

“The Propitiation for Our Sins,” 1 John 1:1-2:2 (Fourth Sunday of Easter, April 22, 2018)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— <sup>2</sup> the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— <sup>3</sup> that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

<sup>5</sup> This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. <sup>6</sup> If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. <sup>7</sup> But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. <sup>8</sup> If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup> If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. <sup>2</sup> He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

## PRAY

We are starting a new series in 1 John. 1 John is a letter written by the apostle John – the same apostle John who wrote the gospel of John. He probably wrote this letter at a very old age to a group of Christians whom he knew very well. Over and over again he calls them “little children.” It’s obvious he loves them.

We are looking at the first twelve verses of this letter this morning, all of chapter one and the first two verses of chapter two.

In the first verse John talks about Jesus and takes great pains to point out two things: *first*, Jesus Christ was fully God. In verse one he begins by talking about Jesus and he says, “That which was from the beginning.” 1 John 1:1a. Now combine that with what John says at the beginning of his gospel. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.” John 1:1-3. John wants it clear that Jesus is God.

John also wants it clear that Jesus was fully man. The entirety of verse one reads as follows: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—” 1 John 1:1. Jesus didn’t just come down to earth as some sort of ghost nor did he just look like a human being. No, John says, we saw him, we looked at him, we touched him. Jesus is fully God and fully man.

Now, why does John go on about that? Because only if Jesus is fully God and fully man does 1 John 2:2 make any sense: “<sup>2</sup> He [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Today we are going to talk about propitiation. I try as a preacher not to use Christian lingo too much in my sermons – I try to speak plainly and not throw around a bunch of technical, theological jargon. I don’t think I’d be a particularly helpful preacher if I did so. The best preaching is always clear and simple.

But you need to know the term “propitiation.” Nothing gets closer to the heart of the good news of the Christian message than propitiation. It’s not the sum total of the good news, nor is it used all that often (some form of the word is used only six times in the entire New Testament), but until you understand what propitiation is you won’t understand why Christianity is good news at all. You’ll certainly never be moved to sing the great hymns of that faith, like the one with the line that says, “My chains fell off, my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

Three things about propitiation: *first, the nature of propitiation. Second, the mercy in propitiation. Third, the justice in propitiation.*

First, the nature of propitiation (in other words, what is it?). Propitiation means to offer a sacrifice to turn the anger of someone else away from you. Propitiation, defined like that, is not a Christian concept. You find it all over world history and philosophy.

We read about it in Greek mythology. Sophocles tells us about Agememnon, and how he gathered the Greek forces to attack Troy. But they can’t sail across the Aegean Sea to get there because there is no wind. The prophet Calchas announces that it’s because the goddess Artemis is angry at Agememnon, and the only way to propitiate, or turn away her anger, is for Agememnon to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. Agememnon does it, the winds start to blow, and the Greeks set sail and ultimately capture and sack Troy.

We read about propitiation in the Old Testament, among the pagan peoples who worship Molech god of the Ammonites and Chemosh, god of the Moabites. These gods required child sacrifices, usually through burning, to appease their anger and secure their blessings.

We read about propitiation in the Old Testament among the Jews, in Leviticus 16. Once a year on Yom Kippur, which is Hebrew for the Day of Atonement, the high priest of Israel would slaughter a goat, take its blood behind the curtain of the tabernacle into the Most Holy Place (it was the only time each year when anyone could enter that room), and sprinkle the blood on the solid gold cover of the Ark of the Covenant, also known as the mercy seat. When the high priest did so, we read that he propitiated the anger that God had toward his people for their sins.

And of course we read about it in the New Testament. We read 1 John 2:2 earlier. Now let’s read Romans 3:25 where Paul says Jesus is the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins.” The Bible says God is angry with us for our sins,

and the only way for God's wrath to be turned from us so that we might be spared is through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Now, for a lot of you, probably most of you, this idea that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for our sins to keep God's wrath from us is no problem. I remember speaking to a young lady years ago and I asked her to explain the gospel to me. She grew up in a Bible-believing church, and I'll never forget her answer. She told me, "I believe that God could squash me like a bug, and that's exactly what I deserve." She had no problem with the notion of God's anger at us.

A lot of you are like that, but at least a few of you here today, along with millions of people in our country today, are not.

Instead, you are horrified by this notion. A few years ago the mainline Presbyterian denomination refused to put a hymn we sing quite often, *In Christ Alone*, in their new hymnal, because it has a line that says, "Til on that cross as Jesus died, the wrath of God is satisfied." They did not want lyrics about propitiation in their new hymnal. Years before that R.C. Sproul gave a lecture on the theme of Jesus' death being a propitiation for our sins and someone stood up and interrupted him by shouting, "That's primitive and obscene." That man was disgusted by the notion that God demanded the death of Jesus for our sins.

Is that you? Do you want to shout "primitive and obscene"? Do you wonder, "What is it with Christians and all this blood of Jesus stuff?" Do you think, "I get angry with people, but I don't demand blood before I can calm down. And I would expect any god worthy of my worship to be at least as reasonable as I am (and in fact a lot more patient and loving than I am), and not so angry and bloodthirsty all the time."

Is that you? If so you've asked a good question. The Christian answer begins with 1 John 1:8: "8 If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." And then 1 John 1:10: "If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."

It is just, it is fair, it is right for God to be angry at us *because we are sinners*. And friends no matter what objections you have to this idea of propitiation, ***you know what it's like to be angry at sin***.

Several years ago a Liam Neeson movie came out called *Taken*. In that movie, the pretty girl who plays Neeson's daughter is on a senior trip to Europe, and she is kidnapped out of her hotel by sex traffickers while she's on the phone with her dad. But it turns out these guys kidnapped the wrong guy's daughter, because Liam Neeson turns out to be a super duper, Jason Bourne-type spy, and in the last hour of the movie he kills half of Eastern Europe in order to get his daughter back.

And I can say, as a dad with two young girls, there's a part of me that see that and says, "That's about right – that's a proportionate response." Everyone watching that movie, especially the scene where the bad guys abduct the girl, gets angry at what's happening. Everyone is so angry that they are actually glad it's Liam Neeson's daughter that gets kidnapped, because he's the kind of guy who can take the bad guys apart and make them pay for what they've done.

That doesn't only happen in the movies. Horrible things like that happen every day. Therefore, while I can understand why someone would say that any god they worship has to be reasonable and not bloodthirsty, the opposite is also true: any god that did not get angry at sin like that would not be worthy of worship either.

God must get angry at sin. If he doesn't care, or if he looks the other way, how could he possibly be a good God?

You may say, "Yes, but J.D., I'm not a kidnapper! My sins consist of lying, or losing my temper, or not being as generous with my money and time as I should be, or not following all the Bible's rules about sex. I don't get angry when other people do those things. I can understand why God gets angry at sins like sex trafficking. I do, too. But I don't understand why he demands propitiation for **my** sins. They are nothing like that."

I'll say two things to that: *first, I bet you do get angry when people commit even those kinds of sins **against you**.*

*Second, you don't really understand what sin is.* The Bible won't make sense to you until you realize all the stuff we normally call sin – from a little white lie all the way up to kidnapping and selling people into slavery – are expressions of an underlying disease we all have. **We are all chronically disposed to rebel against God.**

All sin comes from our refusal to align ourselves with God's plan for the world, God's way of guaranteeing this is a wonderful place to live. When we sin, we are in small ways and big ways helping to destroy this world. When I tell a little white lie to get me out of an uncomfortable situation, the desire to do so comes from precisely the same disease in me that, in another man, leads to kidnapping. It's all rebellion against God.

You say, "But J.D., aren't white lies and kidnapping different?" Absolutely – in the degree of harm they cause to others they are different. But they are *exactly the same in kind*. They both come from the same disease. And God precisely because he is good he will not have it. He is determined to rid his universe of all of this disease because he doesn't want any harm coming to his world and the people whom he loves in it.

And if you still want to say, "*That's not fair!* I haven't done anything all that bad, yet I need propitiation just like the really wicked people do?"

Friends, the one thing no one ever has to worry about is that God would be unfair. In Luke 12:47-48 we read: "<sup>47</sup> And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. <sup>48</sup> But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more."

Jesus says God will judge you fairly. He will judge you according to all the factors that make up your life. *But you don't get a pass just because there are people out there who have done worse*

*things than you.* After all, their childhood may have been far worse than yours. Their lives may have been far worse than yours. They may never have been taught right from wrong. They'll get off lightly, because God is fair. They may have done far worse things, but because God is fair he may actually be more angry at you for your sins.

God will judge you fairly, but that's not good news for sinners. We don't want fairness. We need more. And in the Christian God we have it. Second, the mercy in propitiation.

Let's read 1 John 1:1 and 2:2 one more time. "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life." "He [Jesus] is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."

Do you realize what John is telling us at the beginning of 1 John? John is saying that because Jesus is fully God you can trust that he actually did live a perfect life, a life without the disease of sin in it, so that when he died on the cross he could not have died for his own sins – he had none. And because Jesus Christ is fully man you can be sure that when he died, he did it in your place, as another man, as the propitiation for *your* sins.

The mercy in propitiation is that if you believe Jesus died for you, to turn away the wrath of God you justly deserve for your sins, you are forgiven ... *no ifs, ands, or buts.* No matter what you've done or how easy or hard your life has been. It's over. That's all it takes – we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. *It's not fair how God saves us – it's merciful.*

1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Christians can get sloppy with their language and say things like, "God forgives sin." That's not true. God never forgives sin. He can't forgive sin. If he did, if he looked the other way, he would not be worthy of worship. He's bound and determined to destroy sin, because sin is destroying his world and the people he loves so much in this world.

God will never forgive sin. But do you know what God loves to do? *He loves to forgive sinners.* He can forgive *us* our sin, because through Jesus Christ and the propitiation he provides God found a way to be just and destroy all sin but at the same time be merciful and forgive the sinners who commit the sin, the sinners whom he loves so much.

We don't need justice from God before we come to Christ for forgiveness, for if we got that justice it would destroy us. We need mercy. However, once we do come to Christ there's a wonderful kind of justice we do get, and we all desperately want.

Third, the justice of propitiation. 1 John 2:1a: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."

In other words John says yes, we are saved by grace through faith. But it's not a cheap grace that makes no demands of us. It doesn't mean we can do whatever we want. We cannot give

ourselves over to sin. When we are saved we are saved not so that we can sin but to love and serve each other.

John wants to be clear about that, but he also wants to be encouraging. “But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.” 1 John 2:1b.

John says you will still sin. No matter how badly you may not want to, you will slip up. But when that happens, you must remember that Jesus Christ is your advocate. You know what that literally means? When you sin remember that Jesus is your lawyer in heaven right now arguing your case, arguing for you, before God.

I love this imagery, probably because I used to be lawyer. But if it meant that Jesus is just doing for me what I used to do for my clients, which was make them look as good as I possible could in the eyes of the court given the facts and the law of the case, then 1 John 2:1 would not encourage me. It would terrify me.

I didn't practice law very long but I represented a few clients who, I knew, deserved to lose their case. Their cases had no merit. They'd messed up and they deserved to lose. So when I went in the courtroom I did my best but sooner or later the facts catch up with you.

I'm sure Jesus Christ would make a most excellent lawyer, but if he's dealing with the law of God applied to the facts of J.D.'s life, I'm toast, because I'm guilty. No lawyer, not even Jesus, could get me out of that.

I would picture Jesus as my lawyer and it would bring me no comfort. Jesus goes up to God and says, “Father, J.D. Shaw did it again. Even after he swore he wouldn't do it, he did it again. But please, Father, I'm begging you, don't condemn him. I know he deserves it, I know he has it coming, but please, give him another chance.” And the Father says, “Well, ok, for you, Jesus, I'll forgive J.D. more time.” The thought of that terrified me because I'd wonder *how much longer could Jesus keep that up?* At some point, the Father's going to say, “This has been going on with J.D. for forty years now. I mean, Jesus, really, enough is enough.”

If Jesus were like any other lawyer it would help me not at all. *But that's not how Jesus acts as our advocate. Jesus on this side of the cross does not ask God for mercy for me but justice.* Jesus goes to the Father and says: “Father, J.D. Shaw is a sinner, and he deserves your wrath. He is guilty. He has broken your law and his sin must be paid for. But, Father, look at my body. Look at the nail prints in my hands, the nail prints on my feet, the hole in my side. He's broken your law, but for that my body was broken on the cross. He offended your holiness, but my blood was shed on the cross. I am his propitiation. And since you are a just God, you cannot demand two payments for the same debt. I demand justice for J.D. Shaw, Father. Because I have paid his debt in full, you cannot condemn him. You must love him as you love me.” And the Father will say, “Jesus, you are absolutely right. J.D. Shaw, because Jesus Christ, the righteous one, is your Advocate, you are innocent.”

Christians, Jesus is not in heaven pleading for mercy on your behalf; ***he's demanding justice.*** Do you see that? If not there there is nothing more important for you to settle this week. Talk to

one of us. “[Jesus] is righteous and a propitiation for our sins. He has done all that justice and holiness require in order to [secure] our pardon and acceptance. The plea which he is thus enabled to present is a sufficient one. It is not only sure to be heard, but it must be heard. It cannot be righteously disregarded. This plea is not only effectual for some, but for all in whose behalf it is urged.” Charles Hodge, *Princeton Sermons*, 51.

Propitiation looks so backwards and capricious at first glance, but when you really see what God is up to it's the most wonderful news in the world. Do you want to stop worrying about how God looks at you? About whether God is pleased with you? About whether God will take care of you? Then believe that Jesus Christ is the propitiation for your sins. AMEN