

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series: Exposition of Romans
Number: 175
Text: Romans 12:1-2; Hebrews 5-10; Mark 14:12-26
Date: January 27, 2013 (A.M.)

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THE PRIMARY FOCUS OF THE MERCIES OF GOD

Probation--the word has a decidedly uncomfortable ring to it. We use the word in reference to a person being tested to determine character or conduct. When someone is placed on probation, we recognize that a condition of continual good behavior is expected--or else! As a college professor, I have had to place students on academic probation because of poor grades—which, if not remedied, will result in their dismissal from school. We read of people involved in some criminal activity having their sentence suspended on the condition of promised good behavior and regular reporting to a probation officer. The covenant of works was probation. If Adam showed perfect obedience to God for a certain period, he was to have eternal life. However, if he disobeyed, he was to have death. He disobeyed, and when Adam fell, all mankind fell with him (Roman 5:12-21; 1 Corinthians 15:21, 22). The Bible refers to two Adams: the first Adam and the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). The last Adam (or second man, 1 Corinthians 15:47) is Jesus Christ. Let me propose a hypothetical question: Suppose that on the cross Jesus merely paid the just penalty our sins deserve and that was *all* that He did for us--where would we then be? This is a legitimate question (and a very crucial one at that). If Christ had merely paid the penalty of sin for us and that was all that He did on our behalf, we would all be back in a situation like the first Adam. We would simply be under probation again, only we would be in a worse condition than Adam. He was created in righteousness and without sin--yet he fell. We would certainly fall. Do you see my point? If all that Jesus did for us was to merely remove from us the guilt of past sin and then leave us to our own efforts to offer a continual perfect obedience to God--where would we be? Hopeless is what we would be. What else must Christ do for us? Sometimes, or so it seems, we become so familiar with certain portions of the Bible that they tend to lose their impact. The Upper Room discourse (the institution of the Lord's Supper) is one of those portions of Scripture that frequently falls in this category. It is a pity, too, because the deeds and words of our Lord on this occasion are tremendously significant. Jesus had gathered with His disciples on this, the last night before His crucifixion. It was the first day of the Jewish Feast of Unleavened bread. Arrangements had been made to celebrate the Passover in the Upper Room of a friend's house (Mark 14:12-16). No servant was present to assume the custom of washing the feet of guests (and none of the apostles would stoop to such a menial task). So Jesus laid aside His own garments, put on a slave's attire, and proceeded to wash the disciples' feet, illustrating in a vivid way how authentic love expresses itself in humble service. He stunned His disciples by telling them that one of them would betray Him. He also spoke of the Holy Spirit, the other Comforter (John 14:5-26). At some point during the meal, Jesus inaugurated the Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:17-19; I Corinthians 11:23-25). Notice how central in all of this is Jesus' own view of His death. In particular, note what our Lord did with the elements, what He said about them, and his own explanation as to their meaning and purpose.

I. THE CENTRALITY OF CHRIST'S DEATH

"Read your four Gospels," wrote Lloyd-Jones, "and calculate, in terms of proportion, the amount of space given to our Lord's death. Though they are all very brief records, look how much space is given to the account of the death"¹ The bread and the wine speak to us of Christ's death. The bread, Jesus tells His disciples, stands for His body *broken* and *given* for them in death. Likewise, the wine stands for His blood, not as it coursed through His veins, but as it is *poured out* for them in His death.² J.R. W. Stott has observed, "The Lord's Supper, which was instituted by Jesus, and which is the only regular commemorative act authorized by him, dramatizes neither his birth nor his life, neither his words nor his works, but only his death. Nothing could indicate more clearly the central significance that Jesus attached to his death. It was by his death that he wished above all else to be remembered. There is then, it is safe to say, no Christianity without the cross. If the cross is not central to our religion, ours is not the religion of Jesus."³ One common misconception is that the Trinity was somehow disrupted when God's wrath was poured out on Jesus during His time on the cross -- especially when Jesus cried out that He was forsaken. (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15: 34). Matt Jenson recently addressed this. "Let's take Jesus at his word; he is forsaken by God at the cross. It's

true that these are the first words of Psalm 22, in which the speaker entrusts himself and his cause to God; and Jesus could have spoken or implied the entire psalm. Maybe, that is, he is uttering a faithful prayer of trust in dire circumstances. Or maybe he is speaking in his role of representative, taking on words that surely fit the sinful people of Israel, and indeed all of sinful humanity. Then again, Jesus said other things from the cross. Only Matthew and Mark record the cry of dereliction. Luke tells of his intercession for those who crucified him ("Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do") and his committing his spirit to the Father (Lk. 23:35, 46). In John, Jesus gives his mother into the care of one of his disciples, says he is thirsty, and utters his final words: "It is finished" (Jn. 19:30). God didn't make him do this. The Father sent the Son (Jn. 3:16), and the Son gave his life freely (Jn. 10:17-18). So the cross is at once the low point and the high point of Israel's history---and indeed, of human history. It is the low point as the final outcome of sin, wherein the Creator of the universe suffers a shameful death at the hands of, for the sake of, and instead of his creation. It is the high point as the perfection of human obedience, with Jesus being found faithful unto death, even death on a cross. His moment of greatest humiliation is his moment of glorification. A few verses after Matthew records Jesus' cry of forsakenness, he records the centurion's response to Jesus' death: "Truly this was the Son of God!" (Matt. 27:54) Here the centurion gives witness to Jesus as King and Lord, one closely tied in to the ways of God with the world. Despite, or perhaps in light of having seen the wrath of God poured out on Jesus, the centurion responds that Jesus is God's Son. Maybe the simplest answer to the question of how the Trinity is not broken at the cross is to recall that the Father sent his Son and the Son laid down his own life freely---that is, that both Father and Son gave all for the world at the cross."⁴

II. THE PURPOSE OF CHRIST'S DEATH

It is not uncommon to hear people say that the cross is at the center of Christianity and then proceed to explain it in terms that do not reflect the emphasis of Scripture. For instance, to say that Christ's death was primarily an example, or that it was designed simply to move us to repentance, misses entirely the Bible's perspective on the atonement.⁵ The words of Jesus specifically tell us that the cup referred to His blood and that this was shed for the forgiveness of sins and the establishment of the New Covenant (compare Exodus 24:8; Isaiah 42:6; 49:8; 52:12; Jeremiah 31:33-34; Zachariah 9:11; Hebrews 8:8-13; 9:18-20; 10:15-18). In order to ratify the New Covenant and secure the forgiveness of sins, Christ *must* die, and the death He dies is described in theological terms as being *penal*, *vicarious*, and *propitiatory*. As Bible-believing people, we should know the meaning of such terms as well as we know the names of our closest friends.

III. THE NEED FOR PERSONALLY APPROPRIATING CHRIST'S DEATH

Our Lord took bread, broke it, and explained its significance. He took the cup and likewise explained it. In both cases, He also gave the bread and wine to the disciples so that they might participate in His body and blood. Thus the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine are, as it were, visible signs of our receiving the crucified Christ and being nourished by Him in faith (John 6:53-55; I Corinthians 10:16).

IV. RIGHTEOUSNESS MORE THAN GUILTLESSNESS

The Law of God contains a two-fold sanction. If the Law were *perfectly* kept, the reward will be eternal life; it is broken in *any* respect, the penalty of death is the punishment. "Pardon alone would release from the punishment of its breach, but would not entitle to the reward of its performance. In other words, he who broke it and has suffered the penalty, therefore does not stand on the same platform with him who has kept it."⁶ Remission of sin *by itself* is not justification. The sinner stands in need, not only of pardon for guilt, but also a positive title to favour and life. "If the believer founds his expectation of an eternity of blessedness upon the amount of obedience which he has himself rendered to the law, and the degree of holiness which he has personally attained here upon earth, he is filled with doubt and fear respecting the final recompense. He knows that he has not, by his own work, earned and merited such an infinite reward as *glory, honor, and immortality*."⁷

A. The Illustration

In Zachariah 3:4, 5, we have pictured for us Joshua, the high priest, being accused by Satan before the Lord. The text says, "Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes." The Hebrew word translated *filthy* is TSO'IM. This is the strongest expression in Hebrew for filth of the most vile and loathsome character.⁸ The Lord has Joshua's filthy clothes removed and says, "See, I have taken away your sin, *and* I will put rich garments on you." Justification is not only the stripping off of the filthy garment, but *also* the putting on of the clean turban and rich garments. Note how this dual aspect is stated elsewhere in Scripture. Acts 21:18 – Faith obtains forgiveness of sins, and inheritance among the saints. Romans 5:1, 2 – Justification faith brings us not only peace with God, but access to a

state of grace, joy and glory. Galatians 4:5 – Christ’s coming under the curse for us results in a redemption, which includes adoption (cf. also John 1:12, where believing is the immediate instrument of adoption).

V. THE SATISFACTION OF GOD’S RIGHTEOUSNESS

“Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them (Galatians 3:10). This is one aspect of the law and its curse, but there is also another aspect – that of perfect performance. If life is to be received, the law must be kept *perfectly*. “If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments” (Matthew 19:17). Christ fulfilled both aspects in His work of obedience. “In fact, the word *obedience* is actually used. In the noteworthy passage where Paul speaks of Christ’s emptying and humbling Himself, we read that He *became obedient even unto death, yea, the death of the cross* (Philippians 2:8); and concerning His suffering, we read that *though he was a Son, yet learned obedience by the things which he suffered* (Hebrews 5:8). He was *born under the law* (Galatians 4:4) and his entire life was a continuously obedient living under the law.”⁹ John Murray says “that no category could more significantly express the execution of his vicarious work than obedience. The language of prophecy is again confirmatory: *I delight to do thy will, O my God: Yea, thy law is within my heart* (Psalm 40:8; cf. Hebrews 10:5-10).”¹⁰ Theologians speak of two parts of the saving work of Christ. One is commonly referred to as His *passive* obedience, and the other is called his *active* obedience.

A. The Passive Obedience of Christ

The passive is not to be confused with passivity. Christ was *active* in His passive obedience (John 10:17, 18). His passive (or suffering) obedience is not to be restricted to what He experienced in the garden and on the cross. Everything in His human and earthly career that was distressing belongs to His passive obedience. Machen put it best when he wrote: “By His passive obedience – that is, by suffering in our stead – He paid the penalty for us.”¹¹ By bearing the punishment due our sin OBOEDIENTIA PASSIVA, Christ has disarmed the law of its curse (Galatians 3:13).

B. The Active Obedience of Christ

Christ’s active obedience is, simply stated, His perfect performance of the requirements of the moral law. The Lord Jesus fully obeyed the law in His heart and in His conduct without a single slip or failure. Machen wrote, “By His active obedience, that is, by doing what the law of God required – he has merited for us the reward.”¹²

CONCLUSION: “The Lord’s Supper, which Jesus initiated, was not meant to be a slightly sentimental ‘forget-me-not,’ but rather a service rich in spiritual significance.”¹³ Finally, as all of you know, we are called to “do this in remembrance of me” when we come to the Lord’s Supper. The biblical concept of *remembrance* entails a great more than simply the recollection of data. The Hebrew word ZĀKHAR is used repeatedly in the Old Testament with distinctive covenantal overtones. In fact, for the Feast of Unleavened Bread, its annual observance is important as a remembrance of God’s covenantal faithfulness (Exodus 13:8f; Deuteronomy 16:3). We are told that God will *remember* sin and execute judgment (Psalm 137:7; I Kings 17:18; Jeremiah 14:10; and especially Hosea 7:2; 8:13, 14; 9:9). Remembrance here refers to *the bringing up to the present the effects of something done in the past*. When we read of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:13-34 and Hebrews 8:8-13; 10:15-18, the same concept is present. Remembrance, in the Lord’s Supper, points us in the same direction. It means emphatically that God, in covenantal faithfulness, does not remember our sin. The effects of Christ’s obedience unto death are made a present reality. In actuality, the emphasis is on what God does, not on what we do! Christ’s active obedience and His passive obedience are *not* two divisions of His work on our behalf. The two are inextricably intertwined. Neither was performed apart from the other. Together they make up the complete salvation, which was accomplished for us by the Lord Jesus. Can you say with the Apostle Paul, “He loved me and gave Himself for me; He took my place; He bore my curse; He bought me with His own precious blood; He is my righteousness”?

ENDNOTES

¹ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, *The Cross* (Crossway, 1986), p. 23

² In discussing the language of Scripture regarding the nature of the bread and the wine, Stephen Charnock wrote, “Christ is called the Passover; was the paschal lamb, therefore, substantially the body of Christ? Were those lams that were slain in Egypt, or at any other time in the celebration of this ordinance, transubstantiated into Christ? Yet Christ is as absolutely

here called the Passover, and in other places the lamb, as the bread in the sacrament is called his body, or the wine his blood. Christ is said to be the rock, of which the Israelites drank. I Cor x. 4. Was the rock or the water that flowed from it, transubstantiated into Christ? But in Scripture the name proper to the thing represented, is given to that which represents it. The lamb is called the Passover, because it is a memorial of the angel's passing over the Israelites' families, and not only called so at the first institution, but above fifteen hundred years after that miraculous mercy. So the bread and wine are called the body and blood of Christ, because they are memorials and signs of his body and blood. If the church of the Jews spake figuratively in the case of the Passover, what difficulty is it, that Christ should call the memorials of his body and blood by the name of the things they signified?" *Christ Crucified* (rpt. James Family, 1979), p. 61.

³ J.R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986), p. 68.

⁴ Matt Jenson, *You Asked: Does The Father's Wrath Upon the Son Sever the Unity of The Trinity?* thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tg/c/2013/01/21you-asked-does-the-fathers-wrath-upon-the-son-sever-the-unity-of-the-trinity/print/

⁵ "Some," R.L. Dabney remarked, "say that the object of Jesus' innocent sufferings and death was designed to add moral weight to this example as our pattern, especially in practicing the virtues of truth, moral courage, patience, and fortitude under calamity. Still another set hold that the object was to soften and melt our hearts by sympathy with his sufferings; and yet another, that God's object in the sacrifice of Christ was to make a dramatic display of his opposition to sin, even while pardoning the sinner, and so to prevent men's presuming too much upon his kindness. When we are taught that these are ends designed and secured through Christ's death, we respond, yes, they are secondary ends; but in order that they may be such, they must be grounded in the great truth that he suffered legally and righteously for the guilt of sin imputed to him." *Christ Our Penal Substitute* (rpt. Sprinkle, 1978), p. 65.

⁶ R.L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (rpt. Zondervan, 1972), p. 624

⁷ W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology II* (rpt. Zondervan, 1971), p. 432

⁸ Cf. D. Baron, *The Visions and Prophecies of Zachariah* (rpt. Kregel, 1972), p. 90

⁹ G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Work of Christ* (Eerdmans, 1965), p. 314.

¹⁰ *Collected Writings of John Murray II* (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), p. 151.

¹¹ J.G. Machen, *God Transcendent and Other Sermons* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1949), p. 174.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Stott, *op. cit.* p. 71.