

Millions of people play an online game called Words with Friends. My wife is one of them, she may even be playing with some of you, although I hope no one is playing right now. For many the game used to be played on an actual board and it was called Scrabble. Players take turns placing words on the board using only the letters they've been dealt. Each letter has a point value and the idea is to make words with the highest number of points. Looking at the words my wife plays I might think a game involving words would be educational. But some words don't even look like words.

I think the Apostle Paul was scholarly enough he could've dominated Words with Friends. If only he had an iPhone. His letter to the Romans is said to be one of the most doctrinal books in the Bible. Within its chapters you can find almost every major doctrine and teaching that God wants you to know and believe. Over the next couple of weeks we're going to search through and pick out some of those words and apply their meaning to our lives. It won't be much of a game but I'll call it Words of Romans.

Last week we heard about how God created the entire universe with just words. **"Let there be light"** and there was. His power was fully on display. So was his knowledge, his wisdom, and everything else about God in all his glory. And God didn't just create the earth. He still preserves it to this day. Why anyone would be separated from this all knowing, all powerful God is a question without an answer.

Yet we are. Human beings are separated from God naturally. The law does it. The law with its do this and don't do that. The law with its telling us how far we can go and no further. The law when it is fully applied reminds us of just how guilty we are. We're accountable for everything we do and have done in the past. **"There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."** It doesn't matter what nation, race, culture, or gender you are. Everyone is the same under God. All are sinners. You're a sinner who has fallen short of God's expectations. The law of God tells you not to lie, and you have. The law of God tells you do not lust, and you have. The law of God tells you to be perfect in everything always, and you haven't. In your thoughts, words, and actions you can't escape sin or condemnation. You're not "at one" with God.

Sin stands between human beings and God, and has ever since Adam and Eve. Without sin being removed God and human beings can have nothing to do with each other. But that's not what God wanted. Already in the Old Testament every year, only once a year, the High Priest would make preparations to go into the most holy place. It was the inner most part of the temple, separated from everything else by a thick heavy curtain. It was dark and no one ever saw inside. A perfect God dwelled among his sinful people inside. But once a year on the Day of Atonement the high priest entered with the blood of animals to atone for the sins of the people. This blood showed and reminded the people that blood had to be shed to atone for their sins before God. The blood of those animals looked forward to another sacrifice that would atone for their sins and make them "at one" with God.

To understand where Paul goes in the second lesson, to understand the word we focus on today, we must start with an understanding that none of us are "at one" with God. You and I are completely at odds with God naturally. I realize it isn't pleasant. Paul understood that too. But to understand the word of Romans that stands at the center of this section we must start with our separation from God.

As Paul pivots it's important to remember the group of people Paul said were not "at one" with God because they sinned and had fallen short of his glory, that same group includes you, me, and all people. Instead of you and I being lost and destined only for hell's punishment apart from God, there's a way to escape. It isn't something we can do. It isn't some hoops to jump through or contracts to fill out. It doesn't cost money and it isn't something you can search for and find alone. **"But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known to which the Law and the prophets testify."** This righteousness from God applies to the same group of people that have to call themselves sinners. **"There is no difference, for all have sinned...and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."** The main message of the Bible is universal righteousness through Christ. Free. Gift. No works, no action on our part. God gives it to all people in Christ as a gift so that we're right with him. God makes us "at one" with himself through Christ.

The blood of the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament always pointed the people ahead to an even greater sacrifice that needed to be made. In fact you can't talk about being set right with God, about being declared justified, essentially declared not guilty before God and saved from all your sins without also talking about how it happened. How it happened is most important. The only place in all of human history where it is possible to believe that every single sin is punished as God requires and also every single sin is forgiven is the cross of Christ. **"God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."** There in that moment in time Christ carried all sins as punishment. Jesus was atoning before God for all the sins of all people of all the world. He was atoning for your sins. All your lies, cheating, lusting, and imperfection, all of it was atoned for on the cross. And there in that moment in that sacrifice God was forgiving every single sin of every single person because Christ was paying for them all.

It was a sacrifice of atonement. It brought us back to being "at one" with God again. Jesus offered himself as the sacrifice of atonement so all your sins would be punished in Christ and forgiven in you. The reality is that all of our sins have been paid for and are freely taken away from us as a gift. God forgave all sins of all people including you and me in Christ Jesus. His is the blood of a better sacrifice, a sacrifice that can actually atone for sins. He made a sacrifice of atonement once and for all. His atonement was strong enough and precious enough to pay for all sins for all people and never have to be made again. You and I are once again "at one", atoned for before God.

Since Jesus atoned for our sins to make us “at one” with God we can be sure that nothing is left out. No one is left out. Every last sin you and I commit is wiped out in the cross of Christ, in his atonement. We don’t shed our blood, Christ shed his blood for us. We don’t hold on to our guilt from past sins because Jesus declared us not guilty. There is nothing left to pay. Nothing left unaccounted for before God. Jesus is our atonement, how we are made “at one” with God.

Atonement is probably not a word you use very often. In Words with Friends the base value would be 14 points, not great. But what makes atonement, today’s word of Romans, so special for us is how the Bible uses it to describe what Jesus did. Atonement is what he did on the cross. He is our atonement. Jesus is the sacrifice that takes away our sins and pays the penalty for all of those sins before God. Jesus is our atonement. He satisfied every demand that God had for the sins of the world. He satisfied the demand that someone suffer for those sins and shed blood. Jesus shed his blood for you and me. Jesus is our atonement. He is the one place God’s justice and God’s mercy make sense. God remains completely just because all sins get paid for in Christ. God remains completely merciful because in Christ all are forgiven.

There’s a reason for the air quotes at certain times today. I hope it helps you to lock in this word of Romans. Picture “at one” in your mind. Two words separate from each other. Now push them together and you get atone. Split atone but bring it back together to remind you what Jesus did for you. You were separated from God by your sin. Jesus is your atonement. By his work on the cross, his atonement, Jesus makes us “at one” with God again.