

Defending the Heart of the Gospel

by Phil Johnson

Phil Johnson emphasizes the critical importance of justification by faith as the heart of the gospel and a foundational doctrine of Christianity.

Duration: 1:02:44

Scripture: Romans 3:24, 2 Corinthians 5:20-21, Galatians 2:16

Topics: "Gospel"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the simplicity of the message of preaching Christ. The main verse discussed is 2 Corinthians 5:20, where the Apostle Paul describes his role as an evangelist and urges people to be reconciled to God. The sermon highlights the importance of understanding Christ's relationship to sin, sinners, and God the Father, as well as the means by which atonement for the world's sin was accomplished. The speaker also emphasizes the doctrine of justification by faith and the imputation of righteousness to sinners, using various key texts from Paul's writings in the New Testament.

Transcript

This is a seminar on justification, and I want to suggest to you in this hour that the doctrine of justification by faith, the Reformation principle of sola fide, is of such primary importance that it deserves to be a regular focus in your preaching ministry. You need to master the nuances of this doctrine. You need to understand the biblical basis for it.

You need to learn to defend it against all the various attacks that have been brought against it, and you need to build your message around the various truths related to this doctrine, because this is, after all, the very heart of the gospel. And in fact, that is the very thing I believe the Apostle Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 2 verse 2, when he wrote, I am determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. That is what I believe Paul was referring to when he said, I'm determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

You see this in Paul's own writings. Virtually every subject he ever deals with in the New Testament, he ultimately brings it back to this touchstone article of the faith. Justification is by faith alone in Christ alone.

Now, why give such prominence to this doctrine? After all, there are many other doctrines that are fundamental, essential to true Christianity. There's the deity of Christ, His incarnation, His bodily resurrection, the promise of the second coming. All of those are explicitly named in Scripture as

non-negotiables.

They are all essential to true Christianity and essential to authentic faith. If you deny any of those, you have, in effect, departed from the Christian faith. That's what I mean when I say they are fundamental.

Or there's the doctrines of the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Abandon that and you have opened the door for every other kind of error. And so that's a fundamental doctrine, too.

So you might ask, why place so much stress on the principle of justification by faith? Is it really that important? My answer is yes. Justification by faith is unique, I believe, because this doctrine distills the pure essence of everything that is fundamental and everything that is distinctive about Christianity. A person can affirm the deity of Christ and give lip service to the authority and inerrancy of Scripture and be very sound in all the basic points of Trinitarian doctrine and still come under the curse of Galatians 1 verses 8 and 9 because he preaches a different gospel.

A person can affirm the doctrines of the virgin birth of Christ and have a solid grasp on the Incarnation and believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ and still be one of those described in Romans chapter 4 verse 4 and also Romans chapter 9 verse 32 and also Romans 10 verse 3 who, rather than trusting in Christ alone for justification, are seeking to establish a righteousness of their own by works. Paul always elevated this doctrine to the top of the list of importance. In other words, you can be basically sound on Christology and theology proper and still be unsound on the gospel.

And that error, that unsoundness on the gospel, Paul says, will damn you without remedy. But the converse is not true. I've never met anyone who truly understood and affirmed justification by faith and the principle of sola fide who was unsound on any other fundamental doctrines.

This doctrine is like an anchor to keep all the others straight because if you truly understand justification by faith and the principle of imputed righteousness, then you are going to affirm the deity of Christ because the imputation of righteousness requires that we have a perfect substitute with perfect righteousness, a righteousness that, in Jesus' words, exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees and is as perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect. And the only substitute who qualifies for that is a Christ who is God. And so if you truly understand sola fide, if you truly affirm justification by faith, you will believe in the deity of Christ because the principle of Christ's deity is ultimately built in to a sound understanding of justification by faith.

In the same way, this principle of justification by faith works only if you affirm the substitutionary atonement of Christ. If you stay sound on the principle of sola fide, you will also be basically sound in your doctrine of the atonement. In the same way, all the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Christ, the truth of a Trinitarian Godhead, the doctrines of grace and even the authority of scripture, all of them are linked one way or another so that the better you understand this doctrine of justification by faith, the more sound you will be in all of your theology.

This is the primary fundamental doctrine. And that's why if you were to ask me to name the one doctrine in all of theology that is most vital, the one point of faith that carries the most weight, the one doctrine that is most important to handle with care and most vital to proclaim accurately, it would not be a difficult choice for me. I would tell you instantly that in my opinion, and I believe this is biblical, it is the doctrine of justification by faith, the Reformation principle of sola fide that rises to the level of supreme importance.

This is the one doctrine that encompasses the heart and the soul of everything that is essential to Christianity, everything that is fundamental to our faith. This doctrine of justification by faith is the very life and nerve of the gospel itself. Now, it is to the shame and the detriment of the evangelical movement in our generation that we have not given this in this doctrine sufficient stress or suitable attention.

And that's been true for more than a century now. For that reason, no matter where you look these days on the horizon of theological controversy, people are attacking the doctrine of justification by faith. It's under attack from seven or eight different sources right now.

Serious attacks launched against this doctrine. And you will discover an interesting irony if you study the history of the fundamentalist movement at the start of the 20th century. I'll be talking about this tomorrow in my seminar on fundamentalism.

But that movement, the fundamentalist movement, almost from its inception, failed to give sufficient attention to this most important of all fundamental doctrines. The early fundamentalists, as I'm sure you know, were a group of loosely affiliated evangelical leaders who rose up together to defend the foundational, essential, most vital doctrines of the Christian faith against the influence of modernism 100 years ago. Modernism was a rationalistic, humanistic movement that denied the miraculous elements of Scripture.

That's where it started, with the denial of the miraculous elements of Scripture. And therefore, modernism undermined the authority of Scripture itself. At the height of modernist influence in the late 19th century, virtually every essential doctrine of Christianity was under direct attack.

The authority and inspiration of Scripture, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, creationism, and the historicity of the early chapters of Genesis, all of those things had been attacked by modernists and attacked viciously. And so the fundamentalists began responding by writing and publishing a series of articles called *The Fundamentals*. That was a complete set of articles that was published in four volumes, actually published in 12 volumes in the early 1900s.

They are still available today in a four-volume set. They are still definitive and convincing arguments against modernism and in favor of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity in defense of the truth of Scripture. But if you study the table of contents of those volumes, you'll notice one glaring omission.

There is only one brief article in the whole book, the whole set of books, one brief article in defense of the doctrine of justification by faith. That's a short and succinct article by H.C.G. Moule, who was then the Bishop of Durham in England, and it's fine as far as it goes, but it stops short of being a thorough and definitive explanation of how Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner. It's buried in the middle of volume six or something, and it's not at all given the kind of prominence I have suggested this doctrine of justification by faith deserves.

I think our fundamentalist ancestors simply took the principle of sola fide for granted because it wasn't the main doctrine under attack by modernism. The truth is a long and hard battle had been fought over justification early in the first half of the 19th century. This battle had been fought and won by Protestants in response to John Henry Newman and the Oxford Movement, a group of Anglicans who led hordes of people into Roman Catholicism.

They started by attacking this doctrine of justification by faith, but the Protestants had held on and fought for justification by faith, and so of all the fundamental doctrines, this one was probably the least targeted by the modernists at the end of the 19th century, and it was taken for granted. And sadly, it was therefore neglected and almost completely neglected for more than 75 years. In 1961, the Banner of Truth published a reprint of a book that was then 97 years old.

It's called *The Doctrine of Justification* by James Buchanan, originally published 1867. And the first Banner of Truth reprint in 1961 carried a foreword by J.I. Packer in which Packer, and this was a young and more orthodox Packer, wrote this. Here's what he said.

This is from the foreword of his introduction to this book by Buchanan. He says this, it is a fact of ominous significance that Buchanan's classic volume, now a century old, is the most recent full-scale study of justification by faith that English-speaking Protestantism has produced. Packer says, if we may judge by the size of its literary output, there has never been such an age of feverish theological activity as the past hundred years.

Yet amid all its multifarious theological concerns, it did not produce a single book of any size on the doctrine of justification. And then Packer says this, and this is the crucial statement, and I love this, and he's right about this, by the way. He says this, if all we knew of the church during the past century was that it had neglected the subject of justification this way, we should already be in a position to conclude that this has been a century of religious apostasy and decline.

It's been some 44 years since Packer wrote those words, and now the doctrine of justification by faith is under attack, direct attack, from several sources within the evangelical movement. After several generations of near total silence on the issue, evangelicals are simply not well-equipped to defend the principle of sola fide. The ecumenical movement has made serious inroads into evangelical churches for precisely this reason.

The inaccurate and watered-down notion most evangelicals have about justification by faith really isn't all that different from medieval Roman Catholicism. The typical evangelical today doesn't understand the doctrine of justification well enough to see how profound and important the difference is between what the Reformers taught and what the Roman Catholic Council of Trent declared. And try this if you don't believe me.

Read the Council of Trent. That's the Roman Catholic Council that rebuked the Reformers. Read the Council of Trent on justification to the typical evangelical.

Don't tell him what it is, but read what Trent, this Roman Catholic Council, had to say about the doctrine of justification. And in all likelihood, your modern evangelical listener will tell you that it's perfectly sound. And in fact, that is pretty much what some evangelical leaders are saying today.

There are several influential voices and a number of popular movements within Protestant evangelicalism now suggesting that Luther and the rest of the Reformers got it all wrong because they misunderstood what the Apostle Paul meant when he spoke of justification by faith. That is one of the major themes of N.T. Wright and the *New Perspective on Paul*, which I'll be talking about, I think tomorrow, no, Friday in one of my seminars. That's the main thrust of what some of these men are saying.

It's an idea that is also being echoed here in America by Auburn Avenue Theology, which is a movement among American Presbyterians. It's a notion that's had a surprising and dismaying influence in Reformed circles where you'd expect men to understand and fight for the central defining doctrine of the Protestant Reformation. And my answer is that Paul's teaching on justification by faith is neither as obscure nor as difficult to follow as this new breed of New Testament experts wants us to pretend.

Paul spoke with absolute clarity on the doctrine of justification. Romans 3 and 4, Romans 5, Romans 8, Philippians 3, many other key texts from Paul in the New Testament are clear and definitive. And if you put them together and let Scripture interpret Scripture, they give us a clear understanding of justification by faith.

And this is the ideal anchor and the perfect centerpiece of a comprehensive biblical theology. It's my contention that proper exegesis of all the biblical texts will definitively prove the principle of sola fide, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, the forensic nature of justification, and every other key point that was under dispute in the Protestant Reformation. And to give you a clear example of that, what I want to do in this hour is take you to the that sums up the doctrine of justification by faith, I think, more pointedly than any other.

And I'm going to try to keep this short for your benefit. I know this is late today, the first day. Some of you guys are jet lagged.

I will keep this as short as possible. I think you're going to hear a lot about justification by faith this week. My understanding is it's one of the things R.C. Sproul will address in some of the plenary sessions.

So I don't step on too much of what he might say. I just want to look at this one verse. Second Corinthians 5:21 says this.

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. Now, here is the Apostle Paul's most succinct statement about the meaning of the cross. And this is the shortest, simplest verse among many in the Pauline epistles that make the meaning of justification inescapable.

He's made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. The whole gospel message is contained in those words. The text explains the nature of the atonement, the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the principle of substitution.

It teaches us about the character of God, the sinlessness of Christ, the simplicity of salvation. Have you ever noticed how much theology Paul could pack into just a few words? This summarizes biblical soteriology. It has important implications for Christology.

It teaches us something about theology proper because it plainly assumes the sovereignty of God, the love of God, the justice of God, and the grace of God. And so I hope you understand what I mean when I say this is one of the most important and far-reaching texts of Scripture. It's a crucial text that we have to understand.

This is one of those crystal clear verses that helps us make sense of the rest of Scripture. It helps explain the significance of the priestly and sacrificial laws of the Old Testament. It thoroughly illuminates the meaning of the cross of Christ.

It reveals why Christ is the only way of salvation from sin. It shows us why no good works performed by sinners could ever contribute one iota to their salvation. And it demonstrates how salvation was accomplished for us apart from any works of our own and yet in a way that completely fulfilled God's law, upheld His justice, vindicated His righteousness.

And in other words, to borrow an expression from Romans 3.26, here is how God can be just while He justifies sinners who believe in Jesus. This text explains how it is that God can pardon sinners and treat them as righteous without compromising His own impeccable righteousness or lowering His own perfect standard. Now, I love John MacArthur's summary of the meaning of this text and it bears repeating.

It's also a pretty good paraphrase of the text itself. This is what this verse is saying in the words of John MacArthur. You may hear him say this this week.

Here's what this verse means. On the cross, God treated Christ as if He had committed all the sins of every sinner who would ever believe so that He could treat believers as if they had lived Christ's perfect life. That's what this means.

God is treating Christ as if He committed all the sins of every sinner who would ever believe so that He could treat believers as if we lived Christ's perfect life. Look at the verse again. He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him.

This is all about the atoning work of Christ. Its meaning can be summed up in a single word, substitution. This describes an exchange that took place through the atonement that Christ offered our sin for Christ's righteousness.

He took the place of sinners so that they could stand in His place as a perfectly righteous man. And notice the graphic language. He was made sin.

That's the epitome of all that is despicable and odious so that we might be made righteousness. That's everything that's good and pure and acceptable in God's estimation. This was the exchange.

Our sin for His righteousness. Our sin was charged to His account. His righteousness credited to our account.

This is a profound concept and several amazing things stand out on the face of this text. First of all, notice God did this. He, God, hath made Him, Christ, to be sin for us.

It was God who appointed His own Son to stand in the place of sinners. Or in the words of Acts 2.23, Christ was delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God. Jesus' death on the cross was not something that was inflicted on Him by the wicked hands of sinful men.

It was that, but it was not only that. This was not merely an atrocity that was carried out in the strength of human free will. God ordained it.

Or as Isaiah 53 verse 10 says, I quoted this verse last hour, it pleased the Lord to bruise Him. He hath put Him to grief. He made His soul an offering for sin.

Acts 4.28 also says that what happened on the cross was precisely what the hand and the counsel of God predetermined to be done. God was the one who offered this amazing sacrifice on behalf of sinners. It was all done, according to John 19.28, so that the scripture might be fulfilled.

The cross was not an accident of history or an afterthought, but long before the beginning of time, this was the predetermined plan of a sovereign God to redeem sinners. That's why Revelation 13 verse 8 refers to Christ as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. And so, as I said, the sovereignty of God permeates this text.

God did this. Second, notice, He did it for us. He hath made Him to be sin for us.

Christ, who didn't deserve the wages of sin, suffered the full weight of divine wrath on behalf of people who did not deserve anything but judgment. He didn't deserve to die. We didn't deserve to live, but He changed places with us.

First Peter 3.18, Christ suffered for sins, the just for the unjust that He might bring us to God. I mean, think of how amazing this is. Has this ever really struck you? Romans 5, verses 7 through 8, for one will hardly die for a righteous man, though perhaps for the good man, some would dare to die.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And so this was an extraordinary expression of amazing, unimaginable, incomprehensible love for people who were utterly undeserving of any favor whatsoever. And yet God did this for us.

Sinners though we were, enemies though we were, our sin having set us against God as stubborn adversaries, nonetheless, He sacrificed His own beloved Son for us. God did this. He did it for us.

And notice third, He did it through Christ. What God planned and purposed was accomplished through the agency of the incarnate Christ, the eternal Son of God, who in human flesh did this willingly on our behalf. He who knew no sin became sin for us.

Now notice, this speaks of His life as well as His death. The fact that He knew no sin speaks of His sinless life. The reality that He became sin for us speaks of His dying.

Now we're going to explore a little bit more what those expressions mean before this hour is past. But for now, just notice that when it says He became sin, it speaks of His dying. On the cross, He stood in the place of sinners and bore the wages of their sin as if He Himself had been guilty of all of it.

And yet He wasn't. He knew no sin, it says. Again, that speaks of His perfect life.

Born under the law, He fulfilled every jot and every tittle of God's commands perfectly in every degree. Hebrews 7, 26, He was holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners as far as His character was concerned. He did no sin.

Neither was any guile found in His mouth. 1 Peter 2, 22. And according to 1 John 3, verse 5, He was manifested to take away our sins, but in Him there was no sin.

He was spotless, the sinless Lamb of God, innocent, pure, without sin, as far from sin as anyone could be. Separate from sinners in the sense of His character. Not separate from them in the way He walked through this world, but separate from sinners in the sense that He never partook in sin.

But He was manifested, it says, to take away the sin of the world by bearing it and by paying the awful price of it. Now, that message is what the true gospel is all about. No text of Scripture presents it more plainly or more concisely than this verse.

This passage is also uniquely rich in that it explains Christ's relationship to sin, His relationship to sinners, His relationship to God the Father. It sheds important light on the meaning and the nature and the extent of Christ's work. It describes in graphic language the means by which atonement for the sin of the world was accomplished.

It's one of those texts that is vitally important to our understanding of the doctrine of justification by faith and the imputation of righteousness to sinners. Speaks of both sides of the equation. And in fact, the principles of justification, expiation, imputation, substitution and reconciliation are all illuminated by this one text.

And if time permitted, we could practically do a comprehensive survey of every aspect of soteriology, that is the doctrine of salvation, beginning with this one verse alone. But I'm not here to overwhelm you with theological terms or to turn this into just a seminary lecture about points of systematic theology. Instead, what I want to do is show you the utter simplicity of this message.

This is what it means to preach Christ. This verse is about Christ and it's set in a context where the Apostle Paul is describing his own role as an evangelist. This is his one verse summary of the evangelistic message.

And it's an account. It's accompanied by an evangelistic appeal. Verse 20.

Now, then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us. We pray you in Christ's stead. That is, as his ambassadors speaking for him, making the same appeal he would make if he were here speaking himself.

We beseech you be reconciled to God. That's the plea of the gospel message. That is the simple truth that ought to be the heart and the focus of everything we teach.

And again, this passage is all about Christ. Three clear perspectives of Christ are given to us in this text, and I want to take some time to look at each one of them individually. First, we see Christ as sinless.

Christ as sinless. The text is very plain here. Christ knew no sin.

Now, those words appear in the middle of the verse, but this is the logical starting point for understanding the meaning of the whole text. The utter sinlessness of Christ is the foundation for everything Paul has to say in this verse. First Peter 1:19 echoes the same truth.

That verse speaks of Christ as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. As Hebrews 9:14 says, he offered himself without spot to God. Now, of course, you know, and I'm not telling you anything you don't know, Christ was perfectly righteous, absolutely holy.

He's the eternally immutable God and all his perfections. Long before the incarnation, he was holy. And all the virtues of deity were his.

Everything true about God was true about Christ. Everything scripture says about the perfect holiness of God applies to Christ. He is, according to Habakkuk 1:13, he is of purer eyes than to behold evil and unable to look approvingly on iniquity of any kind, totally separate from sin.

But here in 2 Corinthians 5, Paul is not speaking about Christ's holiness as God. He's speaking about his utter sinlessness as a man. See, Christ was not only God, he was also man.

He became man and his humanity was not an illusion. He was a true man, God incarnate in human flesh. And when Paul says here that Christ knew no sin, he is speaking in this context of Christ as our substitute, as a man, the perfect man who lived his whole life spotlessly, flawlessly in obedience to the law of God, without ever once succumbing to temptation or defiling himself with sin in any way.

See, Christ, as a man, did what Adam failed to do. He withstood temptation. He rendered perfect obedience to every commandment of God.

Scripture makes that very comparison of Christ to Adam in several places. 1 Corinthians 15, verse 45, Paul writes, The first man, Adam, was made a living soul. The last Adam was made a quickening spirit.

He calls Christ the last Adam. In that verse, Paul is actually quoting from Genesis 2, verse 7, where it says, The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. And man, that is the first man, Adam, became a living soul.

The last Adam, and that's an expression that speaks of Christ, became a life-giving spirit. Now, so this comparison is clear between Christ and Adam. In what sense was Christ like Adam? Well, just as Adam stood in relationship to the human race as our head and our representative, Christ stands in relationship to the redeemed race as our head and our representative.

Again, by withstanding temptation, Christ did for us what Adam failed to do. And that's why Paul says in Romans 5, 19, As by one man's disobedience, many were made sinners. So by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

You see, Adam was put to a simple test. He had only one commandment to obey, and that was the command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He failed.

By contrast, Christ's obedience was much more complex. He was born under the law, according to Galatians 4, verse 4. So the obedience that was required of Christ in his earthly life included more than 600 distinct commandments, moral, civil, ceremonial. But he fulfilled them all to the letter from the beginning to the end of his life.

Hebrews 4, 15 says he was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. In other words, he was put to the test and he was proven to be perfectly sinless, without any spot, without any blemish. And that fact came out clearly in his trials just before the crucifixion, right? Remember, his enemies were desperately seeking a way to accuse him, and they looked diligently for anyone who could testify of anything wrong he'd ever done.

But in the end, they had to rely on the testimony of two false witnesses who twisted his words in order to justify some false and trumped-up charges against him. And even Pilate refused to render any verdict of guilt against Jesus. But after hearing all the charges and all the testimony and all the cross-examination of Christ, Pilate said, and he said it repeatedly, I find no fault in this man.

Now, let me address a couple of hard questions that always come up when you talk about the human sinlessness of Christ. First of all, many of you are aware of these debates, but there's been a running debate among theologians, really for centuries, over the question of whether Christ, as a man, could have sinned. Did he even have the potential to sin? Was there any possibility that Christ would succumb, as Adam did, to temptation and fall? Some have argued that unless there was a real possibility that he might sin, his temptations were somehow unreal, a pretense, only a simulation of the temptation Adam faced,

and unlike the temptations you and I face, and that's their claim.

Now, every true Christian, of course, acknowledges that Christ did not sin, but some would say that in order for his temptation to be meaningful, he must have had a real potential to sin. Those who hold that position say that he differed from you and me in that he had the ability not to sin. And so he was subjected to temptation with an ability to say either yes or no, and he simply exercised his ability not to sin.

The difference between him and you and me being, we don't have the ability to say no. Our hearts are so bent toward sin that presented with temptation, we will ultimately fail. He had the ability to stand or fail, and he chose to stand.

He exercised his ability not to sin and was victorious. Now, others say, and I'm among them, that there really was never any real possibility that Christ would sin, but his moral perfection was such that sin had no appeal to him whatsoever, and therefore, no matter what Satan might have done, he could never, under any circumstances, have enticed Jesus to sin. Now, this debate has raged since medieval times, and in fact, there's even Latin names for it.

For those of you who like theological terms, there are Latin terms for the different views. The first group believes that Christ was *posse non peccare*. *Posse*, P-O-S-S-E, meaning able, and *peccare*, a verb meaning to sin.

Posse non peccare, able not to sin. And the second group says, no, Christ was *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. Now, you and me and everyone else who was born as Adam's offspring, because we inherit both his guilt and his sinful nature, we are *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin.

And so you have these three possible moral states, *posse non peccare*, able not to sin, *non posse peccare*, not able to sin, and *non posse non peccare*, not able not to sin. Now, I believe strongly that Scripture teaches Christ was *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. His inherent righteousness is one of the attributes of his deity.

His absolute hatred for sin is part of his eternal nature, and he didn't divest himself of the attributes of deity in order to become man. As I said, he was a man. He was fully human.

But he didn't give up his divine attributes. And therefore, he could no more sin than God could lie. And Scripture says plainly and repeatedly that God cannot lie.

See, for example, Titus 1-2, Numbers 23, verse 19, 1 Samuel 15, verse 29. All of those texts say it's impossible for God to lie. And in the same way it's impossible for God to lie, it would have been impossible for Christ to sin.

Furthermore, Christ is immutable. He's unchanged and unchanging in his character. And the New Testament expressly declares this.

Hebrews 13-8, Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. There was nothing in him that held any attraction whatsoever for sin. He hated sin as God hates it.

He had none of the evil desires that you and I have inherited as part of our fallen nature. Jesus couldn't be deceived the way Eve was. He wouldn't yield to sin the way Adam did.

And in fact, although he was tempted, meaning he was assaulted with enticements and inducements and arguments by Satan, Jesus said this about Satan in John 14, verse 30, The prince of this world has nothing in me. So what about this argument that Jesus' temptations weren't real unless he had the possibility to sin? Look, you can put gold in a crucible and you can heat it to a white hot temperature and there is no possibility that it will be burned up or that it will produce any dross if it's pure gold. But the purity of the gold doesn't make the heat of the flame any less hot.

If anything, Christ's temptations were more intense, not less intense than ours, because he never sought relief from any temptation by giving into it. He felt all the normal, non-sinful human weaknesses that you and I struggle with. Scripture says he suffered from hunger and thirst and bodily fatigue, just like you and me.

He surely knew what it was under the pressure of temptation for the pains of those kinds of infirmities to be intensified. And in fact, isn't that when Satan tempted him? At the end of a 40-day fast. In fact, that is precisely what Hebrews 4.15 says.

We have not a high priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, but was in all points tempted, like as we are, yet without sin. He bore all the natural, non-sinful infirmities of human flesh and he endured all the pressure of temptation on the night of his betrayal to the point that his capillaries burst and his sweat was mixed with blood. But never, ever did he have any desire or attraction to sin or a wish for that which is sinful.

To say that there was ever any possibility of sin in Christ is to misunderstand the utter moral perfection of his character. I would regard it as a serious error to imagine that Christ could sin because it tends to diminish the truth of his deity. Christ was non-*poseidon*, not able to sin, and that is true because he was God incarnate, unchanging, perfectly righteous, in and of himself, with an eternal, immutable, holy hatred of everything that's unholy.

Now, there's a second important debate about Christ's perfect earthly obedience, and it has to do with the question of whether his life, as well as his death, has redemptive significance. We know that Christ died for our sins, according to Scripture, 1 Corinthians 15, 3. We were reconciled to God by the death of his son, Romans 5, 10. In other words, his death bought our atonement.

His blood was the redemption price. 1 Peter 1, verses 18 and 19, you know that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, but with the precious blood of Christ. Again and again, Scripture says Jesus' death is what made atonement for our sins.

But, is there any sense in which his life also had redemptive significance? I believe that there is. Throughout his earthly life, Christ was acting as our substitute, so that everything he did as a man, he did on our behalf, and everything he did ultimately contributed to our redemption. There's a reason why Christ didn't simply take on the body of a human adult and visit earth for a weekend as a full-grown adult, and die in that incarnate form and then ascend to heaven.

Would simply dying in human form, apart from living a complete human life, have provided the same kind of sufficient atonement for us? I believe not. In fact, look at Hebrews 2. If you're open to 2 Corinthians 5, keep a marker there. But turn to Hebrews 2. I want you to see what Scripture says about Christ's incarnation and the atonement.

Notice that verse 14 says, He partook of flesh and blood so that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil. So the ultimate purpose of the incarnation was redemptive. This is why he partook of flesh and blood.

He became a man, that is he partook of flesh and blood, for us in order to deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. Verse 15. Notice verse 16.

He did not do this for angels. Have you ever thought about this? No fallen angel was ever offered redemption. The fallen angels, the angels who fell, were condemned and sentenced without any possibility of atonement.

But Christ became a man. And in fact, verse 16 says he took on him the seed of Abraham. That's a reference to the Abrahamic covenant, which promised Genesis 22, 18, that in Abraham's seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

Christ was that promised seed, Abraham's seed, bringing the blessings of divine grace and eternal salvation to people from every tongue and tribe and nation. And now notice verses 17 and 18. Therefore, it says, in all things, he had to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

For in that he himself has suffered being tempted, he is able to aid those who are tempted. That is a sweeping statement that makes it clear that Christ had to live a complete, full life as a man. He couldn't just come down for a weekend and die, but his life, not only his death, clearly has redemptive significance.

A full life, a perfect faithfulness, is absolutely essential to his role as a mediator between God and men. That's what verses 17 and 18 mean. This was the essential proof that Christ qualified to be the spotless lamb of God to take away sin.

But I believe it was more than that. I'm convinced by my reading of Scripture that Christ's whole life was a fulfillment of the principle of substitution we find in our text, 2 Corinthians 5, 21. And I hope you see this clearly as we get further in our study.

But if we're going to get there, we have to move on. Meanwhile, keep this principle in mind. Christ's life and not his death only contribute something vital to our redemption.

Now, Scripture is clear, Hebrews 2, verse 17, that Christ, in order to be the high priest who offers atonement, had to be made like his brethren in all things. So those who limit his atoning work to his death alone have an incomplete work on the atonement. I'll promise I'll try to come back to that point.

But that's the first perspective of Christ we see from this passage, Christ as sinless, not only sinless God, but sinless God incarnate. So that he's a sinless man as well. Now, there's a second view of Christ you see in this text, and this one is shocking.

Now, I hope you're taking these down. First, Christ as sinless. Now, second, Christ made sin.

I wouldn't even use such language if Scripture didn't use it. It's the opening phrase of our text. He hath made him to be sin for us.

God has made Christ to be sin for us. This is a deliberately graphic expression. I hope it jars your mind and offends your sensibilities.

God made Christ to be sin. That's not an easy statement to process. But it's pregnant with meaning.

Let's see if we can begin to get a grasp on what it means. First, let's talk about what it doesn't mean. This doesn't mean that God made Christ to be a sinner.

And that's clear by the phrase immediately following, which we've already dealt with, Christ knew no sin. In other words, he knew no sin by his own experience. He had no personal guilt.

He was without any blame or sinful corruption whatsoever. And Paul isn't suggesting that the character of Christ was changed at the cross. Now and then you'll hear some careless or misguided individual claim that Christ became a sinner on the cross.

Or that he took on himself corruption and guilt in such a way that he became an actual transgressor. That is not what this means. I've already quoted Hebrews 7.26, which says that Christ is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens.

And the cross changed nothing of his innocent character. He was not made into a wicked person, nor was he in any way tainted by sin. He died as a lamb without blemish, without spot.

And this expression doesn't mean anything that would change that truth. Those who teach that Christ became sinful on the cross have misunderstood how our sins were imputed to him. Then there are others who want to go the opposite direction and try to tone this expression down.

They point out that in the Hebrew language, in Hebrew, the same word is used for sin and sin offering. And so they say, maybe this was a Hebraism. Okay, this is Greek, but maybe it was a Hebraism.

Maybe the verse ought to be translated this way. He hath made him to be a sin offering for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Now, at first glance, that might seem to make sense.

And it certainly does away with the offensiveness of this expression, or most of it. And the sense of the statement is true enough. Christ became a sin offering.

But you cannot sustain that translation linguistically, grammatically, or contextually. And in the first place, the Greek word translated sin in this text is hamartia. It means sin.

It's never used in the New Testament to speak of a sin offering. Hamartia. In the second place, the same word, hamartia, is used twice in the Greek text of our verse.

And you can't have it mean one thing in one place and another thing in another place, all in the same sentence. It would make nonsense of this verse because you'd have to render it this way. He hath made him to be a sin offering for us who knew no sin offering.

That would destroy the sense of it. In the third place, the word sin obviously stands in deliberate contrast with the word righteousness. He made him to be sin that we might be made righteousness.

And if you make that word to mean sin offering, it destroys the parallelism of the contrast Paul is making. And so this translation is correct as it stands. He made him to be sin for us.

And it doesn't mean, again, that Christ literally became guilty. It doesn't mean that he became a sin offering. So what does it mean? It can only mean one thing.

He was made sin by imputation. He was made sin for us, on our behalf, on account of our sin. He became, in a figurative sense and in a judicial sense, he became the embodiment and the symbol of our wickedness.

In fact, the meaning of the expression is explained by the prophetic prophecy of Isaiah 53, verse 6. All we like sheep have gone astray. We've turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all. Our sin, with all its guilt and shame, were imputed to him, put to his account, reckoned as if all that sin were his, even though it was not.

Or, to back up a few verses, the words of Isaiah 53, verse 4, he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. What griefs and what sorrows? The punishment for our guilt. Verse 5, he was wounded for our transgressions.

He was bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement of our peace was upon him. That's clear, isn't it? He took the burden of our sin without actually becoming sinful himself.

Our sin was imputed to him or reckoned to his account, and he paid for it. Now, there are a lot of people who want to eliminate this sort of transactional language from the doctrine of justification, but you can't do it. You can't do it and be faithful to Scripture.

And actually, there's a parallel expression in Galatians 3.13, parallel to our verse, where Galatians 3.13 says, Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us. He was made sin for us. He was made a curse for us.

Now, again, that language is deliberately powerful. To say he was made sin is actually more shocking than saying he was made a sinner. It means that God treated him as if he were the very embodiment of everything vile, everything contemptible, everything base and evil.

Try to conceive of a world of sin gathered up and concentrated in one ugly mass. Fornication, murder, vile thoughts, every expression of human cruelty, every evil manifestation of human wickedness in one hideous heap. You and I, fallen sinners though we are, we couldn't bear to look at it.

How much less could a pure and holy God stand to see it? This is saying that God the Father treated his own son as if he represented that mass of sin, as if he were the pure, distilled essence of everything a holy God cannot endure, as if Christ were the very personification of everything God must judge with an outpouring of divine wrath and banish from his presence. And Christ drank that cup of wrath, as our text says, for us. That's what this expression means.

God made him to be sin for us. Now, I have to move on to the third point. If you're trying to follow my outline in your notes, here's a review.

We've seen Christ as sinless. Christ made sin. Now, look at a third perspective this text gives us.

Christ in union with sinners. Christ in union with sinners. Look at the last clause of the verse, and especially the last two words.

He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him. Now, what is this saying? In what sense are we made the righteousness of God? You might be tempted to think this simply means God made us righteous. After all, according to Romans 8, 29, he did predestinate us to be conformed to the image of his son, to become ultimately righteous.

And according to 2 Corinthians 3, 18, we are being changed into the image of Christ. God is making us righteous. But this verse isn't talking about that at all.

And in fact, the doctrine of justification has nothing to do with that whatsoever. That's sanctification, where God conforms us to the image of Christ. This is different.

We're talking about justification here. And look at the parallelism in our verse. God made Christ to be sin.

He makes us to be righteousness. Similar expressions saying similar things. God made Christ to be sin.

How did he do it? By making him sinful? No, we've already seen why that cannot be the meaning. God made Christ to be sin by imputing our sin to him. OK, now we are made righteousness.

How is that done? By making us righteous? No, by imputing the righteousness of Christ to us. And the context makes this clear. Notice, it's not our own righteousness.

It's the righteousness of God. It's an imputed righteousness. This verse is describing a straightforward exchange.

Just as sin was reckoned to the account of Christ and he was punished for it, so righteousness is reckoned to our account and we are rewarded for it. It's not our righteousness, but we get the reward. Just like it wasn't Christ's sin, but he took the punishment for it.

We stand before God clothed in a perfect righteousness so that in the estimation of the heavenly judge, it as if we were the embodiment of righteousness itself. That's what this means. Now, where does this righteousness come from? Is this just an ethereal righteousness floating around the universe that's somehow imputed to us? No, it's the righteousness of Christ that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

In him, in union with him. And again, this describes the exchange of our sin for his righteousness. And the basis of this exchange is our spiritual union with Christ.

Paul speaks of that union at length here in 2 Corinthians 5. And verse 17 uses the expression in Christ. If any man be in Christ, he's a new creature. Old things are passed away.

Behold, all things are become new. Now, if you read the apostle Paul, you'll discover our spiritual union with Christ is the basis for our standing with God. And it's the basis for all Pauline theology.

He's saying we are united with Christ in such a way that we are seen by God as if we were in Christ. Paul says this repeatedly. Christ's righteousness covers us like a garment.

His life counts for our life. And the merit of his obedience accrues to us. And just as my sin was imputed to him so that he could pay the full price of it for me, in exactly the same way, and the expression is exactly parallel, his perfect life counts as mine by imputation.

That great exchange is the very essence of the doctrine of justification. It's more than just the forgiveness of my sins. You often hear people say, what's the definition of justification? Just as if I'd never sinned.

It's more than that. It's not merely the erasure of my guilt. That would just leave me with a blank slate.

But the positive merit of Christ's righteousness is also credited to my account. So that I get full credit for the perfection of his divine righteousness and his perfect life. Isn't that an amazing thought? And that brings us back to the issue we discussed briefly earlier.

Here is why it is so important to see that the life of Christ, and not just his death, is an essential part of his atoning work. He lived a full, perfect life of obedience, and he did it on our behalf. And therefore, his perfect righteousness as a man counts for us in the reckoning of God.

Now, did you ever wonder why at Jesus' baptism, he told John the Baptist... Remember, John the Baptist didn't want to baptize him. He said, I'm not even worthy to unloose your shoelace, and you want me to baptize you? Jesus said, you have to do it. He said, this is something you have to do.

Matthew 3, verses 13 through 15, it says this, Then cometh Jesus from Galilee to Jordan unto John to be baptized of him. But John forbade him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so for now, for thus it becometh us to fulfill all righteousness. Now, think about that.

What did John's baptism signify? Repentance. And John the Baptist understood this situation. Jesus was sinless.

John was not. If one of these guys should have been baptizing the other, Jesus should have been the one baptizing John. John was right about that.

He had the right perspective. He understood the meaning of baptism. What he said to Jesus was technically right.

But Jesus said he was doing it to fulfill all righteousness. For whose sake? For his own? No, because he had no need of repentance or baptism. He was perfectly righteous by nature.

He didn't have to do anything to fulfill righteousness for his own sake. But he did this for our sake. To fulfill the righteousness that would be ours by imputation.

This was a complete and perfect righteousness that Christ lived as a man, encompassing even the symbol of our repentance. Encompassing all his perfect obedience to the law. So that we can stand before the law in him as if we fulfilled it all.

Because he did it for us. Again, this is the simple meaning of our text. And I can't say it any more clearly than John MacArthur so often says it.

God treated Christ as if he had committed all the sins of all the people who would ever believe. So that he could treat them, he could treat us as if we lived Christ's perfect life of righteousness. Therefore, Paul says, we pray you in Christ's stead be reconciled to God.

How do you do that? Forsake your love of sin. Embrace Christ by faith. It's not a work.

It's union with him. And this great exchange of our sin for Christ's righteousness was a common theme in Paul's writings. He spoke of it in Romans 3 after spending two and a half chapters showing that everyone, Jews, pagans, religious Gentiles, all of them are hopeless sinners, unable to save themselves.

He says this in Romans 3, 21 and 22. But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is manifested being witnessed by the law and the prophets, even the righteousness of God, which is by faith in Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe. In other words, we lay hold of Christ's righteousness by faith.

A few verses later, he says, Romans 4, 5, to him who does not work, but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. And in verse 6, God imputes righteousness apart from works. And Paul said, didn't he, that this was his own singular hope for salvation.

It lay not in himself, but Philippians 3, 9, he hoped to be found in Christ, not having my own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness, which is of God by faith. That's what we need to be preaching. We need to make it clear.

And we need to preach it with force and biblical conviction. And it ought to be the heart of our message, because that's the heart of the gospel. History reveals that when the church has backed away from this doctrine, the church has gone into decline and worldliness.

It's exactly what's happened in our generation. But you read church history and you will discover that when preachers have featured this truth, as the Reformers did, as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards did in the first great awakening, as the Welsh preachers did just before the outbreak of the revival in Wales, this truth has repeatedly been used by God to awaken the church and enliven the people of God. And so let me encourage you to study and to preach the great principles of sola fide, the imputation of Christ's righteousness, and all the other doctrines that are related to the doctrine of justification by faith.

org. Again, the web address is www.swordandtrowel.org.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/22/SID22345.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/phil-johnson/defending-the-heart-of-the-gospel/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net