

Rethinking the Cross: Understanding Atonement Theology
The Sacrificial System
Pastor Joe Bagdanov
2/18/2024 @ First Presbyterian Church

Friends of Christ,

This is the first Sunday of lent and this is the second sermon in our Lenten series called, "Rethinking the Cross: Understanding Atonement Theology." This morning we are going to talk about the Sacrificial System, but before we get to that I think we may need to break down what Atonement theology even is. I imagine that many of you were not able to watch or read the sermon from Wednesday and so we will just quickly talk about what atonement theology is and why we need to rethink the cross.

What is Atonement Theology and why are we Rethinking the Cross?

Atonement is a funny word. But if you break it down, it makes a lot of sense. At-onement. That might not have helped. -ment is something you put at the end of a word to mean "the act of doing or the result of" so think accomplish-ment, Enlighten-ment, acknowledge-ment. Onement would then mean a unity, an accord, or a reconciliation. At-onement then points to our being made one with God, our reconciliation.

Billions of Christians over the course of 2,000 years have confessed that Jesus saves us. Christians have always believed that there is something about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that reconciles us to God.

But this is only a description of salvation. This just says what Jesus does. Not how he does it. For instance, if someone asked you, "how does a car work?" and you said, "well a car takes you from point a to point b" you have told that person what the purpose of a car is, what a car does, but you haven't explained how a car works. For that you would need to get into ignitions and spark plugs and engines and the role of gasoline, etc.

Atonement theology tries to answer the *how* of salvation. What actually reconciles us to God? what specifically does it take to become "one" or reunited with God? How does Christ save us? Is it that Christ's blood is offered as a sacrifice that removes our sin or does Christ in his death and resurrection defeat all evil and free us from the bonds that hold us down? The answer is yes. Even though these are very different descriptions of the same events, they are both used in the Bible to describe how God saves us. Throughout this series Jamie and I are going to explore 7 different accounts of the atonement. And really, that just scratches the surface. One of my favorite theologians gives 12 different Atonement theologies.

Some people think that these are mutually exclusive, that really we need to choose one. the cross can't be a sacrifice, and an enthronement, and a ransom paid to death all at the same time. But our conviction is that the bible uses all of these images on purpose.

Let me give a quick analogy that illustrates why limiting ourselves to a single theory of atonement would be problematic.

Imagine you are getting to know a new friend and so you go to coffee. Over coffee, somewhere in the conversation, you ask them, "what do you love about your spouse?" and they say, "they are very attractive" and you say, "oh great, that's so lovely. I am glad you are attracted to your spouse. Tell me more what else do you love about them." And they say, "what do you mean, they are attractive." You think, "maybe they misunderstood the question, are they kind, smart, funny, are they a good listener, a good person?" now they are looking at you a little annoyed "I don't think you understand, they are very attractive."

This ridiculous example illustrates the problem a little bit. What started out as an endearing, true, and appropriate thing to say about someone's spouse becomes concerning and even ugly and grotesque, because you have put too much emphasis on one thing, to the exclusion of everything else.

If this is true of our romantic relationships, how much more true when applied to the mystery of salvation and the mystery of God? God cannot be captured by one description and neither can atonement. And so we must turn the gem as Jamie said on Wednesday and consider our reconciliation with God from multiple angles. Each time we turn the gem, we see new beautiful things, the light looks slightly different. Today we are talking about the Sacrificial System as one account of atonement. But remember, it is one surface on the gem. It is helpful, and when rightly understood and properly tempered by the rest of the gem, it is quite beautiful. But remember, it can turn ugly if we don't turn it and consider the other images that the new testament uses to describe our atonement.

I will just give you a warning. For some of you, half-way through this sermon you might be thinking, "woah, what did I get myself into here." If you are visiting the church for the first time you might start questioning, why you walked through the doors. And here is at least partly why. Today we are talking about the sacrificial system. In order to understand that system we are going to have to spend a lot of time describing the background and it's going to take a little time before we actually get to Jesus. However, I believe that when properly understood and when read in light of Jesus, the sacrificial system can be a beautiful view into the mystery of salvation and the heart of our loving God.

The Sacrificial System: A method of removing, not punishing, sin

The New Testament talks about Jesus being a sacrifice for us, but it is often mentioned without too much explanation. John the Baptist says, "behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the World," and 1 John says that Jesus is the "atoning sacrifice" but what does that actually mean? This morning we are going to first look at the context of sacrifice, what did sacrifice mean in the Old Testament, but then we are going to look to the New Testament book of the Hebrews. The most sustained reflection about Jesus as a fulfillment and perfection, of the Levitical Sacrificial system.

I think for most of us, we are uncomfortable with the sacrificial system. The idea of an animal sacrifice strikes us as primitive, barbaric, and flat out wrong. But more than just

our aversion to the death and blood, the vision of God it provides seems totally ugly and grotesque. I think this is what we often think is happening in Sacrifice.

1. We mess up. We sin.
2. This makes God incredibly angry, in fact God is so angry God wants to kill us.
3. So, we sacrifice an animal instead. And for some reason, this calms God down.
4. The animal has taken the punishment instead of us.

Here's the thing. That isn't the point of sacrifice. This is a total misunderstanding of the sacrificial system. So for the rest of this sermon we are going to look at the Sacrificial System and how Jesus' own life, death, and resurrection were understood to be a sacrifice for our sins.

Now I will say this, having a better understanding what sacrifice is all about might not change your mind about the primitive or barbaric nature of animal sacrifice. No matter what, this involved killing an animal, burning parts sprinkling blood on altars, etc. If you have questions about that come to Christian Education and ask your questions. There are good answers, we just don't have time to address that for now.

But, here is the really important bit, I think that properly understanding Sacrifice will dispel at least some of the bad theology about the character of God. About this notion that God hates us and wants to kill us and the only way God can stand to be around us, is to kill something. That has never been what sacrifice was about, and its certainly not what Christ's sacrifice was about, so let's break it down.

Leviticus

In order to understand the big picture of Sacrifice, we are going to talk through a portion of the story of the people of Israel. Specifically, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.

Exodus: At the beginning of the Book of Exodus the people of Israel are enslaved in the land of Egypt. Through Moses, God leads the people out of slavery, out from under the oppression of Pharaoh, and towards a promised land where they could be God's people and God would be their God. When they are in the desert in between Egypt and Israel, God instructs them to build a tent, and at the very center of this tent is something called the Holy of Holies, where God's presence was concentrated. God's heart is to be with God's people. Love drives all of God's decisions regarding the people. That's why God leads them out of Egypt and its why God tells them to build this tent. God wants to be with us.

The book of Exodus ends with Moses completing the tent, the place where they could be with God, but it says, "Moses could not enter the tent of meeting." This is a major cliff hanger. The Israelites might be thinking: "Finally, we have escaped the tyranny of Egypt and we can be with our God, but there is still this barrier." That barrier was sin. Sin was making it impossible for Moses to enter into the Glorious presence of God.

Leviticus: So the book of Leviticus follows right on the tail of Exodus and bingo bango, like a great sequel, Leviticus is designed to resolve the cliffhanger. How can we enter

into the presence of God? To answer this question, Leviticus introduces the sacrificial system. And at the very peak of the sacrificial system is the day of atonement, Yom Kippur. On this day the high priest makes a sacrifice on behalf of the entire nation, for all sins.

The first verse of the book of **Numbers**, which comes right after Leviticus, says this, “then the Lord spoke to Moses in the tent of meeting.” And there you have it, the resolution. The sacrificial system did its job and the people of Israel can be with their God.

So what actually happens in these sacrifices?

At the beginning of everyone’s favorite book, Leviticus, five different types of sacrifice are introduced. 2 of them are purely for saying thanks to God, they did not have to do with sins at all, and they didn’t always involve the killing of an animal.

The other 3 were for “atonement” of sins or *kipper* in Hebrew. The sacrifices of atonement had to do with removing sin. purification is the image associated with the sacrifices. So you can think about applying antiseptic to a wound or removing harmful bacteria from your water or cleaning pollution from the air. purification is about removing harmful elements. This is important, and we often miss it because we think the death of the animal is what is doing the work of the sacrifice. But, the killing of the animal is kind of just a necessary first step in the more important task of bringing the blood to the altar. The sprinkling of the blood on the altar and the priest then stands on behalf of the people and intercedes. They ask God to remove the sins of the people.

I am stressing this element, the removal of sins, because as I just said we have made sacrifice all about punishment. But punishment is the tool of a court room, not of a temple. We will touch on this more as we go along. But really stew on that, it takes a lot of work, but try to uncouple the primary logic of sacrifice from punishment. Sacrifice is about removal of sin and not about punishing sin.

So these sacrifices that atoned for our sin and purified us are outlined in Leviticus. But, here’s the thing, these sacrifices had a lot of limitations. The first is that these sacrifices seem to only cover unintentional sins. If you intentionally or defiantly sin, you might be in a situation much harder to fix under the old covenant or the Levitical sacrificial system. Bummer. These sacrifices didn’t cover everything. The second is that each time you sin or become impure (which are technically different things), you would have to do another and another sacrifice, each time. And the last limitation (at least for our purposes) was that all of these had to be done at the Jerusalem temple. If you lived in Nazareth and sinned, well that’s a several day journey. Imagine if you lived much further away.

Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement)

But the book of Leviticus has a solution to this problem. Yom Kippur—The Day of Atonement. On this day, the high priest would sacrifice a bull for his own sins and the sins of his family so that he was pure and could enter into the Holy of Holies. The Holy of Holies was only entered once per year and only by the high priest. And so this was very serious business.

The day of Atonement was for the entire nation and covered all sins. (although when we read Hebrews in a little bit, it implies that even the day of atonement didn't cover defiant sin). So the limitations of the normal every day sacrifices, were at least in part solved by this much more significant event. You didn't have to travel to Jerusalem, it was done on your behalf and all sins would be covered, probably. Maybe even the defiantly intentional ones, but we don't know. And this is part of the flaw of the old covenant, of the Mosaic Law and the Sacrificial system of the Old Testament. This is why the author of the Hebrews will later put Jesus forward as the perfect priest, who offers, the perfect sacrifice. But we will get to that in a minute.

How did the day of atonement work? First, the high priest takes the blood of the Bull and sprinkles that blood within the Holy of Holies, onto the lid of the ark of the Covenant, this blood purified the high priest of his and his families sin. Then he took the blood of one of two goats and sprinkles that throughout the Holy of Holies and this purified all of Israel's sins. Then in an interesting ritual, which we will discuss as part of a later atonement theory because its technically not a sacrifice, the priest places his hands on a second goat and confesses the sins of all of Israel and that Goat is released into the wild taking the sins of the people off into the desert oblivion.

With all of this finally in place, we are going to turn to the conclusion of the Book of Hebrews, where the author is drawing on the day of atonement, but arguing that Jesus is the perfect high priest who offers the perfect sacrifice, establishing a new covenant.

Hebrews: Jesus as the Perfect Priest, Sacrifice, and day of Atonement

Hebrews 9:1-7, 11-14

Now even the first covenant had regulations for worship and an earthly sanctuary. ²For a tent^[a] was constructed, the first one, in which were the lampstand, the table, and the bread of the Presence;^[b] this is called the Holy Place. ³Behind the second curtain was a tent^[c] called the Holy of Holies. ⁴In it stood the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold, in which there were a golden urn holding the manna, and Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant; ⁵above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy-seat.^[d] Of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

⁶Such preparations having been made, the priests go continually into the first tent^[e] to carry out their ritual duties; ⁷but only the high priest goes into the second, and he but once a year, and not without taking the blood that he offers for himself and for the sins committed unintentionally by the people.

¹¹But when Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come,^[f] then through the greater and perfect^[g] tent^[h] (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), ¹²he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls, with the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer, sanctifies those who have been defiled so that their flesh is purified, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ,

who through the eternal Spirit^[k] offered himself without blemish to God, purify our^[l] conscience from dead works to worship the living God!

Commentary on this passage:

At the beginning of this passage the author of the Hebrews describes the Tabernacle in the same way as it is presented in the book of Exodus. We see all of the furniture described and he ends this description with a reference to the Day of Atonement. Once a year the priest goes into the Holy of Holies and offers a sacrifice, first for himself, and then for all the nation of Israel. This is an earthly temple, with an imperfect priest, offering the blood of an imperfect sacrifice, to imperfectly atone for the sins of the nation.

However, the second part of our passage solves the problems present in this first imperfect day of Atonement. Jesus Christ is a perfect high priest, offers himself on the cross as a perfect sacrifice and through bringing his blood into the heavenly Holy of Holies accomplishes a perfect atonement for all people.

All of the Old Testament sacrifices have been fulfilled in the sacrificial death of Jesus. We are now able to enter into the true Holy of Holies because we have been perfectly purified by the blood of Jesus Christ. This is started on the cross, but Jesus is still doing the work of being our high priest to this day as he stands in the presence of the Father interceding on our behalf. What could be better news than that?

But you may still be asking, "Is this good news?" It took me a long time to consider the sacrificial system "good news" and you may still be struggling with that. That's ok. Turn the gem, consider atonement from another angle and you can return to this later. But do return to it later! It is good news of a loving God who wants his people to be perfected and enter into his loving presence.

Here is the thing, you might still be thinking that it seems "off" that God needs a sacrifice of blood to forgive us. I would plead again with you to not get too hyper literalistic. Every atonement theory needs to be understood as somehow being an explanation of the parable of the prodigal son. The prodigal son realizes the stupidity of his actions and comes up with a plan. He will go back to the father and beg to merely be a servant in his household. But the Father sees him coming down the road and sprints towards the son with open arms. The Father doesn't even let the son spit out his apologies and his plans of making things right, the Father just embraces the son.

The sacrifice of Jesus is an act of love. Not this ugly act that placates an angry and hateful God. It is the Father sprinting towards us with open arms. And if you can't yet see that or accept that, turn the gem. It will be ok. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ is a real sacrifice that really removes our sins from us, but it is the action of God in God's love that saves and purifies us. God is the acting subject of sacrifice, not the placated object. Sacrifice, like all of salvation, is God's reaching out in love to us.

Rest easy that God makes a way for us to perfectly enter into his presence.