

ATONEMENT: Part 2
Romans 3:21-26
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A person's worldview, in a simple definition, is a framework for generating, sustaining, and applying knowledge. For example, as you guys would remember, just a couple of weeks ago the time changed. This was the first time change that Bethany had experienced since she was old enough to observe that something different was happening. These early school years have been such a phase of discovery. She is just being bombarded with new ideas that she is trying to process and implement. Mom and Dad are at the pinnacle of her worldview. We, contrary to what we teach her, are looked at as gods who control everything. Based on this worldview she could not understand why we needed to change the clocks that specific night. Through her worldview lenses, those kinds of things are all truly up to Mom and Dad because they are in charge of everything and everybody.

Each one of us has a worldview in which we generate, sustain, and apply knowledge. What I love about this series on the Atonement is that we are truly digging deep into the depths of how we look at life – our worldview – and doing some significant cleaning. Those of us who profess to follow Jesus are by no means exempt from this... when we begin to really examine our outlook on life it does not take long to see many detours away from basic biblical truths. One central worldview pursuit that has been present since the beginning of time is the search for personal identity. Even the birth of institutions was a search for identity as people pursued their self-interests in the company of like-minded people. Then you have our modern day climate of anti-institutionalism where subjectivity, relativity, and tolerance govern. At the end of the day it is all a search for identity. I believe God created us desiring identity. I also think that in Romans 3 Paul takes us to that identity and spells it out in one of the greatest passages of scripture he wrote.

Romans 3:21-26 is most definitely the heart and soul of this great letter. From the opening words of the book Paul has been building the case of our destruction. We get an appetizer of our unrighteousness then a glass of God's wrath to wash it down. When Paul turns the corner in chapter 3 it is a much-desired change of events. Before you get to verse 21 in this book you feel like you have sat through one of Quentin Tarantino's masterworks and you are ready to call it quits in the most violent way imaginable. Thank goodness the story does not end in Romans 3:20.

The force of this transition to verse 21 is felt by Paul's words "But now." This is a dramatic shift in his argument and an even more dramatic shift in its historical context. We could almost say this "But now" is the transition from the Old Covenant observance of the Law to the new reign of Christ. But, as dramatic as this fulcrum in history is... it is not new news. This idea of the righteousness of God is nothing new

for Paul's audience. However, Paul is making his argument to a people who are completely unaware of the way in which God's righteousness has been made known and yet it was under their noses inside the scriptures that many of them could recite on demand.

We have to understand that in the Jewish mind Law and righteousness were indivisible. There was no righteousness apart from the Law. This has to be such a frustrating life. Righteousness comes from the observance of the Law but there really is no way to truly and completely faithfully adhere to the Law. So, when Paul says those two short words "but now," they represent an entire shift in worldview.

When Paul says the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it he is referring to the Old Testament. There is no doubt that what Paul has in mind here are passages like Genesis 3:15, Deuteronomy 18:15, Isaiah 7:14, and the 53rd chapter of Isaiah which we looked at last week. All of these writings and so many more were pointing ahead to this incredible history changing moment in which the righteousness of God was manifested with incredible finality. This is the age-old where's-my-keys situation. You know exactly what I am talking about... You are on your way out of the door probably a few minutes late to a commitment and begin the key search. They are always right underneath our noses. If we could just call our keys the same way we do to find our cell phones everything would be so much easier. Those who accepted the message Paul brought had to feel this way. They had lived their entire lives with this grand story inside the pages of their scriptures.

Present within any discussion of the Atonement, Christ's life and death which was given to earn our salvation, is the question of for whom his life was given. Verse 22 tells us that this righteousness of God is found through faith in Jesus Christ and is for all who believe. I would like to give you a phrase that I believe answers this question in the most biblically consistent manner. Christ's death was sufficient for all – everyone everywhere – but efficient for those who believe. This means that his sacrifice was big enough for all of creation past, present, and future. However, the gift of his death can only truly have purpose and meaning for those who believe. Maybe we could understand this by thinking of a person who owned an enormous estate, a home larger than we have ever seen before and one larger than we could ever even comprehend. However, even though this home is sufficient for the city of Houston to move into, it is only truly efficient or purposeful for those who actually do live in the mansion.

Paul says that the righteousness of God found through faith in Jesus Christ is for all of those who believe – without distinction. Galatians 3:23 reiterates this idea as Paul is again talking about salvation through faith and he says, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." There is no distinction when it comes to the righteousness of God. The life-changing story of Jesus Christ is for everyone everywhere. It is almost like there is one people group to God, sinners. Everyone who is a sinner has access to him.

Verse 23 is probably pretty familiar to most of you who grew up around the church. To my mind the force of this verse is not the reality that we are all sinners. Most of you are like me and you have known this statement to be true for a long time and you would never claim to live a perfect life. The picture that sticks in my mind about this verse is that the manner in which Paul writes this verse he offers a picture of our sin degrading the Glory of God. If you read this verse as a statement about God and not about us then we can see our sin – each time we choose something against what we know God desires – snatching a chunk of God’s glory away. We cheapen the glory of God in our sin. Each time we fall to prideful desires or a materialistic impulse, we are tearing a piece of his glory away. The way this text escalates it demands the question of how a just God can love and redeem a sinful people. How can he do this and remain just?

Glory represents what Adam had at creation and lost when he and Eve ate of that tree. Adam was created with this incredible ability to glorify God; it is almost like everything that he did functioned as a mirror reflecting God’s glory. Then, all of a sudden this mirror shatters and the ultimate joy offered to man in glorifying the Father is stripped away. This redemption... this atonement that we are talking about is a restoration of that Garden of Eden blessing. This takes place to reverse what took place in the Garden of Eden and then to ultimately restore us back to the wonderful place it all began.

Because we are all sinners our justification can only be his grace. The text says that we are justified by his grace as a gift. Maybe some of you have heard me tell the story before, but my transition to ministry was a rough road. We had some major struggles as I left a previous career and went on staff full time at a church. I was doing ministry full time and working on my master’s degree full time. I will never forget being called into my supervisor’s office and him sitting an envelope on the desk with \$10,000 dollars in it. He went on to tell me that an anonymous giver wanted to pay for my master’s degree – they wanted no tax benefits and no pews dedicated to them with a little gold plate. I remember being completely speechless. What do you say to a gift that demands nothing in return? God lays his gift of salvation on the table and we merely reach out and take it. This kind of gift is so counter-cultural for us because it goes against our nature. There are usually always strings attached. I am a pretty skeptical personally when it comes to free stuff. I know that I am always paying for it through hidden fees or some other hidden cost – our culture teaches us that nothing is free. There are always strings attached – except with the grace of God.

Even more counter-cultural than there being no strings attached, the giver of the gift paid the price for our gift of salvation. That is backwards, right? Nothing is free because we are always paying at some level. This is not the case in God’s economy. This is paramount to understand, in God’s economy he freely gave us grace and he, the giver of the gift, paid the price that needed to be paid. This is another thing that distinguishes God from all of the other belief systems out there. This is what makes Jesus greater than any other man. He gave the gift AND paid the price.

Maybe some of you have been watching the news and keeping up with the election buzz. There has been much publicity lately regarding Jeremiah Wright and some of the sermons that he has given. I would be surprised if any of you have not heard at least one audio clip – they seem to be on every radio station and newscast. It is relevant to what we are talking about today. The word “redemption” in verse 24 is a word pregnant with meaning. Different usages of this word can be traced back to a reference to Israel’s deliverance in the book of Exodus. Maybe you have heard of the term Liberation Theology. This is a belief system that holds to a social and political reality to redemption. It is a system that believes salvation is also a deliverance from social oppression and injustice. You could also describe Liberation Theologies as a collision between Marxism and Moses and a little Jesus sprinkled on top.

It is important for us to see that redemption is, as Paul is using the term, in Jesus Christ. It is not redemption through political structures. It is not redemption through social structures. It is simply redemption in Jesus Christ. To add anything else to the cross would be devaluing to it and to God’s purposes in it.

Verse 25 is really Paul’s thesis within this incredible paragraph. The Father set forth Christ to be his wrath-satisfying agent. He puts Christ forth to wipe away the hurdle of sin and to receive the wrath that a just God must pour out. I have heard this story a million times, maybe this has even happened to some of you. You go out and buy the cutest little puppy that you have ever seen. This puppy, according to you anyway, should be the star of its own television commercials. You take this puppy home and the cute little thing is so sad. It is crying because it misses its momma and so you take the cute little puppy and put it in your bed it goes right to sleep. You and your cute little puppy sound asleep in your bed. It’s not too long before your cute little puppy turns into a horse and this sleeping in the bed is for the birds. But, because you let that dog, when it was such a cute little puppy, sleep in your bed you have dug yourself a hole in which many people never climb out. Because of a double standard you have compromised your position as the authority figure and you have compromised your authority to set standards that will be respected. For those of us who are parents this is easily seen when our children realize which one of us is likely to give in on a specific issue. It doesn’t take them long to go to that parent each time the specific issue comes up. All of you teachers know this all too well; if you give them an inch they will no doubt take a mile.

Do you remember the story of David in 2 Samuel 12? David sins with Bathsheba and then orchestrates the death of her husband Uriah. David was broken before the Lord and the sin is passed over. This sin is met the wrath of a just God. David deserved immediate death at this point. David deserved what Ananias and Sapphira received in Acts 5. There are two options for the Father to remain righteous. He could have slayed all sinners to uphold his righteousness or he could slay his own Son to retain his righteousness. So, God puts Jesus forth as a propitiation – as the appeasement of sin and wrath – by the price of Christ’s blood and he does this in order to show himself righteous.

Why did God put forth Christ to die on the cross? He put him forth to show himself as righteous and so that he might be just and justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. This text isn't really about us, is it? This text isn't really about how short we fall or how we needed a mediator. This text isn't really even about our hopelessness without Christ. We are not the stars of this movie. No, when you follow Paul's argument here this is a text about God. But, in our me-centered, self-centered worldview we can warp it around in such a way to make this all about us.

Our secular worldview has my rights and me at its core. Just stop for a moment and think about our approach to life. We are constantly making decisions in our best interest. Our entire legal system is based on our individual rights. Don't get me wrong... I'm not saying that we need to change our societal or governmental structure, but I am saying that all of this is part of the equation of producing the way that we generate, sustain, and apply knowledge. This is where we begin to understand what Paul means when he talks about having a dual citizenship. We are temporary residents here but aren't truly citizens of this world.

We have a tendency when we look at biblical texts to apply them to a specific area of life like parenting, marriage, or finances. The application of this text radically changes your approach to every avenue of your life. It drastically changes the way that we approach the Bible. Christ followers, the pursuit of our lives are not the advancement of self. The purpose of this book is not to discover our rights and claim our blessings. The purpose of this book and purpose of our lives is to exalt the name of God. Those are the glasses through which we are to look at life. That is the manner through which we find biblical marriage and parenting.

I love the first question that is found in the Westminster Shorter catechism. The document was written in the 1640s and it opens with the question, "what is the chief end of man?" The answer is, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." That is a biblical worldview. Those are the lenses through which we are to look at life. The only way that opportunity is made available to us is through a just and righteous God who freely gave the blood of his son to die for our sin paying the price for sin and appeasing the wrath of the Father. If you get this story... if you understand it then how can you not share it? How can we not talk with our friends, family, and co-workers about this history-changing, life-liberating story?