



## God's Contagious Love

[Mark 8:27-33] John 16:15-20

Whenever I'm learning something new, I usually feel a bit confused until I can wrap my arms around the core concept of whatever the subject is. Now today, before you walk out of this place, it's my goal that you will all understand the core idea of Christianity. I want every person here to walk out the door with the full assurance that you really "get it" -that you understand the basic idea of what Christianity is all about.

- For some, this is going to be review. It will reinforce what you already know, and that's a good thing.
- For others, this is going to be clarifying. The haze is going to dissipate some and you're going to see the core idea with new sharpness and definition.
- And, for others, this is going to hit you like a bolt of lightning. You've never heard Christianity boiled down to its very core in terms you could understand. This might just change everything in your life, both now and for eternity. Really! Because once you understand that the core truths of Christianity grow out of God's amazing and contagious love for us, I think you're going to want to get in on all that he has to offer you!

And to do it, are going to learn some theology. Let's begin.

Do you remember a name that was in the news a few years ago - Richard Speck. He's the guy who assaulted and murdered eight young nurses in Chicago way back in 1966. It was one of the first

mass murders of that generation, and it traumatized much of the country for months. Every day, the cry went out for Richard Speck to pay for his crimes.

Well, he was tried and convicted. And then he was locked away in Stateville Prison, in Joliet, Illinois, for eight consecutive life sentences. Then he died in 1991. So that was that; an ugly chapter of U.S. criminal history was over, or so everyone thought!

Then, several years after his death, a videotape was released showing how Richard Speck spent the final years of his life living like a king in prison. He had free access to drugs and alcohol. He had numerous lovers who would come in and out of his cell. He had carved out a little *country club* kind of life in Stateville Prison, and the tape showed evidence of the whole fiasco.

Well, when that videotape got into the hands of the news reporters, people were outraged all over again. Why? Because it seemed clear to everyone that Richard Speck had not made appropriate payment for his crime. And there's just this thing about society-it can't put a crime behind it until an appropriate payment has been paid.

Appropriate payment. Hold onto that concept. In fact, let's call it atonement, a word the Bible uses - because it's essentially the same concept. *Atonement is satisfying the demands of justice when a crime has been committed.* And we all carry an intuitive understanding of this in our heads.

Somebody walks by your new car and beats on it with a baseball bat. You want that person caught and for him to make amends for what he did.

So do you have the idea of atonement now? It's satisfying the demands of justice when a crime has been committed.

The second half of the core idea of Christianity comes out of another word we're quite familiar with - substitution. We use this a lot in our culture. It's whoever comes into the football game after our favorite player goes out!

*Substitute - taking the place of another.* We all understand this.

Remember what we used to do to substitute teachers? I still carry around a little guilt about that!

Now, let's put those two words together for the complete core concept. *Substitutionary atonement -it's somebody taking the place of someone else and*

*satisfying the demands of justice for a crime that has been committed.*

## I. GENESIS

I want to clarify this concept further by taking you for a brief walk through the Bible and showing you how this pertains to the Christian faith and to your life. We're going to start all the way back in the book of Genesis. Shortly after God created Adam and Eve, he said to them:

*"I've breathed life into you. You can make all kinds of decisions, you're smart, and I love you. We'll commune together, and it's going to be a wonderful experience."*

And if I could just pause here for a moment, I'd like to introduce a drawing that some of you may know, called **The Bridge**. It shows how what was true of Adam and Eve is also true of all of us-that God made us, he loves us, and he wants to have a relationship with us.

We'll come back to this picture, and expand on it throughout this message. I'd encourage all of you to use the box on the insert in the bulletin and write it out with me. Okay? Are you with me? Is everybody drawing it? [**Note: see diagram on page 6**]

Then God also said to Adam and Eve: *"But I am a holy and a just God. If you start sinning and violating my laws and shaking your fist at me, I've got to let you know something. This wonderful gift of life that I breathed into you is going to come to a screeching halt. You're going to die, not just physically, but also spiritually."*

He made it all very clear. But as you know, Adam and Eve bought into a lie from Satan and flagrantly disobeyed God. This brought a separation between them and God, which you can see in this next slide of our drawing. *You can draw in the lines on each side to add this chasm to your drawing.*

So now all of creation holds its breath wondering, "What is God going to do?" Will he strike them dead for their rebellion? Or maybe the whole death warning was just a hoax and God's going to wink and say, *"Just kidding! Apple eating is hardly a crime deserving of capital punishment. Boys will be boys; girls will be girls. I'm going to let you off on this one."*

Do you remember what God does? Because of his great love, he doesn't strike them dead, but he doesn't wink and walk away either.

First, he explains that now the whole universe has been sin-tainted because of what Adam and Eve did. They've opened the door, and now sin is in the world. Human labor is going to be affected, relationships will be complicated by ego. Our bodies will grow old and eventually die.

And God explains that people who continue to live in patterns of rebellion and resistance to Him will pay. They'll atone for their crimes against God in this life and throughout eternity in hell. Not a cartoon hell with red suits and pitchforks-but a very real place of regret and judgment.

Sin is a serious thing. But at the end of God's explanation of the consequences of sin, we read in Genesis 3:21 that God does something that must have knocked the wind out of Adam and Eve, who were cowering with shame and guilt for what they had done. The text says that God covered their shame and nakedness with an animal skin. Most people just read right beyond that and think, "Okay, no big deal." But it is a big deal. I think it's our first glimpse of the arrangement God is designing to provide sinners with an alternative way to have their sins atoned for.

Picture God's dilemma. He's the absolutely holy and just God. He cannot allow sin to go un-atoned - it's got to be paid for. At the same time, he's a tender, loving God whose heart has been captured by these two people and all of the others who will follow. The thought of Adam and Eve atoning for their own sins for the rest of their lives and then for eternity in hell just breaks the heart of God. He knows that even with their absolute best efforts, they'll never be able to live up to his perfect standards or to work their way back to him.

*Let's add this sobering reality to our drawings by putting two arrows on the left side. Some people try harder to get back to God than others, but all of our efforts fall short.*

And, to make matters worse, God's holy nature demands that he punish our sin and disobedience. That punishment, as we indicated earlier, is a penalty of death - *physical* death someday and a

*spiritual* death or separation from God for all of eternity.

*Let's add that challenging truth to our drawings by putting the word "DEATH" at the bottom of the chasm, between Us and God.*

It's not a pretty picture. But our helpless situation moves God to provide an alternate way that sin can be legitimately paid for, without the sinner having to spend an eternity atoning for his or her own sin and without God's holiness being compromised.

So look at what God does. All the way back in the garden of Eden. He takes an animal - an innocent animal - and he kills it. Can you imagine Adam and Eve gasping in horror as they see this? They hear the screech of the animal. They see its awkward movements in its death throes. And then God takes the skin of that animal and covers the shame and guilt and nakedness of Adam and Eve as if to say, **"In order for your sinfulness to be covered, in order for your wrongdoings to be atoned for, an innocent party is going to have to bear the penalty that was rightfully yours."**

There it is. Our core idea. Say it with me - "Substitutionary Atonement." And, friends, this was kind of a sneak preview of this idea of substitutionary atonement - the arrangement by God *for an innocent party to stand in the place of the sinner and absorb the penalty due to that sinner, thereby satisfying the demands of justice.* And the guilty party, then, is set free.

## II. EXODUS

Later on in the history of God's people, we read the story of the Exodus. God's people, the Israelites, have become a faithless people held captive as slaves by the Egyptians.

This pushes God's patience to the breaking point. Scripture shows us that God is slow to anger, but if you push him long enough his righteous wrath finally kicks in. That's what happens in this situation. God says, "Enough is enough!" He announces to all that he's going to bring judgment. He's going to bring it to bear on everyone for the sins they've committed. He announces that an angel of death is going to circulate on a given night and take the life of every firstborn son in every household in the land. *The wages of sin is death!*

But, again because of God's great love he adds, almost as a P.S., one more thing: *"I will offer one escape option. I will make one provision for any interested party. Here it is: anyone who gets an unblemished male lamb and slaughters it, sheds its blood, and sprinkles a bit of the blood over the door frame on the front of their house-the angel of death, on the appointed night, will honor the blood of that lamb and pass over that house. The eldest son in that house will not be killed."* God says, *"That's my arrangement. So you can decide-what are you going to do on that night?"*

I imagine a fifteen-year-old kid watching his dad search around in the herd. He finds the best lamb and he's just lifting the knife to sacrifice it when his son says, *"Hey, Dad! Why are you killing our prize lamb? What did that lamb ever do to you?"*-only to have the father respond, *"Well, son, it's the lamb or you. It's atonement time. Sin is going to be paid for tonight. A holy God has said 'Enough is enough.' It's the lamb or you."*

We read that the next day every household that did as they'd been instructed and offered up an innocent lamb and sprinkled the blood on the doorframe was spared judgment. The lambs died and the sons went free. But the households that didn't offer up a lamb really did pay with the life of their firstborn son.

Sin is serious. And when it's atonement time, sin gets paid for, one way or another.

Once again we see it, don't we. Say it with me - "Substitutionary Atonement." An innocent lamb takes the hit for the wrongdoing of others and guilty parties go free.

## III. THE OLD TESTAMENT

Later on through the Old Testament, you see the sacrificial system. It foreshadows the *substitutionary atonement* idea as well. Whenever a person sinned grievously, an animal sacrifice would be made; an innocent lamb would be slain. Only after the death of the lamb would the priest give the guilty sinner the assurance that his or her sin had been atoned for and then that person could go free.

Then a prophet named Isaiah announces something that makes people's heads spin and hearts stop. In one of his prophecies he says: **Isaiah 53:5** *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."* People didn't know how to handle

this prophecy because it sounded as though someday, somewhere, God was going to send a human sacrifice to make an *ultimate* atonement for the sins of the world...

#### IV. JESUS CHRIST

And then, later on, came Jesus Christ. And he's born amidst all of these miraculous circumstances. He grows up, and there are all of these indications that he's God's Son.

When he's about 30 years old, he goes out one day to where John the Baptist is preaching. A large crowd of people is listening to him. Jesus stands on the fringe of the crowd, and John the Baptist sees him, stops preaching, and says, "*Look, everybody!*" And he points right at Jesus and says an amazing thing: "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*"

"Here he is," John was saying, "*the one we've all been wondering about, the one Isaiah prophesied would come. He's God's ultimate provision for atonement. He's the unblemished prize lamb that will be offered as the ultimate substitute for sin. He's the one that tens of thousands of sacrificial lambs have been foreshadowing all these years.*"

The people strained to understand, just like some of you who are seekers are straining to get what I'm saying right now. You're thinking: "Does this make any sense? Can it be so? How does it all fit together?"

- When Jesus began his teaching ministry, he too began to refer to himself in these *sacrificial* terms. He'd give a great talk and people would be applauding. Then he'd add, in so many words, "*But you've got to know something. Not too long from now, I'm going to be sacrificed for all of your sins.*" And the people said, "No, no, no!"
- Even His closest disciples, as we saw in John 16, could not understand Jesus when he started to talk about his death.

I'm telling you, people just couldn't take in that kind of supernatural love.

But, sure enough, after living a sinless, unblemished life, he was arrested and falsely convicted. He was beaten and bruised. All the angels in heaven looked on in horror as Jesus was nailed to a cross outside the city of Jerusalem.

- You think Adam and Eve cringed at the killing of an animal?
- You think the fifteen-year-old boy at the time of the Exodus got a little nauseated when he saw his father kill the lamb?
- Imagine what's going on in heaven as Jesus, the innocent, second member of the Trinity, slowly bleeds to death in front of a group of gawkers who-instead of bowing low to worship him for what he is doing-are busy auctioning his tattered robe to the highest bidder. You'd better believe there's some major grieving going on in heaven when Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, finally cries out, in effect, "**It is finished! I have made atonement for the sins of the world.**"

*Let's pause to **add the cross** to our drawings, to show how Jesus died to pay for our sins.*

It just didn't seem right in heaven. The price seemed too high. Guilty sinners don't deserve a substitute like the one God provided. They ought to pay for their own sins.

And you know what? They're right! We deserve to pay ourselves! I deserve to because I'm the one who does them. You deserve to because you're the one who does them. We're the ones who know God's rules and break them anyway. And we deserve to atone for these kinds of crimes.

But the Bible says, that even with Him being as holy, righteous, and just as he is, God still has this thing about you. You matter to him. He knows your name. And whenever he thinks about you, his heart is moved with love. So the Bible tells us that *God so loved the world* that even though we ought to pay for our own sins, *he sent his only begotten Son to stand in our place*, to pay the death penalty we should pay, making a *substitutionary atonement* for our sin.

*Let's illustrate this amazing reality by going back to our drawing, and **CROSSING OUT the word DEATH.***

Do you see the core idea of Christianity? Jesus Christ taking your place and mine, satisfying the demands of justice so guilty parties like you and me can go free.

**We can be forgiven and stand blameless before God on the merits of the Lamb of God who paid our price for us. What an idea!**

Every other religious system I've studied is based on a different core idea-one that establishes some kind of **performance expectation**. If you try hard and struggle and strive and give money and do all kinds of things, well, then you might make it. That's unfortunately how a lot of people see Christianity too.

But Christianity is the only religion in the world whose core idea is based on **substitutionary atonement** - where guilty sinners go free on the merits of the provision God has made in Jesus, his Son, who pays the price on our behalf.

It's an amazing thing. There's nothing else like it in the world.

By the way, in case you were wondering, the Bible says that on the Day of Judgment you're going to stand before a holy God, and there will be no argument whatsoever about whether or not you're a sinner. That's going to be the shortest discussion in history!

From afar some of us say, "I'll hold my own when I stand before God. I've led a pretty good life." But stand five seconds in the brilliant, blazing light of God's holiness and you're going to say, "I'm in BIG trouble!"

On the Judgment Day the issue is not *who's the sinner* -the question is, *who makes the atonement?* Because in God's economy, sin will be paid for. It's just a question of who pays.

## V. YOU

The Bible says that between this moment right now and the Judgment Day you've got a decision to make. You can decide to take the hit and do your own atoning, then you'll have to do it forever -separated from God for eternity in a place called hell. It's your choice.

But then there's this other option available to you: say it again with me: **substitutionary atonement**. It's Jesus Christ, out of his amazing love, saying, "I'll take your rap. I'll take the hit. I'll pay the penalty. And you, on my merits alone-can be forgiven, set free, adopted into God's family, and taken to heaven forever.

Your choice! All you have to do is humble yourself to ask him for his forgiveness, paid for on the cross, and for his leadership now and into the future."

*I want to illustrate that choice by having us all draw a stick person figure on the left side of our pictures and an arrow going over the cross to the right side, where we'll add a second stick person. That's actually the same person, who has moved across to God's side!*

## CONCLUSION

Now, everybody look at your page. We're all going to do something together. This is very important, so please stay focused with me. Two steps.

The core idea of Christianity is substitutionary atonement -Jesus Christ willingly shouldering the weight of our wrongdoing so that we could be set free.

**Step one.** Now, if you really get this, I'd like to have you write, "**I understand it**" under the drawing. Also, put down where you were and when it was.

I put down "Seymour, CT - 1972" on mine, because that's when I could first say, "I understand it!"

- Now, if you really don't get it yet, leave it blank. You're on a journey toward getting it, which is great. We want to do whatever we can as a church to help you move in that direction.
- Some of you might say, "Well, I just got it, a few minutes ago! I just understood it during this service." Then put down today's date, 9/23 and First Baptist Church.

You can all talk about it afterward and show each other your cards and tell each other when and where it was for you. I hope for some of you it will be today!

**Step two.** And here's the second, equally important step. The Bible warns that you can fully understand the core idea of Christianity and still end up atoning for your own sins in hell forever. That's because merely understanding this is not enough. That would be like standing on the left side of our drawing, on the wrong side of the chasm, and merely nodding your head in agreement. It's a good

first step, but it doesn't get you over to God's side. The Bible says in **John 1:12** (NASB), "*As many have received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.*" You have to receive him as your forgiver and leader.

So if that has already happened in your life, then write "**I receive it**" below where you already wrote "I understand it," put down where and when it happened, and initial or sign that second part. For me, it was again Seymour and 1972.

Not long after I really "understood it," I said, "**I receive it!**" I reached out for his salvation. Jesus Christ's atoning work became real in my life and I've never looked back since.

When did this happen for you? If you're thinking, "Uh oh-I don't know," it might be that you've never really appropriated the substitutionary work of Christ.

The great news is you can get that squared away right now. If you're ready, just write "I receive it," add today's date [9/23/07], and put First Baptist Church next to it.

And to help you seal that decision, I'd like to lead you in a prayer right now. Let's pray.

*Father, I thank you for how you're working in hearts here right now. For those who want to receive you, I pray that you would help them to reach out and express that desire to you now ...*

Friends, just silently talk to God right now, and say something like "*I ask for Christ's atoning work to take effect in my life. I reach out for it, and I receive your forgiveness and leadership right now, by faith. Thank you for your love and grace in my life. Make me who you want me to be and spread your contagious love through me to others.*" In Jesus' name, amen.

If you prayed that prayer sincerely, Christ will do it for you. He died to do that for you.

