

Substitution

by Charles Finney

Christ's substitutionary atonement is a demonstration of God's moral government, where He treats Christ as a sinner to show the universe how He regards sin and to provide a way for sinners to be forgiven.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:5, John 3:16, Romans 3:22-24, Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 2:8-9, Hebrews 2:16, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 John 2:2

Topics: "Atonement", "Righteousness through Faith"

Description

Charles Finney's sermon 'Substitution' emphasizes the profound theological concept that Christ was made sin for humanity, representing all sins while remaining sinless Himself. He explains that this act was necessary for God's moral government, allowing for the possibility of forgiveness without compromising divine justice. Finney clarifies that Christ's suffering was not punishment in the traditional sense but a demonstration of God's abhorrence of sin, ultimately leading to believers being treated as righteous through faith in Him. The sermon calls for a response of faith from the congregation, especially the youth uniting with the church, to embrace this gift of salvation and righteousness offered through Christ.

Transcript

"For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him."--2 Cor. 5:21

The present occasion in which a large number of youth are about to unite with our church, together with the circumstance that many are still enquiring the way of salvation, seems to render the subject presented by this passage peculiarly appropriate for this day. In treating the subject here presented, I shall,

I. SHOW WHAT IS INTENDED BY CHRIST'S BEING "MADE SIN FOR US."

II. SHOW FOR WHOM HE IS MADE SIN.

III. WHY HE WAS MADE SIN FOR US.

IV. WHAT IS INTENDED BY "BEING MADE THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF GOD IN HIM."

You will see at once that the subject relates to Christ as the Author and Finisher of our faith, and of course that it presents Him in his most interesting attitudes and relations to mankind.

I. We are first to inquire What is meant by Christ's being made sin for us?

It is plain that the language cannot be understood literally. It cannot mean that God made Jesus Christ actually a sinner, or made Him real sin--for the latter is physically, and the former morally impossible. But the meaning is that Christ was made to stand as the representative of sin and of sinners. The apostle uses very extraordinary language, and it would seem from it that he conceived of Christ as standing before God in a sense as the embodiment or impersonation of sin. God looked upon Him in the scenes of his atoning death, as if all the sins of our race were in Him, and He were Himself the sum total of them all. Against this sin, thus embodied, or better, represented, in Christ, God revealed his high and awful displeasure, so as to show the universe how He regards sin.

The language of the apostle here is very striking. God hath made Him sin, not "to be sin," as in our translation, but better according to the original, "made Him sin for us, who knew no sin." The obvious meaning is that Christ was treated as a sinner. This was for governmental purposes, and as a governmental transaction. He stood in the place of sinners, and God dealt with Him accordingly. He consented freely to take this position, and of course was treated as if He were Himself the embodiment of all the sins of our world.

II. We next inquire--For whom was Christ made sin?

The Bible gives us the only and the true answer. "He tasted death for every man." "And He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world." It is clear therefore that Christ stood governmentally as the representative before God of the whole race. No further governmental provision would have been needed in order to save the whole race.

Again, it should be considered that Christ was made sin in the sense explained, for man alone, and for no other beings but man. The Bible teaches that the work of Christ as a system of salvation, is restricted to our race in its application. "There is one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." Between God and men, you observe; not between God and angels. So in Hebrews 2, Paul says--"For verily He took not on Him the nature of angels--or better as in the margin--He did not take hold of angels--&c., to save them, but He did take hold of the seed of Abraham." Christ made no attempt to save lost angels, but lost men He did seize hold of, to save. You observe that the apostle says--"He took hold of the seed of Abraham. From this passage itself we might naturally infer that Christ saves only the lineal descendants of Abraham, but other passages make it certain that this restricted sense cannot be the true one. The phrase must here be used of all real Christians; for "if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

III. Our next inquiry is--Why was Christ made sin for us?

Why was there need of any atonement? Is God so inexorable and implacable that somebody must die to appease his wrath? Would you represent God as being infinitely cruel?

Now these questions would be asked with great force, if the atonement, rightly understood, did represent God as being implacable in the sense assumed. If it were true that God's indignation against sin must be quenched in some victim's blood before He can be pacified, and this for his own sake too, because of his vengeful nature, then would the objections I have mentioned indeed lie with great force against both the atonement and God Himself. But it should be well considered that an atonement for sin by suffering was not necessary on God's account, but on account of his moral government. It was demanded of God out of

regard to the intelligent minds of his universe. He must not set aside the penalty of the law against sin without an atonement, lest a false inference should be drawn, lest it should be supposed that God is reckless of sin, and can permit its commission in his kingdom with impunity. Hence divine wisdom and divine love also must provide against so ruinous an inference. Hence this awful demonstration of God's abhorrence of sin, and of his holy purpose to punish it, which was exhibited when He caused his own beloved Son to be made sin for us, and to bear our sins in His body on the tree. We see therefore that Christ's being made sin for us was a naturally necessary condition of our acceptance with God. And this results not from any want of mercy in God Himself, but wholly from his relations to the intelligent beings who are under his moral government. God well knew that He should certainly be misunderstood if He should pardon sin without an atonement. It is in the nature of the case impossible that He should not have been. If therefore, He would forgive sin--if He would arrest the onward march of law and justice towards their dreadful execution;--if He longed to throw wide open his great heart of mercy, He must first make some terrible demonstration of his utter hostility to sin--must show that He abhorred and would surely punish it. And this was done to perfection in the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ.

Now who can not see this necessity for an atonement? Suppose some one of these United States should rebel. Would it not be a vastly dangerous thing to offer universal amnesty with no atonement? Who does not see that it would be the imperative duty of the President and the General Government to make some terrible demonstration of justice that should make every man throughout the Union quail in dread of the penalty of rebellion? Surely every one can see that that clemency would be by no means wise which should show a general and indiscriminate mercy towards the guilty. Before any mercy could be wisely shown, such a demonstration must be made, as would make all the people of the nation feel that rebellion can not be tolerated. And if this be true in the government of the United States, and every child can see that it is; then how much more must it be true in the great universe of God? Who can count the worlds of intelligent minds under his sway? Who can tell how far away in the realms of space they lie scattered, or how immense are the hosts that people them? But God's moral government extends over them all, and every eye of all their hosts is on Him. What infinite folly then, for God to set aside the execution of the penalty of his law in such a manner as would virtually annihilate it altogether! To do this would be to doom the intelligent universe to ruin. Who then could trust, or love, or revere their God? Alas, they have lost the evidence that He cares for the good of his creatures. They can not trust Him to maintain his own law; there is no longer any God in the universe to be trusted, loved, and obeyed!! How frightful a result is this!

But we need not fear it. God is too wise and too good to let it occur. When He would prevent it, and yet would pardon sinful men, He made (as was indispensable,) a strong and solemn demonstration of his heart towards sin.

And who must be selected as an atoning victim for this purpose? Shall it be some mighty angel? Oh no; for what could an angel do? How could he endure the wrath of God, standing in the place of all the sin of our race? And still more, I ask, how could any angel's sufferings make such an impression upon the universe, as would sustain God's throne in proclaiming an amnesty on such grounds? No angel, then, however great or exalted could avail, and God must pass them all by, and select his own co-equal Son! No being less glorious and less exalted than God's Eternal Son can stand forth as the representative of sin, to receive in his own person such inflictions of divine displeasure as would avail to show the universe most impressively how God regards sin. Now it shall be known throughout all worlds, as far as God Himself is known, that it is in his heart to pardon when He can, and punish when He must.

And mark, how perfectly fitted for his work, in character and relations is our great atoning sacrifice. He is a "lamb without blemish and without spot." He "knew no sin." Hence it could not be said or thought that He suffered on his own account. It would be known at once that a just God did not hide his own face from his beloved Son, for any wrong He had done. All the more impressive therefore must this scene have been for this reason. The great enquiry must run through all the ranks and orders of created intelligences--Wherefore does the spotless Lamb of God suffer? Why does He descend so low, and assume a nature into union with his own, which ranked so infinitely beneath his? What mean these strange things? O, what impressions must have been made throughout all heaven when it was made known that the Son of God came down from the throne of the universe to a mean manger in Bethlehem, to toil and weep in the land of his chosen people, and to die an accursed death on Calvary, that He might stand before divine justice as the embodiment of all earth's sin, and pave the way thus for all earth's sinners to be forgiven! The second person of the Trinity--Himself God, assumes in union with his own, the entire nature of the sinning race, that He may thus save them and raise them to a higher rank than that from which they had fallen. What a work is this!

IV. What is intended by our "being made the righteousness of God in Him."

This also cannot be taken in its most strictly literal sense. It cannot be conceived that we should be converted into the intrinsic, essential righteousness of God. The idea of representation obtains in both clauses of our text. As Christ stood before God to represent the sins of our race, so his pardoned children stand forth to represent the righteousness of God. He stood disowned and forsaken of God, as if He were Himself our sin; we stand forgiven and accepted through Him, as if we were God's righteousness. He is treated as a sinner; we for his sake are treated as righteous. Just think of this. What an exchange! Christ was infinitely righteous, but laid aside the relations of a righteous one, and appeared for us as a sinner and was treated accordingly. We were altogether lost in sin, yet we are transferred governmentally from that position before God, and for Christ's sake are treated as if we were righteous. What a wonderful transaction is this! It were easy to show that this were the perfection of philosophy in government to make such a substitution as will save an indefinite amount of suffering, and yet secure most perfectly, regard for the law, obedience to its precepts, and confidence in the great Lawgiver.

REMARKS.

1. We see that Christ was not literally punished instead of the sinner, while yet it is true that He suffered in the sinner's stead. It is one thing to suffer for another, and quite a different thing to be punished for him. Punishment under a righteous government implies guilt, and it is precisely the execution of the penalty of law. Of course it assumes the fact of actual and criminal transgression. It is often objected to the gospel system that it is unjust, because it punishes the innocent for the sake of screening the guilty. This is a mistaken view of the subject. What Christ suffered was not in any proper sense the punishment of sin.

2. Christ suffered for us and was made sin for us by his own consent. What! It is sometimes said--does God arbitrarily inflict suffering on the innocent and let the guilty go free? No, not arbitrarily. Jesus Christ was not forced--he consented--most cheerfully consented to bear what need be borne for the sinner's ransom. The principle is the same as when a missionary sacrifices his home, his friends, and his life to do good to the lost heathen. In both cases the sacrifice is voluntary--in both it is made for others' good. Perhaps some of these dear children who are to-day to unite with the church may yet go to foreign lands, and sacrifice all that man holds most dear to carry the gospel to the heathen. And then shall one rise up and complain that an innocent one suffers for the guilty--that God compels his innocent people to suffer,

that the guilty may be spared and blessed? The truth is, God compels no one to do this. But He does approve the spirit of self-sacrifice for others' good, and has given us a most glorious example of it in giving up his own beloved Son. Jesus has given us a divine example in giving up Himself for suffering and death for our lost race. God knows how to reward such self-sacrifice. We shall ultimately see that whoever shall for Christ's sake lose his own life shall save it eternally.

3. Christ's sufferings were not in kind altogether like those of sinners. Not being Himself a sinner, He could not suffer what may be called the natural penalty of sin. He could not experience that state of mind which accompanies sin, the remorse, the shame, the self-condemnation, and the indescribable anguish of self-torture. These natural penalties He could not experience, nor was it at all necessary that He should. The atonement was purely a governmental expedient, demanded only for governmental purposes, and of course should be adapted only to meet those purposes. Viewed in this light it is easy to see that the specific thing needed was to reveal the heart of the great Moral Governor of the universe towards sin, and that this must be done by inflicting in some degree the governmental penalty, that is the penalty which the government had threatened and must inflict for sin.

Now it is plain from the Bible that some of the chief elements of inflicted penalty upon lost sinners are--being driven from God's presence--a consciousness that God hides his face, and expresses his withering disapprobation--a deep conviction that God has withdrawn from them and has left them to the horrors of being abandoned of God. And precisely such, so far as we can ascertain, seems to have been the character of the most awful sufferings of Jesus Christ. When on the cross, He did not cry, O, the agony of such a death--but--"My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" And in the dreadful agony of the garden it is plain that physical sufferings bore no part. His chief sufferings therefore throughout were mental, and so far as we can infer from his language and his circumstances, they must have resulted from the withdrawment of his Father's face, from the awful horror of that conviction, My God has forsaken me, and from the impression of God's dread and withering frown. For Christ now stood before God as sin, and from sin God must avert his smile, and against it He must reveal his awful frown. How the Son of God, spotless in innocence, conscious of perfect rectitude, could have this awful sense of being forsaken, perhaps we may never know, unless perchance we may in the lapse of eternal ages learn it from his own lips. The fact we have no ground to call in question. Christ Himself we may suppose, understood the reason and design of his being thus forsaken of the Father, and if so, we must interpret his expression--"My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" not as an inquiry for the reason, but as an outburst of intense agony, as if his soul could scarcely endure the anguish of that strange, and dreadful frown of the Infinite God.

It seems probable that the Father intended to treat the Son when He stood governmentally as the embodiment of sin, in such a way that sinners might infer from it what their own doom must be--without mercy. There is nothing impossible or even improbable in the idea that the sufferings of Christ were substantially of the same nature as the governmental penalty due the sinner. If we suppose a being to be perfectly holy, and hence, of course, abstract the idea of his suffering the natural penalty of sin, such as remorse, shame, self-condemnation; what we have called the governmental penalty only will remain, namely; those inflictions which fall upon the sinner directly from the Lawgiver as expressions of his intense displeasure. Precisely this seems to have been the state of the suffering Son of God, when He said--"My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death." "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

4. We are not to suppose that in degree and amount Christ suffered the same as all the saved would else have suffered in hell. This has sometimes been asserted, but always without proof. Such a substitution of

equal sufferings is by no means necessary to the value and efficacy of the atonement; there is no good reason for assuming it, and the assumption certainly detracts from the honor conferred by the atonement upon the wisdom and the love of God.

5. It is a strong objection to the idea of equal substitution of sufferings that in such a case, the atonement is no gain at all to the universe. The sinners of our race might just as well have borne the sufferings themselves, as to have Jesus Christ bear them, if the amount is in either case the same; not to urge also that it is in itself considered a relief to the mind to have the guilty suffer what they deserve, instead of having the innocent suffer it for them, provided nothing is gained on the score of amount.

But while we hold that the sufferings of Christ are not to be considered equal in amount to the suffering saved thereby from being endured, yet let it not be supposed that the sufferings of Jesus Christ were of small amount. Doubtless we are apt to estimate their amount too low. We shall estimate it higher and in all respects more correctly when we come to hear the description from Christ Himself. Who has not often thought that in heaven we shall want to hear the story from the very lips of Him who was slain? O, what a scene, to gather round the Lamb of Calvary, and hear Him describe the agonies of Gethsemane--the awful horrors--the darkness, and the being forsaken of God, which extorted those agonizing cries on Calvary!

No doubt those sufferings were exceedingly great--great beyond the comprehension of any finite mind. We shall readily see the reason why they should be, if we consider that it was the design of God in this transaction to make a deep and solemn public impression that should pervade the universe of minds and endure forever! Sin must be rebuked--terribly rebuked--rebuked in a manner worthy of God, and so rebuked, that its awful impression should continue unabated, down, along through all the cycles of eternal ages. This must be done, or God's government will be dishonored. Hence the necessity for so terrible a demonstration of God's justice.

6. We see in what sense the saints are saved by the righteousness of Christ. Much has always been said by Old School divines about imputation. I do not mean now just what they do by this term, but there is a sense in which the righteousness of Christ may be said to be imputed to us. I have already explained what this sense is. Jesus Christ was treated as if He were a sinner, that we for his sake might be treated as if we were righteous. He deserved no sufferings--we deserved them all. They were not endured for his sake, but for ours. He stood before God to be treated as sinful; we as a result, stand before God and are treated as righteous. As He represented the sins of a lost race, so we represent the righteousness of a spotless Savior.

7. Our own personal obedience has no part in the matter of our justification, not even any obedience rendered after conversion. After conversion we are pious and to some extent holy; but this is not taken into account as a ground of our justification.

(1.) Because when once condemned, no subsequent obedience can procure our acceptance on legal grounds. It is perfectly obvious that no obedience performed after sin and condemnation, can in any way atone for the previous sin.

(2.) Our obedience is not our own in such a sense that we can be justified by it according to law. It should be considered that our obedience after conversion is not under law--that is, not a system of mere law, but is under grace--it being all performed in consequence of Christ's gracious work within us, and not wrought out under purely legal influences. We are therefore not to suppose that we do not need Christ after once being converted and pardoned. No idea can be more false and ruinous than this. For the holiness of

Christians after conversion is the result of Christ's Spirit working in them and is in this sense a gracious righteousness, and hence can never come into the account as if it were a legal righteousness, so as to justify men on merely legal grounds. We owe to the grace of Christ our entire salvation, and are to be rewarded, not for our own righteousness, but on the ground that we represent the righteousness of God.

8. We see how much we are indebted to Christ for our salvation. He has been set forth as a propitiation for sin, and in him an atonement was made. He stood in our stead where we must else have stood as condemned and quailing rebels; he suffered in his own person that awful manifestation of divine displeasure which would else have been made in our destruction in order to render it possible for God to be just to his government and good to all his subjects and yet pardon sinners. Christ has done all this for us, and now does it well become us to say--in the inmost soul--

"Had I ten thousand hearts to give,

Lord, they should all be Thine."

9. We can see how great the future glory of the saints must be. We have been looking at the great agony and grief endured by Jesus Christ. Look now in the other direction at the great glory resulting from our being made the righteousness of God in him. In the days of his flesh God made Him sin for us, laying on Him the iniquity of us all, and in those scenes of anguish making known his own utter abhorrence of sin. It now remains for God to make known to all the universe his own high sense of the value of Christ's righteousness. It remains for Him to show how perfectly pleased He is with the atonement--how delighted He is with the perfect holiness of Jesus Christ, and how fully He appreciates Christ's benevolence in sacrificing Himself for others' good. And all this is to be shown by his treatment of the saints. You will observe that the proximate end of Christ's being made sin for us, as taught in our text, is that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. In us, therefore, that is, in the redeemed from our race, must be revealed before the eyes of the universe the glorious righteousness of God as manifested in and through his Son. O what miracles of glory will be revealed there! Mark, that the saints are not merely to be brought into heaven and suffered to live there, but they are to be used there for displaying the righteousness of God and his infinite glory in the sufferings of his Son. When God saw it necessary to show forth his abhorrence of sin, then Jesus Christ stood out before the universe as if in the place of all the sin of our race, and in this position the Infinite Father withdrew the light of his face, and gave expression to his fearful wrath against sin. Then the suffering One groaned and agonized--the earth quaked--the sun forbore to shine, and nature herself by her throes of agony seemed to sympathize with the unwonted anguish of her Lord.

Thus closed the first chapter of this wondrous development. The scene of the next is laid in heaven. There must be revealed the righteousness of God. There must be unfolded his infinite goodness and love as embodied in this scheme of substitution and atonement. It now remains to show what results of unutterable glory to God in the highest accrue from this plan of redemption. And these can not be revealed in the myriad worlds of Jehovah's universe except by means of exalting redeemed sinners most gloriously before their eyes. We need not wonder therefore that it should be said--"It doth not yet appear what we shall be." "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him." Most truly said, for it can only be in a low and groveling sense that we can be said to conceive of those glorious things prepared by God for his people. O, if some of our departed friends should appear to us in all their present glory, we might perhaps mistake them for God Himself, and be ready to fall down and worship them. You are aware that this very mistake has sometimes

been made, nor is it very strange that it should be. The Bible represents the saints as then "shining forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father." It need not surprise us that they should appear in the palaces of heaven adorned with robes of glory such as no eye of man hath seen or heart conceived. For they are gloriously exalted not to represent their own righteousness, but the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus their Lord. The glory of God and the blessedness of the universe demand that Jesus should be honored and exalted for what He has done and suffered; but the relations of his people to Himself in this work are such that He can not be exalted and honored except in connection with their exaltation. If Christ is an heir of God, they are "joint heirs with Him." If He is to be rewarded with a glorious triumph, they must join in the triumphal procession--the rescued ones--the trophies of his victory--the purchase of His blood. Behold He says, "Here am I and the children whom God hath given me." O, "He is not ashamed to call them brethren." Hence the exalted honor to which they must be raised.

10. This inheritance is received by simple faith. Whoever simply believes and with the heart embraces, shall receive and enjoy it for ever.

11. It is proffered to all, and proffered now. Whoever will believe in Christ, let him come--come now, and receive the earnest of this inheritance in the present gift of the Spirit. The Spirit is given to believers now as the earnest and pledge of that glorious inheritance.

But you say--How can it be that simple faith is the only requisite to secure this inheritance? I am but too well aware that the simplicity of the way of salvation is a great stumbling-block to the world. The mass of men who hear the gospel are stumbled on this very rock, and turn aside and go about to work out some form of self-righteousness. It is too simple a thing in their esteem to have salvation for merely believing on Jesus Christ--not to say also that it is too humiliating. They do not so well like to come into such a possession without having it to say that they have paid well for it. Hence they pass over the simplicity of the gospel, and miss of heaven. Slow indeed are most men to see that it is by simple faith that we commit the soul to God, renounce self in all its forms, and cast ourselves upon the righteousness of God alone.

12. Unbelievers reject this way of salvation, and of course the unmitigated penalty of the law must fall on them. Although Christ has died for them, yet if they will not believe, they must be damned. So the Bible declares--"he that believeth not is condemned already"--"he that believeth not shall be damned." Be it so that they have been bought with blood;--yet if they deny the Lord that bought them, they are not redeemed unto salvation, but on the contrary, bring upon themselves swift and more awful destruction. In the nature of the case this must be so. A pardon proposed to the consent of the prisoner, and by him rejected, becomes no pardon at all. The prisoner's rejection of it nullifies it utterly as to its reference to himself.

It deserves special notice that the apostle represents this mode of salvation by faith in Christ as something to be submitted to by the sinner. He says that certain men "going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God." Now this submission to the righteousness of God implies a full and cordial assent to God's justice in punishing, and to his grace in providing a substitute. The sinner admits most fully that he is just as hopelessly lost as God represents him to be, as hell-deserving, as guilty--as mean, as unworthy--and consents to take his place before God and man accordingly. He takes this system of salvation as God proposes it; submits himself to it;--gets down in the dust;--brings down his high crest, and makes no words about the hardship of taking his own place as a guilty sinner saved by grace. Sinner, can you hope to be saved in any other way than this? You can not but know that this is God's way. Your own reason affirms that it is in harmony with right and with the truth in the case.

13. You may see the impressiveness and force of the question, "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation!" Do impenitent sinners imagine that after all God has done in the gospel scheme--He will trifle with it and set it all aside? Do you dream that the great God will treat your objections and your refusal with marked deference, and contrive for your special benefit some more acceptable plan, or will save you in particular without any Savior or any faith on your part in Him? Remember that it is said and written as with a point of a diamond--"He that believeth not shall be damned." And do you hope by your objections to disannul these awful words?

Sinner, what will you do--make up your mind and answer--what? Do you say--"Well, if Christ has suffered for all my sins--it is enough; what more can I ask? If Christ's righteousness may become mine, it is enough. Why should I forfeit it and go down to hell? The gospel is good enough for me;--farewell sin--farewell vain world; I take the Bible--I take Jesus Christ--I take all his blessed gospel to my very heart!" Will you say and do this, sinner, and do it at once--do it now, in this accepted time? Then, 'tis well.

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