

The Glorious Exchange

2 Corinthians 5:16-21; 1 John 2:1-2

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today we are returning to a sermon series that I began back in September.

I have been basing our fall sermons on the chapters from a book that I read on my sabbatical called *The Big Relief* by David Zahl who is an Episcopal priest, podcaster, and a university chaplain, among other things.

It's been a few weeks, so perhaps a quick refresher is in order. The overall theme of the book is how the gospel offers relief in the areas of our life where we need it most.

And each Sunday, we've been looking at one area of our lives where we can easily feel worn out, and how grace can meet our need.

We've looked at:

- Grace as the relief from deserving
- Forgiveness as the relief from regret
- Favour as the relief from rejection
- Surrender as the relief from control (Zachary preached this one)

If you've missed any of these, they're always available on our church website.

As far as the series goes, that's four down, four to go. We'll be departing from this theme for a few more Sundays between now and the beginning of Advent, one for Peace Sunday and one when we have a guest speaker from Mennonite Church Alberta.

This week, we're talking about Atonement: The Relief from Guilt.

I want to begin with a few articles that have been sent my way recently. Both are discussing the state of Christianity in the West.

The first was an article in *The Economist* called “The West has stopped losing its religion.”¹ The basic thesis was that after decades of rising secularism, Christianity now seems to be holding its ground—even gaining a bit among young people.

For the first time in half a century, the line on the graph charting the decline of Christianity in the West (there were 14 countries discussed in the article) stopped going down!

Now, fewer people leaving Christianity may sound like hardly a victory. But it’s something. According to the article:

The most plausible explanation for the changing trend is the covid-19 pandemic. Lockdowns, social isolation and economic shocks affected almost all countries and age cohorts at about the time that the data on religious belief hit an inflection point. This is especially the case for Gen Z, whose years of early adulthood were disrupted, leaving many young people lonely or depressed and looking for meaning.

The second article was called “Why God came back.”² Nearly sixty years ago, the article begins, *Time* magazine had its famous “Is God Dead?” cover.

Surprisingly, according to the author, the answer now seems to be trending in the direction of “no.” A spiritual hunger seems to be persisting. The inevitable trend of secularism seemed not to be inevitable after all.

This article identified a few more specific features of our particular moment in the West.

Again, it pointed to a renewed spiritual hunger among young people. Sometimes this is just a vague interest in spirituality. Other times, particularly among Gen Z, there is increased interest in Jesus.

This renewed spiritual hunger is often more conservative in nature. The author pointed to the sharp decline of Mainline and progressive Protestant Churches, with membership in

¹ <https://www.economist.com/international/2025/06/12/the-west-has-stopped-losing-its-religion>

² <https://unherd.com/2025/10/why-god-came-back/>

most of these denominations down 30% since the nineties!

Where Christianity is growing is in either more traditional expressions like Greek Orthodoxy and Catholicism or Pentecostalism. The data is fascinating, and I think pastors and denominational leaders would do well to ponder it.

But what struck me was the part where the article talked about the social and practical benefits of faith.

Religious participation is said to contribute to stronger social networks, better health outcomes, more stable families, increased generosity.

I'm all for people coming back to church. Or at least fewer leaving! I'm all for spiritually curious young people. I'm all for stronger families and healthier communities.

I have no doubt that COVID drove some people back to church, whether it was due to big life and death questions or just a desperate desire to connect with people off a screen.

I absolutely do believe that half a century of secularism has proved insufficient to meet people's existential needs—we know in our bones that there is more to this world and to our lives than what can be measured, quantified, proved.

Overall, I got to the end of these two articles and I thought, "Well, praise God!"

But I noticed one thing missing. One thing that I see and hear over and over again.

People are also coming back to faith and to church because they need somewhere to go with their guilt.

Many Mondays as I make the drive to the jail, I listen to a song by Jon Guerra called "The Kingdom of God." I've almost certainly referred to this song before.

The song is basically a creative version of the Beatitudes set to music (with a bit of Psalm 23 mixed in).

I listen on Mondays primarily because of one line that almost never fails to leave me with a lump in my throat: “Blessed are the guilty who have nowhere to go.”

My reasons for playing this song on Mondays are obvious enough. I am about to spend a day with the literal “guilty who have nowhere to go.”

But of course, it is not simply behind literal bars that we find “the guilty who have nowhere to go.”

On the deepest level, this is the human condition: to be guilty and to have nowhere to go.

We see this throughout Scripture:

This is Adam and Eve covering themselves in the garden.

This is Cain with blood-stained hands despairing at his banishment.

This is Joseph’s jealous brothers after selling him into slavery.

This is Moses on the run after murdering an Egyptian slaver.

This is David after he is confronted by the prophet Nathan about his sin in taking Bathsheba.

This is Peter weeping in the courtyard after denying Jesus three times.

This is Judas flinging his guilty change on the temple floor.

This is all of us, to varying degrees and in various ways.

Maybe we feel guilty because we are failing or have failed as parents. Or as spouses. Maybe we feel guilt over “the state of the world” and our complicity in it, for not doing enough to “be the change” we want to see.

Maybe we feel guilt for roads we didn’t take in life, for not realizing our potential, for taking our talent and burying it in the ground.

Maybe we feel guilty for not exercising enough or eating too much or drinking too much or making too much money or not making enough money or not calling our parents enough or forgetting to bring something for the church potluck.

The sources of our guilt are virtually endless. And this is to say nothing about the really nasty sins and hypocrisies that we never speak out loud.

There are two errors we can make, two paths that we commonly take with our guilt.

One is to marinate in it. To focus endlessly on how terrible we are and all our failures and shortcomings. To drown in self-loathing and self-pity. To make our guilt the defining feature of our identity.

The other is to problematize it. Guilt is bad and to be avoided. Guilt and shame are negative emotions, and we should only focus on the positive. Guilt and shame are *the problem*. They are what we require liberation *from*.

Both of these are dead ends.

People that can't let go of their guilt will be eaten alive by it. They will deaden or numb it with addictions. They will destroy their relationships, imagining that they are unlovable and living into that reality. They will be crushed by burdens too heavy to carry.

People that imagine that guilt should be avoided at all costs ignore a basic feature of what it means to be a human being. There are times when guilt and shame are perfectly appropriate and healthy responses to the things we do. If someone didn't feel guilty when they did something bad, we would call them a sociopath!

The gospel gives us somewhere to go with our guilt.

Somewhere that takes it seriously, that acknowledges that it is real and that it is a sign of a well-functioning moral compass, but also that it is not the end of the story.

Atonement can be made. Atonement *has* been made.

Atonement is a fancy theological word that has to do with making amends. It refers to something that is done to make up for the wrongdoing. In its crudest form, atonement means that "someone has to pay."

And here, too, the concept of atonement is alive and well in our culture, regardless of how explicitly religious we may claim to be.

If we eat too much junk food on the couch, we atone for it by hopping on the treadmill or ordering salad and skipping the fries.

If we catch ourselves spending too much time doom-scrolling on social media, we atone for it by reading a book or gardening.

If we drive our cars or fly a lot or generally feel like our lifestyles are bad for the planet, we atone for it by buying carbon credits or installing solar panels. ☺

If we like shopping a little too much, we atone for it by donating to the MCC Thrift Shop.

If we snap at the puppy who is constantly underfoot while we're trying to do some household chores on a Saturday, we atone for it by taking said puppy for a long walk (to pick a completely random, non-personal example).

The list could go on. But the underlying logic in each case is the same. If we do something bad or unhealthy, we have to do something good to make up for it (or so we think). And most of these are good things. We *should* exercise and eat healthy and donate to MCC!

But, to quote David Zahl:

Unfortunately, this kind of perpetual atonement can become enslaving if it offers no completion, or what theologians would call satisfaction. Regret can turn a person in on themselves in a never-ending quest to do enough good to erase the guilt... Experience teaches that the finish line does not exist. There is always one more good deed to do, one more apology to give before the slate is wiped clean. Partial atonement wears us out.³

Yes, it absolutely does. I think some of us know this all too well.

The Christian conviction, obviously, is that Someone has paid fully. God himself, in Christ, has made amends for all the wrong. He has done for us what we cannot and could never do for ourselves.

This is the truth pointed to by our texts today:

“In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, *not counting their trespasses against them*” (2 Cor. 5:19).

³ Zahl, 86.

For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Our short passage from 1 John puts it like this:

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours **but also for the sins of the whole world.**

This is what the John Calvin once called “The glorious exchange.” Christ takes upon Himself our sin and gives us His righteousness.

It’s a terrible trade for God. But for us, it is pure relief, and radiant hope.

When God looks at us, he looks through the lens of the finished work of Jesus Christ on our behalf and he sees... New creations.

Dearly loved, fallen, stumbling bumbling glorious image bearers of God who, by some mysterious spiritual alchemy, are now defined not by our guilt but by the righteousness of Christ.

The defining truth about us is not our sins, our mistakes, our failures, the innumerable things that drag us down. It is Jesus Christ, the one who knew no sin and yet became sin for us.

David Zahl puts it like this:

On Good Friday, the burden of human guilt found its willing off-ramp. The blameless Christ not only took on sin but *became* sin so that “in him we might become the righteousness of God...

The grace of this atonement lies in its vicariousness—meaning, atonement has been made *for* you but not *by* you. This is why Christians talk fondly and frequently about substitution. In the final trial of life’s courtroom, Jesus takes our seat and accepts the verdict due us. He substitutes himself for you and me—not only absorbing our condemnation but also lending us his own righteousness.⁴

⁴ Zahl, 87.

I suspect this is part of the reason that people are coming back to church. Or at least not leaving at the same rate these days.

Many are weary of the punishing, judgmental culture that we are collectively creating. We need somewhere to go with our guilt.

And if the church is doing its job, it provides precisely this space. We should never apologize for this or downplay it in any way.

Many more progressive churches downplay the substitutionary atonement, with its primitive notions of blood sacrifice and all the ways it has been weaponized over the years.

They would prefer to focus on the example of suffering love Christ provides on the cross or his nonresistance to the end. But why focus so much on guilt and punishment?

The first thing to say is that there's a lot going on the cross. These can all be true *and* it can be true that Christ substitutes himself on our behalf, taking the punishment we deserve.

The second thing to say is that churches that downplay the substitutionary atonement provided by Christ on the cross are very often the churches that are dying, according to the data cited by one of the articles I began with.

We need somewhere to go with our guilt.

But the gospel does more than just give us somewhere to go. It tells us that our guilt, though real and often deserved, can be healed and transformed. It tells us that our sins can be forgiven.

It preserves and protects old words like confession and absolution.

I love speaking words of absolution. Along with serving communion, it's one of my favourite things to do in public worship.

I love saying words like these:

Hear the good news!
Who is in a position to condemn?
Only Christ,
And Christ died for us,
 Christ rose for us,
 Christ reigns in power for us,
 Christ prays for us.
Know that you are forgiven,
And be at peace.

Where else but the church can we hear words like this?

I am going to close with the words David Zahl closes this chapter with:

Dolly Parton once said that “grief is love with no place to go.” If that’s true, then despair is guilt with no place to go. **The Christian faith gives guilt a destination.** The foot of the cross is our guilt depository. You can leave your burden there, confident that full atonement has been made. Court is adjourned—for good.⁵

Thanks be to God.

Amen.



⁵ Zahl, 94.