

The Ultimate Transaction

2 Corinthians 5:21

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To appreciate more deeply the marvelous nature of the atonement,
we will study the roles three characters played in it as described by
Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

- **CHARACTER 1: God the Father—the Righteous Judge**
- **CHARACTER 2: Man—the Guilty Sinner**
- **CHARACTER 3: Jesus Christ—the Sinless Substitute**

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CHARACTER 1: God the Father—the Righteous Judge

- “**He**” – mentioned first in our English translations, but at the end of the clause in the original: “Him who knew no sin on our behalf sin He made.”
- The pronoun points to the end of the preceding sentence: “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (v. 20).
- “**He**” also points to a phrase later in the sentence, where “**God**” is described as possessing “**righteousness.**”

- That God is “righteous” (“just”) means He is *morally perfect*.
- He is the definition, standard, and source of all that is just and right.
- All that God does—all that He decrees, speaks, and accomplishes—is always *perfectly right*; there has never been or will be the smallest hint of anything morally impure or unjust.
- **Deuteronomy 32:4** – “The Rock! His work is perfect, for all His ways are just; a God of faithfulness and without injustice, righteous and upright is He.”
- **Psalms 71:19** – “For Your righteousness, O God, *reaches* to the heavens, You who have done great things; O God, who is like You?”

- That God is “righteous” or “just” has a strongly *forensic* or *legal* connotation; this perfection is the basis for His revealed “laws,” “statutes,” “commands,” and “judgments” (e.g. Psalm 19:7–9).
- Consequently, God reveals Himself as *Lawgiver* and *Judge*.
- **Psalm 119:137–138** – “Righteous are you, O LORD, and upright are Your judgments. You have commanded Your testimonies in righteousness and exceeding faithfulness.”
- **Ezekiel 18:4** – “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.”



“If God be a just God, he will take vengeance. God has given men a law to live by, and they break it. There must be a day for the execution of the offenders. A law not executed is but like a wooden dagger, for a show. At the last day, God’s sword shall be drawn out against offenders; then his justice shall be revealed before all the world. . . . The wicked shall drink a sea of wrath, but not sip one drop of injustice. At that day shall all mouths be stopped, and God’s justice shall be fully vindicated from all the cavils and clamors of unjust men.”

—Thomas Watson, *Body of Divinity*, 92

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- “**Made**” – the only active verb in the sentence, indicating that God the Father is *the chief actor*; He is not a *passive observer* nor does He merely *react*; He is the *architect* of redemption.
- **2 Corinthians 5:18** – “Now all *these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation*, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself”

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CHARACTER 2: Man—the Guilty Sinner

- We are not described explicitly, but our condition is clearly implied.
- First, we are *completely passive* in this setting—whatever is done, is done “**on our behalf**”; the original word order highlights our *helplessness*: “Him who knew no sin on our behalf sin He made.”
- Second, we are inherently *devoid of righteousness*; it is something that we can only “**become**” by God’s doing; apart from Him, we remain the antithesis to righteousness—that is, *sinful*.

- The preceding context makes it clear that mankind is in desperate need of *reconciliation with God*.
- **2 Corinthians 5:19–20** – “. . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them. . . . We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”
- Every human being has broken the laws of his righteous Creator and Judge; he has become alienated from God and is by nature and practice at war with Him.
- **Romans 3:23** – “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”
- **Romans 6:23** – “For the wages of sin is death”



“We are so entirely controlled by the power of sin, that the whole mind, the whole heart, and all our actions are under its influence.”

—Calvin, *Commentary on Romans*, 261

“The teaching of Scripture, after all, is not that every human lives at all times in all possible actual sins and is in fact guilty of violating all God’s commandments. It only refers to the deepest inclination, the innermost disposition, the fundamental directedness of human nature and confesses that it is not turned toward God but away from him.”

—Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3.120



AUGUSTUS M. TOPLADY, 1776.

THOMAS HASTINGS, 1830.

1. Rock of A - ges, cleft for me! Let me
 2. Not the la - bor of my hands Can ful-
 3. Noth - ing in my hand I bring Sim - ply
 4. While I draw this feet - ing breath, When mine

hide my - self in thee; Let the wa - ter and the blood,
 fil thy law's demands; Could my zeal no res - pite know,
 to thy cross I cling; Nak - ed, come to thee for dress,
 eyes shall close in death, When I soar to world's unknown,

From thy riv - en side that flowed, Be of sin the
 Could my tears for - ev - er flow, All for sin could
 Help - less, look to thee for grace; Foul, I to the
 See thee on thy Judgment throne, - Rock of A - ges,

doub - le cure; Save me from its guilt and pow'r.
 not a - tone; Thou must save, and thou a - lone.
 Foun - tain fly, Wash me, Sav - iour, or I die.
 cleft for me, Let me hide my - self in thee.

“Rock of Ages” (Augustus Toplady, 1776)

[2] Not the labors of my hands
 can fulfill thy law's demands;
 could my zeal no respite know,
 could my tears forever flow,
 all for sin could not atone;
 thou must save, and thou alone.

[3] Nothing in my hand I bring,
 simply to the cross I cling;
 naked, come to thee for dress;
 helpless, look to thee for grace;
 foul, I to the fountain fly;
 wash me, Savior, or I die.

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CHARACTER 3: Jesus Christ—the Sinless Substitute

- **“Who knew no sin”** – not a reference to God the Father, since the Father is the One who acts with reference to this sinless One; refers to the other character mentioned in the previous verse: “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (v. 20).
- **“Sin”** – is any “departure from the divine standard of righteousness”; it is the most common term in the Bible describing what is *antithetical to righteousness*.

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- “**Knew no sin**” – an absolute statement with no exceptions; not a reference to intellectual awareness but to *personal experience*; the experience of committing sin and sensing guilt was never part of His conscious experience.
- To say that He “knew no sin” is to say that He “knew only righteousness.”
- **John 8:46a** – “Which one of you convicts Me of sin?”

- **Hebrews 4:15** – “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin.”
- **Hebrews 7:26** – He was “holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners.”
- **1 John 3:5** – “You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin.”

esp French *empêcher* to
 wn **impeccable** adj fa
 Latin *impeccabilis*]

- **Isaiah 53:9 (cited by 1 Pet 2:22)** – “. . . He had done no violence, nor was there any deceit in His mouth.”

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- This sinless One the Father “made to be sin” – *literally*, “made sin.”
- What this *does not mean*:
 - That the Father made Jesus *commit sin* as part of His suffering (the term in the original is a noun, not a verb).
 - That the Father made Jesus *a sin offering* (which is true, but not Paul’s emphasis).

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- What it *does mean*:
 - That the Father *considered* Jesus *as sin*—that is, *as guilty*.
 - The Father—as righteous Judge—undertook an act by which He brought about a particular standing with respect to Jesus Christ, the sinless One.
- **Galatians 3:13 (citing Deut 21:23)** – “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us—for it is written, ‘CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE.’”

- **Romans 3:25** – “whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness”
- **Colossians 2:14** – “having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.”
- **Hebrews 9:28** – “so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many”
- **“Imputation”** – the legal declaration by which the guilt of all our sin was transferred/credited to the standing of the sinless Jesus Christ.



“It pleased our heavenly Father, of His infinite mercy, without any of our desert or deserving, to prepare for us the most precious jewels of Christ’s body and blood, whereby our ransom might be fully paid, the law fulfilled, and His justice fully satisfied.”

—Thomas Cranmer, *First Book of Homilies*, 130

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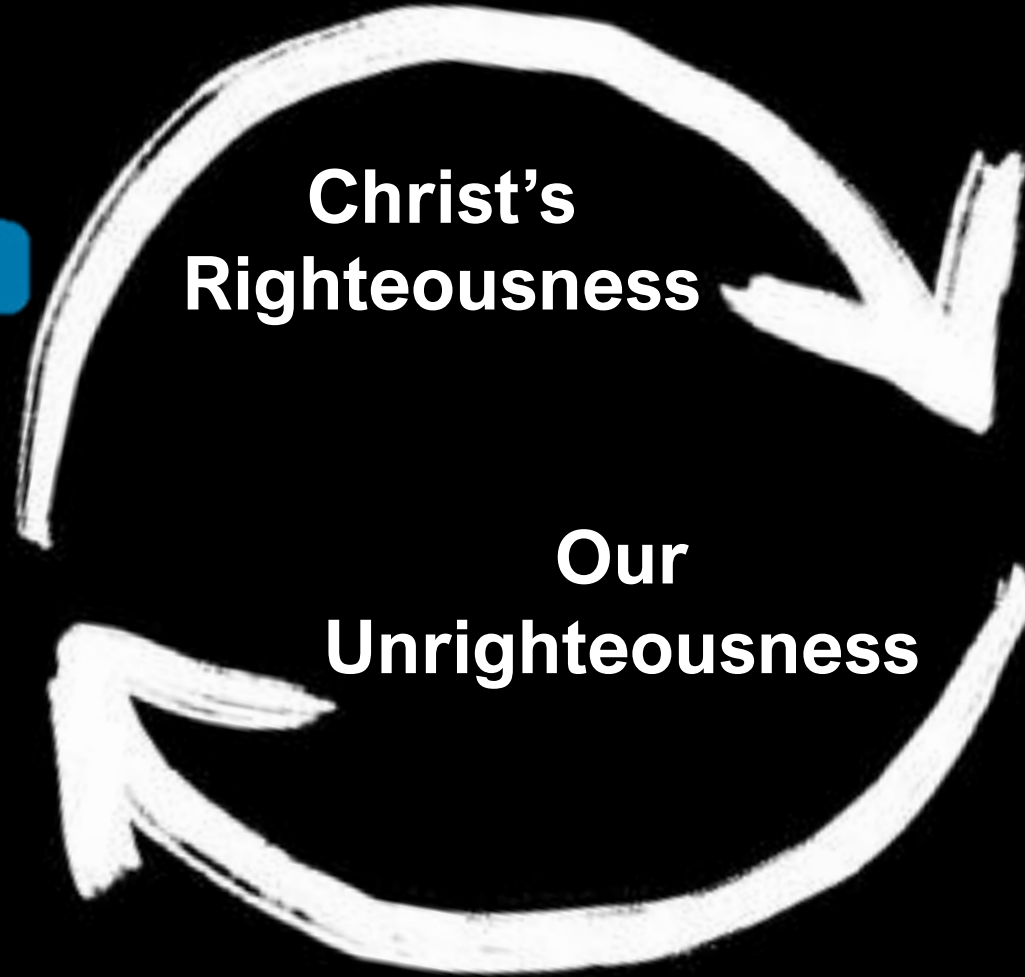
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- “**In Him**” – refers to union/identification with Christ; the sinless One counted as “sin on our behalf” is also the One “in” whom “we become the righteousness of God.”
- Here is another act of *imputation*: the legal declaration by which the righteousness of God is transferred/credited to the standing of guilty sinners by means of their identification with Christ.
- This is the greatest news of all! The sacrifice of Christ represents not only a 1-way transaction (our sin → Christ), but a 2-way transaction (our sin → Christ; Christ’s righteousness → us).

Double Imputation



Christ,
the Sinless
Substitute



Man,
the Guilty
Sinner

“How are we righteous in the sight of God? It is assuredly in the same respect in which Christ was a sinner. For he assumed in a manner our place, that he might be a criminal in our place, and might be dealt with as a sinner, not for his own offenses, but for those of others, inasmuch as he was pure and exempt from every fault, and might endure the punishment that was due to us—not to himself. It is in the same manner, assuredly, that we are now *righteous in him*—not in respect of our rendering satisfaction to the justice of God by our own works, but because we are judged of in connection with Christ’s righteousness, which we have put on by faith, that it might become ours.”

—John Calvin, *Commentary on 2 Corinthians*

“His Robes for Mine” (Chris Anderson)

His robes for mine: God’s justice is appeased.
Jesus is crushed, and thus the Father’s pleased.
Christ drank God’s wrath on sin, then cried, “’Tis done!”
Sin’s wage is paid, propitiation won.

His robes for mine: such anguish none can know.
Christ, God’s beloved, condemned as though His foe.
He, as though I, accursed and left alone;
I, as though He, embraced and welcomed home!

“Indeed, this is one of the greatest mysteries in the world—namely, that a righteousness that resides with a person in heaven should justify me, a sinner on earth.”

—John Bunyan



FACT: “It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment” (Hebrews 9:27).

QUESTION: When you stand in that judgment before the perfect Judge of all creation, what will be your answer to the question, “Why are you deserving of eternal life and not eternal judgment?”

ANSWER: “You made Him who knew no sin to be sin on my behalf, that I might become the righteousness that belongs to You in Him.”