The Magnificent Swap — Delivery Transcript

2 Corinthians 5:21 (NASB) · Dustin Malone (guest preacher) · Sunday, November 1, 2026 · *Standalone sermon*

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If you have your Bible, we're going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. Again, it is a joy and a pleasure to be here with you all, and I am looking forward to what the Lord is going to do. I pray that yesterday you had an amazing opportunity to celebrate one of the most foundational, important holidays in the church — Reformation Day is what I'm talking about. If you celebrated that other day, we'll be praying for you. I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding. I went trick-or-treating as well; my kids came along with me.

A man who took another's place

We're going to be in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. On July 29th, 1941, a prisoner managed to escape from the death camp of Auschwitz. And as a lesson for the whole camp — to learn what happens when you do this, the repercussions — the SS officers chose ten men to be executed. And the means of execution was starvation. As they chose these ten men, one was named Franciszek. As soon as he was chosen, he began to ask and to plead for mercy, saying he had a wife and kids, and he wanted to be with them again, and if there was anything he could do, let him do it. But the soldiers refused to listen. He began to weep bitterly as they dragged him towards the bunker, which would be his tomb.

But one man named Maximilian Kolbe stood up. He wasn't chosen to die, but he stood up and he said, "Let me go in his place, for he has a family. He has a wife, kids. I am here alone and I am aging. Let me take his place in the bunker." Surprisingly, the Nazis agreed to it. They let them switch. And as Kolbe was dragged into the bunker, he was sealed in there, in what would become the tomb for the men. Stories have been passed down that during the time they were in the bunker, Kolbe was found preaching and singing hymns and praying for the men, in order for them to come to know Christ before they perished. After about two

weeks[1] of being locked in this bunker, the SS officers opened the doors and found that everyone had perished apart from Maximilian. They then dragged him to the medical bay, and they injected him with carbolic acid, pronouncing him dead on August 14th.

I want you to see what's going on in this illustration. There were men who were chosen to be condemned to death, and one who wasn't condemned rose up and traded places with one of them. This is what Christ has done for you and for me. But instead of a random selection of ten men, the Bible makes it clear in Romans chapter 5 that we have a universal condition, a universal condemnation. Romans 5:12 says, "Just as through one man" — talking about Adam — "sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned." There's this universal condition that has spread to all men: death, condemnation, sin. The wages of sin is death.

But we in the church proclaim that we've been forgiven. We're in Christ. All of our sins have been forgiven. But then a question arises: **How can a holy, perfect, righteous, just God let guilty sinners go free?** That's what I want to show you this morning. I want to give you the answer to this question. Because if God doesn't punish sin, he is corrupt. He is unjust, and he is unworthy of worship. But if he only punishes sin, there's no hope. So this morning I want to give you four truths that provide the answer to that question — an answer that keeps God just and provides humanity with hope.

The context

Let me give you a little bit of context for what's going on in 2 Corinthians. The whole letter is Paul's defense. He's defending himself to the church in order for them to be reconciled back to God. As you see in verse 20, he says, "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." But he's writing to a church. He's speaking to believers. He's calling them back into right relational reconciliation with God. And how this reconciliation was even possible — how it came about to begin with — is grounded in verse 21: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

So he's calling this church — a church that has experienced disunity, experienced fractures, experienced "super-apostles" who are leading the church astray. They've added works to the gospel. He's trying to bring them back to the foundations of 1 Corinthians, where he built the church on the foundation of Jesus Christ. He's trying to bring them into unity, and he's calling them: be reconciled to God. Remember what God did to bring you to himself. And he reminds them — and I'm reminding you this morning — in verse 21 again: "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

So let's look at the first truth. Actually, sorry — let me pray. Let's pray before we get into it.

Lord, thank you for this opportunity. Thank you for your grace and your abundance. And I pray, Lord, that as we go through this text, your love and your mercy would abound in our hearts. Set our souls on fire for you, God. Open our eyes so that we may behold wondrous truths — truths that the gospel proclaims. In Jesus' name, amen.

1. God provides a way of salvation

Back to the first truth: **God provides a way of salvation.** Notice what he starts the verse with: "He made." Pause. *He made.* That's what we're going to look at for a second.

In Paul's mind, he's been building this case in the reader's mind. If you read all of chapter 5, you'll notice time and time again he's talking about what God the Father is doing through Christ. I'll give you an example. Verse 18: "Now all these things" — what he just spoke of previously — "are from God, who reconciled us to Himself" — how? — "through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself." Skip down to verse 20: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

We see that the Trinity is always involved in the work of redemption and in the work of the church. God's plan is accomplished by the Son in the power of the Spirit. They are always intertwined and working. So we see here that it's God's plan to provide a way. *He made* — God the Father made a way for salvation to occur.

Why does he have to do this? Because only he knows what will satisfy his wrath, and only he knows how our debt could possibly be paid. The wages of sin is death. That's what we're owed. A wage is something that you've earned. And when we commit sin — as Ezekiel says, the soul who sins will die. And so he creates a way to appease his wrath and to wipe the slate clean, thus keeping him holy and righteous and providing us with hope.

It seems mankind is under this illusion that they can earn God's forgiveness — that they can get into God's grace, that they can do certain things to experience this forgiveness. If I do enough good deeds, if I say the right things, if I go to the right church, if I accumulate enough, I can tip the scales in my favor. But let me show you what the Scripture says. In Isaiah 64:6, God says that our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment. Or in Philippians 3, Paul gives his qualifications: circumcised the eighth day; of the tribe of Benjamin; a Hebrew of Hebrews; a Pharisee; zealous for the law; found blameless.[2] Boom — he's just given all his credentials. He says, "If anyone has confidence in the flesh, I far more. Look at what I've done." But then right after that, he says all of that — every single one of those things I've just listed — is rubbish. The Greek term really means excrement. It's trash. It's garbage, compared to knowing Christ Jesus as my Lord.

Romans 8:8 tells us that those who are in the flesh cannot please God. *Cannot.* But humanity tries to stack up these things to please God when it's futile. We can't. If you were given countless lives to live over and over and over again — even if you could keep your knowledge — you would never live a life that was acceptable to God.

And so God, knowing this — knowing our inability to pay this debt we have accumulated — graciously and mercifully makes a way. His love is grounded in this action. John 3:16: "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son." Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." Ephesians 2:4: "But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions." This love is poured upon people in their sins — when they're dead in their transgressions. He loves people, and he makes a way because of his love.

We even see it in Jesus' incarnation. In John chapter 10, he calls himself the Good Shepherd. He compares himself to the hired hands: when they see the wolf, they flee. They're not concerned for the sheep. But he says, "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep." He says, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." Later on in that chapter, he makes it clear that his sacrifice isn't forced: "No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative… and I have authority to take it up again." His love is displayed in the way that he is willing to give everything for his sheep. Brothers and sisters, if you're in Christ, that's you. Christ has given everything so that you could be reconciled to God. He has purchased you. It's a picture of his heart for mankind.

God provides a way when he doesn't have to. Would God be righteous, holy, and just not to provide a way of salvation? Yes, he would. It would leave us without hope, but he would still be righteous if he didn't. But instead, he chooses to do it. He desires to do it. And this is what separates Christianity — true Christianity — from man-made systems. Christianity teaches that there is a loving God who has rescued sinners from themselves at an extremely high cost to himself. False religions teach of angry, apathetic, hostile, distant gods who need to be appeased — gods whose favor you need to earn. You have to earn their love. You have to earn the right to be with them.

Think about the prophets of Baal. False religion drives people to do desperate things for their god's attention. The prophets of Baal are facing Elijah, and they're jumping around, screaming, yelling, hoping that Baal will listen. And it falls upon deaf ears. What does Elijah say? Your god must be sleeping. Maybe he's in the bathroom. Yell louder. So they yell louder. They dance harder. They start to cut themselves — doing these things to appease him, to possibly get his attention. And it falls upon deaf ears.

The Bible teaches that we serve a living God who cares. A living God who is compassionate. A living God who is close to the brokenhearted. A living God who is within arm's length of the lost. A living God who is jealous for you, for your love. A living God who desires all men to be saved. The living God who weeps over the lost, and weeps over sin and the effects it has upon his people. And because of his great love, he makes a way for salvation. God's plan of salvation is grounded in his love for us — for you and for me.

Think about the father in Jesus' story of the prodigal son. The son demands his inheritance. The father gives it to him, and the son wastes it all, living in squander and selfishness. He ends up living in a pigpen, eating pig food, and then he decides, "I need to return to my father's house. Maybe I can be a servant. Maybe I can be a slave in his house. It's better than this." Yet it says that while he was still a long way off, the father sees him, feels compassion, runs to him, embraces him, kisses him, and clothes him. The son was practicing this apology, this grand gesture to show how sorry he was, and he didn't even get a chance to do it, because the father's love acted first. This is a picture of Romans 5:8: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. He wasn't obligated. He didn't have to. He wanted to, and he chose to.

And while it is true that God's love is infinitely great and magnificent, his love cannot override his other attributes. Because God's wrath must be satisfied, and because he is a righteous, just judge, sin has to be punished. God can't just make a way with no payment. He wouldn't be just. He wouldn't be righteous. He would be letting criminals go with no penalty — again, making him evil and wicked. Hebrews 9:22 tells us, "Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." Romans 6:23 states, "The wages of sin is death." So there has to be a payment. God's love is great. God's love is magnificent. God's love provides. But somebody has to pay the toll. God's plan of salvation is provided, but it needs a spotless lamb.

2. Jesus is the spotless Lamb

And that's the second truth: **Jesus is the spotless Lamb.** It says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin." Scripture reveals that no one has lived a perfect life. Romans 3:23: all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God — except for one, the God-man, Jesus.

But what does it mean that Jesus didn't know sin? In what sense did he not know it? Obviously, Jesus is God in the flesh. He knows all things. He can read the hearts of men. The Bible shows Christ knew of sin. He forgives it. He sees it. He speaks about it. He commands others to abstain from it. He was even affected by it: he was beaten, spit on, cursed, blasphemed, disobeyed, and ultimately murdered. But he never committed it.

And the New Testament shows time and time again how people — even his enemies — attest to this. Think about the Pharisees in John 8. He says, "Which one of you convicts Me of sin?"

And they can't rebut that. Think about Pilate. After examining him, he says, "I find no guilt in this man." No guilt. Or even the Roman centurion who headed up the execution. After Jesus was crucified and dead, he says, "Certainly this man was innocent." What about a person who lived with him, walked with him, and did ministry with him? Peter, quoting Isaiah 53, says he "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth." He lived with him for years. If we all lived with each other for years, would we be able to find sin in each other's lives? Absolutely. But he never committed sin, nor was any deceit found in his mouth.

So how did he not know sin? He never committed it. Therefore Paul must mean that he didn't know it in the sense of experiencing it personally. He never experienced it as his own, and he had no involvement with it originating from within himself. So Jesus alone is this sinless man. And he has to be sinless, because the lamb requires a spotless sacrifice. But he also has to be a man, because, as it says in Hebrews 10, "it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." The whole point of the sacrificial system in the Old Testament is to point to the fact that death must be paid for sin. That's the point — driving this home in the minds of the Hebrews: your sin requires death. It's a shadow of Jesus. In order for him to be sinless, he has to be God. And in order for him to be our substitute, he has to be man. Put those together: he is the truly God, truly man sacrifice. Jesus alone fits this category. He alone can be this.

So now that he fits the category, we have to understand that there are two ways that Jesus is our spotless Lamb. Leviticus 16 gives us a picture: two goats. They're both spotless, perfect, without defect. On one goat, the people would place their hands upon the goat's head and confess the sins of the nation upon this goat, and then this goat was driven away from them into the wilderness — symbolizing what sin does. It drives us away from communion with God. Think about the garden: Adam has communion with God; Adam sins; Adam is driven out. So with the goat — they confess their sins, their sins are imputed to the goat, and the goat is cast away. But the second goat had to be killed, because the penalty still had to be paid. Blood still needed to be shed.

And Jesus does both of these things. **He's our sin-bearer and our sin offering.** Jesus is imputed with the sins of those who believe in him. When you come to saving faith in Christ and place your trust in him, your sins are imputed to the Savior. This means that when God the Father looked down from heaven upon the Son hanging on the cross, he saw your personal sin on him — the anger you've experienced, the lust you've experienced, the lies you've told, the bitterness you've had, all of the things you've ever done. When you express saving faith in Christ, those things are imputed to the Son. It's as if he did it. He's credited with what you have done. He bears the sin.

And just like the goat that is cast aside, we see Jesus in his humanity experience this brokenness, this disconnect from communion with God. He cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus never sinned — ever. But he was forsaken in his humanity. In his humanity, he experiences a disconnect. He lived a perfect life from birth till death, never sinning, and he experienced perfect harmony with the Lord his entire life — much like Adam did for the brief time after he was created. Adam had perfect harmony with the Lord. He walked with him. But when he sinned and was cast out, he couldn't cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — because he knew why he was being forsaken. The Lord Jesus cries out because he never experienced or committed sin. As Galatians 3:13 says, he became a curse for us. He becomes the curse so that we can become the righteousness of God.

But he isn't only bearing the sin. Isaiah 53 makes clear he's also the offering for sin. He has to truly pay the penalty, and the penalty is death. Jesus not only had to be forsaken; he had to be slain. Remember Hebrews 9:22: without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness. He must be killed, like the innocent, spotless goat. The Son of God truly dies upon the cross. He dies taking the guilt, paying the fine.

Do you begin to see the love God has for people, and how seriously he takes sin? He gives up his own Son. That's how great sin is in the eyes of God — something that has to be punished — and he gives his Son to be crucified and killed so that we can experience the righteousness of God. But still people continue to berate, blaspheme, curse, mock, insult, defame, criticize — call him unloving, call God indifferent towards people or suffering, like he's distant and doesn't care. But again I tell you: he weeps over brokenness. He weeps over the lost. He is within arm's length of the lost, wanting them to be saved.

It reminds me of the story of Abraham and Isaac. Before Abraham sacrifices his son, God stops him and provides the ram caught in the thicket. So Isaac went free because the ram died in his place. Abraham's son is spared. Meanwhile, God's Son is crucified. Romans 8:32 tells us, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him over for us all..." God made a plan of salvation. God provided the spotless Lamb, who is our substitute.

3. God substitutes Christ for us

Point three: **God substitutes Christ for us.** He says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf." In the Greek, these terms give the idea of "instead of" — someone deserved something, but instead of them, this happened. So he's saying Christ was crucified instead of us. Christ was put to death instead of us. Which is incredible when you think about what the Bible says about mankind.

I'm going to read a few verses. This is how the Bible describes the people who were replaced with the perfect, holy Son of God. I see myself in this list. Let me just quickly read it: children of wrath (Ephesians 2:3); enemies of God (Romans 5:10); dead in their sins (Ephesians 2:1); slaves of sin (John 8:34); hostile towards God (Romans 8:7); not seeking God (Romans 3:11); fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23); deceived in their hearts (Jeremiah 17:9); guilty before God (Romans 3:19); doing evil continually (Genesis 6:5). Or what about Psalm 14? It goes on and on: there is no one who does good; they have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt. It's evident. On and on it goes. This is how the Bible describes humanity.

This is how the Bible describes the people of whom Christ said, "Not them — me. Not these people. Not the people who hate God, not the people who are against God. Take me instead." The perfect Son for these people. It's magnificent. That's why I titled this sermon *The Magnificent Swap*. It makes no sense why he would do it. It becomes more and more evident when you study the Scriptures, and you begin to ask: How could such a wonderful, amazing, holy, loving God do this for me? Knowing myself — how could he do that? Why would he do that?

It reminds me of John Newton in "Amazing Grace": "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind, but now I see." When we have a theology that minimizes the sinfulness of man, we really start to minimize what God truly did upon the cross. It's uncomfortable to talk about sin, and the things we used to do, and how we used to live. But when we truly think about how perfect the Son of God was, and that he stepped in front of us, it leaves me in awe of God.

4. We become the righteousness of God in him

These truths lead to the purpose clause of this verse. He says, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf." Why? **"So that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."** This is how God is able to be in the presence of people who are in Christ: this righteousness is given to those who are in Christ. Before Christ, we're outside of his righteousness. We can't please God. Our gifts, our deeds — filthy garments, rubbish, all of it. After Christ, we are clothed in his righteousness. God's righteousness is imputed to us. Those who are in Christ have been given the very righteousness that God requires for people to be in his presence.

This is God's standard: "Be holy, for I am holy." Or, "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." That's the standard of God. If you're not in Christ, that's what you need to meet: perfection, holiness. And I don't know about you, but I can't. I never will. That's the standard by which God will judge us. But when we're in Christ — when we're in him — we become the righteousness of God.

In the Greek, this is what's called a subjunctive. He says we *might* become the righteousness of God. It's not like Paul is saying, "I hope I'm right about this — we might become the righteousness of God." No. He means that if you're in Christ, you will obtain the righteousness of God. The subjunctive here means it's in the realm of possibility, but it requires something first. It's kind of like in 1 John: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins." So what's the qualifier? We have to confess. Confessing our sins results in this. It's the same thing here: those who are in Christ — in him — receive the righteousness. Only those in Christ receive the righteousness.

Isaiah 61:10: "He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness." I like to use an illustration that describes Jesus with his perfect robe and me with my muddy jacket of sin. He takes his robe off; I take my jacket off. He clothes me in his perfect robe. He takes my jacket of sin and puts it upon himself. He is clothed in my sin, and I am clothed in his perfect righteousness. Only those who express faith in Christ are given this, as it says in Philippians 3.

In Philippians 3, starting in verse 7 — this is right after the list I told you about earlier, where Paul goes on and on about all the confidence he could have in the flesh — he says, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." Down in verse 9: "and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith." The same way our sin is imputed to him is the same way his righteousness is imputed to us. When God the Father looked upon him, he saw our sin. And in the same way, when God the Father sees us, he sees his wonderful Son's righteousness clothing us.

One more illustration: Zechariah 3. Joshua the high priest is standing before the angel of the Lord. He's in filthy garments, and Satan is at his right hand, accusing him, belittling him. The Lord rebukes Satan, and then he commands, "Remove the filthy garments from him." And then he says, "See, I have taken your iniquity away from you and will clothe you with festal robes." Joshua didn't wash his robes. Joshua didn't take his robes off and change them. Joshua was given the robes and clothed in righteousness by God.

Be reconciled to God

So we see now how these truths come together to form an incredible answer to the question I asked at the beginning: How can a holy God forgive sinners? How can he be just and the justifier? It's because Jesus Christ became sin so that we might become the righteousness of God.

This morning, I want to be like the apostle Paul in verse 20, back in 2 Corinthians 5. He says, "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God." Remember, these are believers. This is a church he's writing to. It would be like Paul up here telling you that, and you may be thinking, "Well, I'm a believer. I've been reconciled." That's true. But look at verse 1 of chapter 6: "And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain."

So have you been living in the freedom of Christ with no regard for your holiness? Maybe you've been born again. Maybe you are in Christ. But are you walking in a manner worthy of the gospel? Remember what Christ has done. God sacrificed his perfect Son to bring you to him, to make a way for you to come back to him. Don't receive that grace in vain.

And to those who are not in Christ: God made a way for you to be brought near, and it wasn't cheap. You heard a moment ago how the Bible describes people in the eyes of God before Christ — enemies, hostile, all of these things. Christ is the only way. John 14:6: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." And if you refuse this gift — if you refuse this offer — you will stand before a holy God, and he will open the book of your life, and you will be found wanting by the measure of his standard: perfection, holiness. But if you repent and put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, you will be credited with the righteousness that meets that standard. And it's only in Christ alone that you can meet it. So I beg you as well: be reconciled to God through Christ.

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1. Transcript note: spoken as "after 3 weeks"; Kolbe and the other condemned men were locked in the starvation bunker from about July 31 until August 14, 1941 — about two weeks. Source: Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, "Block no. 11 in Auschwitz" and "The sacrifice and death of Father Maximilian Kolbe" (auschwitz.org). ↩
2. Transcript note: spoken as "circumcised the eighth day, our seventh day … found blameless physically"; Philippians 3:5–6 reads "circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin … as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." Source: Philippians 3:5–6 (NASB). ↩