

# The Cross of Christ, Teacher's Guide

## Lesson 6: Propitiation: The Wrath-Bearer

### Romans 3:24–26

#### Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This is one of the most doctrinally weighty lessons in the study, and it must be taught with both clarity and reverence. The central truth is propitiation: at the cross, Christ bore the righteous wrath of God against sin, in our place, satisfying the just demands of God so that guilty sinners could be forgiven and declared righteous. Romans 3:24–26 stands at the heart of the letter and answers the question the first three chapters have raised: how can a just God justify the unjust without ceasing to be just? The answer is the propitiatory, substitutionary death of Christ. Do not soften this into mere example or solidarity. A real penalty was borne, real wrath was satisfied, and real justice was upheld, all provided by God himself as a gift.

Handle the wrath of God carefully, because it is widely misunderstood and easily caricatured. God's wrath is not petulance or loss of temper; it is the settled, holy opposition of a good God to all that is evil and destructive. A God indifferent to cruelty and sin would not be loving but morally hollow. The cross does not pit a wrathful Father against a loving Son, as if Jesus had to talk God into mercy. Scripture is emphatic that God himself put Christ forward and that the sending of the Son is the supreme proof of the Father's love (1 John 4:9–10). Father and Son act together; propitiation is God lovingly satisfying his own justice at his own cost.

Two further boundaries are essential. First, present substitution plainly: Christ bore the penalty of sin in our place, as Isaiah foretold and as Paul and John declare. Second, and this is critical for this lesson, present this propitiation as made for all people, never as limited to a select elect. Scripture is clear that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, that he gave himself a ransom for all, tasted death for everyone, and died for all. Reject the doctrine of limited atonement firmly but without rancor. The benefit of the atonement is received through an obedient faith, but its provision is universal; Christ died for every person, and the invitation is open to all. Aim, finally, at the heart: when students grasp that Jesus is their personal wrath-bearer, the cross moves from idea to fire, humbling them and deepening their love.

#### Question 1

##### Student Question:

*Paul says we are "justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood" (vv. 24–25). What does it mean that God himself put Christ forward as the propitiation, and why is it significant that the cross is something God provided rather than something we offered to appease him?*

## **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Begin with the astonishing subject of the sentence: God put Christ forward as a propitiation. The initiative is entirely God's. In the pagan world, propitiation meant a worshiper offering a sacrifice to appease an angry deity, working from the human side to change the god's disposition. Paul deliberately reverses this. It is not that we appease God; God himself provides the propitiation. The offended party supplies the very offering that turns away his own righteous wrath.

Help the class feel how this transforms the doctrine. Propitiation is not a frightened humanity bribing a reluctant God. It is a loving God, at his own initiative and his own cost, satisfying the demands of his own justice so that he can welcome us. The same God against whom we sinned provides the way for our sin to be dealt with. This is grace at its deepest: God meeting a debt we owed to God.

Note the phrase by his blood. The propitiation is accomplished through the death of Christ, his lifeblood poured out. This is not an abstract transaction but the real death of the Son of God. The blood language ties this lesson to redemption and to the sacrificial system; the wrath is turned away by the offering of a life, the life of the spotless Lamb.

Underline that this is given as a gift. Paul says we are justified by his grace as a gift. The propitiation is not something we contribute to, complete, or earn. It is provided whole and entire by God and received by faith. This guards the class from any notion that we help appease God by our efforts, and roots their security in what God has done, not in what they offer.

## **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Propitiation as provided by God himself, not offered by us to appease him (Romans 3:25; 1 John 4:10)
- The reversal of pagan propitiation: the offended party supplies the offering
- Propitiation accomplished by his blood, the real death of Christ
- Justification and propitiation given as a gift of grace, not earned (Romans 3:24)
- God meeting, at his own cost, a debt we owed to God

## **Discussion Prompts**

- Why is it significant that God put Christ forward, rather than us offering a sacrifice to appease him?
- How does propitiation as God's gift differ from a pagan idea of bribing an angry god?
- What does by his blood add to our understanding of how wrath is turned away?

## **Question 2**

**Student Question:**

*Many of us instinctively try to make up for our wrongs, to earn back God's favor by being good enough. How does the truth that propitiation is God's gift, not our achievement, free you from the exhausting effort of trying to appease God yourself?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-examining question takes the truth that propitiation is God's gift and applies it to the deep human instinct to atone for ourselves. Almost everyone carries some version of this: after we fail, we try to make up for it, to be extra good for a while, to earn back favor by our performance. It is exhausting, and it never quite works, because the debt is always larger than our payments.

Help students see that this instinct, however sincere, actually denies the gospel. If Christ is the propitiation, then the wrath has already been turned away; there is nothing left for us to appease. To keep trying to atone for ourselves is to act as if the cross were insufficient, as if God still needed something from us before he could accept us. The good news is that the work is finished.

Be a gentle pastor here, because this instinct often comes from a tender conscience, not laziness. The point is not that obedience does not matter, but that obedience flows from acceptance already secured, not toward an acceptance we are still trying to win. We do not obey to turn away wrath; the wrath is turned away, and so we obey out of gratitude and love.

Aim at one concrete release. Invite each student to name where they are most tempted to atone for themselves, and to practice, this week, resting in the finished propitiation of Christ instead. Freedom from the treadmill of self-atonement is one of the great gifts of this doctrine.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The finished nature of propitiation, leaving no wrath for us to appease (Hebrews 10:14)
- Self-atonement as a denial of the sufficiency of the cross
- Obedience flowing from secured acceptance, not toward unearned acceptance
- Freedom from the treadmill of trying to earn God's favor (Galatians 3:3)

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Where are you most tempted to try to make up for your wrongs and earn back God's favor?
- How does the finished work of propitiation free you from that effort?
- What would it look like to rest in Christ's finished work this week?

### **Question 3**

**Student Question:**

*Propitiation means the turning away of wrath through a sacrifice. Why must we take the wrath of God seriously as the righteous response of a holy God to sin, and how is this wrath different from human anger or mere bad temper?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This question asks the class to take the wrath of God seriously, which requires first clearing away caricatures. Human anger is often selfish, impulsive, and out of proportion, a loss of self-control. The wrath of God is none of these. It is his settled, holy, righteous opposition to sin and evil, never capricious, never excessive, always just. It is not a mood that comes over God but an expression of his unchanging holiness.

Help the class see that this wrath is actually bound up with God's goodness and love. A judge who felt nothing toward atrocity would be unfit for the bench. A parent indifferent to what destroys their child would not be loving. Precisely because God loves what is good and loves his creatures, he is rightly opposed to all that corrupts and destroys them. Remove God's wrath and you do not get a more loving God; you get an indifferent one.

Show why this matters for the cross. If there is no real wrath against sin, then the cross deals with nothing, and propitiation is meaningless. The seriousness of the wrath is the measure of the greatness of the rescue. We cannot appreciate that Christ turned away the wrath unless we believe the wrath was real and deserved.

Guard against two errors. One makes God all wrath, a stern judge with no love, which the cross flatly contradicts. The other makes God all sentiment, with no holiness or justice, which empties the cross of meaning. The biblical God is perfectly holy and perfectly loving at once, and the cross is where both are fully displayed.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The wrath of God as his settled, righteous opposition to sin, not human temper (Romans 1:18)
- Wrath as bound up with God's goodness and love, not opposed to it
- The reality of wrath as the measure of the greatness of the rescue
- Holding God's holiness and love together, against caricatures of either
- Propitiation as meaningless without real wrath against sin

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How is the wrath of God different from human anger or bad temper?
- Why would removing God's wrath against evil make him less loving, not more?
- Why does propitiation lose all meaning if there is no real wrath against sin?

### **Question 4**

**Student Question:**

*Where have you been tempted to think of your sin as no big deal, something God should simply overlook? How does seeing that your sin deserved real judgment, judgment Christ then bore, change the way you regard both your sin and your Savior?*

**Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-focused question presses against the common tendency to minimize our own sin, to treat it as a small matter God should simply overlook. We readily excuse in ourselves what we condemn in others; we tell ourselves our sins are understandable, minor, not worth much concern. The cross confronts that minimizing directly.

Help students reason from the cross back to the seriousness of sin. If our sin were truly trivial, the propitiation would have been unnecessary; God could have waved it away. But he did not. He dealt with it at the cost of his Son's death under his own wrath. The measure of how seriously God takes sin is the cross itself. We learn the weight of our sin by looking at what it cost to remove.

Show how this changes our regard for both sin and Savior. Seeing that our sin deserved real judgment deepens our hatred of it; we cannot keep treating lightly what cost Christ so much. And seeing that he bore that judgment for us deepens our love for him; the one who took our wrath becomes unspeakably precious. A small view of sin produces a small view of the cross; a true view of sin makes the Savior glorious.

Aim at honest reckoning. Invite each student to name a sin they have been minimizing, and to look at it in the light of the cross. The goal is not to wallow in shame but to come to a truer estimate, one that both grieves the sin and treasures the Savior who bore its penalty.

**Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- The seriousness of sin revealed by the cost of removing it (1 Peter 1:18–19)
- The danger of minimizing our own sin while condemning it in others (Matthew 7:3–5)
- A true view of sin deepening both hatred of sin and love for the Savior
- The cross as the true measure of the weight of sin

**Discussion Prompts**

- Where have you been treating your sin as no big deal?
- How does the cost of the cross change your estimate of that sin?
- How does seeing your sin truly deepen your love for the Savior who bore it?

**Question 5****Student Question:**

*Paul says God put Christ forward as a propitiation “to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (v. 25). Why could God not simply forgive sin by ignoring it, and how does the cross uphold God’s justice rather than setting it aside?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Paul now explains why the cross was necessary by pointing to God’s righteousness. God put Christ forward as a propitiation to show his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had passed over former sins. In the long ages before the cross, God had been patient, not immediately punishing every sin. But this patience raised a question about his justice: was God simply letting sin slide? Could a righteous God do that and remain righteous?

Help the class grasp the dilemma. A judge who repeatedly let crimes go unpunished would rightly be called unjust, however kind his motives. God’s forbearance, his passing over of sins, seemed to put his justice in question. The cross answers the question. At Calvary, God demonstrated that he had not been ignoring sin at all; he was holding it, as it were, until it could be justly dealt with in the death of his Son.

Make the central point clear: God could not simply forgive sin by ignoring it, because that would compromise his justice and make him complicit with evil. Sin must be dealt with, not swept under the rug. The cross is how God forgives without ceasing to be just. The penalty is not waived; it is paid. Justice is not set aside; it is satisfied. Mercy reaches us through, not around, the demands of justice.

Draw out the comfort and the seriousness together. It is comforting that our forgiveness rests on justice satisfied, not on God pretending; this is a forgiveness that can never be reopened, because the price is fully paid. And it is sobering that sin is so serious it could not simply be overlooked even by a God eager to forgive. The cross is the place where God’s commitment to justice and his desire to save are both fully honored.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God’s righteousness upheld, not set aside, at the cross (Romans 3:25)
- Why God cannot justly forgive sin by simply ignoring it
- The cross as the satisfaction of justice, the penalty paid rather than waived
- God’s forbearance over former sins vindicated by the death of Christ
- Mercy reaching us through the demands of justice, not around them

### **Discussion Prompts**

- Why could God not simply forgive sin by overlooking it?
- How does the cross uphold God’s justice rather than set it aside?
- Why is a forgiveness grounded in justice satisfied more secure than one based on God pretending?

## Question 6

### Student Question:

*Think of a time you were wronged and someone simply said “forget it” as if nothing had happened. Why does true forgiveness actually require that the wrong be taken seriously and dealt with, and how does the cross show us a forgiveness that is both costly and just?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question illuminates the doctrine through everyday experience of being wronged. When someone hurts us deeply and another person says merely forget it, as if nothing happened, it often feels not like forgiveness but like injustice, a denial that the wrong mattered. Real forgiveness does not pretend the wrong was nothing; it faces the wrong honestly and chooses to bear its cost rather than exact repayment.

Use this to illuminate the cross. God does not forgive by pretending our sin was nothing. He takes it with full seriousness, and then bears its cost himself in the person of his Son. This is forgiveness that is both costly and just: costly, because someone truly pays; just, because the wrong is genuinely dealt with rather than ignored. The cross is the deepest example of forgiveness that honors the weight of the wrong.

Help students apply this to their own forgiving. Biblical forgiveness is not denial or minimizing; it is absorbing the cost of a wrong rather than demanding repayment, releasing the debt to God who judges justly. Understanding the cross teaches us how to forgive truly, neither pretending the hurt was small nor holding it forever against the one who caused it.

Aim at one concrete connection. Invite each student to consider a wrong they have struggled to forgive, and to see in the cross both the model and the power for a forgiveness that is honest about the hurt yet free of vengeance. The God who forgave us at such cost enables us to extend a costly forgiveness to others.

### Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- True forgiveness taking the wrong seriously rather than pretending (Ephesians 4:32)
- The cross as forgiveness that is both costly and just
- Forgiveness as absorbing the cost of a wrong rather than demanding repayment
- Understanding the cross as the model and power for forgiving others

### Discussion Prompts

- Why does true forgiveness require taking the wrong seriously rather than ignoring it?
- How does the cross show a forgiveness that is both costly and just?
- How might the cross help you forgive a wrong you have struggled to release?

## Question 7

**Student Question:**

*Paul says the cross shows that God is “just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v. 26). How does the cross allow God to remain perfectly just while also declaring guilty sinners righteous, and why is it crucial that God does not have to choose between his justice and his mercy?*

**Commentary and Teaching Notes**

Paul reaches the climax: the cross shows that God is just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. This is the heart of the matter and one of the most profound statements in Scripture. The great problem was how God could be both, how he could remain perfectly just, refusing to clear the guilty, and yet justify guilty sinners, declaring them righteous. At the cross, both are fully true at once.

Explain how the cross resolves what seemed impossible. God remains just because the penalty for sin is fully paid in the death of Christ; he does not pretend sin away or lower his standard. And God becomes the justifier of sinners because that paid penalty is credited to those who have faith in Jesus; their sin was borne by their substitute, so they can be justly declared righteous. Justice and mercy do not compromise each other; they meet and embrace at the cross.

Stress why it is crucial that God does not have to choose between his justice and his mercy. A God who set aside justice to be merciful would be untrustworthy and morally compromised. A God who insisted on justice without mercy would leave us all condemned. The glory of the cross is that God is fully just and fully merciful in the same act. He upholds his righteousness and saves the unrighteous, all in the death of his Son.

Note the phrase the one who has faith in Jesus, which marks how the benefit is received. The propitiation is applied to those who trust Christ. In keeping with the whole New Testament, this faith is not bare mental assent but a living, obedient trust that lays hold of Christ, the faith that hears, believes, repents, confesses, and is baptized into him. Justice satisfied at the cross becomes our justification as we come to Christ in that obedient faith.

**Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- God as both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Jesus (Romans 3:26)
- Justice satisfied by the penalty fully paid in Christ's death
- Justification grounded in the substitute's payment credited to the believer
- God not forced to choose between justice and mercy; both meet at the cross
- The benefit received through an obedient, living faith, not bare assent (Romans 1:5)

**Discussion Prompts**

- How does the cross let God remain just while justifying guilty sinners?

- Why is it crucial that God does not have to choose between justice and mercy?
- What does it mean that the propitiation is received by faith in Jesus?

## **Question 8**

### **Student Question:**

*If God dealt with your sin so seriously that it required the death of his Son, how should that shape both your hatred of sin and your confidence that you are truly and fully forgiven? Where do you most need each of those truths right now?*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

This self-focused question draws two practical truths from the seriousness of propitiation, and students need both held together. The first is a deepened hatred of sin. If God dealt with our sin so seriously that it required the death of his Son under his own wrath, we cannot go on treating sin casually. The cross is the death of cheap views of sin. To love the Savior is to hate what cost him so much.

The second truth is a deepened confidence in our forgiveness. The same cost that reveals the seriousness of sin guarantees the completeness of its removal. Because the penalty was fully paid, our forgiveness is full and secure; there is no remaining wrath for those in Christ. Many believers grasp the first truth and miss the second, living under a vague dread that God is still against them. Paul says the wrath has been turned away.

Help students see that these two truths protect each other. Confidence in forgiveness without a serious view of sin breeds carelessness and presumption. A serious view of sin without confidence in forgiveness breeds despair and bondage. Together they produce the healthy Christian heart: one that grieves sin deeply and rests in grace fully, that hates sin and yet is unafraid of God.

Aim at honest self-knowledge. Invite each student to discern which truth they most need right now. Some need to recover a serious view of sin they have let grow casual. Others need to receive the assurance of forgiveness they have never quite believed. The cross supplies both, and the mature believer holds them together.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- A deepened hatred of sin flowing from the cost of the cross (Romans 6:1-2)
- Full confidence in forgiveness grounded in the penalty fully paid (Romans 8:1)
- The mutual protection of a serious view of sin and assurance of grace
- The healthy Christian heart: grieving sin deeply and resting in grace fully

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How should the cost of the cross shape your attitude toward sin?

- How does the same cost assure you that you are truly and fully forgiven?
- Which truth do you most need right now, a more serious view of sin or fuller assurance of forgiveness?

## Question 9

### Student Question:

*Scripture says Christ is “the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2), and that he “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Timothy 2:6). Explain how the cross is a real substitution in which Christ bore the penalty of sin in our place and satisfied the righteous demands of God, and why this propitiation was offered for all people and not only for a select few. How does this guard us against both a sentimental cross that deals with no real penalty and a narrow cross offered to only a chosen elect?*

### Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, and it must accomplish two things: establish substitution clearly and establish the universal scope of the atonement firmly. Take them in order. First, substitution. The cross is a real exchange in which Christ bore the penalty of sin in our place. He did not merely sympathize with sinners or set a noble example; he stood where we stood, under the judgment we deserved, and bore it. Paul says God made him to be sin for us; Isaiah says the chastisement that brought us peace was upon him; Peter says he bore our sins in his body. The penalty was ours; Christ took it. This is the meaning of propitiation: the wrath that should have fallen on us fell on him, and so it is turned away from us.

Guard this against two reductions. Some, uncomfortable with the idea of penalty, reduce the cross to mere example or solidarity, a demonstration of love that pays no actual debt. But a cross that deals with no real penalty leaves our deepest problem, the wrath of God against sin, untouched, and empties the very word propitiation. The New Testament will not allow this. Something objective happened: a penalty was paid, justice was satisfied, wrath was turned away.

Second, and crucial for this lesson, the scope of the atonement is universal. John says plainly that Christ is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. Paul says Christ gave himself a ransom for all. Hebrews says he tasted death for everyone. Paul says one died for all. Present this clearly and firmly: Christ died for every human being, not for a select, predetermined elect from whom others are excluded by divine decree. Reject the doctrine of limited atonement. The provision of the cross is for all; God is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.

Hold provision and reception together so the class is not confused. The atonement is provided for all, but its benefit is received through an obedient faith. That Christ died for every person does not mean every person is automatically saved; it means the offer is genuine and open to

all, and each must come to Christ in the obedience of faith to receive what was purchased. This is the consistent teaching of the New Testament: a universal provision and a personal reception. It magnifies both the breadth of God's love and the reality of human responsibility.

Now name the two dangers the class must avoid, because this single truth guards against both. On one side is a sentimental cross that deals with no real penalty, a cross emptied of propitiation, which cannot save because it never addresses the wrath our sin deserved. On the other side is a narrow cross offered only to a chosen few, which slanders the love of God and contradicts the plain testimony of Scripture that Christ is the propitiation for the whole world. The biblical cross is neither. It is a real propitiation, bearing a real penalty, offered for all people, and received by an obedient faith. Hold all of that together, and the gospel stands in its full glory.

Let the wonder land. The Son of God stood in the place of every sinner, bore the wrath that all deserved, and now offers that finished propitiation freely to the whole world. There is no one for whom Christ did not die, and no one who comes to him in faith whom he will turn away. This is the breadth and depth of the love of God at the cross.

### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Substitution: Christ bore the penalty of sin in our place and satisfied God's righteous demands (2 Corinthians 5:21; Isaiah 53:5)
- Propitiation as the turning away of real wrath, against reducing the cross to mere example
- The universal scope of the atonement: Christ died for all (1 John 2:2; 1 Timothy 2:6; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Corinthians 5:14–15)
- Firm rejection of limited atonement and unconditional election to a select elect
- Universal provision received through an obedient, personal faith (Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38)
- Avoiding both the sentimental cross with no penalty and the narrow cross for only a few

### **Discussion Prompts**

- How is the cross a real substitution in which Christ bore the penalty in our place?
- Why must we affirm that Christ died for all people and not only for a chosen few?
- How do we hold together a universal provision and a reception through obedient faith?

### **Question 10**

#### **Student Question:**

*Look back across Romans 3:24–26 as a whole, where justice and mercy meet at the cross and Christ bears the wrath we deserved. Name one specific way that knowing Jesus is your wrath-bearer is deepening your love and gratitude, and one concrete way you will respond to him this week.*

### **Commentary and Teaching Notes**

The capstone question gathers the lesson and calls for a personal response. Remind the class of what they have seen: a holy God whose justice could not simply ignore sin, a loving God who provided the propitiation himself, a Savior who bore the wrath our sin deserved, a justice satisfied so that God is both just and the justifier, and an atonement real in its penalty and universal in its scope.

Invite each student to name one specific way that knowing Jesus is their personal wrath-bearer is deepening their love and gratitude. For one it may be relief that the wrath is truly turned away; for another, a new seriousness about sin; for another, fresh wonder that God met his own justice at his own cost to save them.

Then ask for one concrete response to Christ this week, whether deeper worship, renewed turning from sin, or resting in the assurance that there is now no condemnation for those in him. End by looking ahead: having seen what the cross accomplished Godward, in turning away wrath, the next lesson turns to what it accomplishes between us and God, in the great word reconciliation, by which enemies are brought near and made friends.

#### **Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues**

- Christ the wrath-bearer as the ground of our deepest gratitude
- Worship and renewed holiness as the response to propitiation
- Assurance of no condemnation for those in Christ (Romans 8:1)
- Love for the Savior flowing from grasping the cross personally

#### **Discussion Prompts**

- How is knowing Jesus is your wrath-bearer deepening your love and gratitude?
- Which truth from this lesson struck you most powerfully, and why?
- What is one concrete way you will respond to Christ this week?