Theology” is More Helpful Than You Think – The cross

“How a proper understanding helps us in everyday life” mini-series

I John 4:9-10

There is no more long lasting, universal symbol for Christianity throughout the world and history than the cross. You will find a cross prominently displayed in most churches. We have a large one prominently displayed on the top of our tower outside; you’ll see it in a prominent place on our church logo in your bulletin and we have one directly in the center of the front of our worship room here.

By the way, this cross here was only meant to be a temporary one. Our original design called for a larger one, hollowed out in the back with the same variable lighting we have behind the stained glass windows so that we could have this neat light/shadow frame highlighting the cross. But as what happens with many plans, we ran out of time, money and energy. This cross is actually from an Assembly of God church in Williston – the church used to be called “Community Bible Church” and currently is called “Vibrant” I think – everyone keeps rebranding themselves. Way back in the 1980’s they were replacing their cross with a larger one that I think was back-lit and they were also replacing their choir robes. So they gave all that to us. Several years later we then passed all the choir robes on to an Ethiopian church in Boston who wanted them and would use them more than we would. Now you know the rest of the story so it isn’t forgotten.

Our cross represents two core beliefs that are foundational to any true Christian faith. First it represents that Jesus died as a sacrifice for our sins on a cross and second, the empty cross also represents Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead. Our cross has no one on it because Jesus rose from the dead and He’s alive. Today, we want to focus on the first truth this cross represents and that is Jesus’ death for our sins. The fancy word for this is “atonement” – in particular “substitutionary atonement”.

The word “atonement” is really from the Old Testament. “To atone for” means to “make amends”. In the Bible, atonement is associated with people’s sin. So in the Old Testament, God commanded Israel to set aside one day each year (the tenth day of their seventh month), which God called “the Day of Atonement.” The nation was to bring a sin offering to atone for their sins. This was a picture of what only Jesus, fully God and fully man, could do by His sacrifice on a cross. Atonement deals with reconciliation. It is the way that sinful humans can be reconciled & brought into relationship with the holy & perfect God and be restored to His favor. We’ll explain this more and see how understanding this Biblical truth really helps us know what to do in challenging interpersonal relationship issues.

PROPOSITION: Jesus’ death on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for our sins and subsequent bodily resurrection from the dead is absolutely core to our Christian faith and greatly impacts good relationships.
I. Jesus’ death on the cross

One of the oldest statements we know the early church regularly made is found in I Corinthians 15:3-4. Here Paul is describing the gospel, or good news of Jesus, quoting what believers were saying before he ever came to faith in Christ personally. "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Our passage today is from one of the last letters actually written by Jesus’ chosen apostles and notice it says the same thing. READ I Jn 4:9-10. So from the start of the Christian Church 10 days after Jesus ascended into heaven to the end of the New Testament, the core message of Christians has always been Jesus died for our sins.

A. Picture of God’s incredible love

Jesus’ atonement, His death for our sins, is a direct expression of God’s love. V 9, “This is how God showed His love among us”. Real love is more than words or feelings; Love is something that is shown in actions. Since God is love, His love will be demonstrated or made manifest or revealed to us. God showed His love most fully in the atonement - Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. Even though we have misuse our free will to disobey God, act selfishly and mess up His world – God reaches out to us in His unfailing love. The one wronged is the one who takes steps to atone for our sin, reconcile us and provide eternal life instead of our deserved judgment.

Some false Christian teachers claim that Jesus’ death on the cross was just a dramatic action to influence us to do right. They claim Jesus didn’t actually die in our place. Jesus wasn’t our substitute. He was just a martyr for a righteous cause which is to be our example to sacrifice for others. In their eyes there is no need for Jesus to die FOR OUR SINS, because God the Father would never be that strong against sin – He would never hold us accountable for the full consequences of our sinful thoughts and actions. But that would be unjust – it would be like letting Jody Herring out of prison right now after murdering 4 local people. Whenever you think or read “Jesus died for our sins”/“atonement” remember it’s based in God’s unfathomable love that’s just.

B. Shows God’s sacrificial initiation to restore

All true love requires sacrifice. READ v 9-10. Without the atonement – without Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins – we are all headed towards eternal death. Notice in v 9, God the Father, intentionally sent Jesus the Son so we might LIVE through Him – that means we will die otherwise. This "sending" shows both the incredible sacrifice and the incredible initiation on God’s part to provide us with a chance for eternal life. It is amazing that God takes the initiative and it is so sacrificial – sending His "one and only Son" – because God is the One who was wronged. If I am in a hurry and rudely step on your toes – it is not YOU who should initiate reconciliation, but me. If I hurt you physically, I am the one who should say, "I am sorry", and then take some action to help restore what you lost! But God is the one wronged by our sin, selfishness and disobedience yet it is He who takes the initiative to send Jesus to this earth so we could find life BEFORE we were even remotely sorry!
There is a piece of the atonement we describe in legal terms: Eternal law has been broken and it must be paid for. That is true but it is not complete. Some false Christian teachers say that Jesus’ death on the cross is just a picture to show how much God is against sin. They claim God has no intention of actually punishing sinners. Instead, they claim Jesus’ death on the cross for sin is just to show God’s hatred for sin and the importance of obedience in a legal way. That is why they also claim Jesus isn’t the only way to heaven, since, in their minds, Jesus’ atonement doesn’t forgive our individual sins, but just shows the general legal principle.

C. God initiates reconciliation

A key in atonement is reconciliation. Not only have laws been broken, but genuine real relationships have been broken. Just paying a fine doesn’t reconcile the broken relationship or bring the offender and the wronged together in harmony. READ v 10. God initiates reconciliation through an “atoning sacrifice”. Atonement doesn’t just pay a penalty but it also restores a relationship. Again this is something that God, as the wronged, initiates.

But some false Christian teachers claim it is not necessary to pay for sins or satisfy the righteousness of God. “A father who had to be reconciled to his children, whose wrath had to be appeased or whose forgiveness could be purchased, is not the Father of Jesus Christ.... Certain widely used hymns still perpetuate the theory that God pardons sinners because Christ purchased that pardon by His obedience and suffering. But a forgiveness that is paid for is not forgiveness.” That only makes sense if we do not think our sins are that bad or that God is not really totally holy & righteous. The only way God can totally forgive sinners, uphold His holy law AND be consistent with His holy nature is by what Jesus did on the cross. There He took on the punishment for our sin & met the just demands of the holy Law.

D. Sacrifice for our sins (propitiation)

READ v 9-10. Notice there are two clear purposes given here for Christ’s death on the cross: (v 9) that we might live through Him and (v 10) that He might be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. His death was not an accident; it was an appointment. He did not die as a weak martyr, but as a mighty conqueror.

Another word used for this sacrifice for our sins is “propitiation” – that is an actual English word that people regularly used in everyday conversation long before I was in school. It refers to the appeasing or satisfying the wrath of a wronged person. “Sam, we are really late for work and the boss is going to be mad. We better think of a way to make propitiation.” Propitiation is a two-part act that involves appeasing the wrath of a rightly offended person and then being reconciled to them. When Jesus willingly died on the cross it paid the penalty of our sin, turning God’s righteous anger of sin away and then re-establishing a genuine positive relationship. None of that was because of what we did. We can not atone for our own sin any more than someone can do something to make up for the murder or rape of another.
In our day if you mention God's wrath, you get weird stares, because we tend to only use the word *wrath* for out-of-control human anger - clearly sinful, bad & often irrational. Like when a child absent-mindedly forgets to do something and their parents go berserk. *(I put that in for the teens in case any thought I was harder on them than parents last week.)* Some false Christian teachers claim any talk about God's wrath needing to be satisfied is just pointing to a false picture of God that is not love. They say, 'sure Jesus said the Kingdom must be bought with a price - but each of us must pay that price ourselves.' That's not only false but prideful, thinking our sin isn't that bad.

But sometimes we do wonder, *"Why can't God just wave His magic wand and forgive everyone's sin?"* Let's answer that question with another question. *"Why doesn't the state of Florida just release that fellow who killed 19 students in a High School last month?"* To ask the question is to answer it. To do so would be an incredible violation of justice! If God were to do the same for our sins, it would be a denial of the seriousness of sin and a gross violation of His holiness. Sin is so bad that it leads to a state of affairs where the Son of God himself ends up being crucified.

II. Transformational for everyday relationships

That's all nice and neat theology, Neal, but I don't see how this truth can transform *our everyday relationships* or help guide us in some of our toughest relationship conflicts? So let's spend the remainder of our time giving some examples of this.

A. Transforms how we act towards others

I John 4:7, 11

Rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms how we act towards others. *READ v 11.* We are exhorted to love others since we ourselves have already experienced the love of Jesus dying for our sins. And *"the love"* God is asking us to show is not just an imitation of what we have seen Jesus do for others. But we have received and participated in God's love personally. Our response is not just gratitude or emotions for what has been done, but we have experienced God's love inside us which we then can share more freely. So we don't limit our expressions of love to those times the weather is good, we feel healthy, our stomach is not upset, we had enough sleep or life is going good around us. We love because God loved us - the other person doesn't even have to like us or be likeable.

B. Transforms our definition of love

I John 4:9

Rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms our definition of love. Love is not a sentimental, mushy, emotional word. It is not an Oprah *group hug* word. Love is seeking the best for a person for the long run, which requires initiative and sacrifice on our part. This is very important because each of us is going to have friends, co-workers, family or neighbors who we don’t like, who don’t appreciate what we have done for them and have taken advantage of us. Let’s say a brother or sister keeps asking you to do favors for them *(maybe their chores or if they are older, lend them money)*, BUT they never repay you – in fact the only time
they are even the least bit grateful is that moment you give them what they want. Does love mean we keep lending to them or doing their chores when they don’t repay? Do we separate ourselves from them and not communicate to protect ourselves from being taken advantage of? Notice what Jesus did in dying on the cross for our sins is neither of these options. God keeps seeking that we will repent our whole life-time, but we won’t receive all that true believers receive without repentance. The atonement encourages us not to be limited by our 2 natural responses – loving friends and hating foes.

C. Transforms who we are to love  
Rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms who we are to love. Who does God love? - the whole world. It was while we were yet sinners, or enemies of God, that Jesus sacrificed to die for us. So we are to take initiative for reconciliation BUT there needs to be a response of the other person for the relationship to be restored. Ty Cobb was one of the all-time greats in the game of baseball but he was also the meanest man in baseball. He would insult, humiliate, and even injure other players in his quest for victory. Even his own teammates once rooted against him when he was in a tight race for the batting title. He verbally and physically abused all three of his wives. He was constantly involved in fistfights, arguments, & tirades against fans and players. Even though he was the first person elected into the Baseball Hall of Fame, only three players came to his funeral. Pretty unlovable. But God kept raising up people and bringing situations in Cobb’s life to give him yet another chance he didn’t deserve to repent. It was terminal cancer that finally got through to him. First his medical doctor, William Nesbitt, pointed to Jesus as a spiritual cure, even though Nesbitt couldn’t bring a physical cure. Then a friend asked a Presbyterian pastor named John Richardson to visit Cobb in the hospital. On the second visit, “I explained God’s plan of salvation and the need for repentance. He replied that he wished to put his complete trust in Christ. On subsequent visits Ty was eager to talk about Jesus Christ.” God never stopped giving opportunities to Cobb to repent of his awful life, but God also didn’t keep the consequences of his sinful actions from coming into his life! Problem relationships and frustrating circumstances will come into all of our lives. Some will respond by turning to Jesus for help and others will get mad at God for not doing what they wanted. God’s love equally reached out to both, but what each experienced was VERY different depending on their response. Relationship is a two way street – you can’t force a person to be in a relationship or force them to change as you want, but you can keep taking the initiative for what will be best for the long run, which usually isn’t what is easiest for the other person.

D. Transforms our call to sacrifice  
Rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms our call to sacrifice. We regularly have people in our lives who we no longer want to sacrifice for – many modern Americans call it “falling out of love” even though that is a false definition of love as defined by God. Even though we ignore, disobey, or ridicule
Jesus, He reaches out to us with this message of hope that our sins can be totally forgiven by Jesus’ death on the cross and a genuine personal relationship with God can be established. That is a sacrifice on God’s part – not just in Jesus coming to earth and suffering in our place – but also all He does and the suffering He asks Jesus’ followers to go through so God can keep bringing this message of hope back into our lives. So in a similar way, when you are totally frustrated with someone and not speaking to them – God wants us to still make sacrifices for the other person – but this time it is for the best for their long term rather than what they want you to do. It is not for the best to lend to them again if they have repeatedly misused or failed to repay. But we do want to sacrifice (or be ready to sacrifice) to help them overcome their addiction, learn better money management skills, or have exposure to the gospel. When you are frustrated change the place and way you sacrifice to help provide what they are weak in – we couldn’t atone for ourselves.

E. Transforms our picture of God
Rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms our picture of God. God is holy and righteous – therefore He will judge all we have done. Some then only see God as judge – a speed trap just looking for places to catch us doing wrong. But the atonement constantly reminds us that His initiating, sacrificial love providing what we can’t for salvation and making a way to be restored in our personal standing with God completely IS ALSO always there. God is not just a stern taskmaster or impossible to please parent. He has taken more initiative when we were acting like spoiled brats, sacrificed more when we cared less and provided what we couldn’t do ourselves than we can conceive!

F. Transforms our idea of reconciliation
Finally, rightly understanding the atonement, or how Jesus died for us, transforms our idea of reconciliation. Naturally when we think we have been wronged we believe it is the other person’s responsibility to initiate doing a bunch of things to make up for the wrongs they have done. That would be like us thinking we need to clean up our lives, get everything under control before we could go to Jesus to ask for forgiveness. God didn’t wait for rebellious humanity to suddenly transform and send sacrificial gifts to heaven to start the process of reconciliation. God himself started the process even when we were not interested! And God provided help in what we could not do. But while freely given it has requirements of a response of faith and repentance. So if you are in a contentious situation, look beyond what they want or what is easiest for you. What is it they most need, but aren’t doing – and what can you work on to make that available if they take a small but important step? Billy Graham excelled at this! He sacrificed his whole life to provide the gospel message to friend & foe alike so that they could have the chance to understand God’s offer of salvation from sin if they would repent and believe in Jesus alone. Billy Graham looked beyond the surface conflict or problem and sought to bring Jesus to all. We’ll further apply this during our communion together.