

“AT-ONE” (#703)

by Tony Reinke
04.29.07 in MN

Tonight I've been asked to teach about the Atonement – of the spotless Lamb, Jesus Christ giving His life and spilling His blood, to cover our guilt before God. **Few doctrines are more important – and no doctrine is more challenged today – than the Atonement.**

Tonight we will be bouncing between the Old and New Testaments. I want to start in the Old Testament.

Leviticus 4:27-31 → ²⁷ “If anyone of the common people sins unintentionally in doing any one of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done, and realizes his **guilt**,²⁸ or the **sin** which he has committed is made known to him, he shall bring for his offering a goat, a female without blemish, for his **sin** which he has committed.²⁹ And he shall lay his hand on the head of the sin offering and kill the sin offering in the place of burnt offering.³⁰ And the priest shall take some of its **blood** with his finger and put it on the horns of the altar of burnt offering and pour out all the rest of its **blood** at the base of the altar.³¹ And all its fat he shall remove, as the fat is removed from the peace offerings, and the priest shall **burn it** on the altar for a pleasing aroma to the Lord. And the priest shall make **atonement** for him, and he shall be **forgiven.**”

Context. This bloody section flows from the context of how Israel was to handle sin. Sin was not to be forgotten about. National sins: “If the whole congregation of Israel sins unintentionally...” (v. 13). Leader's sins: “When a leader sins ...” (v. 22). National sins are bad and sins of leaders are bad because they can derail all of Israel into sin. But here we see that sin is bad even in the life of the common people and even for “unintentional” sins.

Unintentional sins are the “oops” sins. Your mom asks you to clean your room. You fully intend to, but after a phone call with a friend, your little sister or brother wanted to play a game and you picked up a book and read a few chapters. In the end you've forgotten to clean your room. It's not that you said, “I will not clean my room no matter what you say!” You just forgot. It was an “oops sin.” But it's still sin, because by forgetting, you did not *honor your mother*. The Covenant relationship with a holy God demands perfect obedience to His Law.

Is it really that big of a deal? ...Yes! The unintentional sin of every common person is worthy of separating that soul from the face of God eternally!¹ Atonement is necessary. Unintentional sin causes the sinner to be guilty before God. These Old Testament worshippers could not say, ‘I didn't know it was

¹ Spurgeon, 10:303. Entire sermon on Lev. 4 (see pp. 299-314 and also 23:832-847).

wrong!’ because even “ignorance of the law of God is itself a breach of law.”² Notice the words used for this “unintentional” act of ignorance. It is called “sin” it results in “guilt” and it needs to be “atoned” for with death and blood and fire. Unintentional sins are worthy of God’s judgment. We must understand this Law if we are to understand the Atonement of Christ.

The purpose of these meetings on Sunday nights is to equip you and prepare you for spiritual dangers that lurk within our culture. This is a good place to pause for a moment. A misunderstanding of the Atonement grows from a misunderstanding of God’s Law.³ If we are to understand the Atonement of Christ, we must understand the Law... A contemporary danger is called the “**New Perspective(s) on Paul.**”⁴ At its very foundation, its proponents argue that Old Testament Judaism did not understand the Law to demand perfect obedience. Rather, the possession of God’s Law was a status symbol marking out the true people of God. In other words, it’s a matter of possessing the Law not necessarily perfect obedience to the Law that authenticated Israel as the people of God.⁵ ... There are many problems here, but primarily a misunderstanding of the holiness and perfections of God as displayed in His Law. *A relationship with God is dependent upon perfect obedience.* That’s why the “tiny” little sin of eating an apple from the wrong side of the orchard is high-handed rebellion in God’s eyes.⁶ Adam and Eve’s sin was a sin of such dire consequence that the rippling effects of this one sin continue to this day, even to the point that a young man takes two pistols in hand and slaughters 32 of his classmates. ... Every sin is serious. Every sin carries heavy consequences. This explains why God commanded Israel to take even “unintentional” sins seriously and to spill the atonement blood of a goat. God’s Law demands *absolute perfection.* ... The Old Testament worshippers were well aware that, as Deuteronomy 27:26 says, “Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them.”⁷

Once we say that our relationship with God does not demand perfect obedience to the Law, the nature of sin, God’s holiness, Christ, His death on the Cross, the Atonement, the Gospel ... everything looks radically different. The Law gets emptied of its seriousness, our self-righteousness doesn’t look so bad, the wrath

² Spurgeon, 23:843.

³ “Does God require perfect obedience to his law as a condition for eternal life? In writings cited above, Federal Vision proponents have argued that the doctrine of justification does not depend upon an affirmative answer to this question. In a different academic context, but also relevant to the present discussion, E.P. Sanders, a fountainhead of the New Perspective movement, and New Perspective advocates themselves have claimed that first-century Jewish writers, who influenced Paul, did not believe that the law of God demanded perfect obedience” [David VanDrunen in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* (Crossway: 2007) p. 134].

⁴ See especially the opinion of E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Paul himself clearly understands that the Law demands perfection (see especially Gal. 3:10).

⁵ This new interpretation of law keeping is evident in N.T. Wright. On Romans 2, he writes, “Like ‘circumcision’, which becomes for him a polemical title, snatched from the physically circumcised, for Christians whether circumcised or not (Phil. 3.3), he refers to Christians as ‘lawkeepers’, not because they have observed every one of the Torah’s commandments but because, as he says in 8.3, that which the law intended but could not do has been brought to fulfillment in them. This will only appear illogical to those who have not grasped the covenantal context and dimensions of Paul’s thought. I am proposing, therefore, that in 2.25-29 ... the ‘keeping of the law’ which Paul ascribes to these Gentile Christians should be seen as a new sort of theological category, derived from the ‘new covenant’ theme, ranged polemically against the failed Jewish ‘lawkeeping’, but yet to be worked out fully. It is a matter, not of achievement, nor yet of ethics, but of status. ... ethnic Israel is inalienably the people of the one true god, and that her possession of the law, quite irrespective of her keeping of it, demonstrates this fact” [from “The Law in Romans 2,” in J. D. G. Dunn, ed., *Paul and the Mosaic Law. The Third Durham Tübingen Research Symposium on Earliest Christianity and Judaism* (Durham, September, 1994), pp. 131-150].

⁶ Gen. 2:16-17

⁷ That any breaking of the Law results in God’s wrath is a parallel harmonizing the Old and New Testaments (compare Deut. 27:26 with Jer. 11:3, Ezek. 18:4 with Rom. 3:19-20, Gal. 3:10 and Jam. 2:10-11).

of God is cooled, the Cross doesn't look so necessary, justification is no longer being declared righteous,⁸ the holiness of God is neglected, evangelism becomes vague and unnecessary. On and on ... Take it from Adam and Eve, there is divine curse, a separation from God for any and all disobedience – even for something as simple as eating fruit from the wrong tree. God's Law demands perfect obedience.

God's Law is no less important today. Paul says it this way,

Romans 3:19-20 → ¹⁹ Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law [only Israel? No...], so that **every mouth** may be stopped, and the **whole world may be held accountable** to God. ²⁰ For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law **comes knowledge of sin.** [Law is no mere ethnic symbol. God's Law is universal + the Law demands perfect obedience].

God's holy and demanding Law is intended to silence the boasting lips of every sinner. The Law says to the whole world: "You are not perfect, you are not justified, you are not right with God!" The Law shuts our mouths. And so when the Law's demands are no longer important, sinners walk around proudly thinking they are dressed in robes of righteousness, pleasing to God, when in fact they are covered in filthy rags and smashed under the weight of condemnation. We boast in our own self-righteousness until the Law duct-tapes our mouths, shuts us up, and reveals the ugly depth of our sin. Then we sit in silence.⁹ Then we are ready for the Cross.

Here is the big question: What is the greatest humanitarian problem? Is it global warming, tsunamis, nuclear warfare, evil dictators, poverty, persecution, school shootings? You will get many different answers to this question. The Bible says the biggest humanitarian problem facing mankind is that God's Law demands perfection and every sinner – even those who commit "oops sins" – are under the just wrath of a Holy God.¹⁰ The most pressing and universal humanitarian need is to find Atonement, for blood to cover our sin, for someone's body to cover the fire of God's wrath. ... **So beware of the contemporary errors.** It's common to find churches that do not preach the holiness of God and His Law. These churches are often filled with large crowds of people who say

⁸ "If we use the language of the law court, it makes no sense whatsoever to say that the judge imputes, imparts, bequeaths, conveys or otherwise transfers his righteousness to either the plaintiff or the defendant. Righteousness is not an object, a substance or a gas which can be passed across the courtroom. For the judge to be righteous does not mean that the court has found in his favor. For the plaintiff or defendant to be righteous does not mean that he or she has tried the case properly or impartially. To imagine the defendant somehow receiving the judge's righteousness is simply a category mistake. That is not how the language works" [N.T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co.) 1997. p. 98].

⁹ "Eighty-five percent of American adults believe that they will stand before God to be judged. They believe in hell, but only 11% think they might go there. R.C. Sproul observed that to the degree that people think they are good enough to pass divine inspection, and are oblivious to the holiness of God, to that extent they will not see Christ as necessary" [Michael Horton, "Reformation Essentials," *Modern Reformation Magazine* (March/April 1994; Vol. 3.2)].

¹⁰ John Bolt sounds a necessary caution: "It is important, in my judgment, to protect and maintain the fundamentally legal/forensic character of the Creator-creature relation while at the same time not *reducing* it to a legal one" [*By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification* (Crossway: 2007) p. 184]. Indeed, the Judge that declares us "innocent!" is the same Father who takes us home as His adopted children.

they are saved, except they cannot tell you what they are saved *from*! “What is the biggest problem facing humanity?” That answer should always begin with the Law and move to the Cross. *I would bet that your pastors at Sovereign Grace Fellowship preach the Cross out of a conviction that there is no way they could love you more but by preaching Christ and Him crucified. And they do a monumental service to your souls.*

A lawyer-turned-monk named Martin Luther understood the weight of the Law. Even with duct tape around his mouth, Luther strove to plead his self-righteousness before God. He did whatever he could to be holy. He beat himself in various ways. Rather than sleeping on a bed he slept on the cold stone floor. He would say later that some of his decisions would cause permanent damage to his digestive system. Luther attended confession for hours every day, once spending six hours in confession in one day! R.C. Sproul rightly asks, “How much trouble could a monk in a monetary get into?” Yet Luther went to confession every day, attended mass every day, sought absolution, performed ceremonies, pursued good works, and tried to do everything possible to appease God’s Law.¹¹ And the more he saw his own sin and his inability to appease God’s holiness, the more this *brilliant, intelligent lawyer* grew *psychologically insane*. ... Until one day. One day, God opened Luther’s eyes to Romans 1:17: “The righteous shall live by faith.” Everything for Luther changed! ... He realized that the Atonement death of Christ has everything to do with sinners being “unrighteous and bad” and unable to appease God’s holiness. Christ died because I could not keep the Law, and because I needed the righteousness of God imputed to my account. That’s the point of the Atonement! Because of *my* sin I am an enemy of God and I need peace with God. My sins need to be covered in atonement blood so I can be at peace. I am at odds with God and I need to be AT-ONE with Him. Luther realized, it is by **faith alone** the atonement blood of Christ covers my sin and declares me righteous!

Hebrews 9:11-12 ¹¹ But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) ¹² **he entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.**”

Time-warp back to the Old Testament priesthood. We need to let the work of Christ sink in ... I want you to see in Israel’s history the hundreds of thousands of goats and lambs and bulls and birds slaughtered by thousands upon thousands of priests working overtime every day, repeatedly offering the same sacrifices all day long. I want you to see the flock of animals pouring in, the fast-paced life of the priests trying to keep up with the sacrifices, as the rivers of atonement blood spill like a river that never runs dry trying to keep pace with the gushing torrent of sin flowing from every human heart! There was no end to the stream of

¹¹ See R.C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Tyndale: 1998) pp. 84-88.

sacrifices, no end to the blood, no end to the priest's work in the bustling slaughterhouse. The priests never sat down because there was no stop to the sin, no end to the "oops sins."

I want you to see the priests daily pleading with God for His favor on behalf of wrath-deserving sinners. Over and over again; burnt offerings, meat offerings, peace offerings, sin offerings, trespass offerings, drink offerings, incense offerings... on and on, never ending, always continuing as the lifeblood of innocent animals poured from slit throats. The dead bodies of animals being burned so the guilt of sin could meet God's flame of wrath in atonement. A unending cycle of sin and atonement, sin and atonement, sin and atonement. Every priest standing daily at his service, "offering repeatedly the same sacrifices."¹²

I want you to see the sinner, the one who forgot to honor his father and mother, now walking home – sin atoned – but walking home with sleeves and clothes and shoes soaked in blood, leaving footprints in the desert, the sound of a screaming Lamb in his mind, the picture of the blood pouring from the dying lamb. See this sinner crossing paths with those walking *towards* the temple, with a spotless lamb being led behind a rope. *The lamb walking quietly to His death.*

I want you to see how this process was continuing every day, until one day! One day, a new High Priest was born, one being "made like his brothers in every respect"¹³ and being "born under the Law."¹⁴ I want you to see John the Baptist saying, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world!"¹⁵ I want you to see this Lamb revealing Himself to the world as the *eternally* anointed Priest.¹⁶ And "being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation"¹⁷ ... This Priest would not need the blood of an animal, it would be His body that would meet the fire of God's wrath. "He was **wounded** for our transgressions; he was **crushed** for our iniquities; **upon him** was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his **stripes** we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one – to his own way; and the Lord has **laid on him** the iniquity of us all. He was **oppressed**, and he was **afflicted**, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the **slaughter** ... so he opened not his mouth."¹⁸
The Lamb walked quietly to His death.

The priest killed bulls, Christ gives His own life. The priest enters the holiest of holies, Christ enters heaven.¹⁹ The priest sprinkles blood on the mercy seat, Christ spreads His blood before the Father. The lamb's body is laid over the fire, Christ's body covers the wrath of God. The high priest closes the curtain to God's presence to the masses, Christ has torn open the curtain to expose multitudes of

¹² Heb. 10:11

¹³ Heb. 2:17

¹⁴ Gal. 4:4

¹⁵ John 1:29, 36

¹⁶ Heb. 5:5-6; 6:20; 7:24

¹⁷ Heb. 5:9

¹⁸ Isa. 53:5-7; see also Mark 14:60

¹⁹ Heb. 4:14, 9:24

sinner to the presence of God. The priest pacifies God's Law, but "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4).²⁰ "It is finished." No more offerings, no more sacrifices!

I want you to see the sufficient Atonement of Christ. See the sufficiency of this One Lamb that all other offerings cease, the blood-dripped path from the temple is gone, the river of blood flowing in the temple is now dry, the temple fire is extinguished, the priests go unemployed. Sinners who trust in this Lamb have perfect peace with God, forever attained in Him. All their sin – past, present, future, oops sins – all paid in this Atonement! He is without blemish and spot, an even greater offering, more glorious than all of the preceding thousands of sacrifices! *His lifeblood* forever covers our guilt and *His body* meets the fire of God's holy wrath, once-for-all, and eternal redemption secured!

C.H. Spurgeon: "He has done all that was necessary to be done, to make an atonement and an end of sin. He has done so much, that it will never be needful for him again to be crucified. His side, once opened, has sent forth a stream deep, deep enough, and precious enough, to wash away all sin; and he needs not again that his side should be opened, or, that any more his hands should be nailed to the cross."²¹ [Christ is sufficient!]

This is the Eternal Atonement. Have you ever noticed the predominate displays of Christ in the later chapters of Revelation are all centered around Jesus Christ as a Lamb? In case we miss the importance, John tells us Jesus appears in Heaven as though He "had been slain."²² Through this one act of Atonement, Christ secured an eternal redemption that is the eternal centerpiece of heaven. **And** Jesus Christ, the Atonement Lamb, is revealed there as the source of every eternal blessing!

Revelation. We are told in the Bible's final book, Revelation, that the river of life flows from the **Lamb** – not just from Jesus Christ – *but from the Atonement sacrifice!*²³ The One Whose lifeblood flowed in Atonement is now the source of the river of life, feeding the tree of life. Our Great High Priest, now sits on His throne, the Atonement completed, now He is our all-sufficient source of spiritual life and joy for all eternity. Nothing more highlights the sufficiency of the Atonement! It washes our sin – it fills us with living water and spiritual life!

Rivers grow polluted because we use them to carry our waste away. The river of life, however, is the one source of water that can wash away the waste and

²⁰ Thomas Watson writes: "He [Christ] presents the merit of his blood to his Father, and, in the virtue of that price paid, pleads for mercy. The high priest was herein a lively type of Christ. Aaron was to do four things. Kill the beasts. Enter with the blood into the holy of holiest. Sprinkle the mercy-seat with the blood. Kindle the incense, and with the smoke of it cause a cloud to arise over the mercy-seat; and thus atonement was made (Lev. 16:11-16). Christ was offered up in sacrifice, which answers to the priest's killing the bull; and he has gone up into heaven, which answers to the priest's going into the holy of holies; and he spreads his blood before his Father which answers to the priest's sprinkling the blood upon the mercy-seat; and he prays to his Father, that for his blood's sake, he would be propitious to sinners, which answers to the cloud of incense going up; and through his intercessions God is pacified, which answers to the priest's making atonement" [from *A Body of Divinity* (Banner of Truth: 1692/1965) p. 179].

²¹ *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 2:485

²² Rev. 5:6

²³ Rev. 22:1-3

filth and guilt of our sin and yet remain perfectly pure for thirsty sinners to come and swim and drink deeply.²⁴ The Lamb who appears as slain -- this is the One from whom this river pours. In the Atonement of Jesus we have forgiveness and salvation, but also life and an “eternal redemption.” This is the beauty of Christ’s all-sufficient Atonement sacrifice!

John 4:13-14 → “¹³ Jesus said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.’” [Eternal redemption]

The Atonement of Jesus Christ is more than getting saved! So what is it that you seek? What sin do you seek to wash away? What do you think is too dark and too deep to be carried away in this river? Throw it in! ... What joy, peace, assurance, hope do you thirst after? Swim and drink deeply from the water of life! It all flows freely from the Atonement Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Prayer:

Father, we come tonight, first to reclaim the importance of Your Law. Your Law is the beaming brightness of Your Holiness. Your Law is perfect and righteous. And while your Law shuts our mouths, it also reveals your love for us. You want us to see our sin, so we will see the beauty of Your Son! Thank you for your Law! Thank you for revealing Your love to us by revealing Your Law to us. It is an act of kindness that You dehydrate our souls! ... Lord help us to drink deeply from the River of Life, flowing from You and Your Son. ... Anyone here tonight who has looked at the water of life, we pray that they would be made thirsty by Your Holiness. Dehydrate us freshly when we look at our sin and hopelessness in ourselves. Silence all self-righteous boasting. Give us a gracious appetite to drink deeply from the water of life. And for those who have never come, tonight we invite them with the prophet Isaiah, “Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live ... Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, **for he will abundantly pardon**” (55:1-7). God, we thank you for Your “abundant pardon” in the Atonement of Christ. An atonement that opens to us the river of life, that drowns all our sin and guilt, that pours grace for our lives today and hope eternally as this river feeds the tree of

²⁴ See *The Works of John Bunyan* (Banner of Truth) 3:544.

life! May we drink daily, drink deeply and live off the all-sufficient, all-satisfying Lamb. It's in His name we pray, Amen!

Questions:

1. Back to the question asked earlier: What is the greatest problem facing humanity? Why does this matter? What are some other possible answers you will expect to hear? Why the difference of opinion? Will we then avoid serving the needy and those affected by natural disasters? Why not?
2. During a conversation, you ask your friend whether they hope to enter heaven one day. They respond by saying "Of course" because they think of themselves as a pretty good and nice person. How will you respond?
3. Please share one instance when you sinned "unintentionally" recently? Does it sound bad? Why does unintentional sin carry guilt along with it? Read Hosea 4:1-6 and note what God says about "forgetfulness." In light of the Law, how should we view our "oops sins"? In light of the Atonement of Jesus on the Cross, how should we view our "oops sins"?
4. We are not only saved by the Great High Priest, we also find our daily provisions, eternal joy, life, and strength in Him. How can we be reminded daily of our dependence upon Him (i.e. living the Cross-centered life)?
5. Will a Christian wake up tomorrow with new sins to atone for? How do we know?
6. Although Christians have been redeemed from the Law and are adopted into God's family, the accusations of Satan challenge the sufficiency of the Atonement made for the sinner. What lies are we commonly told about our own sin? How do we confront these lies?