

“Rethinking the Cross: Understanding Atonement Theology Introduction”  
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Well friends, as we move through the 6 weeks of Lent, we are going to focus on the cross this year. We are going to think deeply about Jesus’ death. We are going to ask, “Why did Jesus die?” and “What does it mean that Jesus died FOR us?” The word that is typically used when thinking about the cross is **atonement**. Atonement is actually a relatively new word. It was first used in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century to capture in English what the biblical writers described when they try and explain the cross. It's not a word that we tend to use in our everyday vocabulary anymore, but it is an important word for Christians to understand. Even more, atonement is the term that’s now been used for over 500 years to serve as the broad heading over all the various theologies or understandings of the cross. And so, as we try and make sense of the cross, we’ll be diving into what is commonly called, **Atonement Theology**. When we talk about what it means that Jesus died, we’re talking about all the various ways we have come to understand how Jesus’ death ‘atones,’ how the cross reconciles God and humanity.

**“Atonement: (At-one-ment) = to make right, to reconcile. Referring to the reconciliation of God and humankind, especially through the life, suffering, and death of Christ.”** Atonement is our English word for what we have in **New Testament Greek: *hilasmos***; and in **Old Testament Hebrew: *kipper*...** and means to **“cover over” someone’s failure, to erase the debt, to purify the relationship.** So, when we’re talking about what it means to atone, or to reconcile, we’re trying to explain what it means to repair a rupture, to bring back into unity that which has been separated in some way.

I’d like us to turn to 1 John 1, beginning in verse 5; hear the Word of the Lord: **“This is the message we have heard from Jesus and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. But if we walk**

**in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us. My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” 1 John 1:5-2:2** This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Let's begin by noting what John just repeated in this epistle, which is really less of a letter, and actually one of the earliest recorded sermons. Three times here, John draws our attention to something about the effect or impact, of Jesus death. (one slide)

**1:7 “The blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin”**

**1:9 “he will forgive and purify us from all sin”**

**2:2 “Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins”**

Humanity has this issue with sin, both in the individual sense and in a more social and global way too. We seem to be unable to help ourselves, we are prone to wander, prone to leave the God we love, as the hymn goes. We make a mess of things, there's really no denying that. In fact, John says, if we act like we haven't sinned, we probably should see a therapist, because we're obviously in denial. We all sin; we all end up hurting ourselves and others. We know it, our family knows it. Our friends know it. No denying it. But thanks be to God, Jesus' blood (the cross) purifies us, forgives us, atones for us... AND for the “sins of the whole world.”

John uses this word purify, which I think we understand. It's what you do to a wound that needs to be cleaned out before it can heal. It's what we do with dirty dishes before we eat from them again. Somehow the cross of Christ, it purifies us from whatever needs healing and forgiveness. The crucifixion is about

atonement for the sin of the world. It makes right what has been ruptured between humanity and God.

Now, if you've been raised in church, then this is not a new concept for you. I'd wager that, if asked what the cross means, most folks would say something about the forgiveness of sins, they'd say something about Jesus dying to save the world. Nearly everyone on the planet—on a scale of highly religious to committed atheist—would be able to tell you that Jesus' death on the cross is THE CENTRAL IMAGE at the heart of Christianity. Everyone has seen the cross somewhere. There are more depictions of the cross than any other image in all of human history. I am not kidding. The crucifixion of Christ has been painted, carved, sculpted and molded billions of times. Billions. The cross is everywhere.

But when you really stop to think about it, do you know why? Why is an ancient executionary tool the central image of what it means to be a Christian? Think about it, what is it about the cross that saves us, that offers us forgiveness, that repairs the rift in the relationship between us and God? What exactly happened on the cross that transformed the world?

These are massive questions. Ones we're going to attempt to unpack that over these weeks. But there is something important that I need you to understand. When we talk about atonement theology, when we try and make sense of the cross, we are talking about something so huge, so mysterious, so profound, so transformative... that it simply cannot be contained by a sermon series, or a semester of classes, or the largest theological treatise. We are not going to get to the end of Lent and be able to say, "Yep, I know all there is to know about the cross." That is impossible. The cross of Christ can never be fully explained or understood. Trust me... theologians for centuries have tried and failed. And that is because the cross of Christ is beyond human wisdom.

This is why the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians writes this: (NRSV) **"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, 'I will destroy the**

**wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.” -1 Cor 1:18-25**

The cross carries a divine wisdom that is beyond our ability to fully grasp. And yet, and yet... that doesn’t mean we just ignore atonement theology or dismiss it as foolishness. It matters that we grasp all we can of what it means that Jesus died for us. Especially in our modern western culture, which has so narrowly defined atonement theology that they’ve simply cut it off at the knees. There is much to learn, much to soak in this lent, that I believe will bring you life. Spending a season focused on the cross has the power to be deeply healing and transformative for your life and faith. Because when we look at the cross, we discover who God really is and how God feels about humanity... at that matters. This is why Paul goes onto to say, **“When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” 1 Cor 2:1-2**

At some point or another, it really does all come down to the cross. This really is all about Jesus Christ, and him crucified. So, we are going to take our time. We are going to soak in the cross this Lent. Each week we are going to do what rabbinical scholars call **‘turning the gem.’** We are going to look at the different scriptures and various atonement theologies that offer us different perspectives... but all of the same event. Just like turning a gem, we’re going to look at the same event—the cross—through each cut and shape of the gem, seeing how the light refracts differently from one angle than it does from another.

For this is what the biblical writers have offered us... a number of different angles and images, of metaphors and motifs for understanding what the cross of Christ means for us.

You will notice that each Sunday we will focus on one angle of the gem, one particular atonement theology and the biblical texts that inspire it, to try and understand the cross. Please hear me friends... more than any other sermon series we've done, it will matter that you keep yourself engaged week to week. If you miss a week, please, please, please go back and stream the sermon online or download the transcript. It's not so much that the series will build one sermon on another... it's just that if you miss a week, you'll miss an essential turning of the gem to help you better understand Christ and him crucified. We want to broaden our too-narrow understanding of what the atonement means by turning the gem, by looking closely at each of the atonement theologies available to us.

Because when we don't turn the gem, we get in trouble really quickly. If we only look through one angle of the gem, or hyperfocus on a particular atonement theory, we miss an essential image of who God is and of what the cross means. Pastor an author Brian Zahnd would caution us, writing **“single atonement theologies have an unfortunate tendency to reduce the crucifixion to a single meaning. This is an enormous mistake. If you're going to dabble in atonement theories, keep it plural. Reducing the cross to a single meaning, quarantines the cross so it doesn't touch too many areas of our lives. The crucifixion means EVERYTHING. Everything that can be known about God is somehow present at the cross. It's the pinnacle of divine self-disclosure. The eternal moment forgiveness. Divine solidarity with human suffering. The enduring model of discipleship. The supreme demonstration of divine love. The beauty that saves the world. The re-founding of the world around an axis of love. The overthrow of the Satan. The shaming of the principalities and powers. The unmasking of mob violence. The condemnation of state violence. The exposé of political power. The abolition of war. The sacrifice to end sacrifices. The great divide of humankind. The healing center of the cosmos. The death by which death is conquered. The lamb upon the throne. The tree of life recovered and revealed.**

**And with this brief list of interpretations, I have come nowhere near exhausting the meaning of the cross. For indeed, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the inexhaustible revelation of who God is.”**

Friends, let us approach the cross this Lent in humility. Let us come to understand what it means that Christ died for us. That the great mystery of death being swallowed up in resurrection life, can transform our lives.

Tonight, we are going to invite you forward to receive the imposition of ashes. We will remind you that you are dust... that you have come from dust... and that someday you will return to dust. But this is not just a night to remember our frailty, to reflect on how fleeting our life really is... it is also a night to remember that death is not the end. That the cross of Christ changed that for us all. So, we will smudge the ashes across your forehead in the shape of the cross. Because yes... we are all dust... but even dust, when it has been redeemed by God's love will be transformed into resurrection life. As we prepare to come forward, hear this blessing of the dust:

**All those days you felt like dust, like dirt,  
as if all you had to do was turn your face toward the wind  
and be scattered to the four corners  
or swept away by the smallest breath, as insubstantial—**

**did you not know what the Holy One can do with dust?**

**This is the day we freely say we are scorched.  
This is the hour we are marked  
by what has made it through the burning.**

**This is the moment we ask for the blessing  
that lives within the ancient ashes,  
that makes its home inside the soil of this sacred earth.**

**So let us be marked, not for sorrow.  
And let us be marked, not for shame.  
Let us be marked, not for false humility  
or for thinking we are less than we are**

**but for claiming what God can do  
within the dust, within the dirt,  
within the stuff of which the world is made  
and the stars that blaze in our bones  
and the galaxies that spiral inside the smudge we bear.**

**-BLESSING THE DUST —Jan Richardson, from Circle of Grace**