

2 Corinthians 5:21 - Doctrine of Substitution

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 April 2025

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 00] Good morning Church. Good morning. Today the reading is from 2 Corinthians 5 from verse 16 to chapter 6 verse 2.

! So from now on we regarded no one from a worldly point of view. Though once we regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer.

Therefore if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, the old has gone, the new is here. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

That God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God.

[1 : 12] God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As God's fellow workers, we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain.

For he says, in the time of my favour I heard you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. I tell you, now is the time of God's favour.

Now is the day of salvation. Amen. Thank you so much Gloria. Welcome to you again. We're going to be looking at just verse 21 of chapter 5.

So you want to keep your Bible open and we'll look at that together. Let me pray for us as we do say. Father, we do thank you that we come together to listen to you and what you say in your words.

We do want to pray that you would give us open ears and tender hearts to hear you, to listen, to submit. Lord, we pray that you might take away distractions, that you might help me to speak faithfully and clearly.

[2 : 23] And that you would do us all good this morning, by your spirit, in Jesus name. Amen. If you're new this morning or you've only been coming for a few weeks, let me just explain to you that our normal pattern of things at this point in our service is for us just to open a chunk of the Bible and work our way through it together.

That's been our normal practice and we have been working our way through the book of Mark this year. But this morning is a little bit different. So in the build up to Easter in these two Sundays before Easter Sunday, I want us to slow down and take a more detailed look at why Jesus died on the cross and see just how the Bible explains what is happening there.

And this morning, like you've probably picked up, we are going to be looking at 2 Corinthians chapter 5, verse 21. Look down at it. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Now I hope what is obvious, and it should be obvious if you were at least listening while we were talking to the children, is that the whole idea in that verse is the idea of substitution.

Jesus, the righteous one, substitutes himself in for us, the sinful ones. What was ours becomes his, what was his becomes ours.

[3 : 52] He becomes sin, sacrifices himself on the cross. We become righteous, receiving resurrection life with the Father. Now, I don't think actually that substitution like that is a very complicated idea.

I do hope if you brought children with you this morning that when you go home you are able to explain that idea to them and that they might have understood that through the children's talk.

We talk, don't we, regularly about substitution in sport, clearly not in basketball in the way I thought, but we have substitute teachers as well at school, don't we?

That we talk about subbing in for one another on church rotors. It's a familiar idea. And even this idea that Jesus dying in our place is a really helpful and common summary of the gospel. Even if we've not really heard the gospel before, we might even have heard simple ideas and explanations like that. No, Jesus died in our place. But what I want to show you this morning is that this really simple idea of Jesus dying in our place holds great riches for us as Christians.

[5 : 00] And I don't doubt that for all of us here this morning that thinking in more detail about what it actually means for Christ to be our substitute is going to be a real spiritual blessing for us this morning.

And if you're not a Christian, it will be really helpful to you as well because you will get to get a glimpse of what Christians believe Christ is doing on the cross and why that's so important to us. So I want to show you four facts about substitution from 2 Corinthians 5 verse 21. The first is this. The first is it is God who makes the substitution.

God is the one who makes the substitution. This is, of course, how the verse starts, isn't it? God made him who had no sin to be sin. In other words, when it comes to substitution, this is something that God is responsible for.

Again, that's not particularly complicated, is it? But it does make a big difference. Paul's claim here is that God himself is the initiator, the provider, the rescuer in salvation.

[6 : 02] Salvation was God's idea. It was not my idea or your idea. So that at its heart and at its start, salvation is about our rescue from sin, not because of our faith or our work or our desire to know God, but rather about God and his plan, his purposes.

His sovereignty, his authority, his work, not ours. Now, you probably don't need me to tell you that that is a very different version of what's going on in history to the version that we hear every day. We like to think of ourselves as the main character in the story, don't we? I believe the term is main character syndrome. My kids sometimes talk about that at school.

Oh, yeah, they've got main character syndrome. It's not a compliment. It's an insult, isn't it? This idea that we think we're at the center of what's going on in the world. But we don't just think about that in a selfish way, do we?

We also think about it in a kind of humanity way. We think that humanity is the center of the story, don't we? Or maybe even creation is at the center of the story or the environment or the planet.

[7 : 12] The story is the story of this world. But no, actually, what we find is that history is really God's story. The story of what God is doing in our world in history.

And so salvation, the rescue of a kingdom of people to live with God in the glories of a remade world, that is something God does. It's his action in history, seeking the lost, saving them from sin, adopting them into his family, promising them eternity with him.

And to do that, God rules over all that he has made. So he knows that without a doubt, his plan will happen. God made substitution.

That's not just those two words at the beginning of verse 21 that declare this. If you have a look up the rest of the section, verse 18, all this is from God, we're told. Verse 19, God was reconciling the world to himself.

And you get to see the Trinity at work here. Look at verse 18 again. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.

[8 : 21] God here is God the Father, reconciling us to himself through his son Christ, then sending us out to proclaim that message in the power of the Spirit to the world. The plan of the Father in the work of the Son to bring people to himself through the preaching of the Spirit.

And the point is that all of this is God's idea. It's not your idea or my idea. When it comes to talking about substitution, when it comes to talking about the gospel, we haven't yet mentioned us because we're still talking about him.

Imagine it like this for a moment. Imagine you're on a beach and you're building a sandcastle. There it is. It's a very pathetic little sandcastle that you're making. And the sand is a little dry and it keeps falling down.

And then you look across the beach and you see someone else is building something remarkable and marvelous. It's not so much a sandcastle as it is like a sand planet.

It's got turrets and moats and underground rooms and bridges to walk over. Now, in that scenario, what would you rather, right? What would you rather that the builder of the sand planet came over and said to you and looked at your little pathetic sandcastle and said, don't worry, I'll help you.

Yeah, build your little sandcastle, make it a little bit better.

[9 : 35] Or would you rather they said, hey, come, come join me in planet sand. Yeah, come come to the underground rooms, come run over the bridges, come play in my sandcastle.

Of course, that second one is way better, isn't it? Because what you realize when you see that great sand planet creation, you see that your plans, your castle, your efforts are really rather miserable, rather small and rather pathetic.

And you want to be part of something bigger and greater. Now, Paul says that's the story of salvation. In the story of salvation, God is not coming to kind of finish off and bless the plans that you have for your life.

He's not saying, oh, yes, I can see what you're doing there. Let me just help you a little bit. No, not at all. God says, come join in what I am doing. I have a great plan, a plan to substitute my son to save a people for himself.

Come and join it. Come and be part of it. Leave behind your little sandcastle and come join what I am doing. God makes the substitution.

[10 : 41] Secondly, notice that substitution has been made. Substitution has been made. Now here, we're getting really simple. All I want you to notice is that made is in the past tense. In other words, the work required for salvation has been completed.

It has been done by Christ past tense. So while we experience salvation in the present day, today is the day of salvation for us.

This now is the era of people being saved from their sins for glory. If you look down at chapter 6, verse 2, you'll see it says that, don't you? In the time of my favour, I heard you. And in the day of salvation, I helped you.

I tell you, now is the time of God's favour. Now is the day of salvation. That's the present tense bit, right? The day of salvation is today. Not because today is the day that the work has been done, but today is the day when people are hearing that the work has been done.

And it is through hearing that the work has been done that we get to be part of it. So much so that if you're not a Christian this morning, today is the day to become one, right?

[11 : 45] Today is the, this is the time, this is the era when the gospel message is being proclaimed. And today is the day to put your trust in Christ. There is a day when it will be too late.

The day that you die or the day when Christ returns. But today is the present day of salvation. Even though the work of substitution is in the past tense.

God made him. The work of substitution has been completed. Now think about what that means for a moment. And here I'm going to stretch your minds a little bit. So nudge the person next to you if you feel like they're dropping off, right?

If substitution has happened, if Jesus has already taken my place and completed the work, if Jesus has ascended to his father and is sat down at the right hand of God, then, then God is not waiting for you and I to finish off the work of salvation.

He's not waiting for us to add its final flourishes. He's not waiting for us even to activate it. No, Jesus went to the cross and died as our substitute in our place.

[12 : 50] It has been done. It is finished. It is completed. Now just think about the difference that that makes. If God the father substituted the son in your place in an action that has now been completed so that he can say, it is finished, ascend to the father and seated his right hand.

What does that mean for your salvation? Well, it means that your salvation was along with all the plans of God planned in eternity past.

Yeah. How does an eternal non time bound God make his plans? He makes them in the eternal councils of eternity, doesn't he?

He does. He does. He's not muddling along on the fly, right? Oh, I might do that today. Oh, I thought about maybe doing this today. No, that's not how God works, is it? God is in eternity.

He makes all of his plans in eternity. It is who he is. This is what Paul says in Ephesians chapter one, verse four, when he says, for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight.

[13 : 59] And those plans are then worked out and accomplished in history by the son. As God, the eternal son clothes himself with humanity, lives in perfect relationship with his father in absolute obedience before giving his life on the cross in your place or before you or I were even born.

In other words, salvation was accomplished before you or I even had a thought that we might need it. It's mind blowing, isn't it?

What Paul is saying here is that God's plan in Christ is not just somehow to make salvation theoretically possible. You know, for you and I to be saved if we kind of perhaps want to be.

No, rather God's plan in Christ accomplished in history was to send Jesus as a substitute for you on the cross. And that has been done, completed, eternally planned, historically accomplished, coming to light in the preaching of the gospel in the day of salvation, which is today.

Now, I know this is perhaps profound. I have a sermon read through on a Friday afternoon. And I get to kind of read my sermon through with a small group of people.

[15:10] If you'd like to be involved, come and speak to me. I'd love to have you. And they get to feed back to me. And when we'd fed back there was sort of like a look of bamboozlement on some of their faces. Like, oh, what have you been? This is just like mind blowing.

And this idea that God accomplishes our salvation in history past is mind blowing, isn't it? But let me just show you that this makes a world of difference to you and I today and how we live the Christian life and how we think about it.

If you're a Christian this morning, you know that Jesus died to save you. You. He hung there as your substitute, paying for your sin.

Now, as the hymn goes in my place, condemned, he stood, sealed my pardon with his blood. Now, this isn't somehow to sort of limit the saving power of God or the value of the cross or to narrow it in any way.

Now, you can't put a value on the infinitely valuable work of Christ. Rather, the point is that the infinitely valuable work of Christ in history is powerfully aimed at the salvation of his people.

[16:20] And that work has been done even while we wait for its full achievements to be seen. Perhaps I can try and illustrate it for us for a moment. For us living today in the UK, we owe our lives to a lot of people who have given their lives for us.

Right. There are soldiers to whom we owe a lot who fought fascism and Nazi Germany, and we owe our lives to them. They laid down their lives for us.

For the Christian, we owe a lot to Tyndale, who translated the scriptures into English at the cost of his life. They even dug him up and burned him again. They were that mad with him. Or the reformers who burned in Oxford for their affirmation of Bible truth.

You know, if you're a Baptist Christian this morning, there were men and women in this country who gave their lives for the freedom to worship God outside the confines of the state church. So we can say, can't we, in a general sense, those people died for us.

Tyndale died so that you and I could read the scriptures in our own language, not rely on corrupt priests fumbling over Latin text. D-Day soldiers gave their lives for our freedom and our democracy so that we could vote our leaders in and vote them out.

[17:29] And maybe that's sometimes how we begin to think about Jesus' death on the cross.

Like, he died in the past to kind of make it possible that we might become Christians if we wanted to. But that's not how Paul describes it here.

Jesus died for us. It was planned. Jesus did it. It's been done. Christ died as my substitute. So this isn't really like a World War II soldier or Tyndale or Latimer.

Instead, this is more like someone jumping into water into which you're drowning, grabbing you by the neck and pulling you out, even as they themselves drown. It's that personal.

Jesus was my substitute. He has taken past tense what was mine and paid for it on the cross.

Thirdly, then, substitution made Jesus sin.

Substitution made Jesus sin. It's common, isn't it, for us to illustrate the cross in all sorts of different ways. One of them goes a bit like this. Perhaps you've heard this.

[18:30] Now, imagine for a moment that you're stood in front of a judge, right? The judge is passing sentence on your crimes. The evidence is damning. You know that. You know that you're guilty. It's been proved beyond reasonable doubt.

And as the sentence is passed by the judge, in walks the innocent son. And the innocent son takes the judgment for you and they are sent down instead of you.

Right? That's the illustration. It's meant to capture the drama of salvation. God the judge, us the sinner, Jesus the innocent son who takes the punishment in our place. But if you think about it, that makes absolutely no sense, doesn't it?

Right? You know, how can the son take punishment for crimes he obviously didn't commit? Now, if that happened in a court of law, there would be a huge scandal, wouldn't there?

You know, you can imagine the headlines. You know, unjust judge takes out punishment on his innocent son. Guilty criminal goes free in absurd injustice.

[19 : 30] You know, the innocent receiving punishment is by definition unjust. And the idea that that is the story of the cross is not really quite right. And that's why 2 Corinthians 5 verse 21 is so important to us.

Because it is the transfer of our sin onto Jesus which secures the justice of the cross. Notice what Paul says. He made him who had no sin to be sin for us.

Just think about Paul's assumptions here. Notice the innocence of Jesus. Jesus had no sin. Literally in the Greek there, he knew no sin. Not as in Jesus was some kind of naive five year old who knew nothing about wickedness, never heard the word.

No, Jesus knew more about sin and wickedness than any of us in the room. He was not naive. No, the point is that he had no connection to it. He had no experience of it. Jesus was morally perfect. So that while he was fully man clothed with the same weak, frail, mortal flesh that you and I are. Flesh that ages, that gets tired, that wakes up hungry in the morning.

[20 : 36] Still, Jesus had no sinful nature. He was pure. He was without sin. He knew no sin. You just need to be really clear about this, don't we?

Jesus wasn't just like us, but a little bit better behaved. No, he knew no sin. He had no desire to sin. He had no inclination to put himself first.

He had no desire to ruin the reputation of others, to lust after others for his own self-satisfaction.

You know, temptation for Jesus was not because he wanted to sin but knew he really shouldn't. No, temptation for Jesus was to use his divinity to compromise his humanity and disobey the plan of the Father.

To turn stones into bread and eat them. To gain the world without going through the suffering of the cross. Jesus was morally perfect, pure in nature.

And yet, still, the wonder of this verse is that God made him to be sin for us. And of course, the implication here is that sin is ours.

[21 : 41] It has nowhere else to come from. You want to know what you contributed to salvation? This is it right here. Sin. Because Jesus had none of his own. Sin.

And the implication is not that we do a few things wrong, is it? It's not, notice, God made him who knew no sin to take on your minor misdemeanors. No, he made him to be sin.

In other words, Paul is suggesting that you and I hold our sinfulness in a parallel way to that Jesus holds his perfections. So Jesus had no experience of sinning.

You and I have no experience of not sinning. Right? Our corruption means that it is in our very nature to put ourselves at the center. To ignore the one that we were made for.

Sinful desire is natural to us. Not to say that we're incapable of doing anything good. I'm sure you've done many good things. Rather, the problem is that we are incapable of moral perfection.

[22 : 39] So much so that even the good things that we attempt to do are tainted by this desire for our own glory. Did you notice how good I was?

Did you notice what I did? Did you see it? Let me hand over this giant check so you know how generous I am. So, sinful selfishness. So, sinful selfishness. And the point is here that at the heart of the cross in the finished work of salvation, in planned in the mind of God in eternity past is the transfer of our sin onto Christ Jesus.

Even as his perfections are then transferred onto us. So that the cross is not a great act of injustice, but a great action of justice.

As Jesus died a sinner's death. Because in that moment, he is a sinner. Not with his own sin, but with your sin.

My sin. Theologians have used a word to describe this. It is the word imputation. The father imputes our sin onto Christ, even as he imputes his righteousness onto us.

[23 : 50] I grant you that imputation is a funny word. It sounds, doesn't it, like amputation.

Amputation is when you chop something off that is there like an arm or a leg. Imputation really, in one sense, is the opposite, isn't it?

When you add something or credit something that's not there. If you were to impute the money from your bank account into my account so that I could spend it, that would mean that you were

transferring your money into my name.

Now, that's what's happening with our sin here, isn't it? Really, it's a debt rather than a credit. Our debt of sin is being imputed to Christ, counted against him, even as his great righteous credit is being imputed into us, counted over as ours.

Now, think about the implications of this. I don't think there's a person in this room. I talk to people all the time, and I know that there's not a person in this room who doesn't at some point feel guilty. Whether you call yourself a Christian or not, I'm sure that you can think this morning of reasons to feel guilty. Maybe it's something that you said, and you know you shouldn't have said it.

[24 : 56] Perhaps it's something that you've done, or somewhere you've been, or something you've thought, something you've dabbled in. No one else knows. Even your loved one who sat next to you, they don't know it.

But you know it. And you know God knows it. And when you think of it, guilt sort of rises in your guts. Now, let me tell you, the world has absolutely no solution to offer you.

You know that, don't you? Yeah? The world will tell you, just ignore that feeling. Just distract yourself. Scroll a bit more, it will say. Religion has no answer to it either, does it?

It will tell you to try and cover it with good work. But you know that doesn't work, don't you?

Because we've already seen that even the good works that we do are tainted by this kind of selfish desire. And if I think that I'm covering over my sin by my good works, I'm by definition doing my good works for my own ends, which is sin.

So all we have is this instinctive sense that before the God who made us, we're damned. We're lost. We're guilty. And this floods back to us. And let me say to you, if you're a young person in the room, this just gets worse as you get older.

[26 : 03] I have sat by the bedside of many people as they have passed away. And there are very few who do that courageously.

And they want someone like me there because they want to know that they're not going to be confirmed as guilty before the God who made them. But here is the solution to that guilt in the cross of Jesus Christ.

And it's not to underplay the wickedness, is it? It's not as, oh, don't worry, it doesn't really matter. It's not that at all. The cross shows you the deep horror of sin, but it shows you that while at the same time it shows to you that it is being punished.

It has been punished in Christ on the cross. So that when I stand before God as my judge, I don't hope that he will forget my sin, or that he'll turn a blind eye, or that he might just not have noticed.

No, I stand before God and I know that my sin has been punished already in Christ on the cross.

And I know that God is unable to punish that sin again because that would make him unjust.

[27 : 13] Let me say to you, that is great news. There is no other news that's as good as that. That you and I, before a holy God, can stand because our sin has already been punished.

No guilt in life. No fear in death. That is the hope of Christ in me. And if you don't have it, it's here on offer in the preaching of the gospel.

Finally then, this is perhaps the most incredible part. Substitution makes me righteous. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Here then is this idea that in the substitution of the son, we are made righteous. Righteousness of God is ours in Christ. Again, let me just tease this out for you because it's really, really important.

If salvation was by any other means other than substitution, where Jesus takes my sin and I take his perfection, then I could never hope for the gospel to bring me the righteousness of God.

[28 : 25] You know that, right? You know, think about it. If salvation were by you and I doing certain works, then we could never, ever hope that salvation would make me as righteous as God.

We might hope against hope that we could do enough works, perhaps, for God to let us into glory. I mean, we know we couldn't, but we might hope that that would be it. But we would never dare to imagine that our works would make us as righteous as God himself, could we?

We wouldn't dare to talk like that. But Paul talks like that here. We never dream of putting ourselves at the top of the class.

But if Jesus is my substitute, then I am as righteous as the divine son in human flesh. You know, put it another way, if salvation were just sort of made possible by the cross, you know, if the cross is just opening some kind of theoretical door to salvation for you to go through it, if you really perhaps want to, but not actually achieving salvation for his people, then perhaps you might hope that you've

walked through the door, right?

You might hope that you'd repented hard enough, that you'd believed earnestly enough. But if salvation is by substitution, then what was Christ is now mine, just as what was mine is now his. [29 : 42] So I am as righteous as Jesus, as safe in him. And that means that my assurance, the question that I'm asking about whether I'm really safe before God, is not the question, have I believed hard enough?

Or have I repented earnestly enough? Or have I felt enough emotion? No, the question is this, for my assurance, would God the Father abandon the righteousness of his son?

Would he? Of course not. He could not. Would God reject his own perfections? Would God turn up his nose at the son who loved him and lived for him in the perfection of a sinless nature?

Of course he wouldn't. But substitution means all that is mine. That's how God sees me. Those perfections are mine. And just as my sin has already been judged, so the perfect works of Christ have already been done.

They are mine in Christ. Let me just try and land this personally as a pastor, if I can. There are Christians in this room, maybe you're one of them, who live anxiously, wondering whether they'll be okay.

[30 : 51] Will Jesus save me in the end? I think I'm probably the worst Christian in the room. My faith wobbles at the first sign of trouble. I don't know my Bible very well.

I get the questions wrong in the quizzes at youth club. Well, listen, if that's you this morning, we're all a bit like that. Can I say to you?

There's a Christian who loves Jesus and delights in Jesus. You're just looking in the wrong place for your assurance. You will never settle the worries of your heart by looking into the mess of your own life.

Instead, look to Jesus. Look at his moral perfections. See there the one who is tested in the extreme and stood firm. The one who had zero experience of sinning. He never thought of doing it. The one who obeyed the father even to the laying down of his own life. And think, would God save someone like that? Would that kind of perfection be enough?

[31 : 49] Of course it would. And Christian, those perfections are yours. Imputed to you by Christ's substitution on the cross. For God made him who knew no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Let me pray for us. Heavenly Father, we thank you so much that you sent Jesus to die as our substitute.

Thank you that that means that all the guilt and shame, the punishment that our sin deserves, has been paid in full by Christ on the cross for us.

Thank you now that his righteousness belongs to us. And we pray, please, that you just might help us to delight in Christ and to trust in him as we pray in his name.

Amen. Amen.