

The Propitiation for Our Sins

I John 4:10

By Randy Wages

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

I. Introduction:

- A. Today I want to direct your attention to the Lord Jesus Christ as “The Propitiation For our Sins” as set forth in I John 4:10. ‘Propitiation’ is a word that isn’t commonly used in our day but it is an important word for us to understand since it is one of the biblical descriptions of Christ’s saving work on the cross of Calvary, describing what was accomplished there for each and everyone for whom He lived and died.
- B. We will be considering in some detail today the meaning of this word, ‘propitiation’ and the glorious significance of this great accomplishment – the propitiatory work of Christ. But as we begin and for the sake of simplicity, know that ‘propitiation’ simply refers to the satisfaction rendered unto God the Father whereby the just wrath of God due to the guilt of sin is removed, God’s just wrath against sin being appeased. Thereby, reconciliation is made between a holy God and ungodly sinners. And this propitiation was made by Christ as the sin-bearing sacrifice – as He, God the Son incarnate (God, in the flesh) paid the debt due unto God Himself by His own shed blood on Calvary’s cross – blood that was shed as a payment for the just penalty due unto all the sins that were imputed or charged to His account. So as I use the word ‘propitiation’ this morning, I ask you to keep these 2 key words in mind that relate to its proper meaning: 1) satisfaction and 2) reconciliation.
- C. The English word, ‘propitiation,’ as derived from the Latin, was often used to describe the many heathen rites and ceremonies that were designed to avert the anger, or to appease those various angry, heathen gods. But the words in the original language of the Bible which were translated as ‘propitiation’ go beyond a mere referral to the appeasement of God’s wrath. ‘Propitiation’ in the Bible does denote the appeasement of God’s wrath but by way of satisfaction to God’s justice and thereby all those for whom this propitiatory work was rendered are completely and eternally reconciled unto God. That means peace with God was actually made based upon Christ’s propitiatory, justice satisfying death on the cross.
- D. My study of this subject was prompted a few weeks back as Susan and I heard this passage from I John 4 read in a wedding ceremony. The King James translation of I John 4:10 reads: ***“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”***

Now being familiar with this verse, it struck me how the modern version which was read at this wedding suggested a very different understanding of what God the Son was sent to do for the objects of God's everlasting love. The next day after the wedding, I confirmed my suspicion that this reading was from a translation of the Bible called "Good News for Modern Man." Contrary to its title, I've found that this translation often perverts and stands in opposition to the good news of God's Gospel. But it is consistent with what we modern men (as well as men and women throughout the ages) want to hear in our natural state of spiritual darkness in which we all begin this life's journey. Listen to the contrast in how this verse is set forth. In the "Good News for Modern Man" version, I John 4:10 reads: ***"This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven."***

- E. On the surface, that may seem okay and certainly, we all can see some similarity in the 2 translations. Accordingly some will think, "What's the big deal?" The big deal (and the genesis for me beginning this study) is in what has been taken out. In having removed the original scriptural truth that Christ was sent to be the propitiation for the sins of those He saves, this translation promotes the popular, but deadly mistaken false gospel doctrine that stands in direct opposition to God's true gospel of sovereign grace – the very gospel that is believed upon by all those whom God has reconciled to Himself by His propitiation on the cross. This modern language suggests (just as will be suggested this morning in pulpits across our land) –that God the Son was sent by God the Father to be a mere "means" to an end, not actually be the end-all finisher of an accomplishment whereby sins are forgiven. Rather, this "christ" is applauded for having made salvation possible.
- F. And so multitudes are taught and fall for this heresy – the heresy that there remains something for you the sinner to do so as to be saved and have your sins forgiven. While some seem to concede that we can only be forgiven our sins because of what Christ accomplished, they will make His death on the cross subordinate and inferior to that which they presume makes the real difference in their salvation – their decision, their acceptance of Christ, their act of faith, something they do whereby they presume to be able to appropriate for themselves that which their "christ" made possible.
- G. As you've heard me quote before, Augustus Toplady, the old author of that great hymn Rock of Ages, described that popular notion this way saying, "According to this scheme, you make His <speaking of Christ> sinless life, His meritorious death, and His mediatorial undertakings, serve no other purpose, than that of a mere pedestal, on which human worth may stand exalted, and appear what it is not." Who gets the glory according to that "gospel" – not the Lord of Glory, but you the sinner. As Ephesians 2:8-9 teaches us, ***"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: ⁹Not of works, lest any man should boast."***

Many, like me in years past, have labeled such heresy ‘salvation by grace,’ but that is grace in name only and in reality it is at best a cleverly disguised system of works because ultimately, it has salvation conditioned on you and me, the sinner (our works) at least in some way or to some degree and not solely conditioned on the Savior’s finished work whereby God gets all the glory!

H. So whatever is ascribed to Christ as having been accomplished by His life and death, if there remains something else to be done in order for a sinner to be saved and reconciled before God, then His death work would not be a propitiatory work in stark contradiction to the clear original intent of I John 4:10 which sets forth Christ as the propitiation for the sins of the Apostle John and these true believers to whom John writes. For many, the Lord of glory’s glorious work is reduced to being a fulfillment of some sort of prerequisite to the main or crowning event that will have you and me, the sinner, presuming that we can save ourselves.

Some refer to such notions of Christ’s work as if it is an accomplishment of sorts and they may even invoke the word ‘propitiation,’ but if they imagine that Christ’s death failed to provide the full and complete satisfaction to God’s justice whereby those sinners for whom He died are fully reconciled unto God and on that basis alone, then know this: That would mean their “christ” is not the Christ of this Bible because whatever you call it, if what Christ did failed to fully satisfy all that is required for the salvation of a sinner, then that “christ” is not the propitiation for any sinner’s sins.

II. I John 4:9:

A. Well let’s consider our text for today by beginning our reading in the prior verse, verse 9.

As you turn there, let me bring you up to speed on the subject which John is addressing. First, it’s important to know that the Apostle John is writing to true believers and this chapter begins with John cautioning them against false teachers and false doctrines. And then as we get to verse 6, John starts to exhort them to love for their brethren in Christ on the basis that this love is of God, a fruit of His Spirit and grace, and so, is an evidence of being born of God and of having a true knowledge of Him as He is uniquely revealed to those He saves.

B. And as we get to verse 9 John writes to his fellow believers, “***In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him.***” Here we see the manifestation of God’s love toward the objects of His everlasting love. You see, God’s love is revealed in His purpose and will to save guilty, otherwise hell-deserving sinners such as you and I. God sent His unique Son – the only begotten, God, manifested in the flesh – to come into this world that these believers to whom John is writing might live through Him. So in verse 9 we see that the unique love of God being spoken of here is manifested in the glorious Person of Christ – both God and man in one Person.

III. I John 4:10:

- A. And as we move into verse 10, we see that this love that was manifested in the Person of Christ is likewise manifested in the vicarious or definite, redeeming propitiatory work He was sent to accomplish. The Person and work of Christ are not to be separated. To misunderstand His finished work is to not know Him as He is and it is to not know God the Father as He is revealed in the Person and work of His dear Son. We see this in verse 10 as we read, “***Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.***”
- B. In Christ being the propitiation – the satisfaction to God’s justice due unto the demerit of all the sins of all those for whom He lived and died – we see that God’s love has provided in the Person and work of Christ what His holy law and justice demanded. Accordingly God’s law and justice then demands the eternal salvation and final glory of all of these objects of His love because God cannot justly charge them with their sins, their sins having been already charged to Christ, their Surety and Substitute and He is their propitiation – their sin bearing sacrifice that reconciles them unto a holy God.
- C. How can that be – a sinner reconciled to a holy God who cannot commune with sin? As Ephesians 1 tells us, it is because they are accepted in the beloved – In Christ their Substitute. A little further down in this chapter we observe that same truth in verse 17 where we read, “***Herein is our love made perfect, <or reaches its goal> that we may have boldness in the day of judgment: because as he is, so are we in this world.***” I am reconciled to God because I am accepted in Christ, having no merit of my own production, but instead possessing the very merit of what He produced on my behalf – having His perfect propitiatory work, His righteousness, made to be mine. As He is, so are believers in this world before the eyes of God’s justice.
- D. Just as the demerit of all their sins were imputed or reckoned to Him that He might suffer in their place, likewise the merit of His perfect obedience unto death – His perfect righteousness is imputed or accounted to them. His righteousness that is made to be theirs is none other than this perfect satisfaction He rendered to God’s holy law and justice, both in precept and penalty. That is, He stood in their place and perfectly obeyed all of God’s revealed will on their behalf. But this He did as a Substitute and Representative for ungodly, disobedient, law-breaking sinners. So Christ, their propitiation, also satisfied God’s just penalty due unto their sins, satisfying the penal demands of God’s holy law. And thereby they are reconciled. God’s wrath never abided upon them for the just wrath of God was poured out on their sinless Substitute who experientially knew no sin but to whom sin was imputed or charged. God the Father, from eternity past viewed those He loved in Christ their Representative, Substitute, and Surety who would in time be their propitiation and on that basis of His finished cross work, God declared them righteous, not guilty! Oh what a glorious thing for these objects of God’s everlasting love: Christ dying for sins that He had no part in producing and providing for them a perfect righteousness which they had no part in producing. Oh what love, mercy and grace!

- E. Now I want you to notice in verse 10 that not only are we told what the essence of the love of God is but to insure we do not misunderstand it, we are told what it is not as he makes it clear in stating, ***“Herein is love, not that we loved God,...”*** Further down in chapter 4 this is further emphasized as John writes in verse 19, ***“We love him, because he first loved us.”***
1. Do not skim over this. Keep in mind from the broader context that John is distinguishing believers from unbelievers and is relating here how they might know this love of God that belongs exclusively to believers is shed abroad in their own hearts. Believers have this simple but vital truth revealed to them. God’s love was directed toward those He saves when their love for Him was non-existent, even before they were born. And even after they are born their thoughts concerning who God was prior to their new birth, (prior to their regeneration and conversion) expose them as enemies in their minds and at enmity with God according to scripture. So their decision, their act of faith, any turning in love to the true and living God is not what brought on God’s love and favor. A believer’s love to the true and living God is caused by His eternal love to them.
 2. And that is wonderful news for thereby we know that His love is an unconditional, everlasting love as its continuance does not at all depend upon our love for Him. Nor does His perfect love ever vary toward those He saves although their imperfect love toward Him most certainly does. See the sovereignty and the freeness of the unmatched glorious love of God!
 3. Most do skim over this truth as evidenced by their clinging to the mistaken notion that God saves them because of how they respond to Him. Multitudes believe that God loves everybody but yet does not exercise His infinite power and wisdom to insure their eternal well being. What kind of love is that? They will say that God wants to save you but will not dare override your presumed free will. Would any of you young mothers allow your toddlers to run in front of traffic on a busy street to be ran over and killed if it was within your power to prevent such a tragedy? Of course not if you love your child as I know you do. But as much as you love your child it does not compare to God’s matchless love for His dear children. Can you imagine such a neglectful mother arguing before the authorities that I could have stopped little Johnny but I didn’t want to overrule his free will decision to play in the street? That’s not love and yet the doctrine of many suggests just that as it pertains to God’s love. They believe that God’s favor toward them is conditioned on their first choosing Him, contrary to this passage as well as the whole of scripture.
- F. And before we leave this verse, I want you to notice that important conjunction “and.” It reads, ***“Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”*** God’s love cannot be separated from that which He sent His dear Son to accomplish. So to be an eternal object of God’s love is to have Christ as the propitiation for your sins – satisfaction made to justice whereby you, a sinner, are found not guilty – but rather accepted in Christ your Substitute and Surety.

- G. Do you see how the true versus the false as it pertains to religion always seems to reduce down to this dichotomy of grace or works? All religions, denominations, and sects fall under one of these 2 categories. Salvation is either rightly understood to be totally by grace – totally conditioned on the Person and work of Christ or else salvation is tragically misunderstood to be of works – conditioned at least in some way to some degree on something done in or by you the sinner to make the real difference as to whether one is saved or lost.
- H. All believers, at some point in their lives are brought to see (just like these believers to whom John is writing) that our salvation is because God loved us and sent His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to bear our sins away fully by His propitiatory sacrifice in satisfaction to God’s justice (grace). In seeing this, true believers are brought to repent of the popular but deadly false religion of works whereby we sinfully presumed that God favored us because of our response to Him – because of something we did or some decision we made – in other words because of our love for Him as the first and effectual cause of our own salvation.
- I. If that describes you, I pray God will likewise grant you repentance for as we dared to approach God on that basis, in essence we were placing our faith (or whatever we thought made the difference in our being saved) in rivalry with the propitiation that Christ alone could and did render. In a sense you could say that we looked to our sinful selves as the propitiation for our own sins thinking we could satisfy a holy God – looking to our own self-righteousness in our prideful, spiritually blind ignorance of the righteousness we must have – the righteousness of God which Christ, the God-man, alone could and did establish by His obedience unto death.
- J. Don’t dare continue to entertain the idea that something done by or through you, a sinner, could measure up to the doing and dying of the Lord of glory. God’s glory is at stake and He will not share His glory! A sinner cannot propitiate or provide satisfaction to God’s justice for his or her own sins. That’s why we need a Savior. Even a lost sinner’s physical death and subsequent suffering under God’s wrath in hell is woefully insufficient to pay down the debt owed due to our sin before the bar of God’s holy justice. It took the infinitely valuable, sinless, substitutionary, sacrificial death of the unblemished Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ to satisfy that debt. Only God could provide Himself a suitable, propitiatory sacrifice – the blood offering of His dear Son, the God-man.

IV. Other thoughts on Propitiation:

- A. In I John 4:10, John says of himself and the believers to whom he writes, “Christ is the propitiation for our sins!” Can you say that? Is Christ the propitiation for your sins?

- B. The English word ‘propitiation’ is found 3 times in the New Testament. Two of these were translated from the exact same Greek word and are found in this Epistle, in I John 2:2 and in of course in today’s text, I John 4:10. But a variation of that original word is also translated as ‘propitiation’ in Romans 3:25. And that original word, while very similar in meaning, is also translated in Hebrews 9:5 as the mercy seat, in reference to the lid or covering that sat upon the Ark of the Covenant. The Greek version of the Old Testament uses that same word in Exodus 25:21, the same word that is translated from the Hebrew as “mercy seat.” And while time will not permit us to explore those passages today, it does add to our understanding of propitiation to see its relation to the mercy seat.
- C. The mercy seat covered the Ark of the Covenant which inside contained the law as it was inscribed on the tablets of stone that God gave Moses. And of course the people broke that law, just as all of sinful humanity falls miserably short of fulfilling God’s revealed will. As Romans 3:23 declares: “...*all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.*” In accordance with God’s precise instructions to Moses, on the great Day of Atonement the high priest carried the blood of the sacrifice (which he offered for all the people of Israel) within the veil and sprinkled it upon the "mercy-seat." A covering was needed – a propitiation. And to that mercy seat men were directed and commanded by our God to look. All of this pictured the Lord Jesus Christ, our mercy seat – our propitiation whereby God’s just wrath against our lawbreaking, our sins is covered or satisfied by His shed blood.
- D. And this covering, this propitiation is not some mere “means” by which sins might be forgiven. No – if Christ is your propitiation, then He totally put away your sins by the perfect justice satisfying work of reconciliation that He rendered at the cross. We see this in Hebrews 8:12 where the Greek word translated “merciful” there is a word which means propitious. There God is quoted saying, “*For I will be merciful <propitious> to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.*” So if Christ is your propitiation, then it can be said of your sins and iniquities, that He will remember them no more!

V. Closing:

Well, you can know if Christ is your propitiation if His blood offering has been sprinkled or applied to your heart so as to purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God (That is the language of Hebrews 9:14). In other words, has God granted you the gift of repentance from dead works – from the evil of having presumed that some work of your hand – some responsive action taken by you – something done by, in, or through you, the sinner would be a propitiation for your own sins so as to satisfy God and be found in His favor, reconciled and found acceptable in His sight?

If you have repented of such, then it will be reflected in where your hope lies – that is, in the basis upon which you approach God for acceptance. We have an example of that in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18. There we have this same word that we just looked at in the book of Hebrews that is translated “merciful” – that same Greek word which also means ‘propitious’ or ‘reconciled.’

Look there in Luke 18, beginning in verse 9 where we read, “***And he <Christ> spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:*** ¹⁰***Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican.*** ¹¹***The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.*** ¹²***I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.*** ¹³***And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful <make reconciliation, be propitious> to me a sinner.*** ¹⁴***I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.***

Does that humble plea fit your need? This cry for mercy is one that recognizes your desperate need for God’s unmerited favor, His mercy and grace. And this specific mercy, this propitiation, is that which appeases God but by way of perfect satisfaction to His holy law and justice. That’s propitiation! If God has stripped you of a reliance on your own self-righteousness, and has granted you God-given faith and repentance that leaves you trusting solely in the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work alone for all of your salvation, then you can rejoice with me and with this publican (and ultimately with every other justified sinner) in seeing Christ as the propitiation for our sins!

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.