

INTRODUCTION

1. Today marks final the week leading to our Lord's death.
2. On Saturday Jesus arrived in Bethany to stay with His friends Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.
3. On Sunday crowds came to Bethany to hear Him teach.
4. On Monday He rode into the city of Jerusalem to the hosannas and praises of the people, who proclaimed Him as their Messiah.
5. On Tuesday He cleansed the Temple.

6. On Wednesday He entered the Temple and both taught the people and rebuked the religious leaders.
7. On Wednesday evening He ascended the Mount of Olives and taught the disciples about His second coming.
8. On Thursday Peter and John made preparations for the Passover, and that evening Christ and His disciples ate the Passover meal.
9. After they ate the Passover meal they sang a hymn and left the upper room and passed through the city

of Jerusalem and out the eastern gate north of the Temple, descending the slope of the Temple mount, crossing the Kidron brook, and then ascending the Mount of Olives.

10. They stopped for a brief time on a slope of the Mount of Olives where the Lord warned the disciples about their impending defection.
11. Then they arrived at the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus intercedes with the Father and where He was later taken prisoner.
12. Once He is taken prisoner, He

spends the rest of the time before two trials, a religious, Jewish trial, and a secular, Roman trial.

13. Following those two trials, He is condemned to death on a cross.
14. Many years ago, scholar Frederic Farrar wrote *The Life of Christ* (N.Y.: A.L. Burt, 1874). In it he said this:

A death by crucifixion seems to include all that pain and death can have of horrible and ghastly--dizziness, cramp, thirst, starvation, sleeplessness, traumatic fever, tetanus, shame, publicity of

shame, long continuance of torment, horror of anticipation, mortification of untended wounds--all intensified just up to the point at which they can be endured at all, but all stopping just short of the point which would give to the sufferer the relief of unconsciousness.

The unnatural position made every movement painful; the lacerated veins and crushed tendons throbbed with incessant anguish; the wounds, inflamed by exposure, gradually gangrened; the arteries--especially of the head and stomach--became swollen and

oppressed with surcharged blood; and while each variety of misery went on gradually increasing, there was added to them the intolerable pang of burning and raging thirst, and all these physical complications caused an internal excitement and anxiety, which made the prospect of death itself--of death, the awful unknown enemy, at whose approach man usually shudders most--bear the aspect of a delicious and exquisite release (p. 499).

15. One thing is clear: first century executions were not like modern ones.

16. The authorities did not seek a quick, painless death to preserve a small measure of dignity for the criminal.
17. On the contrary, they sought an agonizing torture to completely humiliate him.
18. Such was the torture that our Lord Jesus Christ endured for us.
19. The crucifixion of Christ is the climax of redemptive history.
20. God's plan of salvation culminates in the cross, as the Lord bears the sins of the world and provides

salvation for all who believe in Him.

21. Our text this morning, which comprises 15 Greek words, gives us the purpose of Jesus' crucifixion from the divine standpoint.
22. It says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."
23. All of us have been affected by what the Puritan writer Ralph Venning calls the "plague of plagues."

24. This one plague is more widespread and deadly than all others combined.
25. It effects every person who ever lived – and is 100 percent fatal.
26. Unlike other plagues, which cause only physical death, this plague causes spiritual and eternal death as well.
27. The plague I am referring to is the plague of sin.
28. Because Adam's fall plunged the entire human race into sin (Rom.5:12-21), all people are

sinner from birth.

29. Psalm 51:5 says, “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me.”
30. In Psalm 58:3, David adds, “The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth.”
31. Not only are all people sinners by nature, they are also sinners by action.
32. Paul said in Romans 3:10, “There is none righteous, not even one.”

33. Later in that same chapter he added, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23).

34. Therefore, “There is no man who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46), and no one who can say, “I have cleansed my heart, I am pure from my sin” (Prov.20:9).

35. So the inevitable outcome for all those infected by the sin plague is death.

36. Ezekiel 18:20 states plainly, “The person who sins will die.”

37. Adam's tragic epitaph, "and he died" (Gen.5:5) will be written for all his descendants.
38. The prognosis is no better in the spiritual realm.
39. Sin produces two disastrous spiritual consequences: alienation from God in this life and unrelenting punishment in hell in eternity.
40. But the good news of the gospel is that there is a cure for the sinner infected by the deadly sin epidemic.

41. God, in His mercy and love, provided a remedy for sin – the sacrifice of His Son.
42. The Lord Jesus Christ “released us from our sins by His blood” (Rev.1:5).
43. “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified,” the writer of Hebrews says (Heb.10:14).
44. Those who experience “redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of [their] trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Eph.1:7) are cured from sin’s deadly

spiritual effects.

45. As a result, they have “passed out of death unto life” (1 Jn.3:14) and “are no longer strangers and aliens, but...are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household” (Eph.2:19).
46. How God made the cure possible is the theme of verses 18-20.
47. In those three verses, Paul described the glorious truth of reconciliation – that the sin-severed relationship between holy God and unregenerate sinners can be restored “through” and “in” Christ.

48. But reconciliation raises some profound questions.
49. How can an absolutely and infinitely holy God be reconciled to sinners?
50. How can His just and holy law, which demands the condemnation and punishment of all who violate it, be satisfied?
51. How can those who deserved no mercy receive it?
52. How can God uphold true righteousness and give grace?

53. How can the demands of both justice and love be met?
54. How can God be both “just and the justifier” (Rom.3:26) of sinners?
55. As hard as those questions seem, one brief verse answers them all and resolves the seeming paradox of redemption.
56. It begins with God.
57. It says, “He.”
58. “The end of verse 20 reveals the antecedent ‘He’ to be God the Father” (John MacArthur, 2

Corinthians, p.211).

59. So it all starts with *God initiating our reconciliation.*

I. God Initiated Our Reconciliation (v.21a)

A. Reconciliation is God's Plan

1. It could not occur unless He initiated and applied it
 - a) Verse 18 says, “Now all these things are *of God*, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ.”
 - b) Verse 19 continues by saying that “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to

Himself...”

2. It could not occur apart from Him because sinners cannot devise their own religious approach to God; for they are “dead in [their] trespasses and sins” (Eph.2:1).
 - a) The dooming lie of false religion is that man can reconcile himself to God by his own efforts.
 - b) But all attempts are futile

- (1) Paul said in Titus 3:5 that it was “not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us” (NKJV).

- (2) In Ephesians 2:4, he said that it was because of God’s “great love with which He loved us,” and in verse 9 that it was “not as a result of

works” on our part.

(3) All our deeds apart from Jesus Christ are like “a filthy garment; and all of [them] wither away like a leaf, and [their] iniquities, like the wind, take [them] away” (Isa.64:6, NKJV).

(4) As a result, “There is none

righteous, not
even one”
(Rom.3:10).

- (5) Not even the
“Israelites, to
whom belongs
the adoption as
sons, and the
glory and the
covenants and the
giving of the Law
and the temple
service and the
promises, whose
are the fathers,
and from whom
is the Christ

according to the flesh” (Rom.9:4-5) could devise a way to reconcile themselves to God by their own efforts.

- (6) Romans 10:1-3, expressing Paul’s deep concern for them, reflects that truth:

“Brethren, my heart's desire and my prayer to God for them is for

their salvation. 2

For I testify
about them that
they have a zeal
for God, but not
in accordance
with knowledge.

3 For not
knowing about
God's
righteousness and
seeking to
establish their
own, they did not
subject
themselves to the
righteousness of
God.”

Sin for Us

2 Corinthians 5:21

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“Despite their
zeal for God,
they had not
achieved
salvation,
because they
sought it through
their own
righteousness.
The religion of
human
achievement,
whether practiced
by Jews or
Gentiles, can
never bring
reconciliation
with God. The

only way
reconciliation can
take place is if
God reached out
to sinners; and
He did by the
sacrifice of His
Son” (John
MacArthur, 2
Corinthians,
p.212).

3. Jesus did not go to the cross “because a fickle people turned on Him, though they did. He did not go to the cross because demon-deceived false

religious leaders plotted His death, though they did. He did not go to the cross because Judas betrayed Him, though he did. He did not die because an angry, unruly mob intimidated a Roman governor into sentencing Him to crucifixion, though they did. Jesus went to the cross as the outworking of God's plan to reconcile sinners to Himself. In the first Christian sermon ever preached, Peter declared to the nation of Israel that Jesus 'was delivered over

[to death] by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God’ (Acts 2:23)” (MacArthur).

4. Only God could design an atonement for sin that would satisfy the demands of His justice, propitiate His wrath, and be consistent with His love, grace, and mercy.
5. Only God could conceive a plan in which the second person of the Trinity would, “being found in appearance as a man,

[humble] Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil.2:8).

6. Only God knew what it would take to rescue sinners “from the domain of darkness, and [transfer them] to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Col.1:13), making them “qualified...to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light” (Col.1:12).

7. Only God knew how to make sinners deserving of

hell acceptable in His sight and fit to spend eternity in His presence.

8. Therefore, only God could author and execute the plan of redemption and reconcile sinners to Himself.

B. Reconciliation Flows Out of God's Love

1. It is because He “so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but

have eternal life”
(Jn.3:16).

2. It is a demonstration of
“His own love toward us,
in that while we were yet
sinners, Christ died for us”
(Rom.5:8).
3. It is because “God [is] rich
in mercy, [and] because of
His great love with which
He loved us, even when
we were dead in our
transgressions, [He] made
us alive together with
Christ” (Eph.2:4-5).

The next phrase in 2 Corinthians 5:21 shows how God provided His own appeasement for justice and the means for sinners to become His beloved children. Paul says, “He made *Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf.*”

“This designation points unmistakably to the only possible sacrifice for sin. It eliminates every human who ever lived, “for there is no man who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46), since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom.3:23). Only one who “knew no sin” of his own could qualify to bear the full wrath of God against the sins of others. The perfect sacrifice for sin would have to be a human being, for

only a man could die for other men. Yet he would have to be God, for only God is sinless. That narrows the field to one, the God-man, Jesus Christ” (John MacArthur, 2 Corinthians, pp.213-214).

In this next phrase we see that:

II. Jesus Was Treated As If He Were A Sinner (v.21b)

A. “Him Who Knew No Sin” Refers to Jesus

This truth was affirmed by:

1. Jesus Himself - John 8:46

“Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me?”

2. Pilate, who repeatedly affirmed Jesus’ innocence by saying, “I find no guilt in this man” (Lk.23:4; cf. vv.14, 22).
3. The thief on the cross, also said “This man has done nothing wrong” (Lk.23:41).
4. The Roman Centurion in charge of the execution

detail also admitted,
“Certainly this man was
innocent” (Lk.23:47).

5. The apostles testified to His sinlessness
 - a) Peter publicly proclaimed Him to be the “Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14)
 - b) In Peter’s first epistle he declared Jesus to be “unblemished and spotless” (1 Pet.1:19); one “who committed

no sin” (2:22); and
“just” (3:18).

- c) John said “in Him there is no sin” (1 John 3:5)

- d) The writer of Hebrews said that “we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin” (Heb.4:15), because He is “holy,

innocent, undefiled,
separated from
sinners and exalted
above the heavens”
(7:26).

B. After Presenting Jesus as the Absolutely Holy Substitute for Sinners, the Text Makes the Remarkable Statement that God Made Him “to be sin”

1. This does not mean that Christ became a sinner – that would go against what Scripture teaches

“As God in human flesh,

He could not possibly have committed any sin or in any way violated God's law...He was the unblemished Lamb while on the Cross, personally guilty of no evil" (MacArthur).

2. Isaiah 53:4-6 describes the only sense in which Jesus could have been made sin

“Surely our griefs He Himself bore, And our sorrows He carried; Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, Smitten of

God, and afflicted. 5 But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed. 6 All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.”

- a) Christ was not made a sinner, nor was He punished for any sin

of His own

- b) Instead, the Father treated Him as if He were a sinner by charging to His account the sins of everyone who would ever believe.

“The one who lived a sinless life died a sinner’s death, estranged from God and the object of wrath. He was treated as a sinner in his death” (Garland, D.

E. (2001, c1999).
Vol. 29: 2 Corinthians
(electronic ed.).
Logos Library
System; The New
American
Commentary (Page
301).

It is crucial to
understand “that the
only sense in which
Jesus was made sin
was by imputation.
He was personally
pure, yet officially
culpable [deserving
blame]; personally

holy, yet forensically guilty. But in dying on the cross Christ did not become evil like we are, nor do redeemed sinners become inherently as holy as He is. God credits believers' sin to Christ's account, and His righteousness to theirs" (MacArthur).

In Galatians 3:10-12 Paul explains the necessity of believers' sins being imputed to

Christ.

There is no way for sinners to reconcile themselves to God, because no one is able to “abide by all things written in the book of the law , to perform them” (v.10).

“Violating even one precept of the Law warrants eternal punishment in hell. Thus, the entire

human race is cursed and unable to do anything to lift that curse. Therefore, the only reason believers can be reconciled to God is because ‘Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’” (v.13).

Were it not for the fact that ‘while we were still helpless, at

the right time Christ died for the ungodly’ (Rom.5:6), no one could be reconciled to God” (MacArthur).

III. The Purpose of Reconciliation is that We Might Become the Righteousness of God in Him (v.21c)

A. The People of Reconciliation Are Those Chosen in Him Before the Foundation of the World

“He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on *our* behalf, so

that *we* might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

“The antecedent of *our* is the phrase “ambassadors for Christ” in verse 20; those to whom the “word of reconciliation” was committed (v.19), who have been reconciled to God (v.18), and are new creatures in Christ (v.17)” (MacArthur).

1. Christ’s substitutionary death was efficacious only for those who would believe

- a) John 1:12 - “But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

- b) John 3:16-18 - “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. 17 "For God did not send the Son into the world to

judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. 18 "He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

- c) Romans 10:9-10 -
"That if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart

that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.”

Only those who believe “become children of God.” They will “not perish but have everlasting life,” because they are not “condemned.”

2. All those whom the Father gives to Jesus He draws to Him

a) John 6:37 - “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.”

b) John 6:65 - “And He was saying, ‘For this reason I have said to you, that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him from the Father.’”

B. The Result of Reconciliation is
Us Becoming the
Righteousness of God in Him

The phrase “so that” reflects “a purpose cause in the Greek text. The benefit of God’s imputing believers’ sins to Christ and His righteousness to them is that they *become* righteous before Him.

1. Paul said it this way in Philippians 3:9, “And may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is

through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

“The very righteousness God requires before He can accept the sinner is the very righteousness He provides. Because Jesus paid the full penalty for believers’ sin, God no longer holds it against them” (MacArthur).

2. In Psalm 32:1 David wrote, “How blessed is he whose transgression is

forgiven, Whose sin is covered!”

3. In Psalm 130:3-4 the psalmist added, “If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared.”

“In metaphorical pictures of forgiveness, God is said to have removed believers’ sins as far from them as the east is from the west (Ps.103:12); cast their sins behind His back (Isa.38:17); promised never to

remember them (Isa.43:25);
hidden them from His sight
behind a thick cloud
(Isa.44:22); and cast them into
the depths of the sea”
(Mic.7:19).

CONCLUSION

1. Believers experience the blessedness of forgiveness solely by faith in the complete redemption provided by Jesus Christ; “the righteousness of God [comes] through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe” (Rom.3:22).

2. They are “justified as a gift by His grace through redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom.3:24); therefore, God is “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom.3:26).

3. In Romans 3:28 Paul stated definitively, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.”

4. When repentant sinners acknowledge their sin (Ps.32:5), affirm Jesus as Lord (Rom.10:9), and trust solely in His completed work on their behalf (Acts 4:12; 16:31), God credits His

righteousness to their account.

5. On the cross God treated Jesus as if He had lived our lives with all our sin, so that God could then treat us as if we lived Christ's life of pure holiness.
6. Our iniquitous life was legally charged to Him on the cross, as if He had lived it, so that His righteous life could be credited to us, as if we lived it.
7. That is the doctrine of justification by imputation.
8. That truth, expressed so concisely

and powerfully in this text, is the only cure for the sin plague.

9. As we reflect this week on the death and resurrection of Jesus, focus on *why* He was made “to be sin on our behalf.”
10. Paul says, “so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”
11. Have you been reconciled to God through Jesus Christ?
12. Are you a “new creature” in Christ (v.17)?

13. Are you an “ambassador for Christ” (v.20)?
14. If not, I want to urge you to acknowledge your sin (Ps.32:5), affirm Jesus as Lord (Rom.10:9), and trust solely in His completed work on your behalf (Acts 4:12; 16:31).
15. If you will do that this morning, God will credit His righteousness to your account.
16. Let’s pray.