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*Romans 3:21-25a, 27-28. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. <sup>22</sup> This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. <sup>27</sup> Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.*

### **The Christian Faith, One Word at a Time: Atonement**

Let's get back to the basics! After tinkering with his batting stance, adjusting here and there, the baseball player finds surprising relief in his coach's very simple words of advice, he tells his player to "see the ball and hit the ball". Work has been busy, life has been a bit hectic, there have been graduation parties, social engagements, weddings to attend, family reunions to plan for, and it all gets to be a bit much so a young couple decides to take a camping trip. They grab a tent, some basic supplies, and they go off, just the two of them. For a time, they are able to strip the things of life down for at least a little bit, and get back to the basics of their relationship of their life together; and it is refreshing. Or maybe it is a family that uses a Saturday, or Sunday, or a special day like Father's Day to take a breath and so they decide that they aren't going to go out and do much at all, just a dinner at home together, some time spent in the yard, maybe they watch a movie or play cards or a board game at the end of the night. Simple and basic and yet very much enjoyable and refreshing.

Let's get back to the basics! This simplifying of things and stripping things down to basic levels can be a reinvigorating, perhaps even a necessary exercise, whatever the aspect of our life we are talking about. And this can also be true when considering our faith. When our faith is challenged by the mess of the world around us; when social issues become so corrupted and convoluted; when the stresses of life, the mistakes we make things challenging and complicated, it can be very refreshing and reinvigorating to go back to the simple truths of Scripture, the simple truths of our faith.

In a certain sense our rallying cry for most of the summer, will be, "Let's get back to the basics!" Our summer sermon series will look to the book of Romans and the basic truths of our Christian faith even simplifying things to one word at a time.

The book of Romans lends itself to be such a source of core doctrines, because it was a bit unique in its purpose. Unlike other letters, Paul is not writing to correct an erring congregation, or counteract any specific false teachings. Instead the book of Romans is written as a wonderful overview of the Christian faith. As he writes Romans Paul he is not only tending to the spiritual well-being of this particular group, but he is also eyeing the possibilities for further ministry. In the latter part of this book he describes plans that he has to bring the good news of the gospel to the people beyond Rome and even into Spain, and therefore he sees Rome as a mission center. As the saying went in those days, all roads led to Rome, and therefore this would be a good place to have a presence of well instructed and

faithful Christians who could take the message to the ends of the earth. This would also be an opportunity to have a book of solid instruction that could be circulated among the Christians in this center of the ancient world and sent off in every direction imaginable.

Therefore, it's not surprising to hear that

these lessons from the book of Romans have been described as a curriculum for St. Paul's adult instruction class. Paul would get down to the basics of Christianity while also laying a rich foundation for not only the Christians in Rome, but for Christians throughout history.

Martin Luther found great spiritual footing and clarity in his study of the book of Romans and therefore encouraged others to read and study this book that is so clear, so vivid, so magnificent, in the exposition of law and gospel, sin and grace. He once wrote this about the book of Romans: *In this epistle, we thus find most abundantly the things that a Christian ought to know, namely, what is law, gospel, sin, punishment, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross; and how we are to conduct ourselves toward everyone, be he righteous or sinner, strong or weak, friend or foe, and even toward ourselves. (LW 35:380).* And so today as embark on this sermon series in the book of Romans, as we begin our studies of the basics of the Christian faith, we look to our one word focus for today: Atonement.

If you crack open your Catechism and look in the glossary, atonement has been defined as: A payment offered to remove the guilt of sin so that God and sinful man are reconciled, that is, set at one. Atonement.

Implied in this word is that something needed to be done. God and sinners were not on equal footing, not in a right relationship. Sin brought that break, that divide, that brings so much pain and confusion, so much stress and unhappiness. Mankind used to walk with God in the peace of a garden, but when man fell into sin it was as if the ground split open and there was a gaping horrible chasm that suddenly divided a holy God from sinful man. The wrath of God, the punishment for sin, it stands between the sinner and the sinless one. These verses make clear that something needs to be done, a payment needs to be made, God's wrath and man's guilt need to be dealt with and removed.

If we are honest with ourselves, we are painfully aware of this divide. Day after day, I know that I have fallen short as a father, as a husband, and it doesn't really make it any better that everyone else is imperfect too. Even on a good day we all fall short of perfection and we know that we are sinners. We all fall short of the glory of God. There are no perfect fathers out there. No perfect mothers, sons, or daughters. None of us deserve the blessings that we have. None of us deserve to have a relationship with God now or forever in heaven. In this case the law is almost self-evident. We all fall short of the glory of God. No one ever truly claims to be perfect. Our conscience tells us that we fall short, deserve punishment, and what our conscience makes us generally aware of, the Word tells us exactly what we deserve. The Word makes clear how truly deep and desperate this divide is. The wages of sin is death; that is, eternal death. The Word tells us clearly that all mankind, you and I included, have incurred the eternal wrath of a holy God, for we have not only fallen short once or in one particular area, but time and again we all have sinned in countless ways and fall short of the glory of God.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... And sometimes this is where we

stop. This is all we read. This is all of the verse we memorize and confess. We are all sinners and we fall short, on that we can agree, but then we deviate from the word and try to generate our own solutions, our own remedies to this horrible problem of sin, this gaping divide. And our man-made solutions try to down play the problem, and in the process they offer no real hope. Comparing ourselves to others won't make us right with God. *At least I think I'm a little bit better than that guy over there* will not be a viable defense when we stand before a perfectly holy God. We trick ourselves into thinking that it will be good enough if we are relatively decent and honest people. By nature, we associate righteousness with some kind of obedience of the law. We can make things right with God if we just keep certain rules and regulations, while we sweep the commands we struggle to keep under the rug or push them to a corner. However, the law forces us to be honest and see that there is no way to balance the scales, there is no way to do enough good to make up for the evil that we have done. And if we could measure or record that somehow, how would we ever know if we were right with God? How could we ever get close to perfection? We couldn't, just simply couldn't ever do such a thing. God's not okay with good enough, to dwell with God, to have the honor of his presence means perfection, and that is something that we cannot ever achieve on our own. We deserve only wrath and punishment.... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...

But thankfully the passage does not stop there. Instead, the gospel is made manifest in Christ, explained and presented to the desperate sinner in clear and powerful terms. Here, God, not only gives us a verse that confirms our sinfulness, but he also gives us a verse that immediately presents this beautiful expression of God's grace in Christ. ***There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. <sup>25</sup> God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*** A right relationship with God, is not one that is based on our merit or even our potential, but it is so wonderfully based on God's grace. He presents us with a righteousness that comes from his gracious design. By his grace alone our guilt is paid for, the divide between God and man is solved and healed only through Jesus. God sent Christ for this purpose: to be the atoning sacrifice that God appointed to take away all our sins, to pay the debt of sin in full. Jesus was the innocent victim who was offered in our place. He was the innocent Lamb of God that stands in our place and takes on the punishment that we deserved.

And whoever believes this is made right with God, through faith this universal gospel becomes yours. Through faith this good news is made your possession, yours and mine to cherish. We are made right with God through faith in Christ Jesus. Our LORD is no longer filled with anger towards us but he is pleased with us in Christ. Our guilt is taken away, our sin is paid for and through faith in his blood we are spared, we are set free. By his goodness, by God's grace, this is done for us, it is a gift, even the very faith that believes this is a gift of God. ***All fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.***

This is core doctrine or pillar of our faith. Atonement is a simple and glorious truth that is engrained into the very fabric of Scriptures, from the Old Testament Law and the

Prophets to its New Testament fulfillment in Christ. This central truth of our faith is displayed in the all the appointed sacrifices and especially the Great Day of Atonement, which finds its fulfillment in Christ. In fact, Luther used the same word that describes the mercy seat or the atonement cover on the ark of the covenant in his translation of these verses. For this is the thought which Paul wishes to present. In Old Testament times the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year, and sprinkled on the atonement cover the blood of the goat slaughtered as a sin-offering for the people. This was the height of the Old Testament sacrifices. Above the ark was the holy presence of God, inside the ark was the commands of God broken by the people, and in between was the blood covered sprinkled on the mercy seat, the atonement cover. The blood covered over the sins of the people and as God looked down he was pleased. God's wrath over sin was appeased. Peace with God was given as a free gift. This was a sacrifice that foreshadowed the one great sacrifice of the one who himself was at the same time our priest, our sacrifice, and atonement cover.<sup>1</sup> There was nothing that we could do to make things right, but in his love for us, God would send his own son, to shed his blood, and to cover over all our sins and make us right with God.

There is a refreshing wonder to this presentation of simple sin and grace. The stark reality of what our sins deserved is coupled and then graciously overcome by the incredible grace that God gives to us so freely in Jesus. In a word: Atonement.

The problem of sin is complicated. It entangles our hearts and lives. It separates us from God. No human effort, no sophisticated formula, no complex mixture of our own pious works or words could make us worthy, make us right before God. But God intervenes as he grants us a wonderfully simple solution. By his grace in Christ he freely justifies us, declares us not guilty. This atonement is revealed in Christ. He liberates us as he comes in his grace and gives himself to be the all atoning sacrifice for sin. There was only one thing that could make amends, make atonement for sin, and it was something that the Old Testament laws and sacrifices and the prophets all pointed to; displayed in shadows in the sacrifices, now fulfilled so clearly in Christ. <sup>25</sup> ***God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.*** He who had no sin, became a sin offering for us so that we might be made right with God. Our guilt is taken away and we are assured that our God no longer looks at us as vengeful God, but he looks upon us as gracious father who is in fact pleased with us.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God but the passage goes on. We don't have to wake up each day only to that dreadful law and reality, but we live our lives in the beauty of the gospel that follows. ***All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace, through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood.*** We can wake up each morning in the grace of God, in the joy of salvation, in the light of this mercy shown to us through Christ's atonement. Yes, we have been redeemed and set free from guilt and shame so that we may live our lives in loving service to our Father. We can live our lives for him who died for us and was raised again, for sinners are set at one with a holy God through the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God. What a magnificent message of relief! What a refreshing and simple truth that we are enabled to live our life in. And this in a word is: Atonement. Thanks be to God for the power of his word. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Wendland, E. H. "Sermon Studies on the Epistle". Northwestern Publishing House, Milwaukee, WI: 1978. (page 231)