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Substitutionary Atonement

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Matthew 21:33-46

The Parable of the Wicked Vinedressers, based on a sermon by Bill Hybels

A message I heard last fall by Bill Hybels moved me powerfully. He shared how “These days when you hear the words ultimate sacrifice, you think of a young soldier giving his or her life for their country. Since the birth of our country, over one million one hundred thousand soldiers have made that ultimate sacrifice for our country. I for one am truly humbled by that. And some of those died in a way that distinguishes them further. These are the soldiers who made a voluntary decision to give their lives, in order to spare the lives of their fellow soldiers. You’ve heard about those, who threw themselves on a grenade to save their friends. It’s beyond ultimate sacrifice, or at least redefines it. Those whose lives were *saved* often say things like “I feel like I’m living for 2 people. I’ll never forget him.” It’s why the war memorials in Washington DC are so moving. How *could* you forget someone who voluntarily absorbed a grenade blast to spare your life? Jesus said giving up your life for your friends is the greatest love of all. SCRIPTURE/DRAMA.

Speaking spiritually, God is the landowner, the vineyard is Israel or the world, the tenant farmers are the religious leaders and people (us?), the servants that are sent are God’s prophets, and the son is Jesus the Messiah. The question Jesus asks at the end is haunting: “What will the Owner do to those tenants?”

Well, fellow tenants, as we approach Easter, we have the answer: God will provide a Substitutionary Atonement, the ultimate sacrifice. This is the core idea that distinguishes Christianity and Holy Week from every other religion in the world. The theme of ultimate sacrifice, of someone laying down his life for another, is the core idea of our faith. Theologically, this core idea is called substitutionary atonement. Substitutionary atonement.

The size of those words can scare you. But look at atonement. What does it mean? Like many of you, I’ve gotten a couple speeding tickets in my life. When you get a ticket, the judge will make you *atone* for your traffic violation. You’ll have to make payment, in order to satisfy the demands of traffic court justice. You’ll have to cough up \$50 to \$75 dollars and if you were really bad, you might have to attend traffic safety school. But if you do that, you will, in fact, have atoned for your sin. You will have satisfied the demands of justice, and you are free to go about your business. Atonement means satisfying the demands of justice.

The other word is substitute. We know what this means. When your regular teacher was sick, the school would assign a substitute teacher. Now, some of us probably need to atone for how we treated our substitute teachers. But we understand the idea of substitution. Someone stands in the place of someone else.

So you put the two words together: substitutionary atonement. The demands of justice in heaven were paid for by Jesus Christ. He stood in our stead, atoned, or paid the price for the penalty we racked up, so we could go free and be about our business, because the substitute atoned for us.

It’s heavy stuff, and as we review this parable, we need to put ourselves in the shoes, or sandals of Jesus’ listeners. We need to feel the impact as they did, based on the idea of substitutionary atonement. It’s easy to

get fuzzy on this. We need to grasp this.

So first, we turn the clock way back to Genesis, in the Garden of Eden, with Adam and Eve, when God says “Enjoy the Garden and eat of all the vegetation except the one tree of knowledge of good and evil. Don’t eat of it. I have my reasons. And the day you do, you will surely die.” God is saying this is not a misdemeanor. It’s not a felony. It’s a capital offense. You know the story. The minute they eat the fruit, they are struck with guilt and shame and intense regret, and they start hiding from God. And God comes and visits them in the middle of their shame. Adam and Eve expect the death penalty right then and there. They went totally against what God said to do. And then God does something that blows Adam and Eve’s minds. He grabs hold of an animal, an innocent animal that was hanging around in the Garden, and He kills it. And He skins that animal to make skins, coverings for their shame. It’s a first glimpse of the idea of substitutionary atonement. Here’s an innocent animal dying just to cover their shame and guilt.

Now, move ahead to the time when the Israelites were enslaved by the Egyptians for 430 years. God heard their cries and sent 10 plagues. The final plague was the angel of death. God said “Here’s the deal: At midnight tonight the angel of death is coming, and the firstborn in every household is going to die...unless you find an innocent, unblemished lamb, and kill it, and take some of the blood and put it over the doorpost of your house. Then the angel will PASS OVER that house and not deal God’s judgment.” This is the beginning of the Passover Feast, that’s been observed by our Jewish friends for 3000 years to this day. Someone gets to go free because he or she has a substitutionary atoner.

As Israel became established, their sacrificial system and calendar year were *based* on substitutionary atonement. In the middle of this there was a prophet named Isaiah...and he predicted that *someday* an ultimate human atoner, a human substitutionary atoner is going to bear the sins of all people. The people are like “No, no, no. It’s one thing for substitutionary atoners to be animals. It’s one thing to watch a lamb die, a goat die. That’s bad enough.” But Isaiah prophesied: There’s going to be a *human* substitutionary atoner.

Now, move into the New Testament, 1st Century AD, when one day John the Baptist is talking in front of a large crowd of people. He sees Jesus and screams in front of everybody “Behold! *There is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!*” The thought that God’s Son would die as the ultimate substitutionary atoner just blew people’s minds.

Now, roll the clock 3 years ahead to Good Friday, when Jesus is on the cross and He gets to the end, and He says the words “*It is finished.*” (John 19:30) What did He mean? My *life* is finished? The *suffering* is finished? No. He didn’t say “*I am finished.*” He says “*It is finished.*” *Tetelesatai*, in the Greek. Now Archeologists have found Papyrus tax receipts from that time with the same word *tetelesatai* written across the bottom. It means “*paid in full.*” What Jesus was really saying was “ALL of the dying, all of the animals, all of the sacrifices, all of the Days of Atonement, all of the times since the Garden of Eden that someone has had to die as a substitutionary atoner so guilty parties could go free, the entire sacrificial system and all it represents is culminating in this moment when I make the ULTIMATE SACRIFICE. I am satisfying the demands of justice. I’m substituting. I’m standing in the stead of where sinners should be. Jesus said “I take it all.” I shed my blood for the sins of the world. “*It is finished.*” And then he died.

Now. Roll the clock ahead a little more to the day when history as we know will end. We don’t talk about it much, but the Scriptures clearly do. A day of reckoning is coming: the Day of Judgment when every individual will stand before a Holy God. You will. I will. No exceptions. Most of us imagine this time and we think that the conversation will be about our sins. “How much sin have *you* racked up? A little, a medium amount, or a whole big pile? But that’s not the question that will be asked, because the Living, Holy God already knows your sin. The one question *is* this: “*Who is going to atone for your sins?*” That’s the only issue at the final judgment of God. Who is going to atone, because someone has got to satisfy the demands of justice of a Holy God. Sin has to be paid for. All throughout history it’s been paid for, by animals before the time of Christ, then by Christ Himself. So the question today is “Who is going to atone for YOUR sins?”

Now, there are two options, and only two. The first is a very real option: You can self-atone. You have that choice. You can take the hit and pay the full price for every one of your sins. Now if you choose that option,

your penalty will be to be separation from God forever. So, just be clear: you have the option of self-atonement. You say, "I want to live apart from God, I don't need any help from Jesus Christ, I don't want any of this atonement stuff messing with my life, so I'm going to self-atonement, I'm a big boy, I'm a big girl, I'll face it that day." It's an option of terrible consequence. But it *is* there for anyone who wants to self-atonement.

The only other option is that you, in this life, and on that final day, ask for *Jesus Christ* to be your substitutionary atoner. *This* is the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. There are no other atoners that you can call for to atone on your behalf. No other would-be leaders ever claimed that their deaths were atoning deaths except for Jesus Christ, who took the sins of the world, yours and mine, on His shoulders and paid the price and said "*It is finished.*" Christ took MY hit, substitutionarily atoned for my sins, so that a guilty party like me could go free.

So here's what's going to happen when I stand before a Holy God. My day's coming, and so is yours. When the question is asked of me, "How do you want the atonement thing to work for you? How's this sin that you racked up throughout the course of your life going to be atoned?" I'm going to stand there in *great* humility and say "I ask for Jesus Christ to be my substitutionary atoner, and He agreed to. I put all my hope on Him." And the Scripture says God is going to honor that. And He's going to say "Welcome into My Kingdom on the basis of the substitutionary atoning factor of my Son Jesus Christ." It's God's plan from the beginning, and it's the only way (Romans 3:21-26).

Now here's the question of the day: As we come into Holy Week, how many of you *know and are rock solid* that you have asked Jesus Christ to be your substitutionary atonement? You don't drift into this, you guys. You don't wind up getting atoned for because you came to church. Or because your parents did the baptism thing, or because you think you're a pretty nice guy. In other words, there comes a moment in time when this deal has to get done. This transaction has to take place. This prayer has to be prayed. So I'll ask it again. *Have you asked Christ to be your substitutionary atoner?*

In just a moment we're take communion together. It's a sacrament of great meaning and symbolism to people of faith, people who have decided they need a substitutionary atoner. It's the drinking of grape juice and a little piece of bread, and the idea is you are appropriating the death of Jesus Christ on your behalf. You don't have to be a member of this church. Before God and other people you are saying "I need Jesus Christ. I need Him applied to *my* life and *my* sins. That's what communion means.

No one walks into heaven on their own. The only way you get there is by being carried, on the merits of another. This is the most important decision a human being can make. Be honest. Do you need the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ? If you're on the fence, now would be a great day. Palm Sunday, 2007.

Those soldiers who were saved say "I feel like I'm living for two people. And I will never ever forget him." That's how Christians feel. It's a sense of wonder, a sense of awe, that God's own Son would take the hit to satisfy the demands of justice in heaven, that guilty parties like you and me would be declared free.

And for those of you who are still thinking about it, God loves you, even in this moment when you're not ready. God still loves you. And he's done everything he can to present you with an alternative to your self-atonement plan. I just encourage you now. Once you get this thing settled in your life, there's a huge exhale and you go "I have the peace that passes human understanding. I'm prepared for Christ's Kingdom on the merits of another. My sins are forgiven on the merits of another. I have His presence and power in my life because He was resurrected on the third day and He lives with me now. It's so good, even in hard times, especially in hard times.

Oh yeah. What will the Owner of the Vineyard do to those tenants who killed His servants and His Son? The answer is the Owner already *did* it. He *sent* His Son, to pay the ultimate price of substitutionary atonement. He would make His own Son, whom they killed, become their Savior and Lord. The One they rejected would be the One on Whom the foundation of everything now rested. And He would be Lord of the new vineyard. **Let's pray:** Our Father in heaven, you really are our only hope. Thank you from the bottom of our hearts

that there's an alternative to self-atonement. Thank you for the reminders: from the Garden of Eden and all throughout history that there really is a substitutionary atonement that would be made possible by the ultimate sacrifice of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Pour your Holy Spirit on us and on these gifts of bread and the vine... As we leave today, we leave with the awareness that our sins are gone, that our eternity is secure, that our path between here and there can be a good one, led by the resurrected Jesus Christ. What a Savior You've provided. What a hope! We pray this in the name of our Substitutionary Atoner, Jesus Christ. Amen."