

## **GOD'S CONTAGIOUS LOVE**

Many of y'all know that I did not begin my life in Alaska. Tell the truth, it's the accent, ain't it? No, I am originally from the beautiful state of Kentucky where we raise blue grass, and thoroughbred horses. Kentucky is not generally characterized as a center for think tanks and philosophers. However, most folks there have a fair amount of "horse sense" and are pretty good about getting to the heart of a matter without making it too complicated. Simple minds can be an asset...For instance, I grew up working on a dairy farm – doing all the normal farm chores. It's not rocket science, but it does take some basic know-how. When I went to college at the local university, I met a young man who had come from out of state and was majoring in Agricultural Engineering. We were talking one day and he explained to me how he was taking this course which taught him all about bovine science. He used terms like, "animal husbandry", and went on to explain to me the cow's digestive system and what went on in each stomach. I listened politely for a while then took him for a ride out to the farm (he had never actually been on one). While we walked around he continued to point out interesting factoids about dairy cows and I'm sure they were all technically valid and scientifically correct. So, when we got to the milking barn I handed him a stool, a pail, and pointed him to the nearest cow. I thought for a minute he was going to sit on the pail and milk the stool. He didn't have a clue how to milk a cow. Now, every story should have a point – and mine is that all the book-learning in the world won't amount to much if you don't really understand the core idea and learn how to apply it.

Now today, before you walk out of this place, it's my goal that you will all understand the core idea of Christianity. I really hope that you walk out the door with the full assurance that you really get it—that you understand the basic idea of what Christianity is all about.

This might just change everything in your life. Because once you understand that the core truths of Christianity grow out of God's amazing and contagious love for us, I think you're going to want in on all that he has to offer you!

The first half of the core idea involves a word we call *atonement*.

Atonement is satisfying the demands of justice when a crime has been committed. When someone has been wronged, appropriate payment must be made. We all carry an intuitive understanding of this notion in our heads.

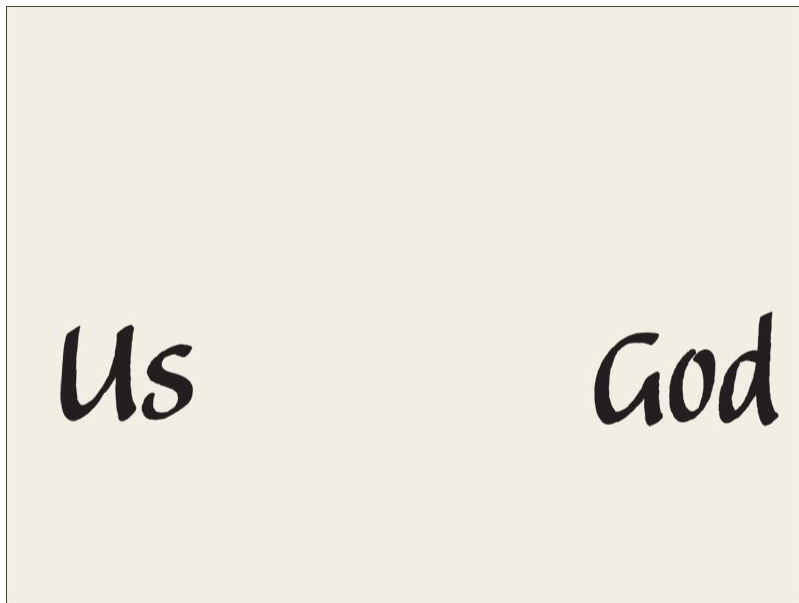
The people who planned and executed the destruction of the Twin Towers in New York City on 9/11—we expect them to atone for that crime. We demand it! The guy who bombed the Federal Building in Oklahoma City, he atoned for his crime with his life. So do you have the idea of atonement now? It's satisfying the demands of justice when a crime has been committed.

The second half of the core idea of Christianity comes out of another word we're quite familiar with—*substitution*. We use this a lot in our culture. It's whoever comes into the basketball game after our favorite player gets kicked out!

Substitute. Taking the place of another. I think we all understand this. Now, let's put those two words together for the complete core concept. *Substitutionary atonement*—it's somebody taking the place of someone else and satisfying the demands of justice for a crime that has been committed.

I want to clarify this concept further by taking you for a brief walk through the Bible and showing you how this pertains to the Christian faith and to your life. We're going to start all the way back in the book of Genesis. Shortly after God created Adam and Eve, he said to them:

*I've breathed life into you. You can make all kinds of decisions, you're smart, and I love you. We'll commune together, and it's going to be a wonderful experience.*



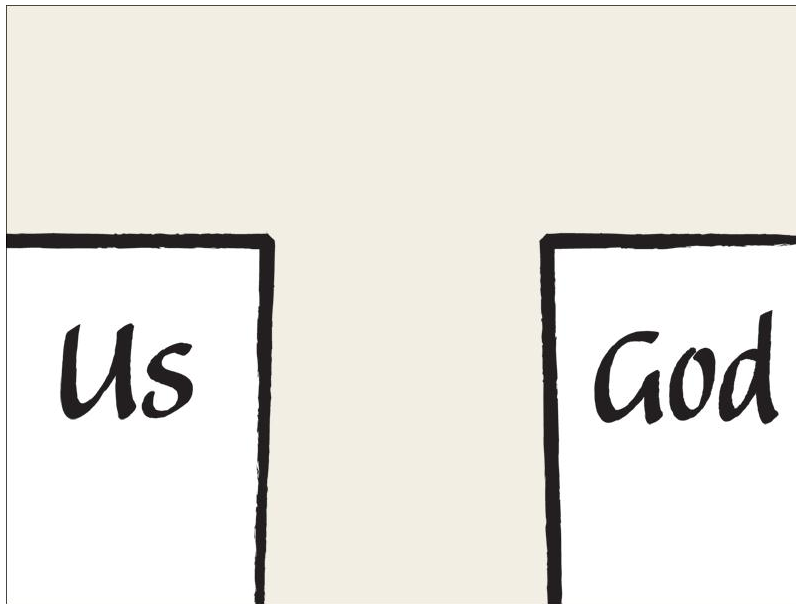
And if I could just pause here for a moment, I'd like to introduce a drawing that some of you saw this past week in our discipleship class called The Bridge. It shows how what was true of Adam and Eve is also true of all of us—that God made us, he loves us, and he wants to

have a relationship with us. We'll come back to this picture, and expand on it throughout this message. I'd encourage all of you to grab a piece of paper or use the insert in the bulletin and write it out with me.

Then God also said to Adam and Eve:

*But I am a holy and a just God. If you start sinning and violating my laws and shaking your fist at me, I've got to let you know something. This wonderful gift of life that I breathed into you is going to come to a screeching halt. You're going to die, not just physically, but also spiritually.*

He made it all very clear. But as you know, Adam and Eve bought into a lie from the Evil One and flagrantly disobeyed God. This brought a separation between them and God, which you can see in this next slide of our drawing. You can draw in the lines on each side to add this chasm to your drawing.



So now all of creation holds its breath wondering, “What is God going to do?” Will he strike them dead for their rebellion? What’s going to happen? Do you remember what God does? Because of his great love, he doesn’t strike them

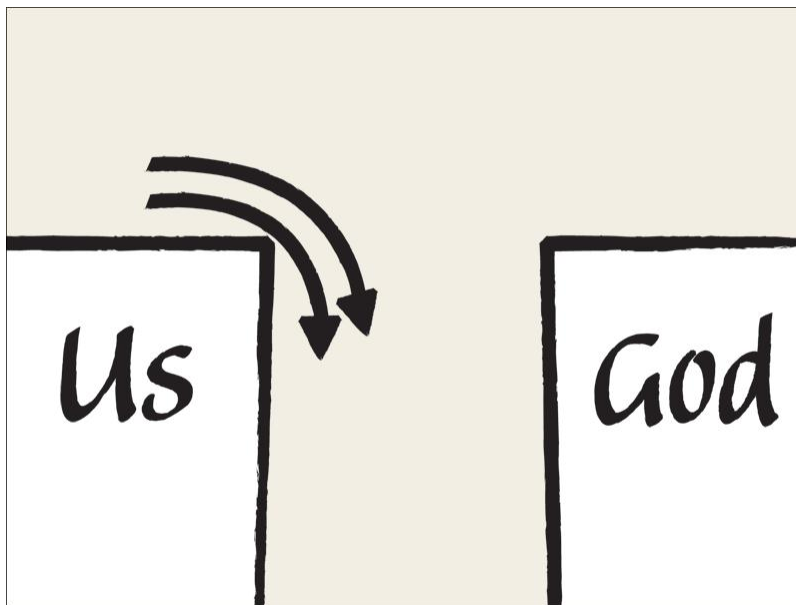
dead, but he doesn’t ignore it either.

First, he explains that now the whole universe has been sin-tainted because of what Adam and Eve did. They’ve opened the door, and now sin is in the world. Human labor is going to be affected, relationships will be complicated by ego, and human bodies will grow old and eventually die.

And God explains that people who continue to live in patterns of rebellion and resistance to him will pay. They’ll atone for their crimes against God in this life and throughout eternity in hell. Sin is a serious thing. But at the end of God’s explanation of the consequences of sin, we read in Genesis 3:21 that God does something that must have knocked the wind out of Adam and Eve, who were cowering with shame and guilt for what they had done. The text says that God covered their shame and nakedness with an animal skin. Most people just read right beyond that and think, “Okay, no big deal.” But it *is* a big deal. I think it’s our first glimpse of the arrangement God is designing to provide sinners with an alternative way to have their sins atoned for.

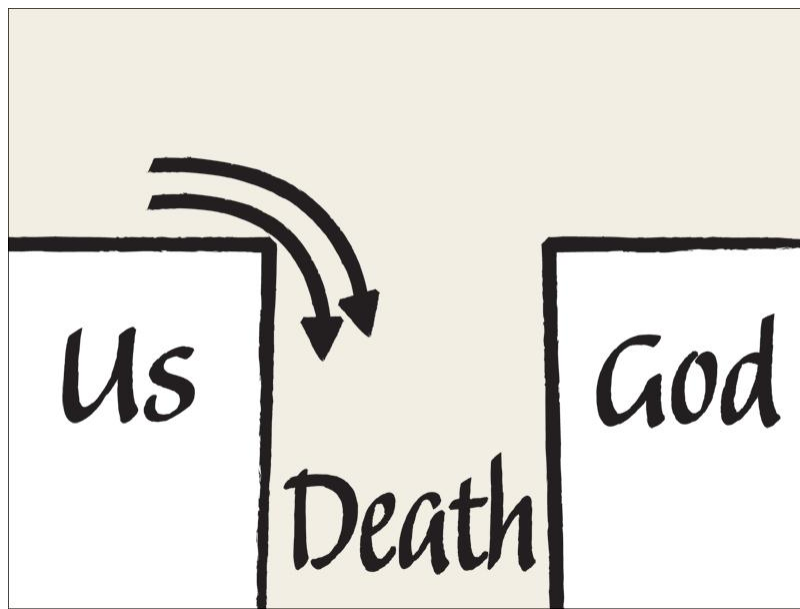
Picture God's dilemma. He's the absolutely holy and just God. He cannot allow sin to go unatoned—it's got to be paid for. At the same time, he's a tender, loving God. The thought of Adam and Eve atoning for their own sins for the rest of their lives and then for eternity in hell just breaks the heart of God. He knows that even with their absolute best efforts, they'll never be able to live up to his perfect standards or to work their way back to him.

Let's add this sobering reality to our drawings by putting two arrows on the left side. Some people try harder to get back to God than others, but all of our efforts fall short.



And, to make matters worse, God's nature demands that he punish our sin and disobedience. That punishment, as we indicated earlier, is a penalty of death—physical death someday and a spiritual death or separation from God for all of eternity.

Let's add that challenging truth to our drawings by putting the word "DEATH" at the



bottom of the chasm, between Us and God

It's not a pretty picture. Our sad predicament and helpless situation moves God to provide

an alternate way that sin can be legitimately paid for, without the sinner having to spend an eternity atoning for his or her own sin *and* without God's holiness being compromised.

So look at what God does, all the way back in the garden of Eden. He takes an animal—an innocent animal—and he kills it. Can you imagine Adam and Eve gasping in horror as they see this? They hear the screech of the animal. They see its awkward movements in its death throes. And then God takes the skin of that animal and covers the shame and guilt and nakedness of Adam and Eve as if to say, “In order for your sinfulness to be covered, in order for your wrongdoings to be atoned for, an innocent party is going to have to bear the penalty that was rightfully yours.”

This was kind of a sneak preview of this idea of substitutionary atonement—the arrangement by God for an innocent party to stand in the place of the sinner and absorb the penalty due to that sinner, thereby satisfying the demands of justice. And the guilty party, then, is set free.

Later on in the history of God's people, we read the story of the Exodus. Remember that? God's people, the Israelites, have become a faithless people held captive by the Egyptians, who are slowly working them to death. The Egyptians are sinning against the Israelites, and the Israelites are sinning against each other and against the Egyptians—and the whole thing turns into a colossal, sinful mess.

This pushes God's patience to the breaking point. Scripture shows us that God is slow to anger, but if you push him long enough his righteous wrath finally kicks in. That's what happens in this situation. God says, “Enough is enough!” He announces to all of the Israelites and the Egyptians that he's going to bring judgment. He's going to bring it to bear on everyone for the sins they've committed. He announces that an angel of death is going to circulate on a given

night and take the life of every firstborn son in every household in the land. The wages of sin is death!

But, again because of God's great love he adds one more thing: "I will offer one escape option. I will make one provision for any interested party. Here it is: anyone who gets an unblemished, prize-of-the-herd male lamb and slaughters it, sheds its blood, and sprinkles a bit of the blood over the door frame on the front of their house—the angel of death, on the appointed night, will honor the blood of that lamb and pass over that house. The eldest son in that house will not be killed." God says, "That's my arrangement. So you can decide—what are you going to do on that night?"

Well, most people just ignore his whole message—both the warning and the escape option. They say, "I don't think God's going to bring judgment. The God I worship would never do that. I don't think he ever gets pushed to the point where he brings judgment. I think we can live however we want, and he's not going to lift a finger."

But thankfully there were a few people who decided otherwise. They said, "You know, I think if God is God, he is loving but he's also holy and just. I think from time to time he does bring judgment." So they go out and get the lamb.

I imagine a fifteen-year-old kid watching his dad search around in the herd. He finds the best lamb and he's just lifting the knife to sacrifice it when his son says, "Hey, Dad! Why are you killing our prize lamb? What did that lamb ever do to you?"—only to have the father respond, "Well, son, it's the lamb or you. It's atonement time. Sin is going to be paid for tonight. A holy God has said 'Enough is enough.' It's the lamb or you."

We read that the next day every household that did as they'd been instructed and offered up an innocent lamb and sprinkled the blood on the doorframe was spared judgment. The lambs

died and the sons went free. But the households that didn't offer up a lamb really did pay with the life of their firstborn son.

Sin is serious. And when it's atonement time, sin gets paid for, one way or another.

Do you see the substitutionary atonement principle again in the story of the Exodus? An innocent lamb takes the hit for the wrongdoing of others and guilty parties go free.

Later on in the Old Testament, you see the sacrificial system. It foreshadows the substitutionary atonement idea as well. Whenever a person sinned grievously, an animal sacrifice would be made; an innocent lamb would be slain. Only after the death of the lamb would the priest give the guilty sinner the assurance that his or her sin had been atoned for and then that person could go free.

Then a prophet named Isaiah announces something that makes people's heads spin and hearts stop. In one of his prophecies he says: "But he was wounded for our transgressions. He was bruised for our iniquities. And the Lord will lay upon him the iniquity of us all." People didn't know how to handle this prophecy because it sounded as though someday, somewhere, God was going to send a human sacrifice to make an ultimate atonement for the sins of the world...

And then, later on, Jesus is born. And he's born amidst all of the miraculous circumstances. He grows up, and there are all of these indications that he's God's Son.

When he's about thirty years old, he goes out one day to where another prophet is preaching. This guy's name is John the Baptist and a large crowd of people is listening to him. Jesus stands on the fringe of the crowd, and John the Baptist sees him, stops preaching, and says, "Look, everybody!" And he points right at Jesus and says an amazing thing: "Behold *the Lamb of God* who takes away the sins of the world."



“Here he is,” John was saying, “the one we’ve all been wondering about, the one Isaiah prophesied would come. He’s God’s ultimate provision for atonement. He’s the unblemished prize lamb that will be offered as the ultimate substitute for sin. He’s the one that tens of thousands of sacrificial lambs have been foreshadowing all these years.”

When Jesus began his teaching ministry, he too began to refer to himself in these sacrificial terms. He’d give a great talk and people would be applauding. Then he’d add, in so many words, “But you’ve got to know something. Not too long from now, I’m going to be sacrificed for all of your sins.” And the people said, “No, no, no!”

Then he’d teach another message and people would say, “Oh, that’s great. We love to hear you preach, Jesus.” Then he would say, “I’m going to lay down my life for you,” and, “I am the lamb of God who’s going to take away the sins of the world.” I’m telling you, people just couldn’t take in that kind of supernatural love.

But, sure enough, after living a sinless, unblemished life, he was arrested and falsely convicted. He was beaten and bruised. And then, Jesus, the innocent Lamb of God, finally cries out, in effect, “It is finished! I have made atonement for the sins of the world.”

Let’s pause to add the cross to our drawings, to show how Jesus died to pay for our sins.

It just doesn’t seem right. The price seemed too high. Guilty sinners don’t deserve a



substitute like the one God provided. They ought to pay for their own sins.

And you know what? *We* deserve to because we are the ones

who do them. We're the ones who know God's rules and break them anyway. We're the ones who lie when we ought to tell the truth. We're the ones who hold back when we ought to give. We are the ones who exclude others when we ought to include them. That's the kind of people we are. And we deserve to atone for these kinds of crimes.

But the Bible says, in those words I hope you've heard since you were a kid, "God so loved the world." You know, even with him being as holy, righteous, and just as he is, God still has this thing about you. You matter to him. He knows your name. And whenever he thinks about you, his heart is moved with love. So the Bible tells us that God so loved the world that even though we ought to pay for our own sins, he sent his only begotten Son to stand in our place, to pay the death penalty we should pay, making a substitutionary atonement for our sin.

Let's illustrate this amazing reality by going back to our drawing, and by crossing out the word DEATH.

Do you see the core idea of Christianity? Jesus Christ taking your place and mine,



satisfying the demands of justice so guilty parties like you and me can go free. We can be forgiven and stand blameless before God on the merits of the Lamb of God who paid our price for us. What an idea!

Every other religious system I've studied is based on a

different core idea—one that establishes some kind of performance expectation. If you try hard

and struggle and strive and give money and do all kinds of things, well, they say, you *might* raise your status enough to make it.

Christianity is the only religion in the world whose core idea is based on substitutionary atonement—where guilty sinners go free on the merits of the provision God has made in Jesus, his Son, who pays the price on our behalf. It's an amazing thing. If you understand that truth, and have experienced God's love poured out to you in substitutionary atonement ; how can you NOT get excited and tell others about it? We should be trying to spread his love to as many as we can.

By the way, in case you were wondering, the Bible says that on the Day of Judgment you're going to stand before a holy God, and there will be no argument whatsoever about whether or not you're a sinner. That's going to be the shortest discussion in history! You're going to know it right away.

While we still stand far away some of us say, "I'll hold my own when I stand before God. I've led a pretty good life." But stand five seconds in the brilliant, blazing light of God's holiness and you're going to say, "Oh my, I'm in big trouble!" You're going to know who the Holy One is and who the sinner is that fast. On the Judgment Day the issue is not who's the sinner—the question is, who makes the atonement? Because in God's economy, sin will be paid for. It's just a question of who pays.

The Bible says that between this moment right now and the Judgment Day you've got a decision to make. If you're going to take the hit and do your own atoning, then you'll have to do it forever—separated from God for eternity in a place called hell. It's your choice.

But then there's this other option available to you: substitutionary atonement. It's Jesus Christ, out of his amazing love, saying, "I'll take your rap. I'll take the hit. I'll pay the penalty.

And you, the guilty party—on my merits alone—can be forgiven, set free, adopted into God’s family, and taken to heaven forever. Your choice! All you have to do is humble yourself to ask him for his forgiveness, paid for on the cross, and for his leadership now and into the future.”

I want to illustrate that choice by having us all draw a stick person figure on the left side of our pictures and an arrow going over the cross to the right side, where we’ll add a second stick person. That’s actually the same person, who has moved across to God’s side!



Now, everybody look at your page. We’re all going to do something together. This is very important, so please stay focused with me.

The core idea of Christianity is *substitutionary atonement*—Jesus Christ willingly shouldering the weight

of our wrongdoing so that we could be set free.

And here’s the second, equally important part. The Bible warns that you can fully understand the core idea of Christianity and still end up atoning for your own sins in hell forever. That’s because merely understanding this is not enough. That would be like standing on the left side of our drawing, on the wrong side of the chasm, and merely nodding your head in agreement. It’s a good first step, but it doesn’t get you over to God’s side. The Bible says in John 1:12 (NASB), “As many have *received* Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God.” You have to receive him as your forgiver and leader.

If you are sitting here and have just realized that you are ready to receive the gift of salvation, just *silently talk to God right now, and say something like “I ask for Christ’s atoning work to take effect in my life. I receive your forgiveness and leadership right now, by faith. Thank you for your love and grace in my life, In Jesus’ name, amen.*

If you pray that prayer sincerely, Christ will do it for you. He *died* to do that for you.

If you are not ready yet, that’s okay. You’ve got to understand it first. Please just keep coming back, keep asking questions.

I want to thank you for taking this six-week evangelistic journey with me and encourage you to keep your heart focused on sharing God’s contagious love as a way of life. Nothing could be more important and nothing could be more rewarding.

Now, go in God’s peace, and we’ll see you all next week ...