



Week 3 - Atonement

Day 1 - Substitutionary Atonement

Isaiah 53:4-5

*⁴ Surely he has borne our infirmities
and carried our diseases,
yet we accounted him stricken,
struck down by God, and afflicted.
⁵ But he was wounded for our transgressions,
crushed for our iniquities;
upon him was the punishment that made us whole,
and by his bruises we are healed.*

2 Corinthians 5:21

²¹ For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

1 Peter 2:24

²⁴ He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.

Understanding the Passage:

If you spend enough time in The New York Times Cooking comments section, you'll eventually find reviews like this:

"I substituted almond flour for all-purpose, applesauce for butter, skipped the eggs, and this cake was terrible. One star."

People unironically post about their substitutions and then provide negative reviews because the recipe didn't work. Clearly the issue isn't the recipe. It's that the substitute was never capable of doing what the original ingredient was meant to do. Eggs bind. Gluten gives structure. Butter tenderizes and carries flavor. You can't just swap anything in and expect the chemistry to hold.

The failure of ingredient swaps offers us a helpful window into understanding something much deeper: substitutionary atonement.

In Isaiah 53:4–6, we get a picture of someone stepping into our place – not as a random replacement, but as one who actually carries what we could not.

Wesleyan theology takes our sin seriously – not merely as isolated mistakes, but as a condition that bends the human heart away from God. We are not just people who occasionally mess up recipes; we are people whose inner ingredients are disordered. We cannot, by our own effort, produce the righteousness that reconciliation requires. No matter how sincere, our self-substitution doesn't "set." If we keep insisting on being our own substitute – relying on willpower, moral comparison, or spiritual shortcuts – we will keep collapsing.

But our hope is not just in Jesus stepping in for us and being our substitute – it is also that he transforms us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, "so that in him *we might become* the righteousness of God." And 1 Peter 2:24 adds, "so that, having died to sins, *we might live for righteousness*; by his wounds *you have been healed*."

Notice the movement: not only bearing our sin, but creating the possibility that we might *live differently*. Jesus is not merely absorbing punishment in a cold legal exchange. He is the fitting substitute – fully human, fully obedient – who succeeds where we could not. But his substitution does not leave us passive. The substitute who stands in for us also begins to remake us. His grace is not only pardoning; it is transforming.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Where am I still trying to swap in my own effort for what only Christ can supply?
2. How does understanding that Jesus both substitutes for you AND transforms you change your response to failure or sin?

Day 2 - Satisfaction

Romans 3:21-26

²¹ But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; ²⁶ it was to demonstrate at the present time his own righteousness, so that he is righteous and he justifies the one who has the faith of Jesus.

Hebrews 9:22

²² Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.

Understanding the Passage:

When someone dies, their debt doesn't die with them. It doesn't simply dissolve because the person who incurred it is gone. Creditors don't shrug and move on. It passes to cosigners or to the estate – to whoever is legally bound to it. Because the debt is real and has weight, the question isn't whether it will be resolved but who will bear the cost of resolving it.

Most of us find this uncomfortable. It feels unfair that a debt should outlast the person who caused it. But discomfort doesn't change the arithmetic. A debt ignored is not a debt canceled.

This is the heart of satisfaction theory, which was articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century. The core claim is simple: sin creates a real moral debt, and that debt doesn't disappear simply because we'd prefer it to. A God who waved it away without cost wouldn't be demonstrating mercy. He'd be demonstrating that the debt wasn't real to begin with – which would mean that nothing we do, for good or ill, truly matters.

Paul says God put Christ forward as a sacrifice of atonement, "to demonstrate his righteousness." Paul uses the word demonstrate twice in this passage in Romans 3 to emphasize that God had been showing forbearance by passing over sins and holding back judgment. This extended patience might have led to the questions, does God actually take sin seriously? Does it matter? Is the moral order real?

The cross answers that question. Sin is taken seriously enough that God bears the full cost of its resolution from within God's own self. The cross satisfies the moral debt not because God needed a payment before he could love us, but because God's love took sin seriously enough to resolve it fully rather than paper over it.

When a debt is absorbed by someone who had no obligation to take it on, that act communicates something that mere cancellation never could. It says the debt was real and that the person who incurred the debt is worth the cost of repayment. Forgiveness that costs nothing tends to heal nothing.

Satisfaction theory, taken alone, can make salvation feel like an account cleared and nothing more. But Paul doesn't say we are merely acquitted or the charges are simply dropped. He says we are justified, which means set into right relationship. Instead of just settling the debt, God restores what the debt had broken – humanity's relationship with God.

Questions for Reflection:

1. When you think about your own sin, do you tend to minimize it and treat it as something God can easily overlook? Or, on the other end of the spectrum, do you carry it as something heavier than it needs to be? How does the cross speak to both of those tendencies?
2. Think of a debt – whether financial, relational, or moral – that was absorbed by someone who had no obligation to take it on. What did that act communicate to you?

Day 3 - Moral Exemplar

1 Peter 2:21-23

²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps.

*²² "He committed no sin,
and no deceit was found in his mouth."*

²³ When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

Philippians 2:5-8

⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

*⁶ who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,*

*⁷ but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.*

And being found in appearance as a human,

⁸ *he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.*

1 John 2:6

⁶ *whoever says, "I abide in him," ought to walk in the same way as he walked.*

Understanding the Passage:

When I was a kid, my dad would take my sister & me to the Waffle House by LSU's campus for special dates. I remember two things really clearly about those meals – that he'd let us use as much syrup as we wanted and that he'd tip generously. When the check came, the total was always relatively small. But the work behind it was not. Coffee was refilled without asking. Plates were carried with care. Kindness was offered. And so, he would leave a tip that matched the whole bill.

He never made a speech about it, but simply commented about how hard people worked. Something settled into me and now, when I'm in places where the bill is low and the effort is high, generosity feels less like a decision and more like a reflex.

That's the power of example. Not information. Formation.

When Peter says Christ left us "an example," the Greek word is *hypogrammos*—literally a writing pattern that children would trace over to learn their letters. Picture a young student placing thin paper over carefully formed letters, tracing the lines again and again until the shape becomes natural to their hand. Jesus' life is the pattern we're meant to trace with our own, not once but repeatedly, until the movements become part of us.

Notice what Peter emphasizes in this pattern: Christ "suffered for you." The example isn't just about Jesus' teaching or his miracles. It's about how he responded when life pressed hard against him. "When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten."

Paul's hymn in Philippians reveals the staggering scope of Jesus' example. He "existed in the form of God" yet "did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped." Think about what you grasp in your life – your rights, your reputation, your comfort, your control. Jesus, who had every right to all of that and infinitely more, released his grip. He "emptied himself," took on the form of a slave, and became "obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross."

The moral exemplar view of atonement, often associated with the theologian Peter Abelard, teaches that Jesus saves us by revealing God's love so vividly that our hearts are changed. When we see the cross, we see love poured out without reservation and that vision awakens love in us.

When we watch Jesus wash feet, forgive enemies, and stretch out his arms on the cross, we are not merely observing a moral hero. We are seeing the very heart of God. The Spirit uses that vision to reshape our desires. Over time, through sustained attention to Christ's example, mercy becomes more natural. Forgiveness less forced. Generosity less calculated.

Holiness is not gritting our teeth toward moral improvement but is cooperating with grace as our loves are retrained.

This is where the moral exemplar view, taken alone, would fail us. If we're still trapped in our sin – as we established last week – then seeing a good example won't be enough. We'd try to imitate Jesus and collapse under the weight of our own inability. We need the other dimensions of atonement: we need Christ to substitute for us, to satisfy God's justice, to heal our sickness, to recapitulate human history.

But when we hold these views together, the moral exemplar adds something essential: Jesus doesn't just save us and leave us unchanged. Jesus saves us and then calls us to be transformed, to live as he lived.

John makes it plain: "whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk in the same way as he walked." This isn't optional for Christians. If Jesus served the poor, can we ignore them? If Jesus loved his enemies, can we nurse our grudges? If Jesus forgave those who crucified him, can we withhold forgiveness from those who've hurt us? The pattern is before us. The Spirit presses it into our instincts. And day by day, as we behold Christ, we become like what we see.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. What are you beholding closely enough that it's shaping your reflexes? Whose life is quietly teaching you what matters?
2. John Wesley emphasized that Christian perfection is a heart perfected in love, not moral flawlessness. How does that distinction change the way you think about spiritual growth?

Day 4 - Healing/Therapeutic

Matthew 9:12-13

¹² But when he heard this, he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ¹³ Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous but sinners."

Luke 4:18-19

*¹⁸ "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free those who are oppressed,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

James 5:14-16

¹⁴ Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵ The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up, and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.

Understanding the Passage:

There is a Japanese art called kintsugi – repairing broken pottery with lacquer mixed with gold. The vessel is not returned to an imaginary, untouched past. In fact, the fracture is more noticeable because of the gold – but the crack is honored. It becomes something restored and strengthened through careful, costly repair.

The healing model of atonement, sometimes called the therapeutic model and particularly important in Eastern Orthodox theology, offers us a similar vision. Sin is primarily understood as a sickness or disease, and salvation is the healing of that sickness. This reframes sin from being solely a crime that needs punishing to a disease that needs treatment.

When Jesus was criticized for eating with tax collectors and sinners – people considered morally contaminated – he responded with a striking image: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Jesus identifies himself as a physician. And physicians do not shame wounds. They tend them.

When Jesus reads from Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth, he announces his mission in language of healing and repair: "to bring good news to the poor... release to the captives... recovery of sight to the blind... to set free those who are oppressed." The mission of Christ is not to discard damaged humanity, but to restore it.

Notice the difference this makes. A criminal before a judge feels condemned. A patient before a doctor feels hope. The judge asks, "What have you done?" The doctor asks, "Where does it hurt?"

It is important to remember that we are not self-repaired vessels. Kintsugi requires an artisan. The pottery does not mend itself. In the same way, Christian faith insists that healing is initiated and sustained by divine grace. We do not manufacture our own wholeness through willpower or denial. We bring our fractures into the hands of the one who knows how to mend us.

The crack is not beautiful in itself. But the healing is. Where sin wounds, distorts, and oppresses us, Christ heals and restores us.

The scar remains visible in the risen Jesus. The wounds are not erased. But they are no longer sites of death. They are marks of victory.

This model of atonement is especially helpful for people who struggle with addiction, trauma, and mental illness. The legal models of atonement can make folks feel condemned, and the moral exemplar model can feel impossible ("I can't live like Jesus!"). But the healing model says: you're sick, and there's a Great Physician who wants to heal you. You don't have to fix yourself first. You just have to let Jesus the healer work.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection:

1. Where are you trying to hide a crack rather than bring it to the Great Physician?
2. James emphasizes that healing often comes through community – through confession, prayer, and the presence of others. Who in your life could you trust enough to confess to, so that healing can begin? What makes that kind of vulnerability difficult?
3. Does thinking of sin as a disease rather than (or, in addition to) a crime bring relief or does it feel like it lets you off the hook too easily?

Day 5 – Recapitulation

Romans 5:12-19

¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned— ¹³ for sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. ¹⁴ Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam, who is a pattern of the one who was to come.

¹⁵ But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. ¹⁶ And the gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the gift following many trespasses brings justification. ¹⁷ If, because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. ¹⁹ For just as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

Ephesians 1:10

¹⁰ as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

Hebrews 2:14-18

⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶ For it is clear that he did not come to help angels but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷ Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸ Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

Understanding the Passage:

Imagine a group of travelers setting out on a long journey. At the very first fork in the road, their guide takes a wrong turn. The decision seems small in the moment, but every mile after that compounds the error. Every subsequent choice, however sensible given where they are, takes them further from where they were meant to go. At some point, the travelers don't even remember there was a fork. They only know they are lost, and that they have been lost for as long as anyone can recall.

No amount of better navigation from that point forward will fix the problem. The error isn't in the later decisions. It was at the origin.

Now think about your own life. Have you ever realized you were way off course in your life – only to discover the mistake wasn't recent? Maybe it happened at the very first fork.

The slight turn in your behavior or habits seemed small at the time. Reasonable, even. But every action afterward, however logical, carried you further from where you were meant to be. By the time you notice, the distance feels overwhelming.

This is the logic Paul is working with in Romans 5. Adam's trespass wasn't just a personal moral failure; it was a wrong turn at the very first fork, and the whole human family has been traveling its consequences ever since. The problem isn't merely that we occasionally make bad decisions along the way. The problem is an issue of orientation. If the first fork was taken wrongly, even our best efforts can carry us further into the wrong landscape.

So what does Jesus do? He does not stand at a distance and shout better directions. He does not just offer a better map. He serves as the new guide who goes all the way back to the first fork.

This is the heart of recapitulation, which is one of the oldest understandings of salvation. This model of atonement was developed by Irenaeus in the 2nd century and the word itself comes from the Latin *re-capitulare* – "to head up again," "to sum up again." The core idea is that Christ goes back to the very beginning of the human story and re-travels it, this time without the wrong turn. Christ retraces the steps of Adam in order to set them right from the inside.

Recapitulation means the wrong turn at the beginning does not have the final word. Christ has gone back to the fork. He has taken the right path and it has changed all of our paths.

Questions for Reflection:

1. Paul emphasizes that the consequences of Adam's wrong turn affected all of us, not just Adam. Where in your own life do you feel the weight of brokenness that you didn't personally choose—patterns inherited from family, wounds from others, a world disordered by forces larger than yourself?
2. What would it look like to trust that Christ has already walked the road rightly and to place your steps in his?

Video Discussion Questions:

1. Before you did this week's study, what were some of the ways that you were aware of that the Bible describes Jesus saving us?
2. Why do you think it's important to take sin seriously and not just act like grace is cheap?
3. Do you, like Pastor Ryan, struggle with the word "sin"? Why?
4. Pastor Colin talked about Jesus saving us from our way of being human and helps us live his way of being human. What does this look like in our lives?
5. How does the healing model treat sin differently than the satisfaction and substitution models?
6. Athanasius, who wrote about the recapitulation model in addition to Irenaeus, said, "God became man so that man might become God." What does that mean?
7. Do you want to push back on any of these atonement theories? If so, why and what would your argument be?
8. What is your biggest takeaway this week?

Prayer requests and other notes: