Ark is where the blood of the sacrificed bull and goat were flicked by the Priest as he then proceeded to cleanse the entire tabernacle of sin and impurity.

Lev 16:14–15 “He [the High Priest] shall take some of the blood of the bull and sprinkle it with his finger on the front of the **cover** (Heb. *kapporet*; Gk. *hilasterion*), and before the cover (*hilasterion*) he shall sprinkle the blood with his finger seven times.

¹⁵ He shall slaughter the goat of the purification offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the curtain and do with

its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it upon the cover (*hilasterion*) and before the cover (*hilasterion*).¹⁶ Thus he shall make atonement (*exhilasthétai*) for the sanctuary, because of the uncleanness of the Israelites and because of their **transgressions**, all their **sins**, and so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which remains with them in the midst of their uncleanness.” So this is obviously an ancient purification rite.

So the term *hilasterion* can have both a denotive and connotative meaning.

An Example: Think of the word “**Watergate**.” The literal referent denotes the Watergate Hotel/complex in the Foggy Bottom area of WA, DC. It’s just a building. But the term “Watergate” has become synonymous with Richard Nixon’s crimes, ordering the break in to steal private campaign documents from the DNC headquarters. So it can refer to the literal facility or the events that took place there that made the building famous.

A Second Example: Or think of the phrase “**9/11**”—now, this word or phrase denotes, literally, a recurring day on the calendar. But as soon as I say it, you all associate with it its connotation—because of what happened on that day.

Understand that some translations render *hilasterion* as the physical object “the mercy seat” (assuming you know what took place there) while other translations render it “propitiation; the place of atonement.” The physical object is meant to evoke a mental picture of the whole sacrificial rite.

So what does the symbol mean?

The author of Hebrews tells us...

Hebrews 9:7–10 “But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that **only once a year**, and **never without blood**, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.⁸ The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning.⁹ **This is an illustration** for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. (that is, animal sacrifices didn’t have an internal, conscience clearing function)¹⁰ They are only a matter of food and drink and various **ceremonial washings—external regulations** applying until the time of the new order.”

So, the OT sacrifices had to be repeated annually and ceremonially because it had only a temporary, external affect.

Heb 9:24–26 “For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. (meaning, everything related to the earthly temple was merely symbolic

and typological) ²⁵ Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place **every year with blood** that is not his own. ²⁶ Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But he has appeared **once for all** at the culmination of the ages to **do away with sin** by the sacrifice of himself.”

Here's what we learned about that Old system compared to the New:

- a. The earthly tabernacle was a **symbolic** representation of the heavenly.
- b. As such, animal sacrifices were **inadequate** and **temporary**, while Jesus’ sacrifice was **fully sufficient** and **permanent**.
- c. External rites and ceremonies were **signs** pointing forward to an **Internal cleansing of the conscience/spirit/heart**.
- d. OT sacrifices were offered by an earthly High Priest who **didn’t offer his own blood** or body as the sacrifice. Whereas Jesus offered himself—voluntarily and willingly on our behalf as the righteous lamb who takes away our sins of the world.

- **The Definition of Atonement:** Christ’s died for the forgiveness of sins in order to reconcile us to God. And they can be summed up in one word—propitiation.

But you might say “How does Christ’s death atone for our sins?”

- **The Means of the Atonement:**

(1) Expiation—removal of the impediment, or the offense. We see this for the accidental sins committed in Lev 4:35 “In this way the priest will make **atonement** for them for the **sin** they have committed, and they will be **forgiven**.” The removal of the offense. God is the offended party, our sin is an affront to his holiness and righteousness, and the sacrifice is designed to expiate or remove the impurity of sin.

Lev 16:30 “because on this day **atonement** will be made for you, to **cleanse** you. Then, before the Lord, you will be **clean** from all your **sins**.” So the purpose of the peace, sin, and guilt offerings was to cleanse the person from sin—to remove the impediment to their relationship with God by the death of the Bull and one goat—symbolizing the act of cleansing.

The NT authors interpreted Christ’s sacrifice as the removal of our guilt and liability to sin which separates us from God.

1 John 2:2 “Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. ² He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

The consistent witness of the NT is that Jesus is God’s sacrificial lamb who is offered for the removal of our guilt of sin. The first means of the atonement is Christ’s **expiatory sacrifice**—the shedding of his blood on the altar of the cross.

The second means of Atonement is...

(2) Faith: trusting reception of a free gift. Remember we defined faith a few weeks ago as “trusting reception.” Grace is the free gift of God’s salvation delivered to the empty hands of faith. Rom 3:25 “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the **shedding of his blood—to be received by faith.**” The beneficiary of Christ’s work trusts in its power to save us from our sins. The gift is received not summoned nor searched for. The gift is free not meritorious. It’s not compensation for work done.

Rom 4:4–5 “Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who **without works trusts** him who **justifies the ungodly**, such faith is **reckoned as righteousness.**”

The instrument (delivery system) through which Christ’s expiatory sacrifice comes to us is by the means of faith.

The third means of Atonement is...

(3) Justification—the judicial act of declaring one acquitted of all charges. Rom 3:25–26 “God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to **demonstrate his righteousness**, because in his **forbearance** he had left the sins committed beforehand **unpunished**—²⁶ he did it to **demonstrate his righteousness** at the present time, so as to be just and the one who **justifies those who have faith** in Jesus.” The basis of God’s just verdict is not that we have won our court case on our own merits or that we have acquitted ourselves defending our actions or appealing to our own righteousness. **The basis of our justification is a pardon.** And understand that the OT and Second Temple Jewish literature, *never uses the word “pardon” in the way it is used today with respect to the executive branch of our government.* The President may decide to pardon individuals for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that he just likes certain individuals loyal to him and so he commutes their sentences (that may be legal but its still corrupt).

And the basis of our being pardoned for sin is not that God just **likes us** and would rather we not spend eternity in hell. See, God is all three branches of his government: **Executive, Judicial,** and **Legislative**—God makes the laws, he judges those who break his laws, and as the loving heavenly Father—he is the executive who decides who receives a pardon. As an omniscient being, God knows the truth about every person—that we have sinned and assaulted his holiness. And because he is infinitely holy his perfectly just nature demands satisfaction for sins committed.

Our justification is due to a gracious, loving act of judicial pardon—and the basis of our pardon is that God’s just demands for the sins committed have been satisfied. The payment was punishment, and the price is now paid. But how? Jesus was an innocent party giving his life for a guilty party. As Pastor Daniel asked, how is that just?

(4) Imputation—the reckoning/crediting of our sin to Christ (God’s innocent righteous servant), and the legal imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us.” Now, understand that Adam’s legacy is *infusion not imputation*. That is to say, his one act of sin brought death to all mankind because all who are born into Adam have been infused with a sinful nature that bends with every sinew and particle unceasingly toward rebellion to God. The infusion of that nature led to our sin and the just condemnation of death. Paul does not teach that we will be held liable for Adam’s sin, but that born into Adam we all sin. Here’s how he puts it...

Rom 5:12 “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all **because all have sinned.**” Paul told the Ephesians that we “are by nature objects of wrath.” John Calvin put it this way—we *do sin* because of our nurture (that is, our environment) but indeed our environment becomes merely the theater in which we display our fallen nature.

Of course we are sinners because we sin. But we sin because we are sinners by nature.

So, Adam’s nature is infused to us, causing us to sin and bring the just sentence of death upon ourselves. By contrast, our sins are not infused to Christ nor his righteousness infused to us—but our sins have been imputed (**legally**) to him and his righteousness to us (**legally**).

Passages in Scripture which seem to strongly imply the doctrine of imputation...

Phil 3:8–9 “that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found **in him**, not having a **righteousness of my own** that comes from the law, but one that comes through **faith in Christ**” this righteousness is alien/foreign to us. So who’s righteousness is it?

1 Cor 1:30 “It is from him that you are in **Christ** Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our **righteousness**, sanctification, and redemption.” Who is our righteousness? Jesus.

2 Cor 5:21 “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that **in him** we might become **the righteousness of God.**”

This righteousness is a change of legal standing. We don't just wake up and go "Oh, I have no sinful impulses any more." It's not infusion, it's imputation.

This righteousness is more than the mere removal (expiation) of our guilt. The righteous which God imputes to the believer is not merely the removal of our guilt because sufficient payment has been made—it is the positive ascription of a status of righteous given to us by God. That right status is alien, or foreign to us, it comes through the means of faith in Jesus, it is in Christ and it *is Christ alone*.

So, in the past God left sins unpunished until the present. He justly condemns sin in Christ who has met the legal demands of his justice for wrongdoing, forgives the sinner who by faith receives Christ's work for taking the punishment that would have been ours; now the guilty receive a divine pardon declaring us acquitted on all charges, having received Christ who is our righteousness, sanctification, and resurrection hope.

Application:

3. The Response

1. Conviction and confession over sin's severity. The gravity of our sin should humble us before a holy God.
2. Appreciation that God would demonstrate his love and justice. That God would demonstrate his love for us in this—while we railed and raged against him he died for the ungodly. The innocent given for the guilty. And the guilty now declared absolved and in the right. And that should inspire awesome gratitude.
3. Assurance in the all sufficiency of Christ's work. Whenever I am tempted to trust in my own righteousness, or if ever I am tempted to think that I have somehow been disqualified because of my struggles and fight against sin—I am reminded that the one who sought me and bought me also keeps me. When my own heart condemns me I am reminded that the God who is love and justice holds me.
4. Motivation to change. —**Jesus is our righteousness, sanctification, and resurrection.** That his sacrifice was fully sufficient for my standing, my sanctification and my ultimate redemption in resurrection. Not that I have obtained all this, but this one thing I do—I press on toward the goal of the heavenly prize—resurrection glory.