

## Jesus Talks About Atonement

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The title I've chosen for our study and worship this morning is "Jesus Talks About Atonement". And to introduce the subject, you might like to join me in reading Romans 5:10, 11. Paul writes: "We were God's enemies. But He made us His friends through the death of His Son. Now that we are God's friends, how much more will we be saved by Christ's life? But that is not all. We rejoice because of what God has done through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has now made us God's friends."

Now I'm using the *Good News Bible*, or also known as *Today's English Version*, produced by The American Bible Society not so long ago. In the *King James Version*, if you have it in front of you, this passage ended with, not the words "has now made us God's friends", but "to whom we have the atonement." In the margin it will say "or the reconciliation". In the *King James Version*, this is the only occurrence of the word "atonement" in the whole New Testament.

Every once in a while someone will stop and ask me, "Do you believe in the Atonement?" The easy way to answer that, especially if you're in a hurry, is to say "Yes, indeed, of course I do. It means everything to me." And that may be a very good way to avoid an argument, or even a prolonged sermon on the sidewalk, but it may also be quite misleading. For, as many of you must know, there are several different understandings of the atonement, some of which I believe put God in a very undesirable light. And so, in effect, when you say "Yes, I believe in the atonement," you're saying to this individual, "I agree with your understanding", which may not be true at all.

I recall a long time ago, the first time I was asked if I was a fundamentalist. And I thought as a youth, that has a good ring to it, a fundamentalist; we certainly believe in the fundamentals, and I said yes I was. But later on I found out what he meant by a fundamentalist, and I hastened after him and said, "I'm certainly not one of those". And if you knew his list of the fundamentals, you would agree with me. I recall on a university campus, also a long time ago, standing among a group of graduate theology students, and one said to me, "Do you believe in the supernatural?"

I thought "that's pretty safe; we all believe in the supernatural." But later on I found out what he meant by the supernatural, and I had to pursue him and say "No, I don't believe in that." And then someone asked me once if I was a perfectionist, and that has a good sound to it. Matthew 5:48; "Be ye therefore perfect," I owned up that I was a perfectionist. But later on I had to find that person too and tell him no, I wasn't one of those; not the way he understood perfectionism. So now I've learned to be much more cautious, even if someone asks me, "Are

you a Seventh- day Adventist?" I say, "You tell me what you think one is and I'll tell you if I am one." And sometimes when they're through, I say "I like to call myself a Seventh- day Adventist, but I'm certainly not one of those that you just described."

So when someone says, "Do you believe in the atonement", I'm cautious about that, too. And I ask people, "Tell me what you think the atonement means, and I'll tell you if I do." Of course, when the situation is right, I like to reply, "I believe in the kind of atonement Jesus described." And the reply will come, "But Jesus never talked about the atonement." And I'll agree with them, it's true, Jesus never ever used the word, nor did anyone else in Scripture, including Paul. You see, the Scriptures were written in Hebrew and Aramaic and Greek, and the atonement is a sort of made-up English word. You'll never find it in the original. But though Jesus never used the term, I believe Jesus had a great deal to say about the most important meaning of that famous word. And if you want to find the meaning, settle for nothing less than the multi-volume set of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. That dictionary is so enormous, it makes the *Webster's Unabridged* look like just a pamphlet. And you go through those volumes, and you trace the history of the development of the meaning of the word. And you look up in volume one, "atonement", and it says it's true; it was made up of "at" and "one" and "ment". "Atonement". I read recently that that isn't true. I need to refer that person to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. It just seemed too clever to someone that that's where the word came from; that it really means "being at one".

So in that great old dictionary it shows how way back in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the word was being used to mean "Being at one. Being in harmony. The opposite of being at odds." And the verb "to atone" means, "To set at one. To unite." There was even a verb back in those early days, pronounced to "one"; "go in one, people." Not win, one, o-n-e. Two children are fighting at home, and the mother comes to "one" them; to restore unity and harmony between the two, so there might be "at-one-ment" and atonement. And it's interesting to watch mothers pursue this kind of "at-one-ment". And she says to the two, "Now you stop fighting right now, and be at one, or I'll severely punish you." And they stop fighting. And mother says, "Say, that system really works. I'll go a little further. Now Billy, you tell your little sister how much you love her, or I'll severely punish you." And you know what? Billy, who's had experience with his mother, will probably say to his little sister, "Sister, I love you." But it'll have a certain hollow sound to it. Have you children, perhaps, ever done that? And then mother warms to her task still further; it really works. "Now Billy, give your sister a kiss, or I'll severely punish you." And little Billy delivers one of those worthless little kisses; can you remember giving those when you were little and you didn't think your sister was at all deserving of it? But you'd better do it, or you'll be in serious trouble. What kind of "at-one-ment" is that? It was produced from fear of mother's threat of getting into serious trouble.

So you go on looking in the dictionary; other dictionaries. "Atonement", the condition of being at one with others. Unity of feeling. See, Billy and his sister didn't have that. They had an "at-

one-ment” of another sort. It was just enforced and imposed harmony, concord, agreement. In other dictionaries, the verb “to atone” means to restore friendly relations between persons who have been at variance. Hence reconciliation, a common biblical term. And then the dictionary goes on to say: “In the realm of religion, atonement means reconciliation or restoration between God and sinners.” And you recall the Scripture I read in Romans 5, “We once were enemies, and now we have become reconciled and become His friends.”

Now, later on, in fact much later on, this word “atonement” came to be used by many in the sense of appeasement; making amends, paying the penalty, to satisfy legal demands. As the *Oxford English Dictionary* observes, if you go this route, the idea of reconciliation or reunion is practically lost sight of, and the meaning is that of legal satisfaction or amends. What an interesting comment in a dictionary. And it’s interesting to inquire how that change developed from the original friendly meaning of atonement. Well, theologians sometimes, even often say, that Jesus never explained the atonement; you have to look to Paul for that. Jesus came rather to offer the atonement and pay the penalty that atoned. Now that’s using atonement in that much later sense, you see; appeasement and propitiation, if you’ll forgive the use of that very difficult Latin term.

Now we sometimes do use atone in the sense of “make amends”, to appease, to propitiate. I mean, what if your husbands came home much too late to take your wife out to dinner, as you had promised to—on your anniversary, no less. And after much effort you have finally at least restored some conversation between you. Your wife hits on a solution. She says, “Husband, you can *atone* for this terrible thing you’ve done, by taking me out to dinner every Monday night for the rest of the year.” Now that’s atonement in the later sense, you see. Hopefully those efforts will result in reconciliation, and peace, and “at-one-ment” between husband and wife. And the unity of “at-one-ment” is the original and the ultimate meaning of atonement.

Now it’s true that Jesus never used those very difficult and often Latin terms that are used to describe the provisions of salvation. In fact, it’s been observed that when Jesus explained salvation, there was no need for anyone to consult the dictionary, or even to consult the learned doctors, as to the meaning of the words that fell from the lips of the greatest teacher who ever lived. And because He so sparingly used those terms, it’s sometimes said He never really discussed the subject. He just did it in very simple terms. Look for example at John 17, part of that memorable prayer that really could be called the Lord’s Prayer; His prayer to His Father. In John 17, starting with verse 20. Having prayed for quite a while, He then goes on to the Father:

I do not pray for these only [these close disciples] but also for those who believe and trust in Me through their words [the message of the disciples] that they may all be one [that’s atonement, that they all may be at one] even as Thou, Father, are in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us.

What does it mean to be “in” somebody? If Jesus is in me, and I’m in Him, and He’s in the Father, and the Father’s in Him, I want to know who is in whom, or if anybody is really “in” anybody. This has been understood to mean by many, “in-ness” in the sense of “in union with” and is even so translated. So close it’s like being in each other. But we’re separate persons. It’s just a word to describe our relationship. We are as one. We are in union with each other. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are as one. There is atonement between the members of the Godhead. And they treat each other as such, outdoing one another in giving honor to each other. That’s the way trusting friends who are at one with each other behave. That’s the ultimate model of atonement, and “at-one-ment”. Let’s pray that we all may be at one, even as They are. “The glory which Thou hast given Me, I have given to them, that they may be one, even as we are one. I in them and Thou in Me, that they may become perfectly one.” Now that’s perfect atonement, you see. That’s the real, original and ultimate meaning of this word, atonement, “at-one-ment”. Now, in several places, Jesus explains what it would cost to restore this universe, His family, to “at-one-ment”. He mentions His death. He even uses the term that’s sometimes translated “ransom”. When He says in John 12:32, “If I be lifted up”, thus signifying the way in which He was to die, “if I be lifted up I will draw all unto Me.” Angels and men were all drawn closer into atonement and “at-one-ment”. Without His death it could not be possible.

Now Paul was in full agreement with this understanding. Look at Ephesians 1:9, 10. A passage that mystifies some, for reasons we’ll mention in a moment:

For God has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite [make us one] all things in Him, all things [where?] things in Heaven and things on earth.

Colossians 1:19, 20 says it even more dramatically, perhaps. Colossians 1:19, 20. And if you’d rather read the whole chapter before coming to this. But just 19 for now:

For in Him [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell. And through Him to reconcile [that’s atonement]. For Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in Heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.

Now that’s atonement. Peace is the opposite of war. Peace is the opposite of hostility. And you notice it says here it cost the death of Jesus, the meaning of the shedding of His blood, to restore peace and unity and atonement. Now, *how* His death makes possible peace and atonement, is a subject of very great consequence, to which one should devote one’s closest attention. But just to mention one of the many ways in which this is so, is it possible to be at one with someone of whom you’re deathly afraid? Now, in the course of human history, many tyrants have sought to establish unity by means of force and fear. But that kind of unity does

not last. Just look at what has happened in a number of countries in the world in the last few weeks. There was an enforced unity, brought about through fear, and at last the people have risen up to throw off the shackles of fear. And it appears that the unity's breaking up. Those folks are ready to move on to a far greater unity. And hopefully, in this moment of opportunity, we will not go in there with a picture of a tyrannical God who would seek for unity by force and fear. You know, in the vacuum of the moment, many ideas will go in, and we'd better get in there first, with what some of us regard as the great good news about our God.

It is correct though, to speak of Christ's atoning death. His atoning sacrifice. His atoning blood. Of Christ our atonement. But what do you mean by those words? Now, this passage also says it cost the death of Christ to restore peace and "at-one-ment" for the whole universe, and not just for you and me. But tell me, has there ever been a threat to "at-one-ment", even a breach of "at-one-ment" throughout the universe? For those of us who take the book of Revelation seriously, Revelation 12 describes a war that began up in Heaven. And from Genesis to Revelation you can read of the causes and the consequences of that war, and why it cost the sufferings and death of Christ to win that war, and establish peace for the rest of eternity.

For you see, there once was atonement throughout the universe, before the war began. Before there ever was sin in this universe, there was atonement in the original, the first and ultimate meaning of that term. You see, way back in those days, all of God's children trusted each other. All of them trusted their Heavenly Father, and He in turn, could safely trust in them. And where there is such mutual trust and trustworthiness, there's peace, there's harmony, there's atonement, there's "at-one-ment".

But a conflict of distrust arose, even to the point of open rebellion and war. And disunity and disharmony took the place of unity and, shall I say "at-one-ment"? That's atonement. Same thing. That's how sin entered the universe. As 1 John 3:4 defines sin, sin is rebelliousness. That's the meaning of the Greek word there. Or as Paul defines sin in Romans 14:23, sin is a breach of faith. Sin is a breakdown of trust. And where there is no trust, there is no unity, no "at-one-ment". And the plan of salvation all the way to the cross, and ever since the cross, is designed to restore trust, to bring the rebellion to an end. And thus to reestablish "at-one-ment" in the whole universe, in God's entire family. For all were involved. And to reestablish "at-one-ment" in a way that will last forever.

Now, not everyone recognizes that there's been such a conflict in God's family. Even Luther, and I say that even because we think so much of Luther. He's one of our heroes. Think of what he did to turn our attention from man to God and from tradition to the scriptures. And think of the translation he prepared in German that the people could understand. What more could we ask of him? But Luther didn't believe there was such a war. In his commentary on Genesis he says, "Some poor fathers have fancied that there once was a war between the angels." And this

questioning of the idea of the war as merely fanciful was the result of the fact that he did not accept all 66 books of the Bible.

When Luther said “the Bible and the Bible only”, a phrase we so often use—many love to do it in Latin for some strange reason, though few study Latin any more. I studied Latin for six years, so I’ll take the liberty of using it: “Sola scriptura”. Why not in English? “The Bible only”. But when Luther said “the Bible only”, he didn’t mean all 66, he meant only 62. There were four whose apostolic authority and inspiration he seriously questioned. These four were Hebrews, James, Jude, and Revelation. He said of the book of Revelation in his preface, and you can read it, you can see it, he said, “There’s no way the Holy Spirit could have inspired this book. I cannot find Christ in this book. Besides, it’s altogether too difficult to understand.” Now we might agree with his last statement, but not the first two.

But you see, because Luther could not use the book of Revelation as authoritative, he missed the war in Revelation 12. And without the larger understanding of the war that has involved the whole universe, it’s hard to understand Paul’s explanation that Jesus died and shed His blood to bring peace, reconciliation, friendship, unity and atonement to God’s people in Heaven as well as upon the earth. And then it’s hard to understand that the kind of unity God wants is not pertaining just to you and me. But it pertains to His whole divided family, the whole universe. One can take a far larger view of the cross and the plan of salvation and atonement. And it doesn’t minimize the salvation of you and me. It just seems to me to make it a whole lot more sensible and attractive and winsome, and totally unarbitrary to view it in this way.

Now, the kind of unity that God desires cannot be commanded anymore than Billy’s mother could do it. Nor can it be produced by force or fear. Nor can such “at-one-ment” be bought, at any price. You can’t just buy people to be your friends. It can only be won. But we must hasten to add, it did cost everything to win it. The unity and the atonement that God has won and still seeks to win in our individual lives, is described in a colorful way in Ephesians 4, where you recall it says that God’s purpose and the purpose of ministry and the purpose of the church is to bring us to the unity, the oneness, the “at-one-ment”, the atonement, that is inherent, is intrinsic to our faith and our knowledge of the Son of God. That is to say, the atonement that God wants, the unity that He wants, is the oneness that naturally exists among those who love, trust and admire the same Jesus, and the same God.

Now God does not even desire the unity that comes from a mere, blind submission to His supreme authority. And you’d have to admit that He has a perfect right to demand this of us troublesome children. But you remember the incredible offer of Jesus in John 15:15. It’s so important. Would you take a look at that? John 15:15, where Jesus said to His disciples in the upper room; His last message to them, indicating what should be the emphasis of the good news to the whole world, that atonement may be recovered. He said to them, “No longer do I call you servants.” He’d often called them servants. And there’s nothing wrong with being a

servant, especially a faithful one. Jesus said, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." I'd want to be at least a faithful servant. In fact, what more could we ever ask for or expect, than to hear His words of commendation, "Well done, my good and faithful servant"?

But Jesus says, "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing. But I have called you friends; for all that I have heard from my Father, I have made known to you." You notice the difference between the two. You see, servants do not understand their masters' business. They just do what their told. Friends seek to understand. So Jesus is saying, "I call you no longer my servants, because servants simply do what they're told." And many think that's the ideal. "No," He said, "I call you rather my friends because I want you to understand." With servants, even faithful ones, there's no place for reason, questions or explanations. A good servant simply says, "Master, yes sir. If you say so, sir. Very good, sir."

Servants are often afraid of their masters. Even if they call it a 'godly fear'. And thus they're very concerned with pleasing their masters, and especially with staying out of trouble. Servants tend to be preoccupied with their legal standing with their masters. And often, remember, like the parable of the servants, servants are very concerned about being fairly paid and rewarded for their work. They're also much concerned about avoiding punishment, and making sure that in the end everybody gets all the punishment he so richly deserves. That's servant talk. Servants tend to view the atonement as God's indeed generous arrangement whereby they may escape punishment and receive the reward after all.

Now, again, let's not make fun or light of being servants. It's good to be a faithful servant. And remember Jesus' commendation. And how could we ask for anything more? But how could we turn down His generous offer in John 15:15? He says, "I don't want to call you servants anymore. Because servants just do what they're told. I call you rather my friends, because I want you to understand." You see, that's real atonement. He wants the freely-given, understanding unity that He so relished with Abraham and Moses, the ones He called His trusted and trusting friends. And you remember how freely they talked with God, their friend? Abraham said, "God, how could you do this? Surely the judge of all the earth should do what's right." And God said, "That's the end of our friendship"? No, God said, "I'll make you the model of friendship for the rest of the Scriptures." And when God said, "Step aside and let me destroy these people, and I'll make a great nation of you," Moses said, "God, as I know you, you couldn't do it. It would ruin your reputation." And God said, "No one else knows me that well. Moses, you really are my friend." That's not irreverent. That's real friendship. That's real "at-one-ment".

Now you can force people to be your servants. "On your knees or I'll throw you into the burning fiery furnace," said Nebuchadnezzar. He didn't say, "Now my dear people, be my friends. Love me, trust me, or I'll throw you into the burning fiery furnace." That would make no sense at all. And some who are willing to stay as servants, seem to hear God saying to them, "You obey me,

and do what you're told, or you know what I'll do to you in the end." But has God ever said, "Love me, trust me, be my friend, or I'll torture you to death in the end"? It makes no sense. Who would come up with such a diabolical idea?

Now this is where the cross is so important. There can be no friendship and "at-one-ment" where there is fear. What will God do to those who turn down His offer of friendship, unity, harmony, freedom and atonement? Did Jesus die the death of a sinner? What did the Father do to the Son? In Gethsemane and on Calvary, what did the Son cry? "My God, my God, why are you punishing me? Why are you torturing me? Why are you killing me?" No, "Why have you given me up? Why have you let me go?" It makes sense for God to say, "I want you to be at one with me, in freedom, trust and love. I want you to be my friends. But if you turn this offer down, I'll try and try. But in the end, what else can I do but give you up, and let you go? And dependent as you are on me for life (and for other reasons besides), if I let you go, you will die, as Jesus really and truly died on Calvary, and almost died in Gethsemane." And the Father never laid a hand on Him. Calvary says there is no need to be afraid of God. And when He says, "Be my friend", it's not "be my friend or I'll destroy you". Servants; you can talk that way to them. But friends, never. And friendship, you see, is real atonement.

Paul sums this up in a marvelous passage that we often quote, in somewhat different words than the ones I'll read. 2 Corinthians 5:17, and I'm deliberately using again, the *Good News Bible, Today's English Version*. I've taught Greek since 1942, and I'll tell you that this is a magnificent translation of the Greek. 2 Corinthians 5:17:

When anyone is joined to Christ, he is a new being. The old is gone, the new is come. All this is done by God, who through Christ, changed us from enemies into His friends, and gave us the task of making others His friends, also.

How's that for the mission of the church? Our message is that God was making all mankind His friends through Christ. God did not keep an account of their sins. And He has given us the message which tells how He makes them His friends. Here we are then, speaking for Christ, as though God Himself were making His appeal through us. We plead on God's behalf "Let God change you from enemies into His friends." How do you like that?

Now the word that's translated "making friends" is the word that is so often translated "reconciliation". And in that one place in the Scripture I read earlier in Romans, is translated "atonement". If you want, you can substitute "atonement" all the way down through here for "making friends". That's the word in the original. It seems to me that the one who made that incredibly gracious offer of John 15:15 must simply love this American Bible Society translation of 2 Corinthians 5.



Well, there are many so-called theories of the atonement. I just read an excellent article that came from England that describes four major views of the atonement. And as I read it, I thought, "Well I can think of at least five." It doesn't matter a bit how many there are. The all-important question is, does your view of the atonement lead to the restoration of unity, and the freedom of understanding friendship? Like Jesus' story of the prodigal son, does your understanding of the atonement, your view of the atonement, lead you like the prodigal son, to go home? If it does, then your view is like the explanation of the atonement that Jesus talked so much about. Atonement, "at-one-ment", has really taken place, when once again, like Abraham and Moses and Job, we have become trusted and trusting friends of a trustworthy God.

Our loving Father in Heaven, you are the infinitely powerful God who had but to speak, and hang a whole, vast universe into space. And what you desire most of us is not even humble obedience, good as that is, but that we become your loving, admiring and trusting friends, even your understanding friends. And surely we have every reason to trust you when you make this offer all through Scripture, and especially through the experiences of Jesus' life, and Gethsemane, and Calvary. You have shown we have no need to be afraid of you, but every reason to love you, trust you, admire you, be willing to listen to you, accept correction from you, and most of all, be your trusted and trusting friends. Help us to become such, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. {Graham Maxwell. Transcript of sermon at Azure Hills Church, January 20, 1990, Grand Terrace, California}