

The Forgiveness Myth

It is often said that God cannot "just forgive" sin. Divine justice demands that every sin must be accounted for and appropriately punished. Otherwise, forgiving would gloss over the seriousness of sin, and leave us with an implicit license to sin. But if justice was the only recourse, the entire human race would be condemned. So in order to avoid that outcome, we are told that Jesus became a substitute for us and took upon Himself the wrath of God over our sin so that we could be forgiven.

This understanding of Christ's death on the cross is referred to as the "Penal Substitution Theory" of atonement (PST). To restate this in common language: Since all have sinned, we all deserve condemnation and the wrath of God, including the judgment of eternal death. But if we confess our sin and guilt to God, He will shift our guilt to Jesus, who then stands in for us as a substitute to endure the penalty we deserved. And once our sins are all paid for, God can then forgive us and give us eternal life and all the other benefits of salvation.

This version of the gospel has been told and retold so many times by so many Christian leaders, that many simply assume it must be right. Some people even think that if you question this in any way, you don't believe in the atonement at all.

However, the real problem here is that PST creates multiple layers of blindness which keep people from seeing how deeply flawed it truly is. And while we could list about 30 defects in this theory (see *Lamb of God*), this article will focus on the one element under-girding the entire theory; an element so seriously defective that it distorts everything else we could possibly understand about atonement.

That issue is quite simply, ***the mythological definition of "forgiveness" embedded within PST.***

When someone has wronged us, our natural response might include any of the following reactions: contempt, anger, hatred, resentment, desire for revenge, righteous indignation, demands for justice, and so on. If at some point that person gets their "just due" or makes restitution or offers some form of compensation, we may very well let go of whatever ill will we still hold against them. We might even reconcile with that person. But what we need to understand is that if we needed some form of justice before we could release them, then whatever happens there is something other than *forgiveness*.

Forgiveness means (among other things) that we no longer hold them hostage, without requiring compensation and without demanding consequences for the other person. What's more, if that relationship is important to us, forgiveness expressly means offering reconciliation *instead of* demanding justice.

Forgiveness and retribution are mutually exclusive.

No one says, "I will forgive you for running over my dog with your car, but only after you let me shoot your dog." We don't say things like that, because that is not forgiveness; that's not how it works.

So how does God approach the whole issue of reconciliation with sinners? Well, being God, He can establish whatever means He deems appropriate. On the one hand, He could require a sacrificial death as payment for sin before He would reconcile. But then in the interests of intellectual honesty, we ought not call this forgiveness. Because calling it forgiveness twists the word into something else entirely; it is the worst kind of double-speak.

PST wants to claim that we have a precedent in the Jewish sacrificial laws. Under the Old Covenant, full atonement required the death of a lamb as a substitute for the people, supposedly to placate God's wrath, after which He could "forgive" them. But if those were the terms, then God did not really forgive anything. He extracted a penalty. What's more, the Bible itself offers an amazing understanding of those sacrifices that had nothing at all to do with "substitution" or wrath or appeasing God (*Lamb of God*).

For those who remember their high-school math, here is a great analogy. There is a well-known elaborate algebraic "proof" which demonstrates conclusively through a series of steps that **1=2**. Hard to believe. But if we walk through the steps in the proof, all of the algebraic functions appear to be legitimate, and the conclusion looks right. What most people fail to see is that cleverly hidden in one of the steps, each side of the equation is divided by zero. And in case you forgot, dividing by zero is never permitted. So if you gloss over the error in the proof (which is easy to do) the result of 1=2 becomes unavoidable.

In the same way, saying that God cannot forgive until justice has been satisfied is like dividing by zero. It is a meaningless statement. And once you swallow that distortion, all the rest of PST sounds believable.

Let's be honest here. If all sin must be punished or paid for, then what we are really saying is that *sin is in fact unforgivable!* If we will just let that sink in for a while, this myth of *forgiveness after retribution* can be seen for what it really is.

Here's the thing. Everything about PST hinges on this convoluted definition of forgiveness. Once this word is torn from its original meaning, everything else one might interpret from what the Bible says about atonement and forgiveness is as unreliable as pure myth.

Well then, how did we come to believe in this blatant self-contradiction as the basis for our salvation?

The number one reason why people believe justice requires all sin to be punished, is that they also believe if sin is not punished then nothing at all is being done about sin. And if nothing is ever done about sin, then why not just sin and be forgiven over and over? Doing away with punishment gives us license to sin!

The great irony of this argument is that ... *it is PST which does absolutely nothing about sin!* Punishment as a proposed "solution" only deals with guilt and does nothing for our sin condition at all. You are still a sinner, but now you are no longer considered guilty before God. So please, everyone, stop saying that punishment does something about sin! That's just one more bit of nonsense added to the myth of offering forgiveness after retribution.

This leaves us with something like, "if you will admit you are a sinner, God will transfer your guilt to Jesus, appeasing His wrath toward you, and then you will get to go to heaven when you die." No authentic forgiveness; no remedy for sin. Just an agreement to give you a pass in spite of your sin. That is the sum total of atonement offered up to us as PST. That's what you get when you open up your theology to dividing by zero.

Among other things, this misses entirely all the most important issues in regard to reconciliation.

See the real problem is not how to get God to reconcile to people; the problem all through the Bible is how to get people to reconcile to God. The entire history of salvation is about God working out a way to restore people to Himself, and to cleanse them of the death and defilement that separated them from Him in the first place. God did not need to be reconciled to humanity; He was the One offering reconciliation to us!

Just look at the long-standing problem of idolatry in Israel and Judah. God pleaded with them for decades to renounce their idols and return to Him. He did not need to be placated; He was already initiating reconciliation and offering forgiveness if they would just repent. Look at Psalm 51 – *“sacrifice you would not have, but a contrite heart.”* Or 2Chron.7:14 – *“If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”*

The problem that separated us from God was *sin itself*, not guilt. And God has provided a treasure trove of resources to progressively free us from sin; all of which are deeply embedded in atonement itself! That’s what the apostles all taught (which is a huge topic for another discussion).

My plea with Christian teachers everywhere is this: Please stop saying that *“God punished Jesus in our place so He could forgive us.”* It is meaningless nonsense, with no basis in reality. Yes, I know you can read it into the text. But do the homework. Learn from those who have thought this through and found an understanding of atonement that is far more effective, far more beautiful, and far more faithful to the text than PST could ever pretend.

And honestly, we have only seen here the tip of the iceberg. There is truly so much wrong with this theory, it should never have seen the light of day.