

**05/17/26 The Greatest Words of Hope
2 Corinthians 5:21**

Thank you to everyone who came out yesterday and served at our church work day. We are deeply grateful for the many hands that gave their time, energy, and skills to care for our church property and serve one another in love. Steven Schouten started with an excellent devotional and time of prayer from 1 Peter 4 and Glen McLuckie directed us in all the different jobs. So many significant projects were completed, and your willingness to work joyfully together was a tremendous encouragement. So, thank you!

Welcome...

We are studying the book of 2 Corinthians. Normally a sermon will cover several verses. But today we are going to look at a single verse because it is one of the most magnificent verses in the all the Bible. A verse that gives us the greatest words of hope.

Let's read 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

2 Corinthians 5:21 can rightly be called the greatest words of hope because in one verse God answers humanity's greatest problem and provides our greatest need.

This one sentence in verse 21 reveals the heart of the gospel message and articulates the most glorious truth in Scripture—how fallen man's relationship to God can be restored.

The most powerful truth can be found in these 24 words in one verse. There is an amazing simplicity here—21 words of only one syllable, two words of two syllables, and one word (righteousness) of three syllables. It could hardly be simpler than this—yet whole books could be written on the meaning of each phrase.

In twenty-four words, Paul includes the doctrine of substitution, imputation, and union with Christ. Martin Luther called the doctrine contained in this one verse: the great exchange. It is the hinge on which the whole gospel turns.

This brings us to our main point: 2 Corinthians 5:21 explains how God orchestrated the greatest exchange in history — placing our sin on His perfect Son and crediting His Son's righteousness to us — so that we are forever His.

The Perfect One in verse 21a...

The Price Paid in verse 21b...

The Position Received in verse 21c...

My prayer is that the truth of this tremendous verse will not only resonate in your head but will change your heart.

Before we can understand the greatness of the exchange, we must first understand the greatness of the One who stood in our place. The hope of the gospel rests entirely upon the character and perfection of Jesus Christ.

So first, Paul points us to...

I. The Perfect One

Notice how verse 21 begins, "He made Him who knew no sin"

The end of verse 20 reveals the antecedent of He (the first word in verse 21) to be God the Father. God's plan of reconciliation could not occur unless He initiated and applied it. The only way reconciliation can take place is if God reached out to sinners; and He did by the sacrifice of His Son.

Do not miss that this was the Father's plan to make His sinless Son to be sin on our behalf! Reconciliation is God's plan. God initiated it. It flows out of His love. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life."

Romans 5:8-10 says, "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life."

But why was it necessary to have God's Son die in our place? Because Adam's fall plunged the entire human race into sin (Rom. 5:12-21), all people are sinners from birth, and our sin separates us from God.

David lamented in Psalm 51:5 "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity and in sin my mother conceived me." In Psalm 58:3 he added, "The wicked are estranged from the womb; these who speak lies go astray from birth."

Not only are all people sinners by nature, we are also sinners by action. Romans 3:10 tells us, "There is none righteous, not even one" and Romans 3:23 says, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Sin produces two disastrous spiritual consequences: First, alienation from God in this life (Eph. 2:12; 4:18; Col. 1:21), and second, unrelenting punishment in hell in eternity (Matt. 25:41, 46; 2 Thess. 1:9; Rev. 14:9-11; 20:11-15).

Galatians 4:4-5 tells us the good news, "But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons."

In the design of God, the second person of the Trinity became a man. The Bible makes it clear that though Jesus had a human mother, he did not have a human father. Joseph is never referred to as His father, because Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthews 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35).

As the God-man, He was the only perfect One to be the sacrifice for sin (John 1:29; 1 Peter 1:19), fulfilling the Old Testament picture of the unblemished sacrificial lamb (Exodus 12:5; Ezekiel 46:13).

Jesus lived a sinless life and went to the cross as the outworking of God's plan to reconcile sinners to Himself.

As one author writes, "Jesus therefore did not go to the cross because fickle people turned on Him, though they did. He did not go to the cross because demon-deceived false religious leaders plotted His death, though they did. He did not go to the cross because Judas betrayed Him, though he did. He did not die because an angry, unruly mob intimidated a Roman governor into sentencing Him to crucifixion, though they did. Jesus went to the cross in obedience to the Father."

Notice again verse 21... He made Him who knew no sin

Who Is “Him” in verse 21? The “Him” is Christ, established clearly from verse 20 (“on behalf of Christ”). What about Christ? Here we have the most explicit statement of Christ’s sinlessness in Scripture. Jesus Christ knew no sin. Other Scriptures, of course, also reference Christ’s sinlessness.

With regard to perfect obedience to His Father in heaven, Jesus said, “I always do what is pleasing to Him” (John 8:29; the present tense gives the sense of continual activity, “I am always doing what is pleasing to Him”).

At the end of His life, Jesus could say in John 15:10, “I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in His love.”

Hebrews 4:15 tells us Jesus is “one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” Hebrews 4:15. Hebrews 7:26 refers to Jesus as a high priest who is “holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens.”

We heard Jeff read from 1 Peter where Jesus is described as “a lamb without blemish or spot” (1 Peter 1:19), using Old Testament imagery to affirm his freedom from any moral defilement. Peter directly states in 1 Peter 2:22, “Jesus committed no sin; no deceit was found on His lips.”

1 Peter 3:18 tell us... it was “the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.” 1 John 3:5 says about Jesus “In Him there is no sin.”

The most powerful testimony is found in Matthew 3:17, (God the Father speaking) and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Jesus knew all about sin, but he never sinned—not even once. He lived in a sinful world, but the stain of sin never tarnished His character. Of all the billions of people who have lived on planet earth, he is the only one about whom it can be truly said that he never sinned in word, in thought or in deed.

But Christ’s perfection alone could not save us unless He was willing to bear the judgment we deserved. The sinless Son came for a purpose — to become our substitute beneath the wrath of God against sin.

That leads us to the staggering reality of...

II. The Price Paid

Verse 21 continues “...to be sin for us...”

Jesus the sinless Son of God became sin for us. How could this be?

Paul is not suggesting that Christ literally became a sinner. Such a thing would be not possible. Christ remained personally sinless while hanging on the cross. He never committed a sin and therefore never became a sinner.

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to say that God treated his Son as if he were a sinner. Isaiah 53:12 tells us that He so identified with sinners that He was numbered among the transgressors. Jesus not only died between two sinners, he was numbered with them and died as they died—a criminal’s death on the Cross.

Historically Christians have used two phrases to describe how Christ “became sin” for us.

The first phrase is that Jesus took our Place — “For us”

When Christ died on the Cross, he took my place—and he took yours. This is the doctrine of substitution—that Christ died in the place of guilty sinners. Think of it this way. His nails were meant for you, the crown of thorns should have been on your head, the spear should have pierced your side, and the mocking and insults were meant for you. It should have been you hanging on a cross – but it wasn't.

The wrath that fell on Christ was not theoretical wrath. It was wrath for your lies, your lust, your pride, your rebellion, your coldness toward God. The cross becomes personal when you realize Jesus was not dying only for sinners back then — He was dying for you.

Having said that, we must also acknowledge that this doctrine has been controversial throughout church history. Not everyone affirms it as true.

A few weeks ago, I attended a pastors' conference where one speaker referenced an author who rejects the substitutionary atonement of Christ. That author described the cross as “cosmic child abuse,” portraying it as an angry Father venting His wrath on an unwilling Son.

As the discussion continued, the speaker remarked, “Well, at least the author is our brother in Christ.” I respectfully responded, “No — when someone rejects Christ bearing the wrath of God in the place of sinners, they are no longer rejecting a secondary doctrine — they are rejecting the very heart of the gospel itself.”

Years ago, some denominations started removing all the hymns that mentioned the blood of Christ from their hymnbooks because they found it offensive.

1 Corinthians 1:21 reminds us the world has always stumbled over the cross. The death of Jesus offends the sensibilities of those who want a cultured, bloodless religion.

The Bible is a book of blood from beginning to end. Take out the blood and you have taken out God's plan of salvation. Hebrews 9:22 reminds us that without the shedding of blood this is no forgiveness of sin.

You cannot avoid the doctrine of substitution because this is the teaching of the New Testament. It is not just that men treated Jesus so badly; it is that God ordained Christ death on the Cross.

The righteous died for the unrighteous; On the cross, Jesus took our place. Second, on the cross:

B. Jesus took our Penalty— “He became sin”

This follows from the first truth. On the cross Jesus became the sinless Sin-Bearer. He paid the price we owed to God, the debt we could never pay. His death satisfied God's righteous decree that sin must always be punished.

In Leviticus 23:27-28 describes the Day of Atonement, also known as Yom Kippur. It was the most solemn holy day of all the Israelite feasts and festivals. On that day, the high priest was to perform elaborate rituals to atone for the sins of the people.

The atonement ritual began with the high priests of Israel, coming into the holy of holies. The high priest was to bring two goats, one to be sacrificed “because of the uncleanness and rebellion of the Israelites, whatever their sins have been” (v. 16), and its blood was sprinkled on the ark of the covenant.

The other goat was used as a scapegoat. The high priest placed his hands on its head, confessed over it the rebellion and wickedness of the Israelites, and sent the goat out with an appointed man who released it into the wilderness (v. 21). The goat carried on itself all the sins of the people, which were forgiven for another year (v. 30).

The blood of bulls and goats could only atone for sins if the ritual was continually done year after year, but Christ's sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for all the sins of all who would ever believe in Him. When His sacrifice was made, Jesus declared in John 19:30, "It is finished."

The sufficiency and completeness of the sacrifice of Christ is also seen in the two goats. The blood of the first goat was sprinkled on the ark, ritually appeasing the wrath of God for another year.

The second goat removed the sins of the people into the wilderness where they were forgotten and no longer clung to the people. Sin is both propitiated and expiated God's way—only by the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

Propitiation is the act of appeasing the wrath of God, while expiation is the act of atoning for sin and removing it from the sinner. Both together are achieved eternally by Christ.

When Jesus died on the cross, He appeased God's wrath against sin, taking that wrath upon Himself, as Romans 5:9 says, "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!"

The removal of sin by the second goat was a living parable of the promise in Psalm 103:12 that God would remove our transgressions from us as far as the east is from the west and that He would remember them no more - as Hebrews 8:12; 10:17 promises.

Isaiah 53:6 says that "the Lord has laid on him (that is, on Christ) the iniquity of us all." And 1 Peter 3:18 tells us, "Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God." The righteous one took the weight meant for the unrighteous one — not because he was tricked into it, not because he had no choice, but because it was the only way to reconcile us to the Father.

It is hard for us to believe that God in Christ made Himself sin for man, and that man in Christ is now made the righteousness of God. This is a true miracle, and like all miracles cannot be explained but it cannot be refuted either. It can only be believed or denied. Will you believe it or will you deny it?

But the gospel does not stop with our sin being removed. If all God did was take away our guilt, we would still lack the righteousness necessary to stand before Him. But the grace of God goes infinitely further.

Now Paul shows us...

III. The Position Received

Verse 21 "...so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God."

Notice how disproportionate this is. We don't merely receive a righteous standing, or forgiveness of sin (as glorious as that is). Paul says we become the righteousness of God.

This is one of the most staggering formulations in all of Paul's letters. The righteousness in question is not our own righteousness — not our obedience, not our moral improvement — but the righteousness of God.

The key words are the last two — "in Him." The righteousness is not credited to us in abstraction, nor is it a result of our good works. It is received through union with Christ.

This is why imputation and union cannot be divorced. The righteousness of God that Paul speaks is Christ's own righteousness, credited to all who are united to him by faith.

The trade is not: your sin goes, and you get a clean slate. The trade is: your sin goes to Jesus, and His perfect righteousness comes to you. You don't just get out of the negative — you get placed into the positive. Not innocent — righteous. Not tolerated — accepted. Not on probation — beloved.

How does this happen? Paul tells us: "in Him." This righteousness isn't delivered to you from a distance. It becomes yours through connection to Jesus himself — through trusting Him, belonging to Him, being united to Him by faith.

This is why the gospel isn't just a self-improvement program or a moral checklist. It's about a relationship. When you are in Jesus, what's his becomes yours. His record. His standing. His righteousness. You are in Him, and therefore everything that belongs to Him belongs to you before God.

Martin Luther once described it this way: it's like a marriage. When two people marry, what belongs to one belongs to both. Jesus takes your sin as his own — and you receive his righteousness as your own. It's the greatest deal in the history of the universe, and it's entirely on His initiative.

This is where your daily life is transformed. So many people — even Christians — live with a low-grade spiritual anxiety: Am I good enough? Have I done enough? Does God really accept me today, given how I've been this week?

Here is Paul's answer: your acceptance before God is not based on how your week went. It is based on the perfect righteousness of Jesus, credited to your account. You don't earn it. You can't lose it. It is yours in Christ.

That doesn't mean how we live doesn't matter — it does. But we don't live well in order to earn God's favor.

What Paul describes here has historically been summarized under the category of double imputation:

1. Our sin imputed to Christ — “God made Him to be sin for us”
2. Christ’s righteousness imputed to us — “so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God”

This double movement is the heart of the gospel. Without the first, there is no atonement for sin. Without the second, there is no justification. The two belong together as two sides of the great exchange.

Notice the exchange is complete. The text does not say “so that you might begin to become righteous” or “might work toward the righteousness of God.”

The words translated— “we might become” — is an aorist subjunctive in the Greek and points to the definitive result of the exchange. The righteousness of God is yours fully in Christ, not incrementally by performance.

Justification is complete. Sanctification is progressive. One secures your standing. The other flows from it.

You grow in holiness not to secure your standing before God but from your standing in Christ.

James Smith sums up this great exchange this way:

Christ takes our sins—that we might take His righteousness!

He suffers—that we might go free.

He is stripped—that we may be clothed.

He is put to death—that we might live.
He is made sin—that we might be made righteous.

This truth sets Christianity apart from every false religion in the world. The false gods of man-made religions are often portrayed as harsh, unpredictable, or indifferent. Their worshipers live in fear, trying desperately to appease their false Gods through rituals, sacrifices, or acts of self-denial. Those trapped in false religion are left striving endlessly to gain the attention or favor of a god who never saves.

But the God of the Bible is altogether different. He is not indifferent toward sinners, nor does He require man to devise a way to satisfy His justice. In love, God Himself provided the sacrifice that His holiness demanded. He sent His own Son to bear wrath in the place of sinners.

There's a moment in C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* that captures something of what Paul is saying here.

Edmund has betrayed his family, gone over to the White Witch, and by the deep magic of Narnia, his life belongs to the witch. He deserves what's coming. There's no arguing it, no technicality, no appeal. The law is the law, and it says Edmund must die.

And then Aslan goes to the Stone Table in his place.

When the children find Aslan alive the next morning — resurrected, mane restored — Susan asks him how it's possible. And Aslan explains that there is a deeper magic, older than the Witch's knowledge: that when an innocent willingly dies in the place of a traitor, death itself works backward.

Edmund didn't earn his way back. He didn't negotiate. He didn't clean himself up first. He simply received what Aslan had done — and walked into a new story.

That is the Great Exchange. Like Edmund you are a sinner. You know what you've done, and somewhere deep down you know what it deserves. But the innocent one went to the Stone Table in your place. Death worked backward. And now the question isn't whether the exchange was made — no, it was. The question is whether you've received it.

Notice now Paul's words at the end of verse 20, “Be reconciled to God.” Not try harder. Not clean yourself up and come back. Just — be reconciled. Come to the One who was made sin for you, and receive the righteousness of God that is waiting for you in Him.

If you are outside of Christ today, that appeal is urgent. I beg you, repent and be reconciled to God.

If you are already in Christ, then let this verse do what Paul wrote it to do. Stop measuring your standing before God by how your week went. Stop anchoring your assurance to your consistency. You are not standing before God in your own righteousness — you are standing in His. The righteousness of Christ. Full. Perfect. Faultless.

You don't grow in holiness in order to secure that standing. You grow from it.

How can we who are not only guilty but morally filthy possibly be holy in the sight of One whose gaze penetrates our very hearts, who knows our every motive and thought as well as our words and actions?

The answer is that because of our union with Christ, God sees His holiness as our holiness.

Charles Spurgeon writes, "If you want to be found in Christ, you must be found out of yourself. The moment a man begins to seek for any righteousness in himself, he has turned his back on the righteousness of Christ."

When you put all three of these truths together — the Perfect One, the Price Paid, and the Position Received — you begin to see why these truly are the greatest words of hope ever spoken to sinners.

So, believe it and share it with others.

Let's pray...