

At the Heart of the Matter
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Romans 8: 1-4

We're in our fourth week in our summer sermon/teaching series exploring the 450 year old Heidelberg Catechism and its meaning for us today. We have recited again what our comfort is – the summary and intent of the catechism in that first question we shared as our affirmation of faith. This week both in the class and for the substance of the sermon the Catechism explores the articles of the Apostles' Creed in questions 26–52. There are 129 questions – today is questions 26-52. We're not going to cover ALL 27 questions this morning – which I know disappoints you! I'm going to focus on one – the question and answer that are on the bulletin cover.

We are going to continue in the catechism way. I'm going to question you and you're going to respond (if willing!). This is about the Apostles' Creed and the word "suffered" that shows up – "...suffered under Pontius Pilate..." if you know the Creed.

Question: Friends, what do you understand by the word "suffered"?

Answer: That during His whole life on earth, but especially at the end, Christ sustained in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race. This He did in order that, by His suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, He might deliver us, body and soul, from eternal condemnation, and gain for us God's grace, righteousness, and eternal life.

I grew up in the church learning various aspects of this essential construct of the faith described in this question. Christ died for my sins. I learned about it in a lot of ways. Sometimes it was the "blood" language in some of the old hymns – "There is power in the blood;" "There is a fountain filled with blood" – the language of the "purchase of God," the fact that I was "bought with a price;" Christ paid what I owed. That kind of language is sprinkled throughout Scripture – and the atoning, sacrificial work of Christ is centrally described throughout the Apostle Paul in numerous letters written to the Church.

One of the reasons I chose our text from Romans, is because the Heidelberg at each question has little citations – like footnotes – telling you the biblical foundations for the question and answer. So this Romans 8 passage is one of the citations for this question on the front of the bulletin. But I also chose it because the language of this specific text in Romans contains within it the argument between two schools of thought about what actually took place through Christ on the cross. I'm talking about Atonement theory (you heard the word "atoning" in the answer you gave). Atonement theory is the way theologians have tried to describe what was accomplished at Jesus' death. And there are numerous theories of what happens on the cross. Theologians with weird names like Anselm and Abelard – a thousand years ago – purported certain ideas about what took place on the cross – theories that are still embraced and fought over today.

But I get ahead of myself. Let me read the Romans text:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and to deal with sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.

Right there in verse 3, is the language of Christ being sent to “deal with sin.” That language would be foundational to the theory of atonement called Christus Victor – Christ the Victorious one. That Christ was sent to engage the cosmic battle with the power of evil – the devil – and to win that battle for us, that you and I cannot win. Christ came to “deal with sin” and did so, defeating the power of the enemy on the cross and rising from the dead – conquering death. That’s what our version in the pews – the NRSV – says. Christ came to deal with sin.¹ That’s only one translation however.

The NIV on the other hand, another very popular contemporary translation of scripture – says Christ was sent by God not to deal with sin but “to be a sin offering.” This implies another theory of atonement – what’s called substitutionary atonement. Think substitute – in place of. We owe a debt we cannot pay; Christ paid it for us. In this case, it’s a blood payment. Or, another angle on this – human sin has dishonored God, and put creation as originally intended out of balance. God’s honor requires something to balance that – and Jesus is the one who restores God’s honor by balancing the scale of justice. An honor payment. Our own justice system works like that: you do a crime, you pay a penalty. Another atonement theory.

The Greek here in Romans 8 supports either interpretation. It’s not as concise as we would like it. Either one of those – Jesus came to deal with sin or as a sin offering.

But rather than enjoin the debate – I’d want to say that regardless of the mechanics of what and how it takes place, God accomplishes through Christ what is necessary for our salvation. Whether sent to bear the condemnation of God, the righteous judge, against the sin of humanity– or sent to enter the battlefield for us and with us against evil – Christ accomplishes our salvation.

If you read more of the Heidelberg Catechism you read one part that says:
Is there a debt that I cannot pay, that keeps mounting? Yes! (Heidelberg, question 13)

Is there a balance to justice and holiness that ought to be set right because it’s been put out of balance by our deeds, our misdeeds, our words, our actions, our inactions that have consequences and impact on others? Yes.

Are there forces of evil – within and without – bent on my destruction and the destruction of the world that Christ came to conquer? Yes.

But is THAT what the faith is all about? Is that why the Apostles’ Creed jumps from “born of the Virgin Mary to suffered under Pontius Pilate” – with not a peep about what happens between Jesus’ birth and death?

Sometimes the arguments about what happens at the cross, and exclusive, laser-like focus on the transactional nature of what happened on the cross is such a limited understanding of what it meant for God to be incarnate in Jesus. Was God incarnate in Jesus just to pay that bill?

A week ago we went into Center City to a restaurant we had wanted to go to for awhile. It’s been open for less than two years. And I’ll just say up front, it was one of the top three finest meals I’ve ever had in my life. It was just amazing!! My appetizer was a grilled Spanish octopus with chorizo, white bean, gremolata – and my entree was swordfish – which I rarely order, because it’s usually tough and dry – but I ordered it, and it was the most tender and moist and flavor-filled piece of swordfish in the Universe! It had this lovely, tomato olive tapenade sauce..... Every mouthful was an explosion of flavor; layer upon layer of flavor to every single dish we tasted.

But imagine, if instead of hearing THAT description, suppose the only thing I told you about the meal was the accounting of the cost of the ingredients, the payment of wage for the chef and the staff; the tip for the waiter, and my credit card company disbursing the correct amount. It was a fair, and just transaction.

Of course.....right.....if a told you that Linda and I went into town and we had a fair and just transaction at a restaurant, you would obviously want to run immediately and go there!!!! Are you kidding? There was so much more to that event than the transaction at the cash register. I want to go back because the meal was creative, extravagant, crafted with love for the ingredients and a passion for the culinary arts.

But that's an example of what we've done with the Gospel.

NT Scholar Tom Wright has written how too often the church has boiled down the gospel to **“an over-simple story of an angry God and a loving Jesus, with a God who demands blood and doesn't much mind whose it is as long as it's innocent.”**²

It's all about transaction.

While the work of the cross is central to our faith, any commendation about the faith that jumps only to the cross and skips over the whole of what Christ has done to save us, misses so much.

It misses Jesus' teaching you and me to love our neighbor, and who our neighbor is – they may be the stranger in the ditch. If we only go to the cross, it passes over Jesus' emphasis on healing and visiting and feeding in the broad economy of God, which says there is enough for all, there is abundance. It skips over how God's grace is enlivened and enacted through our relationships between God's children. It also misses the fact that Jesus died because He spoke truth to power – not just to buy us off. Any limitation of His purpose as just paying the bill misses all these flavors in the gospel.

Jesus is the place where God celebrates the triumph of the kingdom of God over the kingdoms of the world by refusing to join in their spiral of violence. He doesn't respond to violence with retaliation but willingly suffers. Here He would love His enemies; turn the other cheek; go the second mile³ – none of which is about bookkeeping, and all of which is about serving and loving and extending grace upon grace.

You see, whenever you and I focus only on “being saved by Jesus' death” – that transaction on the cross – it allows you and me to ignore Jesus' way of life and preaching, because all we really needed from Jesus was the last three days or three hours of his life. If that is the case, why didn't God just show up for the afternoon?

The irony in that is that Jesus – throughout His ministry – undoes, undercuts, and defeats the sacrificial game. It's clear He is not all about counting, measuring, earning, judging, punishing, and ledgers—ways so many Christians are very well trained in, because they believe that is the heart of the way God operates too.⁴

That's not all there is. On the cross we see not only the transaction, we see the perfect and extreme example, the extravagant and powerful nature of God's serving love that Jesus showed throughout His living.

Go back to your bulletin cover. Notice the answer in that question from Heidelberg about the word “suffer” says **“that during His whole life on earth, but especially at the end” – DURING HIS WHOLE LIFE.** It doesn't say just at the END of His life Jesus got done what needed to be done. No, during His WHOLE life Jesus was doing God's work. Reformer John Calvin once said that “Jesus saves us by the whole course of His obedience.” And THAT **LIFE** of love incarnate is what transforms the human heart.

The transaction is not the end in and of itself – it's the beginning of life for us.

When I was in middle school, I was a shoplifter extraordinaire. I was very gifted along with my neighborhood friend. His parents caught him and found out, came to me and said, “Don, you need to tell

your parents or we will.” I figured I might tell them less than they would, so I told my parents that I’d been stealing things. And I’ve told you before the time I was sitting in my room, my mother’s weeping and my father’s pleading my case before God in prayer. It was pretty humiliating...and holy.

Well – the rest of the story is this. My dad said, “Don, you’re going to go back to Mitchell Pharmacy (where I’d stolen a lot of stuff – Papermate pens, zippo lighters, whatever I could put in my pockets and get away with) and you’re going to pay for the stuff you took.”

My Dad could have sent me on my bike – because that’s how I got around in those days – but he got in the car and drove me to Mitchell Pharmacy. But he didn’t wait in the parking lot in the car while I went in. He came in and stood next to me while I asked to talk with Mr. Mitchell.

I didn’t realize until THIS week when I thought about this story – that cost my Dad. To stand there and bear the shame and embarrassment of a son he had sought to raise with integrity – and he, at least in part, had failed. I had failed.

And so it cost him something. To stand up with me, alongside me and to carry some of that burden for me.

So I paid for the pens, the zippos – (at least the ones I had told my Dad I had taken).

But again – it was not the receipt that counted. It was this lifelong love that my father exemplified for me. Willing to stand with you, even when you’re messing up.

It was the whole of what I learned from him. It wasn’t just paying it back that made the difference - the settling of the account. It was always the sum total of his life, his expectations, his desire that I respect Mr. Mitchell and his property, and to respect that my father was going to go in and do business in that pharmacy and wonder if they would say – “Look, there’s that Lincoln guy whose son stole all that stuff.”

Funny thing is – three years later Mr. Mitchell gave me a job as a delivery boy in that pharmacy. I worked for him for 2-1/2 years, I had access to the cash register, all the drugs and his vehicle. Because there’s SO much more flavor in life than just the transaction.

Yes – Jesus paid the bill. Took care of the debt. Beat evil. But He didn’t come just to get done what needed to be done at the cash register. It was to transform you and me into lives of love and service, by HIS extravagant, sacrificial, serving love. He did this so that you and I might know, and the world might know through us.

May it be so. Amen.

1. Karen Chakoian; Feasting on the Word, Romans 8: 1-11; Year A, Vol 3.
2. NT Wright, “The Cross and the Caricatures” lecture 2007.
3. Thomas Talbott, “The Inescapable Love of God”
4. Richard Rohr; Incarnation Instead of Atonement; Daily Meditation, July 25, 2017.