

The Atonement

Introduction

- [Slide #1] Above the entry way to Auschwitz—the Nazi death camp were the words, *Arbeit macht frei*. The same words were above the camp at Dachau. It means "work makes free." Work will liberate you and give you freedom. The Nazis made people believe hard work would liberate them. *Arbeit macht frei*.¹ Many people went to their death for that lie.
- This morning as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper I want to remind you what this meal commemorates. We eat and drink not to remember a death. Not to mourn. Not to marvel at one man's self-sacrifice. We eat this bread and drink this cup because we realize that without the life and death of Christ we are hopelessly lost in our sins. Symbolized in the bread and the cup is the reminder that...[Slide #2]

Big Idea

- **The work Christ did in his life and death fully and completely earns our salvation**
- Christ's work, in his life and death, is called atonement. **The work Christ did in his life and death fully and completely earns our salvation.** Too many people go to their death for a lie—that they must do something to earn their standing before God. *Arbeit macht frei*. It is Christ's work, not ours, that makes us free.

Transition

I want to ask you a few questions. How confident are you that your sins have been paid for by Christ? Was it necessary for Christ to die? What did Christ's death accomplish? **The work Christ did in his life and death fully and completely earns our salvation.** Do you believe it?

Background/Setting

- Most people, when pressed, think God accepts or rejects them based upon how hard they try, how much good they do. It's a performance based relationship. *Arbeit macht frei*. Work makes free. If I'm good, God loves me, He frees me from sin. If I'm bad God rejects me. And the goal in life is to do just enough good, or at least more good than the chump next door so that God accepts us. Except that the Bible says that none of us are good enough. Even this chump.
- **Paul Little** gives an illustration to help us understand our position. "Suppose we were to put one person in Death Valley, 280 feet below sea level; one in Denver, the mile-high city; and one on the peak of Mount Everest, altitude 29,000 feet. Let's suppose that the person in Death Valley represents the dregs of society and the kind of life such people live. The person in Denver is the 'average person,' and the one on Mount Everest is the best person you can imagine. The enormous differences in their altitude, or elevation is apparent. But let's suppose God's standard of holiness is represented by the distance from the earth to the moon.

¹ From Johnny V. Miller's sermon, "The Great Rescue," www.preachingtoday.com (4-14-07)

From our human standpoint, there are great differences in men's sinfulness, but—contrasted with the infinite holiness of God—all of us are equally lost."²

- When the Bible says *for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God* the fall described is not a slip down a couple rungs of the ladder. It's not a two story fall. It's an infinite failure worthy of the death penalty. The gap between humanity and God created by this fall cannot be closed. The chasm cannot be bridged—no matter how much good we do. No matter how hard we try. We are all lost. We are incapable, in our own finiteness, to adequately deal with the infinite nature of our problem.
- So was it necessary for Christ to die? Yes and no. It was not necessary for God to save anyone. God did not spare the angels when they sinned, 1 Peter 2:4. He could have chosen to save no one. And God would have been perfectly justified in making that decision, if that is what he had chosen to do. But God chose a different path. He chose to love. He chose to redeem. He chose to save. And that choice puts God in a bind. How does God justify himself in sparing us? God deciding to love and redeem doesn't make the infinite nature of our sin problem just disappear—our death sentence doesn't just magically vanish. So how does God justify himself in sparing us? Because, honestly, the just thing for God to have done was not spare us. In order for God to be justified in sparing us something must be done with the infinite penalty of sin that still remains.
- The Old Testament sacrificial system—the ritual sacrifice of animals couldn't fully deal with the problem of sin. Hebrews 10:3. *But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.* Something more needed to be done.

Transition

It is for this reason that God sent his Son. So was it necessary for Christ to die? Yes.

- Hebrews 2:17 says *For this reason he had to be made like his brothers 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 for the sins of the people.* Christ had to die. Or as one theologian put it, “only the blood of Christ, that is, his death, would be able to really take away sins. There was no other way for God to save us than for Christ to die in our place.”³ It's in the death of Christ that God justifies himself in sparing us. And it's in the death of Christ that God also justifies us, the sinner. Romans 3:25-26 *God presented him [Christ] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished-- 26 he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.* **The work Christ did in his life and death fully and completely earns our salvation.**
- Listen to how [John Stott](#) puts it. “The only way to be justified from sin is that the wages of sin be paid, either by the sinner or by the God-appointed substitute. There is no way of escape but that the penalty be borne. How can a man be justified who has been convinced of a crime and sentenced to a term of imprisonment? Only by going to prison and paying the penalty of his crime. Once he has served his term, he can leave prison justified. He need

² Paul Little, *Know What You Believe*, p. 71.

³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 570.

have no more fear of police or magistrates, for the demands of the law have been satisfied. He has been justified from his sin.”

- **Stott** goes on to write, “The same principle holds good if the penalty is death. There is no way of justification except by paying the penalty. You may respond that in this case to pay the penalty is no way of escape. And you would be right if we were talking about capital punishment on earth. Once a murderer has been executed, his life on earth is finished. He cannot live again on earth justified, as can a person who has served a prison sentence. But the wonderful thing about our Christian justification is that our death is followed by a resurrection, in which we can live the life of a justified person, having paid the death penalty for our sin. For us, then, it is like this. We deserved to die for our sins. And in fact we did die, though not in our own person, but in the person of Jesus Christ our substitute.”⁴
- As our substitute Christ just didn’t remove the guilt of sin and earn us forgiveness. Forgiving our sins alone does not merit heaven. You do realize that don’t you? Christ also “had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us.”⁵ **It’s the work Christ did in his life and death together that fully and completely earns our salvation.** Romans 5:19 *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.* In his life Christ obeyed all that God required of us.
- And he suffered in his death bearing our punishment for disobedience. He suffered the pain of the cross. He suffered as he bore the weight of our guilt and shame. He suffered the abandonment of God. He suffered as he bore God’s wrath poured out for our sin. And at the end of his life, John 19:30, Jesus cried out *it is finished*. All that needed to be done to make you right with God was completed in the death of Christ. *It is finished*. How confident can you be that your sins have been paid for by Christ? If you are trusting in the work Christ has done for you then Romans 8:1, *There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.* 2 Corinthians 5:21 *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.* Nothing more need be added to what’s already done. It is finished.
- Author **Harry Blamires** says, “In the Christian life, nothing, nothing at all, can be purchased at the do-it-yourself shop.”⁶ It has all been done by Christ. There is nothing you can do in this life to earn God’s favor because there’s nothing left for us to earn. *Arbeit macht frei*. His work makes free. It has all been done by Christ.
- We deserve death as the penalty for our sins. He died for us. We deserve God’s wrath. He bore God’s wrath. We are separated from God by our sins. The gap between humanity and God has been bridged by the cross. We are in bondage to sin. He has freed us from slavery to sin. It is finished. The work done. The payment satisfied. The punishment fulfilled. The debt canceled. The infinite failure erased. He earns righteousness so we don’t have to. It is all finished in the work of Christ. It is done in him. **The work Christ does in his life and death fully and completely earns our salvation.** He alone is our atonement. It is finished.
- [**Video**]

⁴ John Stott, *Authentic Christianity*, p. 172.

⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 570.

⁶ Harry Blamires, *The Tyranny of Time: A Defense of Dogmatism* (Morehouse-Barlow Company, 1965), p. 98.

Instructions

- **John Wycliffe** once gave the warning "Trust wholly in Christ; rely altogether on His sufferings; beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness."⁷ This morning as we prepare to eat the bread and drink the cup, I want to encourage you to put all your eggs in the one basket that is Christ crucified. Trust in nothing else except Christ's full and complete work for you. He has earned what you are unable to earn. He is your atonement. What God has required of you has been completed in Christ.
- This morning, if you realize, maybe for the first time, that you've been trusting in something other than Christ's full and complete work for your salvation. If that's the case, I want to invite you to give up trying to earn God's favor. Stop trying to buy what God freely offers, the life and death of his son. If, however, you're still not convinced—if you still think its Christ and something else that God wants then I want to ask you to refrain from taking the elements.
- This morning we are going to do something a bit different. Before we partake of the elements I want to give you a chance to respond to the work Christ has done for you in his life and death. For the next ten or fifteen minutes, while the worship team plays, feel free to adopt a posture that reflects what God's doing in your heart. You can kneel at your seat. You can come to the front and kneel. Feel free to get up and move around, to pray in groups of two or three. You can sing along as the worship team plays. In your bulletin is a piece of paper. There are some pencils in the seat backs. Respond to God by journaling to him about what Christ's sacrifice means to you. Write a song to God. Write down what you're thankful for as you think about the life and death of Christ. Write out your prayer to God. And when you've prepared your heart, whenever you're ready, make your way to the front to receive the elements.
- Before we respond let me remind you of these words. *The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me' "*
- *In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.' For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. "*

Closing Prayer and Benediction

⁷ John Wycliffe, in *Christian History*, no. 3.