

Christ Appeases the Father's Anger

Romans 3:25-26

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When I was around 14 years old, I was a pitcher on a baseball team. One day, I decided to get some practice in by throwing my baseball in our basement family room. Before you think this is a bad idea, how many of you remember bean bags? All the cool families had one. It was quite comfortable and to me an ideal thing to throw pitches into. So, I was throwing. With each throw I felt a little more confident and was putting a little more speed on the ball, until one fateful pitch inexplicably went high. So high it missed the bean bag and caromed off the wall and into the side of my dad's prized 125-gallon fish aquarium. Not only did it hit said aquarium, it put a hole about a third of the way up the glass. This wasn't the end. Immediately, out of the hole, poured a fire hose of water onto the family room carpet which my dad had finished himself by taking days off from work. I stared in disbelief and then a great sense of dread overwhelmed me. I thought to myself, *My dad is going to kill me.* Off I went to find...Mom.

If you were blessed to grow up with a dad, I wonder if you have similar story. The fact that any of us is still alive is by the grace of a dad. If you had a dad, then you probably know the terror of his displeasure.

As a dad now, I notice that after I have disciplined one of my daughters, they want to hug. You would think they would run away, but no, they want reassurance that we are good again.

This provides a picture of the deeper and eternal desire we have to know that we are right, or righteous, before God our heavenly Father.

"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:21-24 ESV)

In our last message we saw the four key words in verses 21-24. *Righteousness. Sin. Justified. Redeemed. Righteousness* is right standing before God. *Sin* is falling short of that righteousness in action or attitude. *Justification* is God declaring us righteous even though we are not. *Redemption* is a slave term for paying a price to set a slave free. These four words summarize how God makes a sinner righteous before him. The passage continues with two more key words: **Propitiation** and **Forbearance**.

"Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." (Romans 3:24-26)

Embedded in our text today is a raging debate about God. Is he angry or not? Is he all love, no anger? All anger, no love? The word Romans uses to make this clear is wrath. *"The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all the ungodliness and unrighteousness of men."*

(Romans 1:18) It is one thing to have a human, even a dad, who is angry with you. They may or may not be in a position to act on it. They may or may not remain angry. But with God, his wrath is much different from human anger. J.I. Packer summarizes: "*God's wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil*"¹

So, the question is, how can I move from a position before God of wrath and eternal judgment to eternal fatherly love and life? The religions of the world try to appease God's anger by a payment or an offering. The ancients offered money, crops, and even their children. We moderns offer our good works or charitable activities. The thought is that if I do enough good things, God will like me more than he hates my sin. The problem is we all fall short of God's glory and all our attempts to earn his favor don't get us there. "*We are all infected and impure with sin. When we display our righteous deeds, they are nothing but filthy rags.*" (Isaiah 64:6, NLT)²

But then Romans 3 wonderfully announces that there is a righteousness that comes to us apart from the law and all our efforts to be obedient enough. It comes through faith in Jesus Christ. *Yes. Good. Tell me more.* This righteous standing is by God's declaration. *Wonderful! But wait, how can God just declare us righteous? Can he just decide to not hold our sins against us forever?* No. His justice won't allow any sin to go unpunished. This brings us to a fifth word of wonder if this passage.

Propitiation

"*Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood.*" (Romans 3:24-25, emphasis added)

Don't let the size of this word scare you. The same guy who hears a word like propitiation and tunes out seems to tune in for words like horsepower, testosterone, and play-action pass. If you can get those, you can get propitiation. What is it? Its root is in the Old Testament and the temple animal sacrifice that was made and the blood that was sprinkled on the top of the altar of God known as the mercy seat. The sacrifice of blood covered over the sin or, to use another word, "atoned" for the sin. That is why the NIV translates it, *sacrifice of atonement*.³

God is the decider of all reality and has so ordered the moral universe that his anger can be appeased. Just that is wonderful. But how? By a substitute death. A replacement death. Death is the wage or price for sin (Romans 6:23). God said so in the garden when Adam and Eve first sinned. But God allows substitutes. In the Old Testament, they were lambs, bulls, and goats. They were only temporary atonement, not lasting and eternal. What we really need is eternal atonement.

Here is where propitiation intersects with the cross of Jesus. Jesus' death was a sufficient substitute to appease all God's anger at us, not for a day, like the Old Testament, but forever. See it in the verse, "*Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation**.*" (Romans 3:24-25, emphasis added)

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 151.

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God put Jesus "forward." The word means, went public. God put on display a wrath-satisfying redemption through the blood sacrifice of Christ Jesus.

You may or may not realize that with propitiation we are traversing highly controversial territory in our modern day. Propitiation infers that God is angry at sin and sinners. Many people and whole denominations say, *this won't do. The modern man can't tolerate a God who is angry at us.* Why? Because God is love and grace. He is entirely benevolent toward us. And he should be because we are essentially good people.

They say, let's translate this as *expiation* rather than *propitiation*. *Expiation* means that our sin is taken away. We are washed clean. God power washes us. No wrath at all. That sounds much better than anger satisfaction. But that isn't what the word means, and Paul begins his whole book of Romans with "*The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all our ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.*" (Romans 1:18)

Liberal theology does all sorts of gymnastics to avoid any theology that involves wrath. Liberal theology insists we are good people who sometimes mess up. More oopsy-daisies than sin against a holy God. That's why you can go to a liberal theology church and see crosses on the wall and hear many teachings on God's love and Jesus' death as an inspiration or an example. But they will not call it a propitiation. "*A God who is all love, all grace, all mercy, no sovereignty, no justice, no holiness, and no wrath is an idol.*" R.C. Sproul⁴

My wife Jennifer and I were blessed over the past two weeks to travel with Erwin Lutzer from Moody Church and a bus full of people through England and Scotland studying the English reformation (See pictures below).



⁴ R.C. Sproul as quoted by Matt Smethurst, "40 Quotes from R.C. Sproul (1939-2017)," www.thegospelcoalition.org, December 14, 2017.

The Church of England is, by any measure, spiritually dead. They have beautiful and amazing cathedrals, but nobody goes or participates. We were at one famous and huge church and we asked the pastor, how many people are a part of this church? He said in a thick accent, "We have 30 on the rolls but only 15 show up on Sundays." The very place where at one time the Reformation and revival spread like wildfire, now just a handful of old ladies attend from what I could tell. Why?

If sin isn't sin, then God isn't angry. If God isn't angry, then hell isn't real. If hell isn't real, then why should I care? If I don't care, I don't waste a good Sunday morning going to church to hear how wonderful I am. I already believe that. If there is no wrath, then what is the point?

But my dear friend, if God is angry, then hell is real. If God is angry, then I, as a sinner, am in frightening trouble. If God is angry at me personally, then there is no higher priority than for that anger against me to be turned away from me. The wrath of God brings to the sinner a dreadful seriousness and earnestness about his eternal state.

Now the glad tidings that there is an anger-appeasing death on my behalf is the greatest news I could ever hear. To realize that Jesus' death on the cross is the appeasement, sent by the very one who is angry in the first place is great news. As John Stott says, "**God gave himself to save us from himself.**"⁵ What do I do? How do I access this eternal anger satisfier? Please tell me!

"*To be received by faith.*" (Romans 3:25) You don't have to know propitiation to be saved, but you have to know Jesus as Savior by faith to be saved. But dig into the source code of how God accomplished our salvation and you will see that Jesus satisfied God's anger against you. This will stir in you profound gratitude and relief that the flames of hell are no longer in your future. Rather than wrath forever, it's love and life with God forever...if you're a believer.

There is another verse. Let's take it as a whole, "*This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.*" (Romans 3:26)

Forbearance

Our sixth word in the text is forbearance. You see it here. Divine forbearance. Paul anticipates the person who is tracking with propitiation saying, *so God is angry with our sin, right? Yes. Jesus died for our sins, right? Right. What about all the people for centuries who sinned before Jesus was even around? What about them?* Great question. What about them?

God would have been completely just to immediately usher the sinner into eternal punishment. *Adam and Eve, you sinned. To hell you go.* Complete justice. But what did God do with Adam and Eve? He promised that from Eve's offspring one would come who would crush the serpent. (Genesis 3:15) He made them clothes to cover their nakedness and their shame. He gave them children: Cain, Abel, and Seth. He gave them long life. How could God do that when their sin seemed to demand immediate punishment?

⁵ John Stott, *The Message of Romans: God's Good News for the World.*, p. 115.

The answer is *forbearance*. Divine forbearance knew even then that the descendent of Eve, Abraham, Jacob, Judah, David, and Mary, would die a propitiating death; a death which would atone for Eve eating from the tree, Abraham taking Hagar, Judah murdering, and David committing adultery. Jesus' death would atone for them and everyone else who would ever receive and believe in Jesus. Divine forbearance temporarily overlooked the sin, seeing ahead in time a death in their place.

It is not that different from what God does for any of us even now—even before we are Christians. The sin of our pre-Christian life, God could immediately judge us, take our lives, send us to hell, and he would be completely just in doing so. But God looked forward in time to that day we believed and then looked back in time to the death of Christ, and he restrained his wrath so that we might display his righteousness by our salvation.

The result is that God is completely just toward every sin and sinner. Every sin ever committed is either paid for in hell or was paid for on the cross. He is both completely just AND the justifier of all those who trust in Jesus for their right standing.

The sobering truth is that not only does God forbear with the sins of those he will save, he also forbears with the sins of those he will not. God waits. If I may draw a Father's Day analogy, when I was growing up, if I did something kind of bad, my mom would discipline me. If I did something bad, she would say, "Wait until your father gets home." There are no more terrifying words than *wait until your father gets home*. Why? When judgment is put on hold till Dad gets home, I'm in big trouble.

God waits to judge sin. That's what allows people around us to seemingly sin with impunity. Nothing bad seems to happen to them. Often, they prosper. They often have it better than us. But that is because Daddy hasn't come home yet. So, the question forbearance asks is the same question propitiation asks and where we began this, *what awaits you?* Don't judge it based on a sense that you seem to be getting away with it. Your present good financial condition or health condition or sense of well-being are no indication of your future.

We live, we die. I walked through many a cemetery in England, hundreds of years old. They lived as we do. Now they stand before God like we will, either an object of wrath and eternal judgment, or an object of mercy with eternal life. The difference between the two is the application of the propitiatory death of Jesus to God's wrath toward me. This happens by faith. By trust and firm belief that Jesus died for me. As the old hymn says, "*Just as I am, without one plea/ But that Thy blood was shed for me,/ And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,/ O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*"⁶

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⁶ Charlotte Elliott, "Just as I Am," 1835.