

175 and Counting: The Disputed Gospel

Romans 5:8

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you to turn with me to Romans chapter 5, and especially verse 8, although I'd like you to look from verse 6 to 10. We're going to pick up three other phrases right around Romans 5:8 to help us in the study that we're going to this morning.

Last week, when we were in 1 Corinthians 15, we saw Paul's phrase that he delivered to the Corinthians and to us as of first importance that Christ died for our sins according to the Scripture. This is an essential part of the Gospel declaration. It's the declaration about what Jesus is doing on the cross. Did you know that that is in dispute today, amongst not only people who are professing Christians but even amongst some ministers, even ministers that call themselves evangelical. A very prominent self-professed evangelical British minister, a few years ago, wrote a book in which he describes the teaching that Christ bore our penalty on the cross in our place, thus atoning, turning aside God's wrath, His just judgment against our sin; he described that teaching as cosmic-child abuse. Here's what he said:

I don't know about you but at the age of ten I thought that this explanation of the cross was repulsive as well as non-sensible. What sort of God is this, getting so angry with the world and the people that He created and then to calm Himself down demanding the blood of His own Son? And anyway, why should God forgive us through punishing somebody else? It's worse than illogical; it's insane! It makes God sound like a psychopath. If any human being behaved like this, we'd say he was a monster! Well I haven't changed my mind since then. This explanation of the cross just doesn't work, though sadly it's one that's still all too often preached. It just doesn't make sense to talk about a nice Jesus down here placating the wrath of a nasty, angry, Father God in heaven. The wrath of God is no more than a human projection.

What would Paul say to that? What do the Scriptures teach us to think about what God is doing at the cross? There are so many wrong things in that paragraph it would take me a twelve week sermon series to unpack it. But Paul, in the very verse we're going to read, and in the verses around it today, is going to anchor us in two great truths that will help correct the colossal confusion that

you've just heard in that paragraph. You may be wrestling with what the meaning and significance of the cross is. If you are, I invite you to give attention to Paul's teaching on the glorious truths of the cross. It's at the heart of the Gospel and even as it is disputed and rejected by people who profess to be Christians from a pulpit, it's vital for us to understand it. So let's pray before we read God's Word.

Heavenly Father, this is Your Word. Open our eyes to behold wonderful things in it. Feed us by Your Word. We do not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Search our hearts out and especially, O God, show us the meaning and significance of the death of the Lord Jesus Christ at the heart of the Gospel. This we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

This is the Word of God. Hear it in Romans 5 verse 8:

“But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy, inspired, and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all our hearts.

In this passage, Paul is explaining to us the accomplishment of the cross of Christ and he is pointing us back to the Father's love for those who are at enmity against Him, which is demonstrated and proved in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. When people object to the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement — now that's a big phrase, big words. We don't use them over breakfast normally. They're shorthand terms used to describe some gloriously Biblical truths. Penal substitutionary atonement. Let's take it in three parts. Penal, penalty. Jesus bore the penalty for our sins on the cross. He did so as our substitute — penal substitutionary atonement. He took our place. We're going to sing later on today, “In my place condemned He stood.” He bore the penalty for my sin in my place. Atonement — that is, He turned away, through His sacrifice the just judgment and wrath of God against my sin. Penal substitutionary atonement. We just used that phrase as shorthand for three glorious Biblical ideas. When people object to that teaching, which is the Biblical teaching, you have to deny the Bible to get rid of penal substitutionary atonement. Just understand that. To get rid of penal substitutionary atonement you have to start ripping pages out of the Bible.

When people deny that, when people dispute that presentation of the cross of Christ at the heart of the Gospel, a couple of the things that they are typically after are this. One is, they say, “You know, this whole idea of a blood sacrifice placating an angry God, it sounds pagan, it sounds barbaric, it sounds primitive. Surely, surely we don't want to foster that kind of thinking about what the death of Jesus Christ accomplished.” The other thing that they are getting at, and you heard it in the quote that I gave to you, is the idea that Jesus is trying to get this angry, Father God to show some love and mercy, that Jesus is on the cross

trying to get the angry, Father God to show mercy. Well of course the apostle Paul, in one sentence that we have just read, has exploded both of those objections. And I want you to see how he does it.

THE CROSS IS THE SUPREME DEMONSTRATION OF THE LOVE OF GOD

What Paul does in this passage and in the three phrases around it that expand on it and explain it — Paul's a good teacher; he repeats himself. He says the same thing different ways several times just to make sure that you get it. Paul points in two directions, not only to help us refute the disputation of the Gospel that we get when people are rejecting penal substitutionary atonement but to help us understand ourselves the meaning and significance of the death of Christ. Look at what he does. First, Romans 5:8. “But God shows His love for us.” First, Paul points back to the love of God and he says, “Far, far from being some sort of a sub-Christian, barbaric, pagan thing, the cross is actually the supreme demonstration of the love of God.” We'll come to that second.

Then, notice where he points. “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us.” He points to our situation, to who we are. And notice how he says this in several ways in this passage. Look back to Romans 5 verse 6. “While we were still weak, at the right time, Christ died.” So first we're called weak, helpless. That is, we're in a situation where we are so enjoying our sin that we do not have the slightest inclination to come back to God. We are in bondage to Satan. We're in bondage to the world. We're in bondage to the flesh and we have no power in ourselves to do anything about that. We're in Egypt and we're just happy to be there. We are eating slop with the prodigal son and we are happy to be there. We are weak; we are helpless. And at that very time, Christ died for us.

And then another word. Look at the same verse. “At the right time Christ died for the ungodly.” It's not just that we're powerless. It's not just that we're helpless. It's not just that we're weak. It's not just that we can't get ourselves out of the bondage that we're in. It's that we're ungodly. We don't want to. We want to worship ourselves; we don't want to worship God. We want to worship our idols; we don't want to worship God. We are ungodly. And while we were ungodly Christ died for us.

And then Paul, in the verse that we just read, says, “God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners-“ We are sinners. We've not only transgressed His law, we've not only broken His law, we've done what we shouldn't have done, and we've not done what we should have done. We have actually failed to do and be what He made us to do and be. This is a total failure that Paul is talking about here. This isn't just some minor imperfection in our performance. This is a missing the whole point for what we are and what we're supposed to do. We've totally missed the mark.

So we're weak, we're ungodly, we're sinners. It gets worse! Look at verse 10. "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son." We're weak, ungodly, sinful, enemies of God. We were at enmity with God. We were waging war on God. Why is Paul showing us this? Because this is what Jesus is doing on the cross. He's not on the cross because there's something so wonderful about us that it just compels Him to be there. He's on the cross because there's no other way to deal with what we are but by that truth. We are weak, we are ungodly, we are sinful, and we are enemies. And we and no one else are in any position to be able to do anything about that. And so Jesus interposes His precious blood for us. Jesus says, "I'll take that man's place. I'll take that woman's place. I'll take the place of a multitude of sinners — men and women and boys and girls from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation. I will take their place because they're at enmity with God, they've missed the whole point of their being, they're sinful and they're helpless, and they're ungodly. I'll take their place."

Now in doing so, is Jesus trying to get the angry Father God to love His people? No. There's what Paul starts off saying in Romans 5:8. Look at it again. "But God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." Jesus, on the cross, is not trying to get God to love His people; Jesus is on the cross because of the Father's prior love for His people. There's no way for us to be saved unless Jesus is on that cross and God the Father Himself bears the most expensive price, the greatest cost ever borne for our salvation. Paul emphasizes this and it's almost Paul's version of John 3:16 isn't it? "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever should believe on Him would not perish but have everlasting life." Paul is saying Jesus is on the cross not to try and get God to love His people but as the supreme demonstration of God's love for His people because God could not have given a more expensive gift than His own Son and the Lord Jesus Christ is infinitely valuable, infinitely precious, and yet He is the sacrifice who is offered. Paul is saying it all began with the Father's love. It's not that "Jesus loves me this I know," it's that the "Father loves me this I know" because He's given His Son Jesus in my place.

If I could reverently sort of imagine the discussion between the Father and the Son before the foundation of the world, the Father says, "My Son, I love these enemies. I love these ungodly, rebellious, weak, human beings who have turned their back on Me, spurned Me, and preferred the world and the flesh and the devil over Me. And My justice demands that they be condemned. My justice demands it because I'm love but I'm holy. I'm holy love. And the only way for them back into communion with Me is through a substitute of infinite value." And the Son says, "My Father, I'll take their place because I want them to know Your love and I want Your love to be exalted in Your mercy because I know Your heart. I've fellowshiped with You from eternity. I want a multitude that no man can number, from every tribe, tongue, people, and nation to say, 'Look at the love of the Father! Behold, what manner of love the Father has for us!'" And so the

Father and the Son together begin this great expedition.

And then of course the Holy Spirit with all His infinite power applies the benefit of that work to all those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. It's not a picture of loving Jesus getting the angry God; it's Jesus, who is in the image of His Father, loving and holy, being our substitute because the loving and holy God will not let us go. He could have, you know, He could have. If all of us had been condemned it would have been just. There was nobody that could have stood up on the last day and said, "You are unfair!" Condemnation is the most fair doctrine that ever was. You want to complain about unfair? You're going to have to complain about grace, you're going to have to complain about heaven, you're going to have to complain about forgiveness and acquittal. That's unfair. Condemnation, judgment? That's fair. It's what all of us deserve. And here's what Paul is saying. He's saying the cross demonstrates that about God's love. It demonstrates His commitment to His people in love that He would give His own Son. It demonstrates the Son's love in bearing the penalty that was due to us on the tree.

In one sentence Paul explodes this nonsense rejecting the glorious meaning and significance of the death of Christ in His penal substitutionary atonement. And you know what? We sing about this all the time. We're going to sing about it in the very next hymn, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." We're going to sing about it in the last hymn, "Man of Sorrows! What a Name." We sing about it whenever we take up Keith Getty and Stuart Townend's hymn, "The Power of the Cross." Remember the words to the chorus of that modern hymn? "This the power, of the cross. Christ became sin for us. Took the blame, bore the wrath. We stand forgiven at the cross." What is that? It's just a little summary of penal substitutionary atonement. By the way, Stuart Townend wrote those words in response to the denial of this truth that was becoming so pervasive in British evangelicalism. But he doesn't just stop there, does he? In every sentence of the rest of that song he unpacks the glory of that particular paragraph. "Oh to see the pain, written on Your face, bearing the awesome weight of sin. Every bitter thought, every evil deed, crowing Your bloodstained brow. Oh to see my name, written in the wounds, for through Your suffering I am free. Death is crushed to death! Life is mine to live! Won through Your selfless love." Penal substitutionary atonement. God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us. "This the power of the cross, Son of God slain for us. What a love! What a cost! We stand forgiven at the cross."

And that's the only way we come to this table, through the cross. That cross demonstrates the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. That cross accomplishes the purpose of the love of God for us and in us. At that cross Jesus bears our sin and we are accepted in the Beloved so that we may experience a life and a blessing that we do not deserve because He died a death that we did deserve. And we may experience a life that we have not earned because He lived a life that we could not live. God shows His love for us in that while we were still

sinner Christ died for us. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, as we come to the table today grant that we would come very deliberately understanding that nothing in our hands we bring; simply to Your cross we cling. We ask this in the name of Christ by the power of Your Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now let's sing as we prepare to come to the Lord's Table. Take your hymnals in hand and turn with me to number 252, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross."

After the benediction we'll sing together in response, "Spirit of the Living God." The words are in your bulletin. Receive now God's blessing. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God our Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all both now and forevermore. Amen.

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