

**This Is Us**  
***More Than You Know***  
**April 14, 2019**

Let's pray together as we begin.

Good morning everyone. We are in the homestretch of our series *This Is Us* – only one more message to go after today. We're going to wrap things up next week on Easter Sunday ...

... which, I should say is going to be a great day here at NHCC. Shannon talked about how we can all work together to make things go smoothly (since we're probably going to be very full) but, I want to add that what we have planned for next week in terms of music and video and message is going to be over the top. It's going to be amazing, so you don't want to miss it.

It's also a great time to invite someone who isn't a church attender or even a believer-in-Jesus to come with you. Surveys consistently show that Easter Sunday is one of the few times that a non-church person will say "yes" to an invitation to come to church. So, if you've been thinking "so and so really needs to come to my church sometime" this is the time to ask.

But that's next Sunday.

*This* Sunday – today – we're going to move even further ahead in talking about why we are the way we are ...

But, because some of you may have missed a message or two and some of you may be new today, I'm going to take a few minutes to bring us all up to speed on what we've been talking about.

(You can also check out the complete message in the media section of our app, website or on our podcast).

So, here we go.

## **Review**

In week one, we learned that what makes humans like you and me special is that each of us *is created in the image of God*.

... which means that we – along with every other person born into this world – are called to use whatever power and privilege we have to maintain and increase the goodness of His creation. We're to contribute to what the Hebrew people called "shalom" – the full-flourishing of the world where everything and everyone gets better in every way.

This is God's dream for His world and for each of us.

Unfortunately, even a cursory look at the world shows that this dream is not a reality. In fact, as good as things can sometimes be (including us), it's all messed up in some way (especially us) ...

**As illustrated by the Apostle Paul's observation that ...**

*I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.  
Romans 7:19 (NLT)*

And we can all identify with that. This is us. It's part of the human condition.

And we've seen that the reason everything is messed up in some way, according to the Bible, is because of *sin* ... which we've seen

is more than just actions that are wrong but also a condition which affects the whole world and every person in it.

And in week two and week three, we talked about what that condition looks like and how it affects us in everyday life ...

**... the “fallout of sin” so to speak.**

- How sin blinds us.
- How sin stains us.
- How sin disorders our natural human desires.
- And how sin deceives and enslaves us.

And as we went through all of those effects, it became obvious that *this is us*, too. All of us are impacted in those ways because we are

“infected” by the condition of sin ...

... which is demoralizing enough ...

But then, last week we discovered that not only is this “force” (so to speak) working against us, keeping us from being who we were meant to be as kings and queens created in God’s image; turns out the problem is even worse than we thought.

**As the Apostle Paul once put it to the first-century followers of Jesus at Ephesus ...**

*You were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins.*

*Ephesians 2:1 (NLT)*

And he couldn’t have been talking about death in the physical sense because these folks were still walking around and still breathing.

Instead, he's getting at *something much more serious*. Paul is describing the state of being dead *spiritually*; dead *with respect to God*:

- Separated from Him – because that's what death does, it separates us from others.
- With no power to do anything about it – because dead people literally *have* no power.

But, as we also saw, the problem is even worse.

**Two sentences later Paul adds:**

*By our very nature we were subject to God's anger.*  
*Ephesians 2:3 (NLT)*

Or, as some translations put it ... "God's wrath."

Point being that we are born into deep trouble - condemned - because we are born with the condition of sin ... which is just the opposite of what most people think.

Most people think that you have to do something so terrible that crosses some undefined "point of no return" (the unforgivable sin) ... OR ... you have to do so many bad things that you finally exceed some arbitrary limit ... and then "BAM" ... you have now merited God's wrath and condemnation.

But that's not reality, spiritually speaking. Reality is that we're already dead and under condemnation.

The only hope we have is the only hope any dead person has – which is to be given new



life, or as Jesus once put it to be “born of the Spirit” – literally to be born again but this time from “above” (so to speak).

And we talked about that in detail last week – what that means and how that happens – so if you missed it I encourage you to check out the message.

So that’s where we’ve been in this series. We’ve covered a lot of ground in describing who we are and why we are the way we are.

### **This is us. We’re ...**

- Created in the image of God
- Victims of sin’s fallout
- Trapped by sin’s deceit
- And worse off than we thought.

But that is not the end of the story. There’s more to who we are.

And that's what I want to talk about today in the rest of this message.

And to get at that, we need to talk about what God has done about the problem of sin and, more importantly, *why* He has done it and, *even more* importantly, what it means for you and me in everyday life.

I think that's important because those of us who are Christians (and I realize that not everyone here is and that's OK – this is a great opportunity for you to understand and learn) ... those of us who are Christians and who have received what God has done and ought to know what it means in everyday life are so often confused about it.

And because we're confused ... well, we'll get to that in a bit.

## The Solution for Sin

So, what has God done about the problem of sin?

If you've been around church or Christianity for any length of time, you know that God's solution for sin has something to do with Jesus of Nazareth and, specifically, his death on a Roman cross in first century Palestine.

- That's why we have communion from time to time. It's why we use bread and juice to remember that ...

*The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me."*

*In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."*

*1 Corinthians 11:24-25  
(NIV)*

- That's why we do baptism (which is coming up again on the first Sunday in June).

"All who are baptized into Christ Jesus are baptized into his death" Paul says.<sup>i</sup>

- That's why this Wednesday evening as part of our night of worship we're going to spend some time remembering the story of Jesus' journey to the cross.

**Christians do those things because, as Paul puts it:**

*God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood.*

*Romans 3:25 (NIV)*

### **Meaning that ...**

*At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly.*

*Romans 5:6 (NIV)*

When we were still powerless – which is exactly what it is to be dead, for dead people have no power whatsoever ...

When we were unable to do anything about our condition Christ died for us – the ungodly, those “without God” – which is an appropriate way of describing those who, by nature, are opposed to God (being born with the condition of sin).

Now, if you've been around church or Christianity for a while, you've heard the story of "Jesus dying on the cross for our sins" so often that it becomes very easy to zoom past what we're really saying. It becomes very easy to overlook the fact that "a bloody and violent event stands at the very center of our faith."

"Crucifixion is a long, drawn-out affair," writes Mark Noll, "sometimes preceded by bloody scourging, with hands and feet pierced with thick nails, the entire weight of the body suspended at three agonizing points. After hours of agony, you slowly suffocated when your legs could no longer support you and your lungs were smothered with the weight of your body. All this etched in blood dripping mercilessly from head and hands and feet."<sup>ii</sup>

Why did Jesus have to go through this kind of

torturous death? And what did it accomplish with respect to the problem of sin?

These are questions that the writers of the New Testament tried to answer ... as well as theologians from the ancient church which followed them ... and theologians *who followed them* right until the present time.

And various Christian groups throughout the world and throughout history have tended to latch on to one or more of those answers – because there *are* multiple answers in the New Testament ...

... which, to a lot of Christians, is a bit surprising to learn because we tend to hear only one according to whatever flavor of Christianity we're in.

For instance, if you grew up in an Eastern Orthodox church (which claims to predate

even the Roman Catholic Church) – and just a heads up that we’re going to do a little bit of theological travel in the next few minutes, which I debated but then I remembered that you all are really smart and can handle it ...

If you grew up in an Eastern Orthodox church you were taught that what Jesus did in his death was to become the new head of humanity which changes the course set by the first head of humanity, who Paul says is Adam.

*“The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.*

*1 Corinthians 15:45 (NIV)*

... which is important because, again, our greatest problem as humans is that we’re born spiritually dead.



And since this is kind of a different way of looking at “the atonement” (what Jesus’ death accomplished), I came across a short video which explains it.

So, that’s one way of understanding what Jesus did on the cross. And it’s scriptural.

Another theory of atonement which has, again, been prevalent in the Eastern Orthodox Church and is currently gaining popularity among Protestant Christians is the idea that Jesus won a victory over the powers of evil and sin and death by literally submitting Himself to them.

**Paul describes it like this:**

*Having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.*

*Colossians 2:15 (NIV)*

What I really like about this idea is how it lines up with the way God allows humans freedom to choose and then experience the consequences of our choices.

What I mean is this: The Bible tells us in the very beginning that God allows Adam and Eve to have their way in eating the forbidden fruit and because of that, they suffer the consequences.

That same idea shows up again in Romans 1 (which we looked at a couple of weeks ago) where it says that God allows *all* humans to go their own way; that God turns us over to our desires and those desires become disordered, resulting in moral and relational chaos, which Paul says is how God's "wrath" is being released. (In other words, He allows us to experience the consequences of our

actions and decisions).

And when God takes on human flesh, He allows *Himself* to be turned over to the full force of sin and evil, expressed in the desire of the crowd that says "Crucify him!"

In that way, God actually experiences the full consequences of sin without having sinned Himself.

And then, according to the scripture, when Jesus dies, he fully incorporates the totality of evil in his body (which is represented by betrayal, scourging and crucifixion) and then defeats it.<sup>iii</sup>

Let's watch another video that illustrates that idea.

The final explanation of why Jesus had to die and what it accomplished (at least that we're

going to talk about today) is the one that is most familiar to Protestant and Catholic Christians. You've heard it right here in this room, quite often.

It's known as the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement<sup>iv</sup> meaning that when Jesus died on the cross, He endured the penalty or punishment we deserved. He was a substitute who suffered in our place.

### **As Peter put it:**

*Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. 1 Peter 3:15 (NIV)*

### **And Paul expounded ...**

*He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and*

*condemned us; he has taken it  
away, nailing it to the cross.  
Colossians 2:14 (NIV)*

What this particular view has going for it (in addition to its biblical support) is that it mimics the way life works.

- It satisfies the demand in all of us that justice must be done. Sin can't be merely dismissed by the wave of a hand. It deserves death.
- And we regularly see how the death of one can save many others.

That said, there is one potentially negative aspect of this view which we'll look at it just a bit but let's sum up these three ways of thinking about this.

In His death on the Cross ...

- Jesus destroys the bad work of the first Adam and becomes the new head of the human race.
- And He destroys the work of the devil and becomes the victor over sin and death.
- And he becomes the substitute that takes our place and pays the penalty for sin on our behalf.

And there are even more explanations found in the New Testament ... meaning that God was doing A LOT on that cross which we will probably never fully understand ...

... which is why Paul, after discussing the atonement in one of his letters, writes:

*Oh, the depth of the riches of  
the wisdom and knowledge of  
God!*

*How unsearchable his  
judgments,  
and his paths beyond  
tracing out!*

*"Who has known the mind of  
the Lord?*

*Or who has been his  
counselor?"*

*For from him and through him  
and for him are all things.*

*To him be the glory forever!  
Amen.*

*Romans 11:34-40  
(NIV)*

Paul is blown away by the plan of God in something so terrible as the cross.

Bottom line ... putting it all together ... however everything works and whatever lens you use to look at it ...

**Because it “solves” the problem of sin,**

**Jesus' death on the cross makes it possible to be born again (from above) by the Spirit.**

## **The Reason**

Now, let's talk for a bit about *why* God did this – or more specifically, *why* the second person of the Trinity called “the Son of God” became a human being and went to the cross on our behalf ... as well as for all of creation (which is also under the curse of sin).

And to begin, I want to show you a short clip of an interview with one my favorite authors and theologians, Dr. Tom Wright, as he describes one of the potential pitfalls of the substitutionary atonement theory – where Jesus lives the perfect life we should have lived and then dies the death we should have died; where God lays on him the sins of the whole human race.



As we watch, see if you can relate to the pitfall – the criticism – and then we'll talk about the solution Dr. Wright suggests.

Did you catch the criticism?

Instead of "God so *loved* world that he gave his son" the idea of penal substitution can be heard as "God so *hated* the world that He *killed* his son."

I'm curious: have you ever had that thought yourself? Do you know anyone who has?

Wright's solution is to remember that God's primary motive towards creation and towards us is not vengeance or anger or wrath. *It's love.*

And it has to be because as one of Jesus' best friends ...

**... the Apostle John once put it:**

*God is love. 1 John 4:8 (NIV)*

It's the essence of God's being. It's God's primary motivation in everything ... including the sacrifice Jesus made.

**John continues:**

*This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.*

*1 John 4:10 (NIV)*

Now, Wright also points out that part of the problem with seeing this as "love" is that we forget that Jesus *is* God or, more accurately, Jesus is the second person of the three who together make up the One Being we call "God."

So when God out of love "sends His Son" it's

most definitely *not* God saying, "I'll send somebody else to do the dirty work." It's "I (or more accurately 'one of us') will become a human" ... "one of us will take on flesh in the person of Jesus of Nazareth and become the necessary sacrifice."

And, since we've talked about the Eastern Orthodox way of understanding things, I have to say that the way they explain this decision is just the best.

All the way back in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, a church leader named Athanasius addressed it in terms of what he called "the divine dilemma" – the problem that God as creator had to solve.

He wrote:

"The creatures whom God had created ... were perishing, and such noble

works were on the road to ruin. What then was God, being Good, to do?

Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them? In that case, what was the use of having made them in the beginning?"

Athanasius saw that, compared to the staggering greatness of what we were meant to be, we have become faint shadows of our true selves. We have become more like animals than gods. We have become diminished, dehumanized and destined for death. As the divine image faded in us, so did our true humanity.

God's dilemma, then, was how to restore that image. Athanasius envisions God presented with a momentous choice: to abandon his spoiled creation as no longer worthy of his love, or *in that very love*, to act to transform

the human situation.<sup>v</sup>

But the only way to do that is for the divine image to be restored into humanity. And, as Athanasius puts it: "How could this be done, save by the coming of the very Image himself, our savior Jesus Christ?"

Therefore ...

- Because God is love, God *had* to save his creation.
- Because God is love, God *had* to become a man, Jesus of Nazareth.
- Because God is love, Jesus *had* to die for you and for me.

## **In Real Life**

So, what does this mean for you and for me in everyday life?

For starters (and I hope this is obvious) ...

**It means that God loves us more than we can imagine.**

Another of my favorite writers and theologians, Greg Boyd, writes ...

“God could not have gone further than He did to free us from our bondage. [For] out of his love for us, the all-holy God was willing to do nothing less than to go to the extreme of becoming our sin (2 Cor 5:21) and becoming our God-forsaken curse (Gal 3:13).

And if the worth of something or someone to another is determined by what they are willing to pay to acquire it, then the fact that God was willing to pay the greatest price that could possibly be paid can only mean ...

- That we have the greatest possible worth to God ...

- That God could not possibly love us more than he actually does
- And we could not matter more to God than we actually do.

All of this is part of the magnificent revelation and promise of the cross. On the cross God reveals his perfect love for us and reveals our unsurpassable worth to him. And on the cross God promises to always love us like this and to always ascribe this worth to us.

It's no wonder that Paul declared that God's love for us in Christ "surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19).<sup>vi</sup>

Question: do you believe that? Do you know that? Do you experience that?

"Well, I don't know, Rick. It sounds good when

you talk about it in here but when I get out there ... when I look at my life and I see all the things that go wrong, sometimes I wonder.”

I get that. I wonder sometimes, too.

But in the end ... and this is the second application to real life ... in the end ...

**God’s love is measured by the cross not our circumstances.**

One of the greatest mistakes that Christians make is that we measure God's love for us by our present circumstances.

We reason that if things are going bad for us, then God must really hate us. But if the birds are singing, and the sun is shining, and we are happy, then God must really love us.

We also assume that God works only through the successes we have, and not through our weaknesses. The truth is that our



circumstances are constantly changing but God's love is always with us. His love for us does not ride the waves of our feelings. It is rooted in the historical event of the cross.

So when all else fails, look there, to the cross and remember that He did that for you. And *that* has eternal consequences.

*The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. Romans 8:18 (NIV)*

... which leads to the third thing the sacrifice of Jesus means, which is that ...

**If you are a Christian, relax and stop trying to earn God's love.**

*Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus ... Romans 8:1 (NLT)*

“But Rick, I still mess up. I still sin.”

Yes, of course you do. You are “in Christ” you are born again from above but sin still “dwells in your members” as Paul puts it. But you are loved. You are forgiven because of your trust in Jesus and what He did for you.

So, when you sin, admit it, repent of it, then rejoice and move on.

**If you are not a Christian, receive Jesus as your savior.**

The Bible says that we are made right in God's sight when we trust in Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, no matter who we are or what we have done.<sup>vii</sup>

This is we so often call a “time out” and ask “Where are you with God? Have you come to

the place in your life where you've said "I am a sinner, and yes I need a savior, and yes I believe?"

That's what Paul says, when we trust in Jesus and what he did on the cross, Jesus covers our sins.

So, put your faith in Jesus today. Just say "Jesus I believe you. I believe in what you did. I can't justify myself, but I believe in what you did for me on the cross."

1. If you prayed to receive Jesus today, fill out card and give to usher
2. One of the things Jesus asked people to do when they receive Him is to be baptized. It's a way of saying I was born in Adam but now I am in Christ. We're going to do that in both services on the

first Sunday of June ... I invite you to be part of that. More details later.

3. Worship Night – 7-8pm, childcare through 5<sup>th</sup> grade

4. Blessing (Eph 3:18-19)

May you have the power *to understand* how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is.

May you *experience* the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully.

May you *be filled* with all the fullness of life and power that comes from God.

## Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Romans 6:3

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ii <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/penal-substitutionary-atonement-it-doesnt-get-more-personal.html>

iii Stephen Travis, *Christ and the Judgement of God*, p 200

iv <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/january-web-only/penal-substitutionary-atonement-it-doesnt-get-more-personal.html>

v From Graham Tomlin, *The Provocative Church: 4th Edition*

vi <https://reknew.org/2016/08/how-much-are-you-worth/>

vii Romans 3:22