

**The Repentance Substitute**  
**Judges 2:11-22, Matt 3:5-17**

Friends, perhaps you've seen that "everyday stuntman" commercial on TV. When people can't do "everyday" tasks because of back pain, the "everyday stuntman" jumps in as their stunt double and does things like mow the lawn, pick up the paper etc...

The point the commercial is making that when you have lower back pain – you are unable to do even the little things.

And this commercial is kind of funny and ironic because stunt doubles take the place of actors in order to do all the hard and dangerous stunt work in action movies, not the everyday mundane things.

And we have a tendency to think about Jesus in the same way.

We need Jesus when it comes to the hard times in life, the trying times, the big screw ups, when all else has failed. We

need him to step in and do for us what we can't do ourselves – we need him when we need that miracle!

And of course when the Easter season comes around, and we celebrate the death and resurrection of Christ we tend to celebrate it as the ultimate occurrence of Jesus stepping in for us.

He offered his life for us on the cross, he paid the debt for our sins, he went through death and hell for us – He is our ultimate substitute because we could never go through all that is truly required to make things right with God...

But friends, the truth is that Jesus is our substitute for far more than a few days out of the year over the Easter time.

The truth is that Jesus is our everyday substitute, he is our everyday stuntman because while the whole problem of our sin is indeed serious enough to require his death on the cross...

as our series on the seven deadly sins has shown us, our sin twists and warps and touches everything we do on a day to day basis – kind of like back pain, so that all the normal things we do are affected, and thus we need Jesus as our everyday stunt double.

As the Apostle Paul says in Gal 2:20 *“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God...”*

And friends, what is “the life we live in the body...” if not our everyday, normal life.

Friends this Easter we will celebrate that most significant occasion of Christ’s substitution for us, but our goal in doing so is that we come away realizing the significance of how Christ is in fact our everyday substitute – and that our faith and trust will be built up in Him because of this.

Now one of the regular occurrences in our normal everyday lives as Christians is that we seek God’s forgiveness for what we’ve done wrong... correct?

Each day we take time to pray and do this – maybe it’s in the morning when you get up, maybe you do it when you give thanks for your food, maybe you pray before you go to bed at night - but we pray and we ask God to forgive us of our sins.

And we do this because the promise is given to us in scripture in 1 John 1:9 that *“If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”*

And so on a day to day basis we confess, we ask for forgiveness, and we do our best to turn away from what we’ve done wrong.

But friends, have we ever considered that Sin can affect our confession of Sin?

In other words if we were to examine our motives for confession and asking for forgiveness what would we discover? Well, we might find that we only confess because we wish to avoid the consequences of wrong doing?

“Lord, please forgive me for speeding home after work... I know it was wrong and I’m sorry – so please don’t let get a speeding ticket in the mail from that traffic camera I saw flash in my rearview mirror.”

Or maybe a bit more serious – “Lord I don’t want to go to hell, please forgive me for all I’ve done wrong....”

Or we might discover that we are motivated to confess because it relieves our guilty feelings.

When we’ve done something wrong and our conscience is plagued with guilt over it, we feel ashamed about it, so we say a prayer to God and ask to be forgiven and the wrong we’ve done can be forgotten about – like a Mr. Clean Magic Eraser, our conscience is cleared.

Friends, instinctively we know that there’s something not quite right about confessing like this, even if we have the best of intentions. That’s because sin can affect our confession of Sin.

This certainly was the case for God’s chosen people as well. Judges 2 outlines this cycle of sin and sinful repentance.

Israel would break their covenant with God by worshiping the gods of the nations around them, the consequence for unfaithfulness under the terms of that covenant meant that God would then allow them to fall into the hands of their enemies.

Their enemies would oppress them, life was cruel and hard – they would then cry out to God for help, He would hear their cries, and show merciful and send a Judge, someone to deliver Israel...

Under their leadership the people would be freed from oppression and would turn back to worshiping God – but as

soon as that Judge died... they would go right back to their old habits and worship the gods of the nations around them – and the whole cycle would repeat itself.

In the end they only had repented because it was in their best interests to do so, to get out of suffering... its self-interested repentance – and that’s precisely the same motive that John the Baptist discerns in the religious leaders who come to be baptized by him.

He could see that these Pharisees and Sadducees weren’t genuinely remorseful or convicted that they were guilty of anything; they were just trying to make sure they had all their bases covered in case they had missed something.

Because even though they had stringently observed the Letter of the Mosaic Law, and while they could claim their lineage as descendants of Abraham, they felt that it was be good idea to get some “baptism of repentance” just in case they needed some extra fire insurance to cover them come judgment day.

But John says “no way!” God is not going to put up with self-interested repentance anymore.

Under the terms of the Covenant God had been more than patient and lenient, giving warnings and second chances for hundreds of years, even bringing his people back out of exile, and settling them in their homeland again.

But now it’s plain to see that “the fruit of repentance”- a changed heart and a changed attitude and a changed lifestyle towards God - is not being produced in the lives of His people, or in their leaders.

So God had sent John the Baptist to announce the coming of the judgment of the Messiah.

And John had anticipated that the arrival of Jesus would mean the demise of all those whose repentance was not genuine *“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”* (vs. 10)

The Messiah was coming to Judge, and all those who weren't truly sorry for their sins would not receive the forgiveness they figured was theirs by rights or by ritual.

And friends, John the Baptist's warning is good for us to listen to also

– not only because we live in a society which mistakenly believes that if there is a God, he has to be a nice guy who will understand that we've tried our hardest to be good and so he'll forgive us–

But also because it gives us pause to consider if we've become complacent about our repentance. Maybe we too have drifted into that territory where we expect to be forgiven by rights or ritual...

Maybe for the first time we might begin to question if our repentance was genuine enough or sincere enough to warrant God's forgiveness for our wrong doing or.... will we be indicted for "Crocodile Tears" as well?

So it is a good thing to pay attention to this warning friends... but while it may be the occasion for sober self-examination, it is not the cause for us to despair or doubt that God might not forgive us.

Because there is an everyday stuntman, an everyday substitute who steps in and repents on our behalf, and this warning only serves to make us aware that we need him.

So after John delivers his warning to the religious leaders of Israel... Jesus shows up – the Messiah who was coming to judge the sincerity and quality of repentance shows up and requests that John baptize Him.

I do feel sorry for poor old JB. This all happened so fast his head must have been spinning.

One minute he is thundering against false repentance, and then the messiah, the one who has no sin to repent of is requesting His baptism for repentance? What was going on?

John didn't realize that Jesus was coming in as a repentance substitute.

Friends, the truth is that only someone who is without sin could fully know how offensive sin is to God, and be motivated to call it out for what it is, and be sorrowful for it without any hint of self-interest.

We can't do this... but Jesus can!

The truth is that even our best and most sincere confessions of our sins are not righteous enough to be the kind of faithful response God requires from his covenant partners.

And by offering himself as the repentance substitute Jesus does indeed judge the quality of repentance that had been going on, and proclaims it unacceptable - judgment does occur...

But by receiving John's baptism Jesus' judgment becomes a means of grace, as He explains to John "it fulfills ALL

righteousness" – that is He repents as a substitute for each and every person who has ever asked God to forgive then for what they've done wrong.

He offers his perfect repentance... in place of the repentance where we ask forgiveness out of the fear of consequences, when we assume God has to forgive us, for presuming he is obligated to forgive us – for asking forgiveness knowing you'll simply do it again...

Jesus receives John's baptism of repentance so He can be the substitute! For all of Israel, for you for me... and for anyone who will believe that He is their substitute.

And God accepts this substitute repentance as a the faithful covenant response that is required from Israel and from us... because after Jesus comes up out of the water the heavens open up, the Holy Spirit descends upon Jesus, and God the Father proclaims "This is my Son whom I love, with him I am well pleased"

Jesus repentance was perfect. That's why the Apostle Paul can say "there is no condemnation for those who are IN Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1)

Just as some parents live vicariously through the accomplishments of their children – we live vicariously through our relationship with Jesus Christ – we repent in Jesus Christ.

So if Jesus is the one who repents on our behalf, then we need to become connected to him; we need to participate in what He has done and this happens through the work of the Holy Spirit in a number of ways.

But because Jesus became our "repentance substitute" by receiving John's baptism, I want to highlight how we become connected to Jesus as our substitute, through Christian Baptism.

As you may know the word baptism literally means "to be immersed." And through the power of the Holy Spirit we are

immersed in Christ, into all he is, and all he has done, and thus He stands in substitution for us.

Kind of puts that biblical phrase "repent and be baptized" in a whole new light doesn't it?

You see we often tend to think that Christian baptism is primarily a baptism of repentance, and therefore we wonder how we can apply it to babies or children who can't understand what they've done wrong and really be sorry for it.

But Christian Baptism is first and foremost an immersion of someone into Christ – it is Christ becoming our repentance substitute, our everyday substitute.

The power and effectiveness of Christian Baptism does not come from our cognition or apprehension of it but from the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is a sensorial means through which the Spirit helps us experience the spiritual reality that Christ is our substitute – our everyday substitute... our repentance substitute... so that our faith in Him can grow.

Friends the end result is that we can have a complete confidence and assurance that when we confess our sins - that in spite of our sin – God hears a perfect confession through Jesus Christ...

And we see one more way in which our life is in Christ, and thus His life is growing in us.

Friends – I don't want to talk about this anymore. Instead I want to ask the band to come back up and lead us in a song about Baptism...

And as we're singing about Baptism, I want to invite you to come and affirm your Baptism...

We have a bowl of water here this morning with some shells in it, come dip your hand in the water as a symbolic act that you have been immersed in Jesus Christ and He is your repentance substitute.

If you have not been baptized - I invite you to come and dip your hand in the water as a statement that you are ready to receive that immersion in Christ and then come talk to me afterwards and we can make arrangements to baptize you and celebrate that.

Friends – Jesus is our substitute.... let it be so, because He has fulfilled all righteousness!