

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 17: The Words and Works of Jesus Part 5: – The Atoning Work of Christ

In this lesson we will look at the work of Jesus Christ in his death on the cross, burial, and resurrection. This is also called the atoning work of Christ. As we noted in a previous lesson, the Gospels detail the events that led up to and the description of the events of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, but it's in the New Testament epistles where we get the "doctrine" of the atonement, and what Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection means for the world.

Definition of Atonement

The word "atonement" derives from the term "at-one-ment," which means to be in harmony or agreement. It literally means to be "at one" with someone, signifying the process of reconciliation and making amends. The Hebrew word translated as "atonement" is "kippur". This word is derived from a root word which means 'to cover, purge, or make reconciliation'. The most well-known use of this term is in "Yom Kippur," which translates to "Day of Atonement," a significant Jewish holiday dedicated to repentance, fasting, and seeking forgiveness.

In Christian theology, atonement refers to the reconciling of humanity with God through the work of Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection. It addresses the problem of human sin and God's justice, showing how Christ's sacrificial work restores the broken relationship between God and mankind.

Ideas of Atonement in the Old Testament

Understanding the roots of Jesus' atoning work in the Old Testament is foundational for Christian theology. The concept of atonement in the Old Testament lays the groundwork for understanding Jesus' sacrificial death and its significance for humanity's redemption.

1. Sin Offering and Sacrificial System: The sacrificial system of Israel in the Old Testament forms a central aspect of Israelite worship and theology, serving multiple purposes related to sin, purification, dedication, and reconciliation with God. It provided a framework through which the people of Israel could approach God, seek forgiveness, and maintain covenantal relationships.

- **Leviticus 17:11:** "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life."
- The sacrificial system was made up of different types of sacrificial offerings: Burnt offerings, grain offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, etc.
- The sacrificial system was centered on the shedding of blood for the forgiveness of sin. Blood symbolized life and was used to cleanse and purify from sin.
- Priests served as mediators between God and the people, offering sacrifices on behalf of individuals and the community. They ensured that offerings were performed according to God's instructions.
- Sacrifices reinforced the covenantal relationship between God and His people. They reminded Israel of God's faithfulness and their responsibilities as His chosen people, emphasizing mutual commitment and loyalty.
- The temporal sacrificial system of the Old Covenant foreshadowed the final and ultimate sacrifice for sins of Jesus Christ. Jesus is referred to as the "Lamb of God" symbolizing His sacrificial death that fulfills and surpasses the Old Testament sacrificial system.
- The book of Hebrews outlines how Christ's atonement fulfills and surpasses the Old Covenant sacrificial system with its emphasis on: Christ as a better High Priest, better priesthood, better sacrifice, better blood, better covenant, better access to God, eternal redemption, finished work, and more.

2. Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur): Leviticus 16 describes the rituals of the Day of Atonement, an annual where the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place with sacrificial blood to make atonement for the sins of Israel. This event symbolized the purification and forgiveness of sins for the entire community of Israel through the offering of sacrifices and the scapegoat ritual.

- **Leviticus 16:30:** "because on this day atonement will be made for you, to cleanse you. Then, before the LORD, you will be clean from all your sins."

3. Suffering Servant in Isaiah: This passage is viewed as a prophetic passage that describes the suffering servant who would bear the sins of many and bring about their atonement through his suffering and death. Christians interpret this passage as pointing forward to Jesus Christ, who fulfills this role perfectly.

- **Isaiah 53:5-6:** "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

New Testament Scriptures Concerning the Atonement of Christ

Romans 3:23-25 "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are **justified freely** by his grace through the **redemption** that came by Christ Jesus. God presented Christ as a **sacrifice of atonement** (*propitiation*), through the **shedding of his blood**—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished."

Romans 5:8-11 "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, **Christ died for us**. Since we have now been **justified by his blood**, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, **we were reconciled** to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have **now received reconciliation**."

2 Corinthians 5:18-21 "All this is from God, who **reconciled us to himself** through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that **God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ**, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin **to be sin for us**, so that in him we might become the **righteousness of God**."

Colossians 2:13-15 "When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He **forgave us all our sins**, having **cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness**, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. And having **disarmed the powers and authorities**, he made a public spectacle of them, **triumphing over them by the cross**."

Hebrews 2:17 "For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and **that he might make atonement** (*propitiation*) **for the sins of the people**."

Hebrews 9:12-14 "He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, **thus obtaining eternal redemption**. The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the **blood of Christ**, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!"

1 John 2:1-2 "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** (*propitiation*) **for our sins**, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the **whole world**."

1 John 4:10 "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an **atoning sacrifice** (*propitiation*) **for our sins**."

Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to **give his life as a ransom** for many."

John 1:29 "The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, 'Look, the **Lamb of God**, who **takes away** the sin of the world!'"

Colossians 1:19-22 "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him **to reconcile to himself all things**, whether things on earth or things in heaven, **by making peace through his blood**, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now **he has reconciled you** by Christ's physical body through death **to present you holy** in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation."

1 Peter 1:18-19 "For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that **you were redeemed** from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious **blood** of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect."

1 Peter 2:24 "**He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross**, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed."

1 Peter 3:18 "For Christ also **suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous**, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive in the Spirit."

Revelation 1:5 "And from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and **has freed us from our sins by his blood.**"

Key Terms Concerning the Atonement

Atonement: The uniting (at-one-ment) of humanity with God through the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It encompasses the idea of removing sin so that the relationship between God and mankind can be restored.

Substitution: The doctrine that Jesus Christ died as a substitute for sinners, bearing the punishment that they deserved.

Propitiation: The act of appeasing or satisfying the wrath of God through a sacrificial offering. In the New Testament, Jesus' death is described as a propitiation for our sins.

Satisfaction: The doctrine that Jesus' atonement satisfied the demands of God's justice and holiness, making it possible for God to forgive sin without compromising His righteousness

Reconciliation: The restoration of a right relationship between God and humanity, made possible through Jesus' atonement. This term emphasizes the end of estrangement caused by sin

Redemption: The act of buying back or liberating from bondage. In Christian theology, Jesus' death is seen as redeeming believers from the power of sin and death

Ransom: The price paid to redeem or buy back someone from captivity or bondage. Jesus' death is described as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45, 1 Timothy 2:6).

Justification: The act by which God declares a sinner righteous on the basis of Christ's righteousness. This is a legal term emphasizing the acquittal from the guilt of sin – "just-if-I-had never sinned."

Righteousness: is a status granted to believers through their union with Christ. It involves the standing of being declared "right" or "just" before God, not because of personal merit or works, but because of the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Imputation: The crediting of Jesus' righteousness to believers and their sins to Jesus. This concept is crucial for understanding how believers are made righteous in God's sight

Sacrifice: An offering made to God, often involving the shedding of blood. Jesus' death is seen as the ultimate sacrifice that fulfills and surpasses the Old Testament sacrificial system (Hebrews 9:12-14).

Expiation: The act of atoning for sin or wrongdoing, often involving the removal of guilt. Jesus' sacrificial death expiates the sins of humanity (Hebrews 9:26).