

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **A Community Centered on the Cross**

#### **Introduction: Branding...**

According to some of the best and brightest on the Internet, *“Branding’ is the process of creating a strong, positive perception of your organization, in distinction from other organizations.”*

A company’s branding typically uses winsome words or phrases, or attractive images to identify itself to the public. Businesses use branding to convince us that they - not their competitors - have what we need.

Lowe’s helps us with home improvement projects *“Do It Right For Less”* while Home Depot tells us *“How Doers Get More Done.”*

Mouth-watering images from MacDonald’s and Whataburger, Chick-fil-A and Kentucky Fried Chicken promise us the food we want, when we want it, the way we like it.

Branding is considered essential to doing business in today’s graphics-intensive world.

It is so essential that a company will shell out millions of dollars to an agency that will design a brand that is compelling and that draws customers its way.

If you are putting a brand together for an organization, you want that brand to be friendly and warm and happy and inviting.

And for the last two thousand years, Jesus’ church has used a very distinctive “brand” that certainly sets itself apart from other organizations.

The image that everyone, the world over, associates with our faith is an ancient instrument of torture and execution. It is the cross.

When someone thinks of Judaism, they picture the Star of David. Islam brings to mind the crescent and star.

Christianity’s brand is nothing so winsome. Our brand probably would not have been what an ad agency would have come up with, had the apostles hired one.

But that the cross is our brand is perfectly appropriate because the cross was central to the life and to the mission of Jesus, and it is central to every church’s life and mission.

We are, to the world, *“people of the cross.”*

The first thing you notice when you enter our Worship Center is a cross attached to the front wall. There is a cross in the Encuentro Worship Center.

As we wrap up our time together this morning, we’ll take the Lord’s Supper, the broken bread especially reminding us of Jesus’ death on the cross.

Nothing we do is unrelated to the cross of Jesus. It is true that we are a community centered on the cross.

A guest unfamiliar with what “church” is all about might look around and say, *“That church is obsessed with the cross.”* He would be right.<sup>1</sup>

This morning, as we explore some of what Jesus accomplished on the cross, we’ll see why Christians are obsessed with the cross.

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott mentions St. Paul’s Cathedral in London. The cathedral’s footprint is in the form of a cross. In fact, everywhere you look in St. Paul’s, there is a cross.

*Orient to the cross...*

As we focus on the cross this morning, we won't be thinking so much about the physical aspects of Jesus' sufferings, as important as those are.

Rather, we are going to take three quick looks and one longer look at things Jesus accomplished by His death on the cross.

When you look at a diamond, you turn it and observe it from different angles, because each facet of the diamond gives a fresh glimpse of its beauty.

In the next few minutes, we're going to look at different facets of the cross of Jesus to see different aspects of its beauty and power.

First, we'll briefly consider the cross of Christ from the perspective of a courtroom.

### **A Guilty Verdict Reversed (Justification)**

#### **Under Moses**

When God gave the Jews a legal system under Moses, the laws He gave covered scenarios where sometimes guilty and sometimes innocent people would be brought before a judge to decide their case.

***[Deuteronomy 25:1] If there is a dispute between people and they go to court, and the judges decide their case, and they declare the righteous innocent and pronounce the wicked guilty...***

Just like in our own day, the judge's role was to declare the wicked to be in the wrong and would declare the righteous to be innocent. Or, we could say that the judge *justified* the innocent.<sup>2</sup>

That justification was not an arbitrary decision. It was *just*, it was *right* for the judge to declare the innocent *justified*.

#### **Under Jesus**

Justification is a word that describes the Christian's standing before God. The Bible says that, in Jesus, we are justified.

But how can that be? The Bible says that we are guilty of sin, which is the exact opposite of innocent. We are un-righteous.

So, does God just pretend that we are innocent so that He can declare us justified? No.

He is able to justly declare us justified because of what Jesus did for us on the cross.

#### **The Justifying Work of Jesus**

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

If it was me standing before the judge, guilty of a crime, instead of handing down a sentence of condemnation against me, he would say, *"I declare you, Dave Smith, not guilty, because your good friend did time for you."*

When Jesus died, He suffered the penalty for sin that I should have suffered, that you should have suffered.

If God declared me righteous on my own merit, He would not be just. He would be pretending. If I am going to be justly justified, I have to be GIVEN righteousness by someone / Someone else.

THAT is exactly what happens when we believe in Jesus.

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<sup>2</sup> 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.

God gives us the righteousness we could never have attained on our own. In a beautiful exchange, God gives us Jesus' righteousness. We are, as Paul writes (Romans 4:1-5), justified by faith.<sup>3</sup>

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 carried out against My Son."

This is the only way we can be justified before God. Jesus suffered our penalty.

Another way to look at the cross is from the perspective of a slave, trapped in bondage.

### **A Slave's Bondage Broken (Redemption)**

#### **Biblical Redemption**

In the biblical world, the word *redemption* conveyed the idea of a *ransom* price. Someone or something would be redeemed by means of a price paid.<sup>4</sup>

In the Old Testament, people could be "redeemed" from all sorts of horrible situations.

They could be redeemed from captivity, slavery, or exile. Under certain conditions, 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther, the great reformer, called *justification* "the principal article of all Christian doctrine." Lewis Sperry Chafer, first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, was found weeping in his study at the age of eighty-one. When asked why the tears, he replied, "I am just now beginning to understand what it means to be justified!"

<sup>4</sup> One entire book of the Bible - Ruth - revolves around the theme of redemption. Ruth, a foreigner to Israel, was delivered, along with her mother-in-law, Naomi, from poverty through the price a relative of Naomi (Boaz) paid to *redeem* Ruth.

When we think of redemption, we are to think of the world of slavery and auction blocks and bidding wars where people are purchased as if they were property.

#### **Modern-Day Slavery**

We could right now be thinking about the world in which we live, a world in which slavery thrives, with millions of people caught in slavery's web.

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

A slave is in a terrible spot. He or she has no choice but to do the will of another. Slavery is an evil blight on the history of humanity.

Thankfully, every day, brave men and women fight against this horrible institution. Many slaves are being set free by their efforts.

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

#### **The Redeeming Work of Jesus**

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

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...<sup>5</sup>***

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<sup>5</sup> See Acts 20, where the Apostle Paul charged the Elders to care for the church at Ephesus, which, he says, God / Jesus [*28*]...***purchased with His own blood.*** See also Hebrews 9:12, 15; Mark 10:45.

We could never redeem ourselves. So, what we could have never done - bought ourselves out of slavery to sin - Jesus did for us.

The facet of the salvation diamond we are seeing here is that Christ has redeemed you who have believed in Him. He has broken the chains that bound you. You are free from the condemning penalty of sin. Jesus bought you and you are His forever.

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

We have already been to the courtroom and to the marketplace. Here we come to a place of relationship, a home, a friendship. Here we see Christ's gift of reconciliation, made possible by the cross.

### **A Broken Relationship Restored (Reconciliation)**

#### **A World in Need of Reconciliation**

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, disobeying God's one command, they essentially turned away from God. And God, being absolutely holy, turned His back on them.

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

All the alienations and broken relationships you have ever known in life stem from the initial break between people and God at the dawn of history in the Garden.

There is brokenness, globally. We think of the terrible conflict in Ukraine, with war between Russia and much of the west. North Korea is almost always at a boiling point. Large swaths of Africa and the Middle East are powder kegs.

Closer to home, we're all devastated by the mass shootings in New York, Uvalde, and elsewhere. There is alienation in our own homes.

What began in Eden, continues everywhere: blaming and accusing, bitterness and resentment, domination and manipulation.

We hate all of this. We hunger for good relating and peace - shalom - in our relationships. But our world is broken. The collateral damage - in the form of shattered relationships - is all around us.

Reconciliation is what fixes the problem of alienation.

When we think "reconciliation," we are assuming that a healthy relationship formerly existed. Now, though, there is a fracture in that relationship.

If the two parties are going to enjoy connection again, they must each turn toward each other. It is that movement back together that is in view in reconciliation.

#### **Reconciliation Needed Between Us and God**

Our sin was cosmic mutiny. It alienated us from God. When we, the created, 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.

However, even though it was God's own holiness that was violated by our sin, and even though God was the One who was offended by our sin, He was the One who 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.

#### **The Reconciling Work of Jesus**

***[18] Now all these things are from God, who RECONCILED us to Himself through Christ...***

**[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.**

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.

When Christ died on the cross, God turned back toward us. His arms are now stretched out to you and me and everyone we know.

The reconciliation comes full circle when anyone turns by faith to Jesus.

So far, we have looked at the cross through three lenses:

- God has declared us righteous - **justified** - in His sight because Jesus suffered our penalty.
- God has freed us from the penalty of sin by Jesus' **redeeming** payment on the cross.
- God has ended our alienation from Himself by sending Jesus to effect **reconciliation**.

Our final look, and where we'll spend the remainder of our time this morning, has us dealing with a word and a concept with which you may not be very familiar.

The word I'm using isn't one that we hear very often, if at all (and it will definitely impress your friends when you use it in casual conversation this week).

More to the point, though, to appreciate Jesus' death on the cross, you must understand this aspect of what Jesus accomplished on the cross.

Whereas we have been to the courtroom, the marketplace, and the home, now we're going to the temple to consider *propitiation*.

## **An Angry God Appeased (Propitiation)**

### **Getting a Handle on the Concept**

#### *Non-biblical propitiation*

In his classic book, Knowing God (1973), J.I. Packer tells a story taken from the legends of the Trojan War (ca 1000 BC).

Prince Paris has carried off the beautiful Princess Helen from Sparta to Troy. The Greek navy sent ships to rescue her but was held up by contrary winds.

So, the Greek commander, Agamemnon, sent home to Sparta for his own daughter.

When she arrived, he ceremonially sacrificed her to appease the angry gods so that the winds would be favorable to make it to Troy to rescue Helen.

The move paid off. With the gods evidently satisfied, the winds turned favorable, and the fleet reached Troy without further difficulty.

That story illustrates the concept of propitiation, and it is a concept on which religions all over the world, and in every age, have been built. Here is the thought.

In most 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, joyful or miserable.

The problem is that their tempers are unpredictable. They may take offense at the smallest things.

For instance, one god might become jealous because you are paying too much attention to some other god. That god will take it out on you by arranging some terrible turn of events.

The thing for you to do is to try to pacify the god or goddess by an offering.

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. You make sure it’s big enough to produce the desired result. If your offering is sufficiently sacrificial, you will *propitiate* the god. (Human sacrifice is expensive, but effective.)

Pagan religion, thus, is nothing but 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 present one, true God.

With Him there is no vanity. There are no temper tantrums.

So, we might expect that there would be no place for propitiation in the Bible. We would be wrong.

### *Biblical propitiation*

In fact, the theme of propitiation<sup>6</sup> - turning away God’s anger by means of a sacrifice - runs all through the Bible.<sup>7</sup>

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

And it’s not just an Old Testament thing. Propitiation pops up in some of the weightiest New Testament texts.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Greek word for propitiation, “*hilasterion*”<sup>6</sup> is related in meaning to the Hebrew “*kippur*” (to cover).

<sup>7</sup> The New International Version consistently translates the Greek and Hebrew words for propitiation with “atoning sacrifice” - which gets the idea across.

<sup>8</sup> Some scholars reject the idea of propitiation as inappropriate to the Christian faith (C.H. Dodd, and A.T. Hanson). Hanson writes, “*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, personal, and righteous.

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.***<sup>9</sup>

The author of the book of Hebrews says that Jesus fulfilled the role of a priest SO THAT He could ***[Hebrews 2:17] make propitiation for the sins of the people.***

The Apostle John tells us in his first letter that Jesus is ***[1 John 2:2]...the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.***

Finally, John writes that propitiation defines God’s love for us.

***[1 John 4:10] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***

Any biblical understanding of the Gospel will include an appreciation for the idea of propitiation. Any understanding of the Gospel that excludes it is ***[Galatians 1:6] a different Gospel.***

So, propitiation is a biblical thing. But the propitiation we find in the Bible is not the crass, commercial thing I told you about earlier from Greek mythology.

### **The Biblical Rationale for Propitiation**

When we read about a *propitiation* (or an “atoning sacrifice”) that turns away the wrath of God, we are to assume God’s anger.

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

And God’s wrath isn’t some vague, impersonal outworking of cause and effect in a moral universe.

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<sup>9</sup> Note the relative secrecy of so many of the others of Christ’s works - the Incarnation, the Transfiguration, the Resurrection. By contrast, Romans 3 is explicit that God **PUBLICLY** demonstrated Him as a propitiation on the cross.

God's *wrath* describes His studied opposition to everything evil. God is offended when His righteous standards are violated. His wrath rises out of His hatred of sin because of the damage that sin does.

Propitiation is necessary because of God's wrath. And it was Jesus who propitiated (turned away) God's wrath.

### The Propitiating Work of Jesus

*The enormous problem (our sin) required an enormous sacrifice (Christ's death on the cross)*

In Romans, chapter 3, the Apostle Paul said that God "**publicly displayed**" Jesus as a propitiation.

God hadn't dealt with human sin publicly and globally since Noah's flood. But He did do so with Jesus. Paul got more specific and wrote that this propitiation is "**in [Jesus'] blood.**"

I understand that the image that emerges from this concept of propitiation is a bloody one. And, clearly, some people are put off by it. Some people are turned off to 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 praise songs here at church about blood.<sup>10</sup>

The reason is that, biblically, *life is in the blood.*<sup>11</sup> When there is the spilling of blood, there is the giving up of life, the ultimate sacrifice.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> My understanding is that it's not far off to say that life is in the blood, medically, as well.

<sup>12</sup> [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 other religions, you have to offer something of great value to you to deal with the temper tantrums of this or that "god."

And in the Old Testament, God Himself set up a system of propitiation where the people offered animals to (temporarily) turn aside His anger over sin.

But in the New Testament, the picture changes dramatically.

*We understand being angry AND having people angry with us*

On the one hand, there is God's anger, kindled against us because of sin. 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 righteous.

He is angry because we have violated His holiness and are guilty of selfishness and greed, lusts and lies, gossiping and gluttony.

On the other hand, we understand that when someone is angry with us, we want it resolved.

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, and that's painful.

But, often, our friend's anger melts away. Our spouse's wrath cools.

*God Himself provided the propitiating sacrifice: Jesus*

But what if there was Someone whose anger could not be turned away? What if you had done a wrong so wrong that there was no way back.

Being nice won't cut it. Nothing you try works to get back in your friend's good graces. What then?

That 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 and reconcile. He must be propitiated.

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

He sent His only Son, Jesus.

The enormity of the sacrifice (the death of Jesus, God's Son) helps us see the enormity of the problem the sacrifice resolved.

Given the predicament we were all in because of our sin, God decided that He would send His Son who would offer Himself as a *propitiation* (atoning sacrifice) for our sin.

God, the offended party, took the initiative to make things right. He Himself 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.

And now God gladly welcomes anyone who comes to Him by way of faith in the crucified and resurrected Jesus.

### **Conclusion:**

Our faith has always been associated with the cross where Jesus died. The cross is the basis for our justification before God, our

redemption from sin, our reconciliation with God, and God's propitiation.

With Paul, we say, ***[Galatians 6:14] But far be it from me to boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.***