

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: We are SO Grateful!

Grateful for the Cross of Christ

(Four images of Jesus' cross that drive thanksgiving)

Study #3

Introduction: A pre-Christmas consideration of Jesus' death...

If you've ever ...
eaten dessert *before* the main entrée;
watched the movie and *then* read reviews;
hit the road *before* checking for traffic and directions;
... you have put the cart before the horse.

You did things out of order. This morning's message is an exercise in putting an all-important cart before a well-loved horse.

It is the first Sunday of Advent. Our church is decorated. Our annual Christmas Missions Market is underway. Today is a perfect day to begin considering the birth of Jesus. and we're not going to do that.

Instead, for our time together this morning we're going to put the cart of the cross ahead of the incarnation horse and reflect on Good Friday before we turn, next Sunday, to Christmas. And today, too, we are going to give thanks.

For the last two Sundays, we have considered a couple of different facets of the diamond of thanksgiving.

We have rejoiced, knowing that God is delighted when we take next steps with Jesus, even if - *especially if* - our next step is an "about face." We gave thanks last Sunday that God will be delighted to reward us in eternity for faithfulness in this life.

This morning, on the first Sunday of Advent, we're looking at a third reason for giving thanks. We are thankful for what the Jesus who was born a baby in Bethlehem's stables *did* for us when He died as a full-grown man on the cross.

Our focus is not going to be on the physical aspects of Jesus' crucifixion, as important as those are. Instead, we are going to explore what the cross accomplishes for the one who believes in Jesus.

This won't be an exhaustive exploration. But it will be detailed enough to prompt worship and extreme gratitude. And it will take us into the temple and the market place, the home and the law courts.

We'll start off in the temple, considering the atonement. The word I'll use to describe the atonement is *propitiation*.

This isn't a word you hear often, if at all, and it will impress your friends when you use it in casual conversation. More seriously, though, to appreciate Jesus' death on the cross, you must understand propitiation.

Propitiation: The Cross Turns Away God's Wrath

Getting a Handle on the Concept

Non-biblical propitiation

The concept of propitiation is an idea on which religions all over the world, and in every age, have been built. Here is what it means.¹

¹ J.I. Packer tells the following story in his book, Knowing God - among the best books I have ever read - in the chapter in which he explains propitiation ("The Heart of the Gospel"). From the Trojan War legends (ca 1000 BC), we are told that Prince Paris has carried off the beautiful Princess Helen to Troy. The Greek navy

In these religious systems, there are lots of gods. None of them is sovereign, but each of them has enough power to make your life easy or hard. Their tempers are unpredictable and they may take offense at the smallest things.

One god might become jealous because you are paying too much attention to some other god. He or she will take it out on you by arranging some terrible turn of events. The thing for you to do is to try to pacify him or her by an offering.

Now, the rule with offerings is “the bigger the better.” In this, the gods are cruel. But then, they are gods, so what can you do?

So, you offer a sacrifice, making sure it’s impressive enough to produce the desired result. Human sacrifice is expensive, but effective. By your offering, you have *propitiated* the gods.

So, pagan religion appears as a callous commercialism, a matter of managing and manipulating the gods by bribery.

Now, the Bible takes us away from the world of human-made religion. And, in the place of a cluster of gods who are all too obviously made in the image of man, the Bible describes the one, true God.

With Him there is no vanity. There are no temper tantrums. So, we might expect, therefore, that there would be no place for propitiation in the Bible. We would be wrong.

Biblical propitiation

In fact, the theme of propitiation² - turning away God’s anger by means of a sacrifice - runs all through the Bible.³

sent ships to recover her, but was held up by contrary winds. Agamemnon, the Greek general, sent home for his daughter and ceremonially slaughtered her as a sacrifice to pacify the evidently hostile gods. The move paid off as west winds blew again and the fleet reached Troy without further difficulty.

² The Greek word for propitiation, “*hilasterion*”⁴ is related in meaning to the Hebrew “*kippur*” (to cover).

³ The New International Version consistently translates the Greek and Hebrew words for propitiation with “atoning sacrifice” - which gets the idea across.

In the Old Testament, propitiation lies behind every offering and sacrifice. It is the backdrop to everything that happens on the Day of Atonement.

And it’s not just an Old Testament thing. Propitiation pops up in some of the weightiest New Testament texts.⁴

For instance, when the Apostle Paul explains what Jesus’ death on the cross accomplished, he wrote that God publicly displayed Jesus **[Romans 3:25] as a propitiation.**⁵

The author of the book of Hebrews says that Jesus fulfilled the role of a priest SO THAT He could **[Hebrews 2:7] make propitiation for the sins of the people.**

And the Apostle John tells us in his first letter that Jesus is **[1 John 2:2] the propitiation for our sins.**

So, Jesus propitiated God’s wrath. But the propitiation we find in the Bible is not the crass, commercial thing we find in other religions.

The Biblical Rationale for Propitiation

When we talk about an “atoning sacrifice” or “propitiation” that turns away the wrath of God, we assume God’s anger.

But God’s anger, His wrath, is not the temper tantrum of ancient made-up gods who liked to throw their weight around.

⁴ Many in recent years have considered this concept vulgar, even inappropriate for the Christian faith. Among them are scholars such as C.H. Dodd, and A.T. Hanson. Consider this quote from Hanson: “*If you think of ‘wrath’ as an attitude of God, you cannot avoid some theory of propitiation. But, the wrath in the New Testament is never spoken of as being propitiated, because it is not conceived of as being an attitude of God.*” I understand Scripture to mean what it says when it speaks of God’s wrath. That it is genuine and personal.

⁵ It is interesting to note the relative secrecy of so many of the others of Christ’s works - the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection, and the Ascension. By contrast, Romans 3 is explicit that God **PUBLICLY** demonstrated Him as a propitiation on the cross.

Nor is it some vague, impersonal outworking of cause and effect in a moral universe.

No. God's "wrath" describes His studied opposition to everything evil. God is offended when His righteous standards are violated and His wrath rises out of His hatred of sin.

Propitiation is necessary because of God's wrath. And it was Jesus who propitiated / turned God's wrath away from us.

Jesus' Death on the Cross Propitiated God's Righteous Anger

In Romans, chapter 3, when the apostle Paul said that God publicly displayed Jesus as a propitiation, he became more specific and went on to tell us that this propitiation is "*in His blood.*"

I'll grant that the image that emerges from this concept of propitiation is a bloody one, and some people are repulsed by this fact. Some people reject Christianity because of all the references to blood.

But there is a reason for the repeated references to the blood of Christ in the Bible, and there is a reason we sing songs that contain reference to blood.⁶

The reason is that, biblically, *life is in the blood.*⁷ When there is the spilling of blood, there is the giving up of life, the ultimate sacrifice.⁸

So, the enormity of the sacrifice (the death of God's Son) highlights the enormity of the problem (our sin) the sacrifice resolved.

Given our predicament, God decided that He would send His Son who would offer Himself as a *propitiation* (atoning sacrifice) for your sin and for mine.

⁶ See also Romans 5:9; Acts 20:28; Eph. 1:7; 2:13; Col. 1:20; Heb. 9:11ff; 10:19; 29; 13:12, 20; 1 Pet. 1:2, 19; 1 John 1:7; 5:6; Rev. 1:5; 5:9; 7:14; 12:11

⁷ My understanding is that it's not far off to say that life is in the blood, medically.

⁸ [Leviticus 17:11] *For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement.*

Again, in most other religions, you have to offer something of great worth to deal with the capricious temper tantrums of this or that "god." And in the Old Testament, God Himself set up a system of propitiation to turn aside His legitimate anger over sin.

But in the New Testament, the picture changes dramatically.

Yes, God is angry - with you - for sins you have committed, and we understand anger. But the anger we experience toward others, or that others show toward us is rarely "righteous" anger.

There is immaturity and unholiness at work in our anger. Not so with God's anger. His anger is completely justified. He is angry because of our selfishness and greed, our lusts and our lies, our gossiping and our gluttony. We're guilty.

When someone we care about is angry with us - especially when we have actually done something wrong - what do we do? We try to get back in their good graces. We are extra nice. We apologize. We buy a gift. We change our ways.

Sometimes, our efforts at *propitiating* our friend doesn't work. That's painful. But, often, our friend's anger melts away. Our spouse's wrath cools.

But what if there was Someone whose anger could not be turned away? Your guilt before them is so awful that there is no way back. Nothing you try "works."

This is exactly the predicament we find ourselves in with God. And it's not because God is especially vindictive. It is that He is completely holy. Righteous. Just. He cannot simply ignore our sin.

But He loves us. And this is what our holy and loving God did to open the way for us, the people He created, to come near.

He sent Jesus.

God, the offended party, took the initiative to make things right. He did the work because there was no work we could do to turn away His anger.

When God's only begotten Son laid down His life - shed His blood - on the cross, God's anger was turned away from us. So that now God openly welcomes anyone who comes to Him by way of faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus. *Hallelujah!*

We continue, and the imagery changes from the temple where there are sacrifices, to the market-place where there are business transactions.

Now, we move from a consideration of propitiation to the work of the cross under the heading of redemption.

Redemption: The Cross Pays Our Ransom

Getting a Handle on the Concept

Unlike *propitiation*, *redemption* is a word we might actually use in the course of a day.

For instance, we may use coupons at the grocery store to buy items at a reduced price. We *redeem* the coupons to buy the groceries.

In the biblical world, the word *redemption* conveyed the idea of a *ransom* price. Some ONE or some THING would be redeemed by means of a price paid.

In fact, one entire book of the Bible - the book of Ruth - revolves around the theme of redemption.

The story tells how Ruth, a foreigner to Israel, was delivered, along with her mother-in-law, Naomi, from poverty (starvation!) through the price a relative of her mother-in-law (Boaz) pays to *redeem* Ruth.

By his extravagant act of redemption, Boaz lifted Ruth to an exalted position in the community.

Ruth received blessing by this redemption and received a place in the royal line of the Messiah as she and Boaz became the great-grandparents of King David.

The Biblical Rationale for Redemption

In the Old Testament, people could be "redeemed" from all sorts of horrible situations. They could be redeemed from captivity, slavery, and exile. Sometimes, they could even be redeemed from being executed by the payment of a ransom price.

When we come to the New Testament, we find the vocabulary of redemption applied to Jesus' work on the cross. He "redeemed" us from slavery to the power and the penalty of sin.

So, when we think of redemption, we are to think of the world of slavery and auction blocks and bidding wars to purchase people as if they were property.

We should now be thinking about the world in which we live today, where slavery thrives, with some thirty million people caught in slavery's web.

Some are these are slaves because their parents were slaves. Others are enslaved because they can't pay off debts.

Or think of those who are enticed to come to a new place by the promise of a better life. When they arrive, though, their documents are stolen from them and they are forced into hard labor or degrading work (such as the sex trades).

Or we can even reflect on the time, a century and a half ago, when racially-based slavery existed in our own nation.

The slave has no hope. She isn't free. He has no choice but to do the will of another.

Social slavery is a terrible evil. Every day, brave men and women fight against this evil that traps millions. Many slaves are being set free by their efforts.

But the Bible says that billions are enslaved by a master they can't escape.

The addicting lure of sin over-promises and under-delivers, robs of freedom and hope, enslaves, and condemns.

Redemption, as it relates to us and Jesus, means that Christ paid the ransom price to buy us out of slavery to sin.

Jesus' Death on the Cross is the Basis for Our Redemption

Paul puts it bluntly. *[1 Corinthians 7:23] You have been bought with a price.* And what was that "price"?

[Ephesians 1:7] In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace...⁹

At one point, Jesus summed up His mission on earth with these words, *[Mark 10:45] "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom¹⁰ for many."*

We could never redeem ourselves. So, what we could have never done, Jesus did. On the day you came to Christ by faith, He redeemed you.

Your chains have been broken. You are free from the condemning penalty of sin. You are off the trading block, no longer on the market. Jesus bought you. Nobody else can claim you now. You are His forever.

And you are free from the power of sin.

As a growing disciple of Jesus, you are learning to submit to your new Master, the One who loves you. You are finding freedom to live in love and holiness. You're putting the old ways behind you.

Jesus redeemed your eternal soul and He is redeeming your life, day by day, as you take step after step to follow Him. Again, *Hallelujah!*

The next facet of the diamond of salvation may be one of the most attractive of the four images we will see today, because it is so intensely personal.

Here we have, not a picture of temple or market-place - but of the home. Here we examine salvation from the perspective of reconciliation.

Reconciliation: The Cross Brings Us into Relationship with God

Getting a Handle on the Concept

In discussing the subject of reconciliation, the assumption is that a relationship formerly existed. Now, there is a breach, a break, in that relationship.

The break requires movement on both parties' parts to enjoy fellowship again. It is that movement back together that is in view in reconciliation.

The Biblical Rationale for Reconciliation

Reconciliation fixes the problem of alienation and estrangement. And, from Genesis 3 forward, the Bible says that, because of sin, every person need to be reconciled to God.¹¹

Our sin is cosmic mutiny. It alienates us from God. When we disobey God, it is the creature opposing the Creator. Our every violation of God's commands is one more slap in His face, one more brick in the wall of separation.

⁹ In Acts 20, where the Apostle Paul is charging the Elders to care for the church at Ephesus, he says, *[28] "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."* See also Hebrews 9:12, 15

¹⁰ Literally, "redemption"

¹¹ *[Romans 3:23] All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*

As we have already seen, God's wrath is kindled because of our sin. Paul writes, **[Romans 1:18] For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all unrighteousness and ungodliness of man.**

But, even though it was His own holiness that was violated and even though HE was the One who was offended by OUR sin, He took the decisive step toward us to effect reconciliation.

The Bible says that Jesus' death on the cross forms the basis for reconciliation between you and Almighty God.

Jesus' Death on the Cross is the Basis for our Reconciliation

Paul spells it out for us in 2 Corinthians 5.

[18] Now all these things are from God, who RECONCILED us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, [19] namely, that God was in Christ RECONCILING the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation...¹² [21] He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

That last verse (v. 21) has been called by some the most profound verse of the New Testament.

It describes the nearly unfathomable transaction that took place on the cross. Paul says that when Jesus, the sinless One, took our place, He *became* sin for us.

He doesn't say, "Christ 'sinned'" - but that He "**became sin.**"¹³ God the Father made His innocent Son the object of His wrath and judgment to reconcile with us.¹⁴

¹² This phrase, "**the ministry/word of reconciliation**" (2x in this short section) says that we who have been reconciled to God now have been given the stewardship to share with others the message that will reconcile them to God: the Gospel!

¹³ See also Heb. 4:15; 1 Peter 2:22; Heb. 7:26; 1 John 3:5.

¹⁴ And, when you hear the words, "**He made Him...**", don't understand that the Father *coerced* the Son to do something against His will. The Son agreed to offer Himself as a reconciling sacrifice for your sin and mine.

At creation and then in the Garden of Eden, the first man and woman faced God and each other in perfect communion. When they rebelled, they turned away from God. And God, because He is holy, turned His back on them.

Since that moment, *reconciliation* has been the need of the hour for us all.

All the estrangements you have ever known in life stem from the critical break between you and God and between others and God.

Tensions are high between much of the world and North Korea, and there seems to be little hope for reconciliation. Large swaths of Africa and the Middle East are a powder keg.

For lack of reconciliation, wars break out between nations. Closer to home, relational fractures break out in our homes.

What started in Eden, continues in San Antonio: blaming and accusing, bitterness and resentment, domination and manipulation. The results can be "cold wars" of increasing distance or divorce, tension between parents and kids, squabbles with extended family.

And we hate the distance and the tension. We long for reconciliation. But our world is broken and the collateral damage - in the form of shattered relationships - is all around us.

I think we see the most beautiful picture of reconciliation in Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son. (Luke 15)

A younger son rebels against his father, takes his inheritance and spends it on reckless living far from home, only to wake up one morning, broke and without a friend in the world.

The Bible says that he "**came to his senses.**" All he wanted was to be back at his father's house. So, he started walking and he travelled the painful road back to his father.

As he walked up the driveway, he was greeted by the sight of his father running toward him. He found out that his father had been turned toward him all along. He'd been watching the road, waiting, watching, hoping for his return.

He was greeted with an embrace, new shoes and a robe, a ring, and a "Welcome Home!" feast.

What a picture!

When Christ died on the cross, God turned back toward people. His arms are out-stretched. He's watching the driveway, waiting for us to come home. And when we do, by turning to Jesus, reconciliation comes full circle.

Reconciliation is made possible by the cross. An open-arms embrace, a "Welcome Home!" party thrown by a God from whom we were all estranged because of our sin. Jesus bridged the gap, and we sing, "Hallelujah!"

So far, we have looked at the cross through three lenses. God's anger is turned away; we are freed from slavery to sin; we are reconciled to God.

Our final look tells us that because of what Jesus did for us on the cross, we are no longer guilty before God. We are justified.

Justification: By the Cross God Declares Us Righteous

The Importance of Justification

Martin Luther, the great reformer, called *justification* "the principal article of all Christian doctrine."¹⁵

¹⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder and first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, was found weeping in his study at the age of 81. When he was questioned as to the reason for his tears, he replied, "I am just now beginning to understand what it means to be justified!"

Theologian J.I. Packer says that everything we know about God's love in Christ is summed up in the phrase, "*justified by faith.*"

So, whatever we mean by *justify*, Christians have always thought it important. And *justification* means something very specific.

Getting a Handle on the Concept

What justification IS NOT

Justification is not amnesty. Amnesty is a forgiveness that "forgets". It ignores a wrong. It is moral amnesia (*amnesia* and *amnesty* come from the same root word).¹⁶

As well, justification is not "make believe." When we say, "God justifies," we don't mean He pretends that sinners are NOT sinners.

What justification IS

No, in using the word *justification*, we are using the vocabulary of the courtroom.

When Moses gave laws that set up the legal system in Israel, he pictured situations where sometimes guilty and sometimes innocent people would be brought before a judge who would decide a case.

That's what's in view in Deuteronomy 25:1, where we read, "*When there is a dispute between men and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, [they are to] justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.*"

He meant that they are to *declare* the righteous to be righteous (and set them free) and *declare* the guilty to be guilty (and punish them).¹⁷

¹⁶When Scripture declares that God will not remember our sins (Isaiah 43:25), I don't believe that He has literally forgotten what we did wrong, but that He chooses to not remember it **against us**.

God's gift of justification to sinful men and women is His legal pronouncement that they are righteous before Him. He is pronouncing them no longer under His condemnation.

But how can He do that?! We ARE guilty sinners. If I am guilty, how can God justly declare me righteous?

It may sound at this point like a broken record, but it is still the case that God can declare sinners righteous because of what Jesus did on the cross.

If God declared me righteous on my own merit, He would not be just. He would be pretending, less than honest.

So, if God is going to declare me just, I have to be GIVEN righteousness from some other quarter.

Jesus' Death on the Cross is the Basis for our Justification

When Jesus died, He suffered the wrath of God for me. When I placed my trust in Him, He gave me the righteousness I could never have attained on my own.

The situation is that of a judge who does not take a criminal's crimes into account, because someone else has already paid the fine; somebody else served time on behalf of the guilty.

And the sins of the believer are not taken into account because Jesus already paid the penalty and suffered the wrath of God for them - and with God, there is no double jeopardy.

When a sinner stands before a holy God, God declares him or her to be guilty and is condemned.

But, when a sinner who has placed her or his faith in Jesus stands before God, God applies the righteousness of Christ to them and says,

"Not guilty; sentence already paid in full by My Son" - and instead of a giving a sentence of condemnation, says, "I declare you righteous, justified."

In justification, God took our sins and put them on Christ and then took Christ's righteousness and gave it to us in exchange!

If we are counting on our good works to earn a right standing with God, we're probably deeply offended that justification only happens by faith, not works. But this is the only way a sinner can become the righteousness of God - it has to be God's work from start to finish.

Conclusion:

God offers us many, many good gifts. And His good gifts must be received. Today, Christmas and Good Friday stand together.

In light of the beautiful facets of the cross we've explored today (Good Friday), God invites you to come to Jesus. Come and receive the gift (Christmas) of God's amazing grace. Come for the first time by way of trusting reliance, with your burden of sin, for forgiveness. Come, and receive all the benefits of the cross.

Or, if you have already come to Jesus, come to Him again. Reflect on the cross of Jesus and see if your heart doesn't break with gratitude. Meditate on what He did for you and see if the calluses on your heart don't grow soft.

Today, for so many reasons, we are grateful to God for the cross of Christ.

¹⁷ In Proverbs 17:15 Solomon warned that judges who justified the wicked and who condemned the righteous (that is, who declared the righteous guilty and the guilty righteous!) were abominations to the Lord.