

## 2 Corinthians 5:21

### The Great Exchange

Christianity is uniquely different from all the world religions.

God reconciled sinful man to Himself by making His sinless Son the sinbearer and dying in the sinner's place. Jesus Christ paid the death penalty for the sinner so that God could set the sinner free and declare him righteous in His holy presence. Moreover, He did more than just forgive us our sins; He imputed the perfect righteousness of His Son to us. A great exchange took place. Christ got all our sin and guilt; we got His perfect righteousness standing before God. His righteousness was exchanged for our sin.

The apostle Paul wrote: "Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). The word "reconcile" in the original (*katallasso*) is an old word for exchanging coins. It denotes "to change, exchange" especially money, then of individuals "to change from enmity to friendship, to reconcile." "For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10). God's love provided the means and foundation for man's reconciliation to God against whom he had sinned. God's own sense of justice had to be satisfied (Rom. 3:26). We deserve the wrath of God. Therefore, God gave His Son as a propitiation for our sins (Rom. 3:25; Col. 1:20; 1 John 2:2; 4:10). By means of His own sacrifice of His Son He turns away His own wrath toward the believer. God needs no reconciliation; we are the ones who need to be reconciled to Him. We are the sinning rebels. This has to be done on God's terms and is made possible through the death of Christ.

Two great passages of Scripture present the heart of the Good News of Jesus Christ. They also guide us through the difficult, hard to understand passages.

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

God demonstrated "His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:26). How can God be a righteous, holy and just God and justify the sinner? How can a holy and righteous God maintain His own integrity by justifying guilty sinners? Or to state it another way, how can a person be right with God?

The apostle Paul told us how God did it. "He [God] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21). The foundation for everything in our Christian life is based on the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the imputation of the perfect righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner. Note the contrast and results in this great verse.

He [God] made	so that
Him [Jesus Christ]	we
who knew no sin	might become
to be sin	the righteousness of God
on our behalf	in Him.

God is responsible for our eternal salvation, "namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:19). God caused a double transfer to be made. Our sins were imputed to Christ, and His perfect

righteousness is imputed to us. He bore our sins; we are clothed in His righteousness. All of our sins were placed on Christ. He was punished for our sins. All our guilt was placed on Him and He died in our place. Christ's righteousness was imputed to us, the believing sinners in order that we might be accepted by Him. God acquits the guilty sinner who believes in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for his sins.

## **GOD IS A HOLY AND JUST GOD**

The marvelous beauty of this great passage is that "God was reconciling" us to Himself. Many proud individuals want to blame God for the world's problems. However, the truth is God has done something about mankind's greatest problem.

### ***He is a sovereign God.***

He has absolute power to do as He pleases.

He created the heavens and earth and man all that is in it. All of creation is accountable to Him. Every created thing lives and breathes and has its existence because of the creative and sustaining presence of God. Sinful man answers to God; not the other way around.

God does not have to answer to anyone. In His nature He is absolutely free to do as He pleases. He does not answer to anyone. You and I do not have that freedom.

### ***He is absolutely righteous.***

God is a God of infinite justice. Because of His holy nature, He cannot tolerate sin.

However, in direct contrast all of mankind has come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Our sin problem is defined and illustrated in the first three chapters of Romans. The indictment is vividly clear. We have failed to be what God wants us to be. We can only plead guilty before God because we are guilty.

The penalty is death (Rom. 6:23). "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." Man is dead in trespasses and sins and incapable of solving his sin problem. "And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest" (Ephesians 2:1-3).

### ***God is a God of grace.***

What we could not do for ourselves, God stepped in and did for us. We are spiritually dead in the eyes of God and remain so until we receive spiritual regeneration through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. We remain spiritually dead until we are born again.

John Calvin wrote: "The only haven of safety is in the mercy of God, as manifested in Christ, in whom every part of our salvation is complete. As all mankind are, in the sight of God, lost sinners, we hold that Christ is their only righteousness, since, by His obedience, He has wiped off our transgressions, by His sacrifice appeased the divine anger, by His blood washed away our stains, by His cross borne our curse, and by His death made satisfaction for us. We maintain that in this way man is reconciled in Christ to God the Father, by no merit of his own, by no value of works, but by gratuitous mercy."

## **JESUS CHRIST IS THE RIGHTEOUS SUBSTITUTE**

The Lord Jesus Christ died under the curse of the broken law. "The wages of sin is death." "The soul that sins will surely die." For whose sins did He die? Was He a guilty sinner?

## ***Christ knew no sin in His human and divine nature.***

He never experienced personal sin. No man has ever stood before God and said, "Which of you convicts me of sin?" (John 8:46) Here was the one sinless person who ever lived. He knew no sin. In Him was no sin found. He was perfectly sinless. His inner being was absolutely free from any inclination to evil. He fulfilled perfectly the will of God when He prayed, "Not my will; Your will be done." Then He went out and submitted to that will and fulfilled it by dying on the cross. Jesus said, "For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:17-18).

Christ knew no sin of any kind. He knew no sinful thought; He committed no sinful transgression; He said no sinful word; He committed no sinful deed; He was pure, spotless, perfect.

## ***As God He could not sin.***

Christ is God of very God. He is the same substance with the Father, co-equal, co-eternal, co-existent. God cannot sin; Christ the eternal Son of God cannot sin. He enjoyed unbroken fellowship with the Father saying, "I and the Father are one," and "I am in the Father and the Father in Me" (John 10:30; 14:10; 17:11, 21).

## ***As fully man He did not sin.***

"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 4:15). He suffered greater temptation because He was holy. Christ "committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22). Christ did not experience personal sin. He was spotless, pure, sinless. "Then Pilate said to the chief priests and the crowds, 'I find no guilt in this man'" (Luke 23:4; cf John 19:4, 6). Jesus Christ is "Righteousness-Itself." He could never be our righteousness if He were for one moment unrighteous. God the Father testified, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matt. 3:17; 17:5). The writer of Hebrews said, "For it was fitting for us to have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens" (Hebrews 7:26).

The penitent sinner who was a well versed sinner declared, "And we indeed are suffering justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong" (Luke 23:41). The Roman centurion upon the death of Christ, ". . . began praising God, saying, 'Certainly this man was innocent'" (Luke 23:47).

## ***We are just the opposite of Jesus.***

He was sinless; we are guilty sinners. We stand condemned in the presence of a righteous God. Ezekiel 18:4 says, "The soul that sins will surely die." The person who sinned was exposed to the fierce wrath of God.

## ***God imputed our sins to Jesus Christ.***

"He [God] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

God made Christ to be sin for us the sinners. God regarded or treated Christ, who was sinless, as a sinner. God regarded our sins, i.e. the believers as if our sin belonged to Christ. God made Jesus sin by imputing to Him our sin. Our sins were charged to the account of Jesus Christ.

God is the author of our salvation. He charged Christ with our sins. Peter declared "this Man, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death" (Acts 2:23).

Christ paid the wages of sin as if He were the condemned sinner. "The wages of sin is death." Therefore, He died that death for us. "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'" (Galatians 3:13). Christ "bore our sins in His body on the cross" (1 Peter 2:24). Christ gave His life and died in order to satisfy God's holy wrath against sin. Only the One who was entirely without sin of His own could bear the sin of others. No one else could qualify to be the sinbearer.

No one states it clearer than the Hebrew prophet Isaiah. "Surely our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted" (Isaiah 53:4). "But He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, And by His scourging we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5). "All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him" (Isaiah 53:6). God sacrificed His own Son for us. Christ bore our iniquities (v. 11). "Therefore, I will allot Him a portion with the great, and He will divide the booty with the strong; because He poured out Himself to death, and was numbered with the transgressors; yet He Himself bore the sin of many, and interceded for the transgressors" (Isaiah 53:12). The vicarious nature of Christ's death is clearly in view. Christ though perfectly holy, was treated by God as if He were a guilty sinner. He took the place of the sinner and suffered for Him (Rom. 5:6-11; 8:34; 1 Cor. 15:3; Gal. 3:13). "You know that He appeared in order to take away sins; and in Him there is no sin" (1 John 3:5). God made the Sinless One to be sin for the sinner. God made Him sin--don't take that statement lightly.

Why did God make Him sin for us? Our redemption, forgiveness, reconciliation, etc. demands that the innocent Son of God bear the full wrath of God against sin. God judged Him and found Him guilty! "The wages of sin is death!"

### ***Christ became our substitute.***

In becoming sin for us, Christ became our substitute. The apostle Peter wrote: "knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

On the day Christ died, the Passover lambs were being slain at the Temple in Jerusalem. They were sinless substitutes. They were chosen because they were without spot or blemish. Jesus was the Lamb of God who was slain for sinners (John 1:29). It was for our sins that He died. Our sins which separated us from God have all been removed, and now God can accept us based upon the sacrifice of Christ. Based upon that atoning sacrifice, God drops all charges against, declares us acquitted, and dresses us in His righteousness.

The Reformer, Zacharius Ursinus declared: "God grants and credits to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ, as if I had never sinned nor been a sinner, as if I had been perfectly obedient as Christ was obedient for me."

Christ died in our place, for our sake. He is our atoning sacrifice. "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit" (1 Peter 3:18). "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (Romans 5:6). "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

The apostle Paul tells us "one died for all, therefore all died," stressing the perfect representation on Christ. There is no sin or guilt whatsoever which Christ did not bear. Nor is there any righteousness which believers do not obtain from God in Christ.

## **Place your sins on Jesus.**

The Old Testament sacrifices illustrate the work of Christ's substitutionary atonement. The sinner brought his animal sacrifice to the altar and laid his hands on the head of the animal and confessed his guilt. The animal had done no wrong. The animal died in the place of the sinner. The sinner by faith, comes and puts his hands on Christ's head, confessing all his sins. They have all been imputed to Christ who died in the sinner's place. Christ was punished as if He were the guilty sinner.

Take all of your sins, every sin you have ever committed and place them on Christ. Think for a moment of every evil thought that has gone through your mind, every evil deed or behavior you have ever done, every sinful imagination that flashed upon your mind, every evil desire you have fulfilled, etc. Place them all on Christ. What a seething mass of iniquity. He died for you. Think of every believer for whom Christ died the world over, down through the centuries. Christ died bearing all of that load of sin. "He [God] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Jesus became in a judicial, legal way the representative for sin and died in our place. He paid my sin debt in full. He took my place because I am a condemned sinner and He died for me. He paid my death penalty. I deserved to die; He died my death. Christ died for the sins of everyone past, present, and future. He became sin on our behalf.

Because of that great fact, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the believer. It is in Christ our Righteousness that the sinner is made the righteousness of God.

## **GOD IMPUTES THE PURE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF JESUS CHRIST TO THE BELIEVER**

The object of the vicarious suffering of Christ on our behalf was that we should become the righteousness of God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, God regards and treats the believing sinner as righteous, not having a righteousness of our own, but having a real righteous standing before God. God is the author and giver of this righteousness. "He [God] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

### ***God imputes Christ's righteousness to the believing sinner.***

No other religion in the world teaches this great truth. Everyone else is working to get a right relationship with God. In grace, the Bible tells us, God takes the perfect righteousness of His Son and places it on the believing sinner as a perfect robe. Yes, the believing sinner stands in the presence of a holy God robed in the pure righteousness of Jesus Christ. The righteousness God has manifested is through faith in Christ for all who believe.

This righteousness is that which justifies, or satisfies the demands of the law. The believing sinner stands just in the sight of the law. The law or justice is satisfied by the sacrifice of Christ on behalf of the sinner. The believer has a new legal standing before God. This is not our inward moral state because we are still sinners. We are now saved sinners with a legal standing before God. In the eyes of a holy God we are accepted as righteous, and treated as righteous by God based on the saving work of Christ. Christ was made "sin" and we are made "righteousness." He was treated as if He were a sinner, though He was perfectly holy and pure, however we are treated as if we were righteous, though we are defiled and depraved. He does not tell us to get or earn or merit righteousness, but "become the righteousness of God in Him." We are identified with God's righteousness in Christ.

This, however, does not evade the responsibility to live out in daily experience our new relationship with God. It is our responsibility to take off the old man and put on the new in our daily life.

A fully adequate perfect righteousness was provided for the believer to meet the exacting demands of a righteous God. The only righteousness that can possibly meet God's demands is that which He alone provides through Jesus Christ. You and I cannot produce it because we are sinners. God alone can provide it. He provides an everlasting righteousness. Therefore, He is called "the Lord our righteousness." He is made righteousness to us, and we are made the righteousness of God in Him.

When Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God in His marvelous grace walked in the garden searching out Adam and Eve. The guilty sinners tried to cover up their mess by sewing fig leaves together to make an apron, however, God "made garments of skin for Adam and his wife, and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). Where did these skins come from? From the context of the passage and the rest of the Bible, I think it is clear God had given them instructions about a sacrifice to be offered for their sins. God provided the sacrifice and with the slain animals' skins covered their bodies. The sinless substitute animals that died as sacrifices for their sins provided the coverings for their nakedness.

Again, the Old Testament pictures for us the amazing atonement of the perfect sacrifice of the Lamb of God dying for our sins on the cross, and clothes us with robes of pure righteousness. We stand before a holy God dressed in robes of righteousness without spot and without blemish. The Hebrew prophet Isaiah wrote: "I will rejoice greatly in the Lord, My soul will exult in my God; For He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, As a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (Isaiah 61:10).

Believing sinners are treated by a righteous God as righteous through their union with Christ. They are justified and saved. God sees us "in Christ."

### **Christ's righteousness is given freely.**

It is given freely to all who believe in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Christ presents us before the Father clothed in His perfect righteousness. We are clothed with His robes of pure righteousness. It is "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe" (Rom. 3:22a; Cf. Rom. 4:6-8; 10:3-4, 6-10). We are justified freely by God's free grace through the redemption that is provided by Christ Jesus.

The atoning sacrificial death of Christ is sufficient for every person in the world, but it is efficient only for all who believe on Him. Every individual must decide what He will do with that sacrifice. Only those who appropriate Christ's death through faith receive His forgiveness and righteousness standing before God. Christ died for all who believe on Him. Your personal faith is an essential element in your salvation. Only the individual who places His trust in Christ receives eternal life and reconciliation with God.

## **SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS**

### ***Our self-righteousness never gives us a right standing before God.***

Because Jesus bore all the sins of all who believe on Him, God regards and treats the believer as having a legal status of "righteousness." We have a right standing before God, not because of anything we have done. The only way of reconciliation with God is the atoning sacrifice of Christ our Righteousness.

### ***God imputed our sins to Christ and punished it.***

Because Christ was our sinbearer, God imputed the righteousness of Christ to us. Christ was sinless; sinners were evil. Christ said, "My Father, treat me as I were a sinner; treat the sinner as if he were Me."

The apostle Paul's prayer was "that I may gain Christ and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Philippians 3:9).

By imputing sin to Christ, God imputes His perfect righteousness to the believer. God now sees the believing sinner as perfect as His Son, because He sees us "in Christ." You are perfect in Christ Jesus. You are robed in the pure garments of Christ. "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1).

### ***We have a new position before God because we are "in Christ."***

Christ is the head of our family. Adam is no longer the head of our family. "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous" (Romans 5:19). Adam was the representative of the fallen humanity. Christ is the head and representative of all who are members of His family of believers. God made Christ sin; He makes us righteous. God the Father sees us "in Christ" and declares us righteous. Everything that Christ is was credited to our account.

Just as Christ was treated as a sinner, not because He was a sinner, but on account of His connection with the human race, those who are in vital union with Him are accepted by God as righteous, not because of their own personal righteousness, but because of their relationship with Him. Because of their personal guilt, they dare not approach God with any claim of personal righteousness.

### ***Because it is the work of God, He gets all the glory!***

There is no place for self-righteousness at the foot of the cross. There are no self-made Christians. All true Christians are Christ-made. We are made "the righteousness of God in Him." Sinners must glory in Christ alone because our trespasses were reckoned to Christ and the absolute spotless perfect righteousness of Christ is reckoned to us.

"For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (Ephesians 2:8-10).

Christ made the perfect atonement for your sins.  
He has provided a perfect righteousness for your justification.  
God was in Christ obtaining your reconciliation to a holy God.  
All that remains to be done is to receive by faith that provision God has made for you.

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