



October 7, 2018

Atonement: Life Wins  
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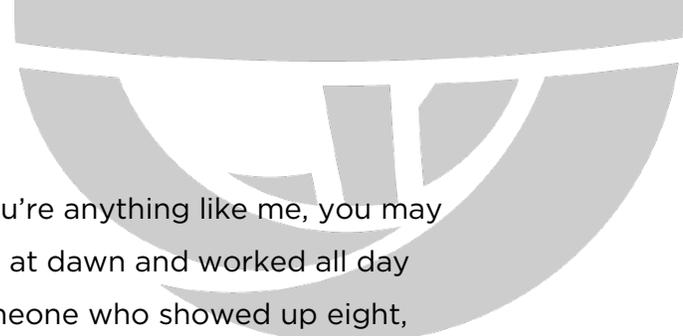
**Matthew 20:1-19 NRSV**

[Jesus is speaking] "For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. <sup>2</sup>After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. <sup>3</sup>When he went out about nine o'clock, he saw others standing idle in the market-place; <sup>4</sup>and he said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.' So they went. <sup>5</sup>When he went out again about noon and about three o'clock, he did the same. <sup>6</sup>And about five o'clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, 'Why are you standing here idle all day?' <sup>7</sup>They said to him, 'Because no one has hired us.' He said to them, 'You also go into the vineyard.' <sup>8</sup>When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, 'Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.' <sup>9</sup>When those hired about five o'clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. <sup>10</sup>Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. <sup>11</sup>And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, <sup>12</sup>saying, 'These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.' <sup>13</sup>But he replied to one of them, 'Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? <sup>14</sup>Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. <sup>15</sup>Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?' <sup>16</sup>So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

<sup>17</sup>While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, <sup>18</sup>"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; <sup>19</sup>then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised."

Let's start with a brief survey. By show of hands, how many of you like fairness?  
Ok, that's what I thought. Second question, and this might take a bit more soul searching - how many of you expect fairness to usually work in your favor?

I hear this from my kids sometimes when one is allowed to do something the other isn't. But our keen sense of what is fair and what is not is not limited to kids. We are creatures who seek fairness. That's why if we're honest with ourselves, the

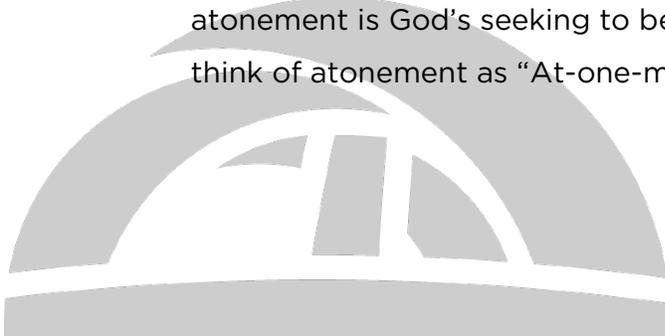


gospel today leaves a bad taste in our mouths. If you're anything like me, you may have resonated with those laborers who showed up at dawn and worked all day for an honest day's wage. I mean, is it right that someone who showed up eight, even ten hours later got the same compensation for their work?

It's not a stretch to think that we all do our best to make the most of each day, contribute what we can to the world, and at the end of the day we look back hoping that what we contributed may have made some difference in the our little corner of the world. And maybe, just maybe we think we deserve a bit of credit from God and anyone else who will give it to us for the work we do.

The problem is when we think about life, and especially about God this way we miss the mark of what's most important to God. We might want God to stand on the side of those who work hard and try do to the most good. We might want God to reward "fairness" because it just might benefit us more than others. But, if Jesus' parable that says "the last will be first and the first will be last" is any indication of who God really is, then we better take a second look at what and who God notices, and what "fairness" looks like in the kingdom of heaven. We might want to consider all the times in our lives that we don't quite measure up, when we ourselves miss the mark, when we have been broken by life and don't know how to put it all back together again. From this perspective, perhaps seeing that everyone is worthy of love and healing and grace in full measure isn't so unfair after all.

It's helpful to remember where we've come in this series already; that God created us and all creation out of love; that even when we messed it all up, from Genesis onward, God has been relentlessly working to restore our relationship with God. God sought to restore God's people through the covenant with Israel, and when that went awry God took the audacious step of becoming one of us in Jesus Christ. We call this restoration project atonement. Atonement is one of those \$50 theological terms that might make some of us scratch our heads. At the heart of atonement is God's seeking to be one with us. So perhaps it is more helpful to think of atonement as "At-one-ment".



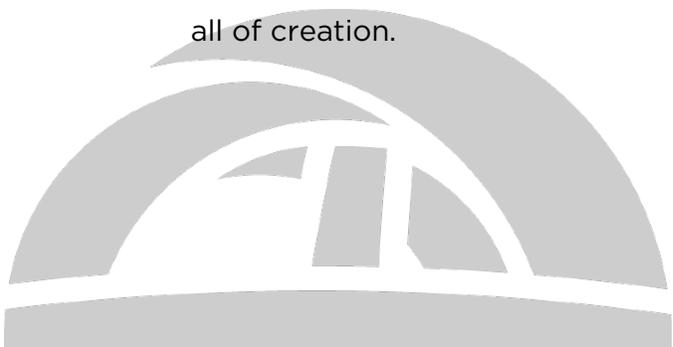


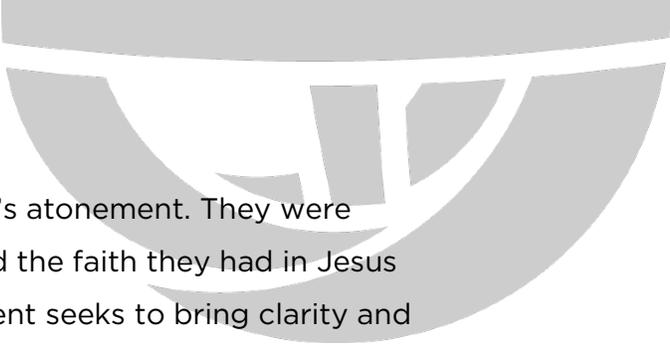
Throughout the centuries Christians have sought ways to understand how God in Christ brings atonement and what Christ atones for that actually makes a difference in how we relate to God. The event at the center of this is Jesus' death on the cross. We cannot get around what Jesus' death means for humanity. Just read Paul's letters or sing through the lyrics of many of our hymns and you'll see a few key reasons why.

In the very early church, Christian faith was a practice that was primarily concerned with the life we are given now, and atonement was thought of as the way Christ's teachings, death, and resurrection point us to God's love and shows us to live as one with God in this life. Jesus atonement was seen as an example to follow in his commitment to God, love for neighbor, and self-giving sacrifice.

Later, theologians placed much more emphasis on Jesus' death freeing our souls from the grasp of Satan, or satisfying the anger of a just God who has been wronged by our sinfulness. Christ's death then either paid the devil for our souls to be freed or his punishment on the cross was a substitution for the punishment we deserve. The emphasis was placed on God atoning for our sins so people could live eternally in heaven after they died, probably because life was so incredibly miserable.

In the time of the reformation, Luther who was transformed by Paul's letters that spoke to the power of the cross, emphasized that Jesus died on our behalf, and in the process defeated sin, death, and the power of the devil. For Luther, atonement occurred both in the life to come, but also had dramatic effects on how freeing God's grace is to us in this life. These teachings still very much shape our imagination of how God in Christ suffered and died for us. We can see it in this sanctuary. The ribbon of blood red and the crown of thorns reminds us of the reality of the cross; and the lengths God will go to make things whole in us and in all of creation.





Here's the thing about these various theories of God's atonement. They were constructed and inspired by people's actual lives and the faith they had in Jesus that gave them life. The ways we talk about atonement seeks to bring clarity and assures us that God's promises are true for us and that they move us toward being at one with God. Those promises are as real today as they were then.

God is not waiting to be at one with us only when we die. God is like that landowner who is going to the places in our lives where we are disconnected, where our fear, our apathy, our insecurities keep us from working in the vineyard and being alive today. The way I see it, the cross not only put Jesus to death it was also the event that led to his resurrection - the new life that is only possible with God. And it is ultimately here where life takes on new meaning. Yes, because of Christ's death and resurrection we will part of the resurrection of the body on the last day, but I don't think that stops God from wanting us to have a sense of that resurrection life now. We are called to die to the things that keep us from living at-one with God today. God offers us life now when we trust God's generosity, and die to the fear of not having enough, or being enough, or measuring who you are by what you see in others. Trust that Christ has died for all these things too, for you, and by God's profound grace you will experience the life. Amen.

