

Justification: Defending the Heart of the Gospel

The Great Exchange

2 Corinthians 5:21

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I want to suggest to you in this hour that the doctrine of justification by faith—the Reformation principle of *sola fide*—is of such primary importance that it deserves to be a major and regular focus of your preaching ministry. You need to master the nuances of this doctrine, understand the biblical basis for it, learn to defend it against all the various attacks that have been brought against it, and build your message around the truths of this doctrine, because it is, after all, the very heart of the gospel.

That’s the very thing I believe the apostle Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 2:2, when he wrote, “I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” And you see this in Paul’s own writings. Virtually every subject he ever deals with in the New Testament, he ultimately brings it back to the touchstone of this one article of faith: justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Why give such prominence to this one doctrine? After all, there are many other doctrines that are fundamental—essential to true Christianity. The deity of Christ, His incarnation, His bodily resurrection, and the promise of the second coming—all of those are explicitly named in Scripture as nonnegotiables—essential to true Christianity and essential to authentic faith. Not to mention all the key doctrines of Trinitarianism. Deny any of those and you have in effect departed from the Christian faith. Or the doctrines of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Abandon that, and you have opened the door for every other kind of error. So why place so much stress on the principle of justification by faith?

Justification by faith is unique, I believe, because it distills the pure essence of everything fundamental and everything distinctive about Christianity. A person can affirm the deity of Christ, give lip service to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture, be very sound in all the basic points of Trinitarian doctrine—and still come under the curse of Galatians 1:8–9 because he preaches a different gospel.

A person can affirm the doctrines of the virgin birth of Christ, have a solid grasp on the incarnation, believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, and yet

be one of those described in Romans 4:4 and Romans 9:32 and Romans 10:3 who—rather than trusting in Christ *alone* for justification—are seeking to establish a righteousness of their own by works.

In other words, you can be basically sound on Christology or theology proper and unsound on the gospel. And that error, Paul says, will damn you without remedy.

But the converse is not true. I have never met anyone who truly understood and affirmed justification by faith and the principle of *sola fide* who was unsound on other fundamental doctrines. If you truly understand justification by faith and the principle of imputed righteousness, then you are *going* to affirm the deity of Christ. Because the imputation of righteousness requires a perfect Substitute, with perfect righteousness—a righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees and is as perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect. The only Substitute who qualifies is a Christ who is also God. So if you truly understand *sola fide*, you will believe in the deity of Christ, because the principle of Christ's deity is built right into a sound understanding of justification by faith.

In the same way, the principle of justification by faith works only if you affirm the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Stay sound on the principle of *sola fide*, and you will also be basically sound in your understanding of the atonement.

In the same way, all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity—the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, the truth of a Trinitarian Godhead, the doctrines of grace, and even the authority of Scripture—are all linked in one way or another so that the better you understand this doctrine of justification by faith, the more sound you will be in all of your theology.

That's why if you were to ask me to name the one doctrine in all of theology that is most vital; the one that carries the most weight; the one doctrine most important to handle with care and most vital to proclaim accurately, it would not be a difficult choice. I would tell you instantly that in my opinion, it's the doctrine of justification by faith—the Reformation principle of *sola fide*. This one doctrine encompasses the heart and soul of everything that is essential to Christianity, everything that is fundamental to our faith. The doctrine of justification by faith is the very life and nerve of the gospel itself.

It is to the shame and the detriment of the evangelical movement that we have not given this doctrine sufficient stress or suitable attention for more than a century now.

You'll discover an interesting irony if you study the history of the fundamentalist movement at the start of the twentieth century: that movement

almost from its inception failed to give sufficient attention to this most important of all fundamental doctrines.

The early fundamentalists (as I'm sure you know) were a group of loosely affiliated evangelical leaders who rose up together to defend the foundational, essential, most vital doctrines of the Christian faith against the influence of modernism.

Modernism was a rationalistic, humanistic movement that denied the miraculous elements of Scripture and therefore undermined the authority of Scripture itself. At the height of modernist influence in the late nineteenth century, virtually every essential doctrine of Christianity was under direct attack. The authority and inspiration of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, creationism, and the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis—all of those had been attacked by modernists.

So the fundamentalists began responding by writing and publishing a series of articles titled "The Fundamentals." The complete set of articles was republished in four volumes in the 1990s, and they are still definitive and convincing arguments today, in defense of the truth of Scripture.

But study the table of contents and you will notice a glaring omission: There is only one brief article in defense of the doctrine of justification by faith. It's a short and succinct article by H.C.G. Moule, then bishop of Durham. And it's fine, as far as it goes, but it stops short of being a thorough and definitive explanation of how Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner. It's buried in the middle of the third volume, not at all given the kind of prominence I have suggested this doctrine deserves.

Perhaps our fundamentalist ancestors simply took the principle of *sola fide* for granted, because a long and hard battle for justification by faith had been fought and won by Protestants in the first half of the nineteenth century in response to John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement.

Those like Newman who rejected justification by faith finally abandoned Protestantism completely and joined the Roman Catholic Church. Newman himself was made a Cardinal in the Church.

But Protestants had held on and fought for justification by faith, and it was not directly under assault by the modernists. It was taken for granted. And sadly, it was therefore neglected—almost *completely* neglected for more than 75 years.

In 1961, the Banner of Truth Trust published a reprint of a book that was then 97 years old. *The Doctrine of Justification*, by James Buchanan, was originally published in 1867. The first Banner reprint in 1961 carried a Foreword by J. I. Packer in which Packer wrote this:

It is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism . . . has produced. If we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been an age of such feverish theological activity as the past hundred years; yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. If all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification in this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline.

It's been some 44 years since Packer wrote those words. And now the doctrine of justification by faith is under attack from several sources within the evangelical movement. After several generations of near total silence on the subject, evangelicals are not well equipped to defend *sola fide*.

The ecumenical movement has made serious inroads into evangelical churches for precisely this reason: the inaccurate and watered-down notion most modern evangelicals have regarding justification by faith really *isn't* all that different from medieval Roman Catholicism. The typical evangelical these days doesn't understand the doctrine of justification well enough to see how profound and important the difference is between what the Reformers taught and what the Roman Catholic Council of Trent declared. Try this if you don't believe me: Read the council of Trent on justification to the typical evangelical; don't tell him what it is; and in all likelihood, he will say it is perfectly sound.

And in fact, that is pretty much what some evangelical leaders are now saying. There are several influential voices and a number of popular movements within Protestant evangelicalism now suggesting that Luther and the rest of the Reformers got it all wrong, because they misunderstood what the apostle Paul meant when he spoke of justification by faith. That's one of the major themes of N. T. Wright and the "New Perspective on Paul." It's an idea that is being echoed by "Auburn Avenue Theology" (a movement among American Presbyterians). It's a notion that has had a surprising and dismaying influence in Reformed circles, where you would expect men to understand and fight for the central, defining doctrine of the Protestant Reformation.

My answer is that Paul's teaching on justification by faith is neither as obscure or as difficult to follow as this new breed of New Testament "experts" wants to pretend. Paul spoke with absolute clarity on the doctrine of justification. Romans 3-4, Romans 5, Romans 8, Philippians 3, and many other key texts on justification are clear and definitive. Taken together, they give us an understanding of justification by faith that is the ideal anchor and the perfect centerpiece of a comprehensive biblical theology. It is my contention that proper exegesis of all the biblical texts will definitively prove the principles of

sola fide, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, the forensic nature of justification, and every other key point that was under dispute in the Protestant Reformation.

And to give you a clear example of that, I want to take you to one short verse that sums up the doctrine of justification by faith more pointedly than any other.

Here is the apostle Paul's most succinct statement about the meaning of the cross, and the shortest, simplest verse among many in the Pauline epistles that make the meaning of justification inescapable.

Second Corinthians 5:21: "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

The whole gospel message is contained in those words. This text explains the nature of the atonement, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, and the principle of substitution. It teaches us about the character of God, the sinlessness of Christ, and the simplicity of salvation. It summarizes biblical *soteriology*. It has important implications for *Christology*. And it teaches us something about *theology proper*, because it plainly assumes the sovereignty of God, the love of God, the justice of God, and the grace of God.

So I hope you understand what I mean when I say this is one of the most important and far-reaching texts of Scripture.

This is one of those crystal-clear verses that helps us make sense of all the rest of Scripture. It helps explain the significance of the priestly and sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. It thoroughly illuminates the meaning of the cross of Christ. It reveals why Christ is the only way of salvation from sin. It shows why no good works performed by sinners could ever contribute an iota to their salvation. And it demonstrates how salvation was accomplished for us without any of our own works—and yet in a way that completely fulfilled God's law, upheld His justice, and vindicated His own righteousness.

In other words, to borrow an expression from Romans 3:26, here is *how* God can "be just, and the justifier of [those who believe] in Jesus." This text explains how God can pardon sinners and treat them as righteous without compromising His own impeccable righteousness or lowering His perfect standards in any way.

I love John MacArthur's summary of the meaning of this text, and it bears repeating. It's also a pretty good paraphrase of the text itself. Here is what this verse is saying, in the words of John MacArthur: "On the cross, God treated Christ as if He had committed all the sins of every sinner who would ever believe, so that He could treat believers as if they had lived Christ's perfect life."

Look at the verse again: "He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." This is all about

the atoning work of Christ. Its meaning can be summed up in a single principle: substitution. It describes an exchange that took place through the atonement that Christ offered—our sin for Christ’s righteousness. He took the place of sinners so that they might stand in His place as a perfectly righteous man.

Notice the graphic language: He was made *sin* (that’s the very epitome of all that is despicable and odious), so that we might be made *righteousness* (that’s everything that is good and pure and acceptable in God’s estimation). This was the exchange: our sin for His righteousness. Our sin charged to His account; His righteousness credited to our account. It is a profound concept, and several amazing things stand out on the face of this text.

First of all, notice that *God did this*. “He [*God*] hath made him [Christ] to be sin for us.” It was God who appointed His own Son to stand in the place of sinners. In the words of Acts 2:23, Christ was “delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God.” His death on the cross was not merely something inflicted on Him by the wicked hands of sinful men. This was not merely an atrocity instigated and carried out in the strength of human free will. God ordained it. As Isaiah 53:10 says, “it pleased *the LORD* to bruise him; *he* hath put him to grief . . . [*He* made] his soul an offering for sin.” Acts 4:28 also says that what happened at the cross was precisely what the hand and the counsel of God predetermined to be done. God was the One who offered this amazing sacrifice on behalf of sinners. It was all done, according to John 19:28, so “that the scripture might be fulfilled.” The cross was not an accident of history or an afterthought. But long before the beginning of time this was the predetermined plan of a sovereign God to redeem sinners. That’s why Revelation 13:8 refers to Christ as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” So, as I said, the truth of God’s sovereignty permeates this text. *God did this*.

Second, notice that *He did it for us*. “He hath made him to be sin *for us*.” Christ, who did not deserve the wages of sin, suffered the full weight of divine wrath on behalf of people who did not deserve anything *but* judgment. He did not deserve to die; we did not deserve to live; but He changed places with us. First Peter 3:18, “[Christ] suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God.” Think of how amazing this is. Romans 5:7-8 (NASB): “For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” So this was an extraordinary expression of amazing, unimaginable, incomprehensible love for people who were utterly undeserving of any favor whatsoever. Yet God did this *for us*. Sinners though we were; enemies though we were; our sin having set

us against God as stubborn adversaries—He sacrificed His own beloved son for us.

God did this. He did it for us. Notice, third, *He did it through Christ*. What God planned and purposed was accomplished through the agency of the incarnate Christ—the eternal Son of God in human flesh, who did all this willingly, on our behalf. He “who knew no sin” became “sin for us.”

Notice, that speaks of His life as well as His death. The fact that He “knew no sin” speaks of His sinless life. The reality that “He [became] sin for us” speaks of His dying.

We’ll explore a little more closely what those expressions mean before this hour is past, but for now, just note that when it says “he [became] sin” it speaks of his dying. On the cross, He stood in the place of sinners and bore the wages of their sin as if He Himself had been guilty of all of it.

And yet he wasn’t. “[He] knew no sin.” Again, that speaks of His perfect life. Born under the law, He fulfilled every jot and tittle of God’s commandments perfectly, in every degree. Hebrews 7:26: “[He was] holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners” as far as His character was concerned. “[He] did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth” (1 Peter 2:22). According to 1 John 3:5, “He was manifested to take away our sins; [but] in him [there was] no sin.” He was the spotless, sinless lamb of God—innocent, pure, without sin—as far from sin as anyone could ever be. But He was manifested to take away the sin of the world by bearing it and paying the awful price of it. That message is what the true gospel is all about. No text of Scripture presents it more plainly or more concisely than this verse.

This passage is also uniquely rich in that it explains for us Christ’s relationship to sin, to sinners, and to God the Father. It sheds important light on the meaning and the nature and the extent of Christ’s work. It describes in graphic language the means by which atonement for sin was accomplished. It is one of those texts that is vitally important to our understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith and the imputation of righteousness to sinners. In fact, the principles of justification, expiation, imputation, substitution, and reconciliation are all illuminated by this text. If time permitted, we could practically do a comprehensive survey of every aspect of soteriology (the doctrine of salvation) beginning with this one verse alone.

But I’m not here to overwhelm you with theological terms or turn this into a seminary lecture about points of systematic theology. Instead, I want to show you the utter simplicity of the message. This is what it means to “preach Christ.” This verse is about Christ. It is set in a context where the apostle Paul is describing his own role as an evangelist. This is his one-verse summary of the evangelistic message. It is accompanied by an evangelistic appeal, verse 20: “Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by

us: we pray you in Christ's stead [as His ambassadors, speaking for Him, making the same appeal He would make if He were here speaking Himself], be ye reconciled to God."

That is the plea of the gospel message. That's the simple truth that ought to be the heart and the focus of everything we teach.

Again, this passage is all about Christ. Three clear perspectives of Christ are given to us in this text, and we'll take some time to look at each of them individually.

First, we see—

1. CHRIST AS SINLESS

Christ "knew no sin." Those words appear in the middle of the verse, but this is the logical starting point for understanding the meaning of the whole text. The utter sinlessness of Christ is the foundation for everything else Paul has to say in this verse. First Peter 1:19 echoes this truth. That verse speaks of "Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot." As Hebrews 9:14 says, He "offered himself without spot to God."

Now, of course, as God, Christ was perfectly righteous, absolutely holy, and eternally immutable in all His perfections long before the incarnation. All the virtues of deity were His, and everything Scripture says about the perfect holiness of God applies to Christ. He is, according to Habakkuk 1:13, "of purer eyes than to behold evil, and [unable to] look [approvingly] on iniquity" of any kind.

But here in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul is speaking about Christ's utter sinlessness as a man. Christ was not only God, but He became a man. His humanity was not an illusion; He was a true man—God incarnate in human flesh. And when Paul says here that Christ "knew no sin," he is speaking, in this context, of Christ as our substitute, as a man—the *perfect* man, who lived His whole life spotlessly, in flawless obedience to the law of God, without ever once succumbing to temptation or defiling Himself with sin in any way.

Christ as a man did what Adam failed to do. He withstood temptation and rendered perfect obedience to every commandment of God. Scripture makes that very comparison of Christ to Adam in several places. In 1 Corinthians 15:45, Paul writes, "The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit." In that verse, Paul is quoting from Genesis 2:7, where it says, "the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man [the *first* man, Adam,] became a living soul." "The last Adam [that's an expression that speaks of Christ] became a life-giving spirit."

In what sense was Christ like Adam? Just as Adam stood in relationship to the human race as our head and representative, Christ stands in relationship to

the redeemed race as our head and representative. Again, by withstanding temptation, Christ did for us what Adam failed to do. That's why Paul says in Romans 5:19: "As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous."

Adam was put to a simple test. He had only one command to obey, and that was the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He failed. By contrast, Christ's obedience was much more complex. He was "born under the law," according to Galatians 4:4, so the obedience required of Him included more than 600 distinct commandments—moral, civil, and ceremonial. But He fulfilled them all to the letter, from the beginning to the end of His life.

Hebrews 4:15 says "[He] was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin." In other words, He was put to the test and proven to be perfectly sinless, without any spot or blemish. That fact came out clearly in His trials, just before His crucifixion, didn't it? His enemies were desperately seeking a way to accuse Him. They looked diligently for anyone who could testify of any wrong that He had done. But in the end they had to rely on the testimony of false witnesses who twisted His Words in order to justify false and trumped-up charges against Him. Even Pilate refused to render any verdict of guilt against Jesus, but after hearing all the charges and cross-examining Christ, Pilate said repeatedly, "I find no fault in this man" (Luke 23:4; John 19:4, 6).

Now, let me address a couple of hard questions that sometimes come up when we talk about the human sinlessness of Christ. First of all, there's been a running debate among theologians for centuries over the question of whether Christ, as a man, could have sinned. Did He even have the potential to sin? Was there any possibility that he would succumb, as Adam did, to temptation and fall?

Some have argued that unless there was a real possibility that He might sin, His temptations were somehow unreal, a pretense, only a simulation of the temptation Adam faced, and unlike the temptations we face. Every true Christian, of course, acknowledges that Christ did *not* sin, but some say that in order for His temptation to be meaningful, He must have had a real potential to sin. Those who hold this position say he differed from you and me in that He had the ability *not* to sin. So He was subjected to temptation with an ability to say either yes or no, and He simply exercised His ability not to sin.

Others say there was never any real possibility that He might sin. But His moral perfection was such that sin had no appeal to Him whatsoever, and therefore no matter what Satan might have done, he could never, under any circumstances, have enticed Jesus to sin.

This debate has raged since medieval times. For those of you who like theological terms, there are even Latin terms for the different views. The first

group believes Christ was *posse non peccare*. *Posse* (P-O-S-S-E) meaning “able,” and *peccare*, a verb meaning “to sin.” *Posse non peccare*, “able not to sin.” The second group says Christ was *non posse peccare*, not able to sin.

You and I, and everyone born as Adam’s offspring, inheriting both his guilt and his sinful nature, are *non posse non peccare*, “not able not to sin.” So you have three possible moral states: *posse non peccare*, “able not to sin”; *non posse peccare*, “not able to sin”; and *non posse non peccare*, “not able not to sin.”

I believe strongly that Scripture teaches Christ was *non posse peccare*, “not able to sin.” His inherent righteousness is one of the attributes of His deity. His absolute hatred for sin is part of His eternal nature. He did not divest Himself of the attributes of deity in order to become man. Therefore He could no more sin than God could lie, and Scripture says plainly and repeatedly that God cannot lie. (See, for example, Titus 1:2; Numbers 23:19; and 1 Samuel 15:29. All of those texts say it is impossible for God to lie.)

Furthermore, Christ is immutable—unchanged and unchanging in His character, and the New Testament expressly declares this. Hebrews 13:8: “Jesus Christ [is] the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.”

There was nothing in Him that held any attraction whatsoever for sin. He hated sin as God hates it. He had none of the evil desires we have inherited as part of our fallen nature. Jesus could not be deceived, as Eve was. He would not yield to sin, as Adam did. In fact, although He was tempted—meaning that he was assaulted with enticements and inducements and arguments by Satan, Jesus said this about Satan in John 14:30: “The prince of this world . . . hath nothing in me.”

What about this argument that Jesus’ temptations weren’t real unless He had the possibility to sin? Look, you can put pure gold in a crucible and heat it to a white-hot temperature, and there is no possibility that it will be burned up, or that it will produce any dross. But the purity of the gold doesn’t make the heat of the flame any less hot.

If anything, Christ’s temptations were *more* intense, not *less* intense than ours, because He never sought relief from any temptation by giving in to it. He felt all the normal, non-sinful human weaknesses that you and I struggle with. Scripture says He suffered hunger, and thirst, and bodily fatigue, just like you and I do. And He surely knew what it was, under the pressure of temptation, for the pains of those infirmities to be intensified.

In fact, that is precisely what Hebrews 4:15 says: “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin.” He bore all the natural infirmities of human flesh and endured the pressure of temptation on the night of His betrayal to the point that His capillaries burst and His sweat was mixed

with blood. But never, ever, did he have any attraction to sin or any desire for that which is sinful.

To say that there was ever any possibility of sin in Christ is to misunderstand the utter moral perfection of His character. I would regard it as a serious error to imagine that Christ could have sinned, because it tends to diminish the truth of His deity. Christ was *non posse peccare*—not able to sin, and that is true because He was God incarnate, unchanging, perfectly righteous in and of Himself, with an eternal, immutable, and holy hatred of all that is *unholy*.

There's a second important debate about Christ's perfect earthly obedience. And it has to do with the question of whether His life, as well as His death, has redemptive significance.

Now we know that "Christ *died* for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3). "We were reconciled to God by the *death* of his Son" (Romans 5:10). In other words, his death bought our atonement. His blood was the redemption-price. Again, we saw this last week, when we studied 1 Peter 1:18-19 ("Ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things . . . But with the precious blood of Christ.") Again and again, Scripture says Jesus' death is what made atonement for our sins.

But is there any sense in which His *life* also had redemptive significance? I believe there is. Throughout His earthly life, Christ was acting as our substitute, so that everything He did as a man, He did on our behalf. And everything He did ultimately contributed to our redemption.

There's a reason why Christ did not simply take on the body of a human adult and visit earth for a weekend in that full-grown incarnate form, die, and then ascend to heaven. Would simply dying in human form, apart from living a complete human life, have provided the same kind of sufficient atonement for us? I believe not. Look at Hebrews 2. Keep a marker here in 2 Corinthians 5, but I want you to see what Scripture says about Christ's incarnation and atonement.

Notice that verse 14 says He "took [partook of flesh and blood] so that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil." So the ultimate purpose of *the incarnation* was redemptive. He became a man—partook of flesh and blood—for us, in order to "deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (v. 15). Notice (v. 16), He did not do this for angels. The angels who fell were condemned and sentenced without any possibility of atonement. But He became a man. In fact, verse 16 says "he took on him the seed of Abraham." That's a reference to the Abrahamic covenant, which promised (Genesis 22:18) that "in [Abraham's] seed . . . all the nations of the earth would be blessed." Christ was that

promised seed, bringing the blessings of divine grace and eternal salvation to people from every tongue and tribe and nation.

Now notice verses 17–18: “Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted.” That is a sweeping statement that makes it clear that Christ *had* to live a full life as a man. His life—not only His death—clearly had redemptive significance. A full life of perfect faithfulness was essential to His role as a mediator between God and men. It was the essential proof that He qualified to be the spotless lamb of God to take away sin.

But I believe it was more than that. I’m convinced by my reading of Scripture that Christ’s whole life was a fulfillment of the principle of substitution we find in our text. I hope you’ll see this clearly as we get further in our study, but if we’re going to get there, we have to move on. Meanwhile, keep this principle in mind: Christ’s life, and not His death only, contributes something vital to our redemption. Scripture is clear (Hebrews 2:17) that Christ, in order to be the High Priest who offers atonement, “had to be made like His brethren [in *all* things].” So those who limit His atoning work to His death alone have an incomplete work of the atonement. I promise I’ll try to come back to that point.

But that’s the first perspective of Christ we see from this passage: Christ as *sinless*. Not only sinless God, but sinless God *incarnate*, so that He is a sinless man as well.

Here’s a second view of Christ we see in this text, and this one is shocking. I hope you are taking these down. First, Christ as sinless. Now second—

2. CHRIST MADE SIN

I wouldn’t use such language if Scripture didn’t use it. It’s the opening phrase of our text: “He hath made him to be sin for us.” It is a deliberately graphic expression. I hope it jars your mind and offends your sensibilities. God made Christ to be sin. That’s not an easy statement to process, but it is pregnant with meaning. Let’s see if we can begin to get a grasp on what it means.

First, let’s talk about what it *doesn’t* mean. It doesn’t mean that God made Christ to be a sinner. And that’s clear by the phrase immediately following, which we have already dealt with. Christ “knew no sin.” In other words, he knew no sin by His own experience. He had no personal guilt. He was without any blame or sinful corruption whatsoever.

And Paul isn’t suggesting that the character of Christ was changed at the cross. Now and then, you’ll hear some careless or misguided individual claim

that Christ became a sinner on the cross, or that he took on Himself corruption and guilt in such a way that he became an actual transgressor. That is not what this means. I've already quoted Hebrews 7:26, which says that Christ was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens." The cross changed nothing of His innocent character. He was not made into a wicked person, nor was He in any way tainted by sin. He died as "a lamb without blemish and without spot." And this expression doesn't mean anything that would change that truth. Those who teach that Christ became sinful on the cross have misunderstood how our sins were imputed to Him.

There are others who want to go the opposite direction, and tone this expression down. They point out that in the Hebrew language, the same word is used for "sin" and "sin offering." So, they say, maybe this was a Hebraism. Maybe the verse ought to be translated this way: "He hath made him to be [a sin offering] for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

Now, that might seem to make sense and do away with the offensiveness of the expression. And the sense of the statement is true enough. "Christ became a sin offering." But you can't sustain that translation linguistically, grammatically, or contextually. In the first place, the Greek word translated "sin" in this text is *hamartia*, and it means "sin." It is never used in the New Testament to speak of a sin offering.

In the second place, the same word (*hamartia*) is used twice in the Greek text of our verse, and you can't have it mean one thing in one place and another thing in the other place, all in the same statement. It would make nonsense of the verse to render it this way: "he hath made him to be [a sin offering] for us, who knew no [sin offering]."

In the third place, the word *sin* obviously stands in deliberate contrast with the word *righteousness* ("he hath made him to be sin . . . that we might be made . . . righteousness")—and if the word is made to mean "sin offering," it destroys the parallelism of that contrast.

So the translation is correct as it stands. "he hath made him to be sin for us." It doesn't mean Christ literally *became* guilty; and it doesn't mean merely that He became a sin offering. So what does it mean?

It can only mean one thing: he was made sin by imputation. He was made sin *for us*, on our behalf, on account of *our* sin. He became, in a figurative sense and in a judicial sense, the embodiment and the symbol of our wickedness.

The meaning of the expression is explained by the prophetic prophecy of Isaiah 53:6: "All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all." Our sin, with all its guilt and shame, was *imputed* to Him, put to His account, reckoned

as if it were His—even though it was not. Or, to back up a few verses, in the words of Isaiah 53:4: “He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows.” What griefs and what sorrows? The punishment for our guilt. Verse 5: “he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him.” That’s clear, isn’t it? He took the burden of our sin without actually becoming sinful Himself. Our sin was imputed to Him, or reckoned to His account, and He paid for it.

Actually, there’s a parallel expression in Galatians 3:13. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us.” He was made sin for us. He was made a curse for us.

Again, the language is deliberately powerful. To say He was “made sin” is actually *more* shocking than saying He was “made a sinner.” It means that God treated Him as if He were the very embodiment of everything vile and contemptible and base and evil.

Try to conceive of a world of sin gathered up and concentrated in one ugly mass—fornication, murder, vile thoughts, every expression of human cruelty, and every evil manifestation of human wickedness in one hideous heap. You and I, fallen and sinful creatures though we are, could not bear to look at it. How much less could a pure and holy God stand to see it?

God the Father treated His own Son as if He represented that mass of sin—as if He were the pure, distilled essence of everything a holy God cannot endure—as if He were the very personification of everything God must judge with an outpouring of divine wrath and banish from His presence.

And Christ drank that cup of wrath (as our text says) “for us.” That’s what this expression means. “[God] made Him to be sin for us.”

Now, I have to move on to our third point. If you’re trying to follow my outline in your notes, here’s a review: We’ve seen Christ as sinless, then Christ made sin. Now look at a third perspective this text gives us:

3. CHRIST IN UNION WITH SINNERS

Look at the last clause of the verse, and especially the last two words: “He hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.” Now, what is this saying? In what sense are we “made the righteousness of God”?

You might be tempted to think this means simply that God makes us righteous. After all, according to Romans 8:29, He *did* “predestinate [us] to be conformed to the image of his Son.” And according to 2 Corinthians 3:18, we are being changed into the image of Christ.

But this verse isn’t talking about that at all. Look at the parallelism: God made Christ to be sin; He makes us to be righteousness. They are similar expressions, saying similar things.

God made Christ to be sin. How did He do it? By making Him sinful? No, we already saw why that *cannot* be the meaning. God made Christ to be sin by imputing our sin to Him.

OK. Now we are made righteousness. How is that done? By making us righteous? No. By imputing the righteousness of Christ to us.

The context makes this clear. Notice: it's not our own righteousness; it's "the righteousness of God." It's an imputed righteousness. This verse is describing a straightforward exchange: Just as sin was reckoned to the account of Christ, and He was punished for it, so righteousness is reckoned to our account, and we are rewarded for it. We stand before God clothed in a perfect righteousness, so that in the estimation of the heavenly Judge, it is as if we were the embodiment of righteousness itself.

Now, where does this righteousness come from? Is it just an ethereal righteousness floating around in the universe that is imputed to us? No, it is the righteousness of Christ. "That we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

"In Him." In *union* with Him. Again, this describes an exchange of our sin for His righteousness, and the basis of that exchange is our spiritual union with Christ. Paul speaks of that union at length here in 2 Corinthians 5. And verse 17 uses the expression "in Christ"—"if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Our spiritual union with Christ is the basis for our standing with God. We are seen by God as if we were *in Christ*. His righteousness covers us like a garment; His life counts for our life; and the merit of His obedience accrues to us. Just as my sin was imputed to Him so that He could pay the full price of it for me, in exactly that same way, His perfect life counts as mine by imputation.

That great exchange is the very essence of the doctrine of justification. It's more than just the forgiveness of my sins. That would merely leave me with a blank slate. But the positive merit of Christ's righteousness is also credited to my account, so I get full credit for the perfection of His divine righteousness and His holy life. Isn't that an amazing thought?

This brings us back to the issue we discussed briefly earlier. Here's why it is so important to see that the life of Christ, and not just His death, is an essential part of His atoning work. He lived a full, perfect life of obedience on our behalf, and therefore His perfect righteousness as a man counts for us in the reckoning of God.

Did you ever wonder why, at His baptism, Jesus told John the Baptist this was something He needed to do? Matthew 3:13–15: "Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him. But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus

answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness.”

Now think about that. John’s Baptism signified repentance. John the Baptist understood the situation. Jesus was sinless. John was not. If one should have been baptizing the other, Jesus should have been baptizing John. But Jesus said He was doing it “to fulfil all righteousness.” For whose sake? For His own? No, He had no need of repentance or baptism. But He did it for our sake, to fulfill the righteousness that would be ours by imputation. It was a complete and perfect righteousness, encompassing even the symbol of our repentance.

Again, this is the simple meaning of our text. I can’t say it any more clearly than John MacArthur often states it: “God treated Christ as if He had committed all the sins of all the people who would ever believe, so that He could treat them as if they lived Christ’s perfect righteousness.”

Therefore, Paul says, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God.”

How can you do that? Forsake your love of sin and embrace Christ by faith.

This great exchange of our sin for Christ’s righteousness was a common theme in Paul’s writings. He spoke of it in Romans 3. After spending two and a half chapters showing that everyone—Jews, pagans, and religious Gentiles—are hopeless sinners, unable to save themselves, he says in verses 21–22, “But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe.” In other words, we lay hold of Christ’s righteousness by faith. A few verses later, he says in Romans 4:5, “To him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.” And verse 6: “God imputes righteousness apart from works.”

Paul said that his own singular hope for salvation lay not in himself, but (Philippians 3:9), “[To] be found in [Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.”

That’s what we need to be preaching. We need to make it clear, and we need to preach with force and biblical conviction.

History reveals that when the church has backed away from this doctrine, the church has gone into decline and worldliness. But when preachers have featured this truth, as the Reformers did, and as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards did in the First Great Awakening, as the Welsh preachers did just before the outbreak of revival in Wales—this truth has awakened the church and enlivened the people of God. So let me encourage you to study and

preach the great principles of *sola fide*, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and all the other doctrines related to the doctrine of justification by faith.