

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 or stuntwoman" jumps in as their stunt double and does things like mow the lawn, take the turkey out of the oven, 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 in reality stunt doubles are used in the difficult and dangerous scenes in action movies, not for the everyday mundane things... like going bowling.

And friends the truth is that we tend to think about Jesus in the same way.

We know 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. And eventually each of us comes to that point in our lives when we realize that on our own we can't overcome the effect of sin in our lives.

That we can't make up for what we've done wrong and we need Jesus to step in and do it for us and that's what happened on the cross.

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

But friends, the truth is that we need Jesus as our substitute for much more than the cross and the grave.

We need Jesus as our everyday substitute, as our everyday stuntman!

Because while the whole problem of our sin is indeed serious enough to require Christ's death on the cross...

The nature of sin is such that it warps and twists and touches everything we do on an everyday basis – kind of like back pain.

So all the everyday things we do are affected by sin, 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 normal, everyday life.

Now one of the regular occurrences in our normal everyday lives is to seek forgiveness when we've done something wrong.

We apologize to others when we hurt them, we say sorry when we arrive late for work, and if you are a Christian you also seek God's forgiveness for what you've done wrong... correct?

Christians take time to pray on a daily basis 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 this promise is given to us in scripture in 1 John 1:9 we it says that *"If we confess our sins, he [God] is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."*

That's great news and I hope that we are turning to Christ on a daily basis to confess our sins and receive forgiveness.

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 don’t let me lose my job because I got drunk at the office party and said some stupid things to my boss!”

Or we want to avoid the ultimate consequences of sin “Lord I don’t want to go to hell, please forgive me for all I’ve done wrong....”

Or perhaps 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.

And we instinctively know that something is not quite right about confessing in this way, but if truth be told we’re all guilty to some degree of confessing in this way.

And that’s because sin... can affect our confession of Sin. Irony isn’t it.

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 worshipping 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 it becomes apparent that Israel had only 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 Mosaic 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 obviously forgives us on the merits of our good intentions...

But also because it gives us pause to consider if we've become complacent about our repentance. Maybe we have also 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 actually forgive us.

Here's the good news!

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

So after John delivers the 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.

Now I have to say that I feel a bit sorry for John here. It all happened so fast that his head must have been spinning.

One minute he is thundering against false repentance and warning the Pharisees about the judgment of the Messiah...

And then the Messiah, the one who has no sin to repent of - is requesting John's baptism of repentance?

What was going on?

What John didn't realize is that while Jesus is the judge, He was also coming as a repentance substitute.

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

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

Friends the truth is that even **our best and most sincere confessions of sin are not free from self-interest** to be the kind of faithful response God that requires from his covenant partners.

Even if we think they are...

So 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 on repentance becomes a means of grace.

As He explains to John "it fulfills ALL righteousness!"

Jesus repents as a substitute for each and every person who has ever asked or will ask 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 that God has to forgive us, or for presuming he is obligated to forgive us – or for asking forgiveness knowing you intend to 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.

Friends are you hearing this, are you understanding this?

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.

And because Jesus became our “repentance substitute” by receiving John’s baptism, I want to highlight how the Holy Spirit connects us 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 – even in repentance.

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 or have truly repented of it.

But **Christian Baptism is first and foremost an immersion of someone into Jesus Christ** and all He has done. It is Jesus Christ becoming our repentance substitute, our everyday substitute.

The power and effectiveness of Christian Baptism does not come from our repentance or our confession or our cognition or our comprehension of the sacrament but from the power of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism 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 and confident assurance that when we confess our sins - in spite of how our sin might affect that – God hears a perfect confession through Jesus Christ... and this is why we are forgiven!

So friends this is what we are celebrating today as we have administered the sign of Baptism in the service.

Baptism is given to assure us that **our life is in Christ, and His life is growing in us,** and that He is our everyday substitute.

Yes we need Jesus for the big things in life – the trying times, the hard times, the big screw ups and the catastrophes...

But the truth is we need Jesus just as much – if not more... in what we think are the little things, the everyday things.

And that's what Baptism is about friends – being immersed in Jesus, having Jesus poured out upon us, so that all of our life, our everyday life is lived through Him by the power of the Holy Spirit.

So friends – this morning I want to invite you to affirm that Jesus is your everyday substitute, that you need Jesus as your everyday substitute by affirming your baptism in Him.

First I'm going to ask the band to come up at this point to lead us in singing "Christ is Enough" so we proclaim Christ as our substitute with our words.

And as we are affirming our faith in Christ in song, I invite you to put that faith into action.

If you would like, you can come and dip your hand in the water as a symbolic act to affirm your Baptism, or your desire to be baptized into Jesus Christ if you've not been baptized yet.

Friends, hear the good the news "For those who are IN Christ Jesus there is NO condemnation!" **So repent though Jesus... and be baptized in Him.**

Amen.