

## **Christ Alone**

Romans 5: 1-11

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August 18, 2024

Have you ever seen one of these on the back bumper of the car in front of you? It's known as a coexist bumper sticker. Basically, it means that all religions are of equal value and importance. It's just a matter of finding the one that's right for you. According to this line of reasoning, all of them can put you in touch with some form of higher divine entity. The symbols on this bumper sticker represent a wide variety of religions from Islam, to Judaism, Buddhism, Daoism, Witchcraft and last but not least Christianity. The sticker is promoting that old idea that there are many different paths to the top of the mountain and all of them will eventually lead you to the summit. Unfortunately, what the sticker promotes does not reflect reality and that's most certainly true with regards to Christianity.

Christianity is different from all other world religions in one important aspect. In the other religions, believers are expected to do something to please their god and gain access to his presence. For example, a follower of Islam is expected to do five things—repeat a memorized call to worship, pray five times a day, give alms to the poor, honor Friday as a holy day and make a pilgrimage to Mecca. All of the other religions also have lists of expected duties and responsibilities on the part of the adherent. It's about doing something that pleases the deity so that the person who worships this divine being will be benefited in some way here on earth or in heaven. Christianity is just the opposite. It's not so much what we can do for God, but what He can do for us. He is the one who welcomes us into His presence and He is the one who insures and makes certain of that possibility. Therefore, with regards to being ushered into His presence and receiving the gift of eternal life, Christianity is not about we can do. It's about what God has already done. This morning let's take a look at how God has accomplished this marvelous feat on our behalf.

Last Sunday we discovered that God loves us, but that sin has separated us from God. In other words we are both loved and lost. We also discovered that because God loves us and because we are lost, separated from Him, He came looking for us like a shepherd searching for one of His lost sheep. That's good news. In fact, that's great news. Several months ago, we lost one of our kitties. Instead of staying in the front yard, Doodle wandered off and didn't come home that evening. We could have said, "Oh well, too bad. It's a real shame that he's gone." But we didn't. We walked all around the house and up and down the driveway calling his name. We went to bed worried and upset because we love "Doodle." The next morning I started walking down the road that leads to our daughter's home, calling his name

over and over again. Then I saw Doodle emerging from the brush on the side of the road. He was wet and weary and unsure on his feet, almost staggering. It had obviously been a difficult and even a frightening and dangerous night for him in the woods. I rushed over and picked him up and carried him home. I could almost sense him saying, "Thanks Dad, I don't think I could have made it home on my own." Doodle had, so to speak, been saved, but he didn't accomplish that on his own. Someone cared enough to go looking for him and to do whatever was necessary to bring him home. That is precisely what God did for us when He sent Jesus into our world. But how did He accomplish that? Let's see if we can find out how God has rescued us from our sins and brought us back into a loving, lasting relationship with Himself.

Basically, the answer can be summed up in one verse of Scripture. Romans 5:8 declares, "God has demonstrated His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Wow! That's a whole lot more than just looking for a lost cat. It says that finding us and bringing us back home to God, cost a man's life and not just any man's life. It cost the life of God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Why? In order to understand why this was necessary, we need to take a look within the pages of the Old Testament and discover how God provided for the removal of sin among the ancient Israelites.

In order to maintain a right relationship with God, an elaborate system of sacrificial offerings were prescribed in the Old Testament books of Leviticus and Numbers. A variety of offerings were prescribed to be presented unto the Lord—sheep, goats, birds and on high and holy occasions even a young bull. These offerings served a number of purposes. Some were thanksgiving offerings, expressions of gratitude. Some were fellowship offerings, a portion of the sacrifice reserved for the Lord while the remainder was enjoyed by His people. The most important ones, however, were the sin offerings. These offerings had two purposes. They were a substitutional payment for wrong doing, as well as being the means by which a sinner's relationship with the Lord could be restored.

Let me explain by using a courtroom illustration. Imagine standing before a judge and being found guilty of a serious traffic violation. You are ordered to pay a hefty fine so that you won't have to spend any time behind bars. After paying the fine you are free to go. So far so good, except for the fact that a written description of your offense has been retained by the court. You have been forgiven, but the record of your violation is still on the books. Since the judge who convicted you lives just down the street, you cannot help but wonder, "Will he always remember what I did and hold it against me?" Then a most unusual thing takes place. The judge asks you to approach the bench. He says, "I'm going to expunge the record of your crime. It will be erased from our court's records. The payment for your crime has been given so freely and so earnestly that I have decided to set

aside your violation as if it never took place. Your relationship with this court and with your fellow citizens has been completely restored."

Sin offerings in the Old Testament achieved the same thing. The sinner would not only be forgiven, but the sin itself would be covered over, removed, washed away as if it had never happened. Take a look, for example, at this passage of Scripture. In Psalm 51, verses one and two, David cries out to the Lord, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to Your unfailing love; according to Your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." Then in another psalm, also composed by David he declares, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He (God) removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). Theologically, the word which describes this act of divine forgiveness is "atonement." Broken down into three syllables, it means "at-one-ment," being completely reconciled with God so that He can wrap His loving arms around you and give you a great big hug.

That's a great, wonderful, life changing event. But here's something even better. The reason why we can be in a state of oneness with God has nothing to do with us. We don't make the sacrifice. We don't pay the fine. We don't bring an offering to God to make things better. It's not something that we do for Him. It's what He has done for us. That's what Paul was talking about in the Scripture which was read this morning. Listen again to what Paul said. The words speak for themselves without any needed explanation. "You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:6-8).

Returning for just a moment to that courtroom illustration I used earlier in this sermon, there's another that I would share with you this morning. It involves a young man that had been convicted of a very serious crime. Asked to rise before sentencing, the convicted man's defense attorney addressed the judge. He said, "Your honor, if it pleases the court, I would like to speak. The young man standing before you did a very foolish thing and he is guilty of the crime. I believe, however, that he deserves a second chance. I am, therefore, willing to take his punishment upon myself. I will pay the price and sacrifice even my own life on his behalf."

What no one in the courtroom knew was that the defense attorney was the son of the judge.

Nearly two thousand years ago these words were written by one of Jesus's disciples named John. He said, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole

world" (1 John 2:1-2). Christ and Christ alone, the One and the only One who can save us.