

Sermon 11, How God Deals with Sin, 1 John 2:2

Proposition: God deals with sin through Christ, who removes both our sin and God's wrath against it.

- I. What Jesus Does: He Propitiates God's Wrath Against Our Sin
- II. For Whom He Does It
 - 1. For Us
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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have listened for the last three weeks to sermons on how to deal with sin. We have heard from the apostle's lips that we must deal with sin by confession, by letting the word of God define our identities, and by throwing ourselves unreservedly on the mercy of the Paraclete. But as magnificent as all of that is, it certainly raises the further question: How does God deal with your sin and mine? We take it to Him. That's clear enough. But what does He do with it? Have you ever asked that question about recycling? "I give this broken piece of worthlessness to you. What do you do with it?" Brothers and sisters, what does God do with our sin? He takes it away by putting it all on Jesus. That propitiates His wrath, not just for us as individuals but also cosmically. That's John's message here. God deals with sin through Christ, who removes both our sin and God's wrath against it.

What Jesus Does: He Propitiates God's Wrath Against Our Sin

John has just been speaking of Jesus Christ the righteous one who stands up in our defense in the Heavenly Courtroom. Now he adds a word about the foundation of that defense. It is not founded on platitudes. It is not founded on vague hopes that we will do better if we are given chance number 7,459,348. It is founded on Jesus' propitiating work.

Now, this word has been a locus of controversy for most of the last century. You will see that the word is proudly in the KJV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, and other conservative translations. In the NIV and NRSV it has been replaced by "atoning sacrifice." What is the deal with propitiation? What does it mean? First off, the word does not appear very frequently in the Bible — actually, in this particular form, only here and in 1 John 4:10. Other closely related words appear a number of times, though, generally referring to the "Mercy Seat" or "Atonement Lid" on top of the Ark of the Covenant, or to forgiveness in general as in the Greek translation of Psalm 130:4. The word means "wrath-removing sacrifice." As you can see, then, propitiation is about soothing an offended party, and especially about soothing an offended deity. That is how the pagan Greeks often used the word.

So if Jesus is the propitiation, what does He do? Essentially He does two things. He expiates our sins and propitiates the Father. To expiate sin is to wash it away. It is to clean it up, to neutralize it, to

get rid of it or render it non-toxic. To propitiate the Father is to get Him to stop being angry against sin and sinners.

Thus, you can see why propitiation as a concept and as a term fell on hard times in the 20th century. To speak of God as someone who needs to be propitiated, as someone who needs to have His wrath quieted down and replaced with love and compassion, just sounds wrong. In our nice suburban lifestyles with plenty of food and plenty of everything else too, universal benevolence is really quite attainable. If we can feel so positive about everyone else, why can't God, for Heaven's sake? Brothers and sisters, that is the question that has been asked. And the overwhelming answer has been "He can!" God is not mad. He's not angry. He does not need to be propitiated. Yes, sin is a problem but it's a problem for us, not for Him. He is a big boy. He is not so petty as to do anything like holding our sins against us, much less actually getting mad about it.

Now, in one sense these representations are true. Of course we should never think of God as petty or immature. But we should always think of Him as a perfectly just and righteous judge. In the wake of the #MeToo campaigns of 2017, many organizations have adopted a zero-tolerance sexual harassment policy. What would you think of a manager who underwent the training, signed the forms, and then proceeded to turn a blind eye to a creepy problem employee who regularly hit on all the women in the office? Would you say, "Oh, this manager is just really mature. He is a big boy. He is not so petty as to do anything like holding this creeper's sins against him, much less actually getting mad about it"? I trust that you would not. I trust that you would say "This manager's overlooking of this sin make him a terrible manager. He is not to be trusted in a position of power. His connivance with the creep makes this a terrible work environment for all my female coworkers and thus for me too."

And you would be right. This is why our God needs to be propitiated. He is angry against sin. He has no tolerance for the creep who hits on women. He has no tolerance for the thief who's robbing the poor. He has no patience with the rulers who are tearing down their societies, or the mothers who are tearing down their children and their households. Brothers and sisters, God is mature, yes. He is a "big boy," if we may use that phrase with all due respect. But He is not now and never will be glib about sin. What the world calls maturity about sin God calls connivance with sin. What the world calls being a good sport God calls being an accessory to the crime.

"God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day" (Psa 7:11). As the KJV fills in there, God is angry with the wicked every day. And if He marked iniquities, we could not stand. We would fall under His wrath and just judgment. But thanks be to God for Jesus Christ our Lord, whom He set forth as a propitiation. That's right: God was willing to have His wrath removed, but only in one way. That way was the offering of His Son as a sweet aroma to please Him and remove His wrath against us.

Jesus Christ the righteous is the wrath-removing sacrifice for our sins. He is not just the atoning sacrifice, who bore the penalty for our sins and thus neutralized and destroyed them. He is the propitiation for our sins. His action at the cross was primarily directed not toward the devil, nor toward sin, nor toward us, but toward God. What were we saved from? Yes, our sin. But why was our sin a problem? Because it provokes the righteous judgment of the Father. We were saved from God's wrath, in two ways — by the removal of our sin (expiation) and the removal of God's wrath (propitiation).

This is the great message of the Gospel. God in Christ has become propitious to you and me. He is no longer angry against us for our sins; He is pleased with us because of Christ, the propitiation for our sins.

For Whom He Does It

So that's the statement here. Jesus is the propitiation. He removes our sins and renders God no longer angry with us. But John does not confine himself to saying that Jesus has made propitiation. He adds specifically who that propitiation is for.

For Us

In the first place, it is for us. It was for you and me that Jesus died. It was for us that He suffered in order to remove sin from us and take the Father's wrath away from us. He washes away our sins and clears away God's wrath. And He does it for us! Brothers and sisters, can you say "Hallelujah"? Does that make you want to shout for joy? Does it fill your heart with a desire to break into song like the most obnoxious of musical-comedy characters? It should. Indeed, I would suggest that if it doesn't you aren't getting what I'm saying. Christ propitiated the Father. Christ expiated your sin. He did what He did for you, and now He stands up and advocates for you on the basis of what He did.

For the Whole World

But then John adds this second phrase, indicating that the propitiation that Christ made was not just for us but also for the whole world! Now, what does this mean? Clearly, if you read the rest of the letter, or even the rest of the chapter, John is aware of people in his own time who are not part of the community of faith. If you read his gospel, you hear him speak of those who are condemned already, those who shall not see life, those on whom God's wrath abides. But the whole point of propitiation is that it removes God's wrath.

Various attempts have been made to harmonize the obvious meaning of our text, which is that God's wrath against the sins of the world has been removed by the death of Christ, with John's statements (and the statements of the rest of the New Testament) that clearly say that some people are still the targets of God's wrath. One attempt makes Christ's propitiation hypothetical. Another simply denies that there is anyone who will not see life on whom God's wrath abides. Another says that John is talking about the church but calling it the world. Essentially, the only way out of the difficulty is either to water down the meaning of "world" or the meaning of "propitiation," or to deny that anyone is ultimately lost. I think the best way is to water down the meaning of "world" not in geographical extent but rather in temporal extent. That is, John is not saying that the whole world is saved today; he is saying that it will be saved at the end. When God drops the curtain on history, then it will be clear that the world has been saved. This does not necessarily mean that no human being or demon will be lost. But it does mean that the whole world will be saved in an eschatological sense. That means that today, before the eschaton, we should not expect to see everyone saved. Jesus is the savior of the world, yes — but His method of saving the world is clearly not to save everyone who's alive right now. It's clear that there are some very lost people doing some very lost things out there right now. But at the end of the day, the world will be saved. He won't let it be lost.

Is this answer satisfying? It's the least unsatisfying of all the alternatives. It allows propitiation its full meaning, does not deny that there are some on whom God's wrath abides (as John so clearly says

elsewhere), and gives “whole world” the fullest possible meaning compatible with the lostness we see in the world today.

Brothers and sisters, that’s how great a salvation we have. It is a salvation that once let loose cannot and will not stop until the world has through Him been saved. Jesus did not come to damn the world but to save it. That doesn’t necessarily mean that everyone is or will be saved. But it does mean that in some sense we will all recognize to be perfectly accurate, the whole world will be the beneficiary of Christ’s wrath-removing sacrifice.

So will you praise, worship, and glorify the Christ who is the propitiation for the sins of the world? Will you go to Him every time you sin in order to seek His forgiveness? And will you glory in what He has done for you? I know you can, and will. Don’t reject the propitiator; embrace Him, and know the joy of having your sin taken away and your iniquity purged. That’s how God dealt with sin. Worship Him for it. Amen.