

Doctrine Of The Atonement

May 31, 2009 – Pastor Ronnie Wolfe

Matthew 20:28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.

The doctrine of the Atonement is a doctrine over which many people are divided. Some teach that the atonement was general in the sense that Jesus died for the sins of all men to make it possible for anyone who trusts Jesus Christ to be saved. Others say that the atonement of Christ (his price paid for our sins on the cross) was paid only for those who would believe and trust in Jesus Christ. I pray that, when this message is finished, you will have a biblical understanding of the atonement and believe it in a way that will bring glory to God.

The differences in opinion in this doctrine come from whether the atonement is based upon God's love or upon his holiness and righteousness. If we say that it is based on his love only, then we will not see importance in its being done to meet the par of God in every way. If atonement is based upon the holiness of God, then it is a propitiation, a satisfaction, to God's justice and his righteousness, and is not this what God is all about?

God is a completely holy God, and before his love can be shown and his compassion can be expressed in a complete way, his holiness must be met. So, Christ did not die for our sins just because he loved us, but because he was required to meet the holiness of God. Jesus was pleasing God, not man, when he died on the cross. He was paying a penalty for sin that God demanded, not that man demanded or that Satan demanded. God did not owe Satan anything, so he did not pay Satan for sins; he paid God to satisfy his holiness and his righteousness.

Romans 8:3 will give us a clearer definition of the atonement. It says, Romans 8:3 *For what*

the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: In the beginning of the creation, God and man were in perfect cooperation and coordination. There was nothing to separate them. But when man sinned, there was a wall between God and man. This wall was sin, and sin separated man from the complete holiness and righteousness of God. Like Humpty Dumpty, man had fallen and was broken, and all the king's horses and all the king's men could not put Humpty Dumpty together again.

So now we see two aspects of the atonement of Jesus Christ. First, we see the supreme holiness of God, never changing, never weakening, always remaining the same. Second, we see man's terrible sin against an eternal God, which makes man's punishment for sin eternal. If only one sin were committed against God, it would take a man an eternity to pay for that sin; because it is a sin against an eternal God. All the repentance in the world and all the reformation in the world will not make God's righteousness and man's righteousness meet. God's righteousness must be perfect.

On the first point, we see God's supremacy. He is a great God. He is perfect holiness, and no man and no god can be compared to him. Isaiah 45:5 *I am the LORD, and there is none else, [there is] no God beside me: I girded thee, though thou hast not known me:* In order for man to be reconciled to God, he must come into agreement with God's perfect holiness. He cannot simply change his mind or change his ways. God's holiness is too high for us to reach. 1 Timothy 6:16 *Who only hath immortality, dwelling in the light which no man can approach unto; whom no man hath seen, nor can see: to whom [be] honour and power everlasting. Amen.* We cannot approach God, because he is too holy for us. His wisdom is greater than ours. His power is

greater than ours. His love is greater than ours. We cannot know him enough for reconciliation. We cannot understand him enough for reconciliation. We cannot bring ourselves to him; we are weak in ourselves. We are totally depraved.

So, whatever God demands for salvation, that is what must be done. God does not demand that we become better people for salvation. He does not even require that we have a better attitude or reverse all of our past sins. The demand is so much greater than that. It is a demand upon God's holiness, and no man can meet that demand. Only God can meet that demand, and that is why atonement is with him alone and not with us.

In the second point, man is so great a sinner that he cannot know his own sin as he should, let alone come to God and satisfy his justice for salvation. Man has hopelessly fallen into sin which has forever separated him from God. He has committed a sin that is so great that God will not accept even the best that man can do. All of our philanthropic efforts, all of our charitable contributions, all of our works of mercy and kindness are not enough to please God's righteousness. We are not righteousness, and nothing can bring us to the righteousness of God except God himself.

A third element that must be considered is that of substitution. Since man cannot acquire his own salvation, it must be done in substitution. If only God's love were required for atonement, there would be no need for substitution; but since God's justice, holiness, and righteousness must be satisfied, then substitution is required. We cannot save ourselves—pay for our own sins in a sufficient way to bring us to God, so someone else must do it for us, someone who is righteous in himself and one who can meet God's requirement. Jesus Christ is our High Priest, so he is the only one who can stand in our place before God and do that which is required.

In the Example Theory of atonement it is taught that Christ died on the cross as our example, and we are to follow that example. If we can follow that example far enough, then we can bring ourselves into fellowship with God and into good standing with him. The problem with this theory is that it denies the need for a substitute, which the Bible demands, and it bases salvation upon an arbitrary will. It makes righteousness only a manifestation of benevolence; but righteousness is a solid and unchanging attribute of God. This theory offers no proper explanation for the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ.

In the Moral Influence Theory of the atonement the death of Jesus Christ was not for the purpose of satisfying the justice of God but in “softening human hearts and to lead them to repentance.” In this theory, as in the Example Theory, there is nothing to remove the obstacle that is in the way of our fellowship with God and no necessity for the payment of sin’s penalty.

The Governmental Theory of the atonement states that Jesus died in order to make strait the government of God. In other words, Jesus suffered to have a beneficial effect upon society—God’s government. Jesus did not die to pay for exact sins but to benefit society.

There are other theories, but we should not get bogged down in these. We need to deal particularly with the Lord’s death and what it accomplished.

Let us notice three things, then, about the atonement: (1) The Essence of the Atonement, (2) The Extent of the Atonement, and (3) The Expression of the Atonement.

The Essence Of The Atonement

What did Jesus actually do when he died on the cross for our sins? Was he our example? Did he affect society? Did he bring man in line with the law or government? Well, actually,

when Jesus died on the cross, he literally took our sins upon himself. 1 Peter 2:24 *Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed.*

The word “bare” in this verse is the Greek word ANAPHERO, and it literally means “to carry up.” Jesus carried up our sins in his own body on the tree. He literally took my sins and put them on himself and carried them up onto the tree where he suffered within the veil (Heb. 10:19-20).

He was our substitute, the just for the unjust 1 Peter 3:18 *For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit:* I could not be brought to God except for Jesus’ death and resurrection. Romans 5:8 *But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.* The word “for” is the Greek word *anti*, and it means “in substitute for.” He died in our place. He was our substitute to pay for our sins and to meet God’s holiness and righteousness. We could not attain to this light, but Jesus could. What the law could not do, Jesus did.

When we are saved by grace through faith, there is no penalty left unpaid. Jesus paid it all. All to him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow. This is the real atonement.

The Extent Of The Atonement

Let me ask you a couple of questions? First, do you believe that God knows who will and who will not be saved? Your answer is probably “yes,” and I would agree with that. The second

question is, “Do you believe that anyone will be saved except those whom the Lord knows will be saved?” You will probably answer “No.” That would also be my answer. Now if that is the case, my next question is “Is it necessary, then, for Jesus to die and pay for the sins and meet God’s righteousness for people whom he knows will not be saved?” My answer is “No.” I don’t know what your answer is.

Our text says, Matthew 20:28 *Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.* Matthew 1:21 says, *And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.* Now, who are his people? These are the people that God has given him:

1. John 6:39 And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day.
2. John 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.
3. John 17:9 I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.
4. John 17:11 And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we [are].
5. John 17:24 Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world.

Now these ones that the Father has given to Jesus are the ones whom he will save and the ones who will be with him in eternity. They will all come to Jesus, because they were given to him by his Father. These are the ones that Jesus died for. Why did he not die for everyone in the world? because they will not come. John said in John 5:40 *And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.* It is not that they cannot come; it is that they will not come, and Jesus knows it; so he did not atone their sins. Can you imagine the worst sinner in the world dying and going to

Hell and suffering for his own sins and at the same time Jesus has gone to the cross and paid for his sins, too? This is not very logical, and it is not taught in the Bible.

One more thing I would like to notice about the extent of the atonement. Some say that, if we believe that Jesus died for only those who will believe, they must be few; but look at Revelation 7:9 *After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands;* In heaven there will be a great multitude that no man could number. The people whom the Lord died for are an overwhelming number. Those who have died in the Lord and trusted in him as Savior, the little babies who die from disease, accidents, and abortion are all taken under the atonement, those who never come to the conscience of sin are covered by the atonement. When Jesus died he died, not for our sins only (1 John 2:2) but for the sins of the whole world. This means that he died, not just for Jews, or Chinese, or Africans, etc., but he died for people of all nations. Notice Revelation 5:9 *And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;*

The Expression Of The Atonement

We have already noticed the Example Theory of the atonement and stated a thing or two which shows it to be the wrong theory. But there is a since in which the suffering and death of Jesus Christ on the cross is our example. Notice 1 Peter 2:21 *For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:* Jesus

suffered on the cross, not just for our atonement, but also for our example. This does not mean that we can follow his example to be saved, but it means that we are to learn from his sufferings and to expect them in our own lives and be willing to suffer as he did. Jesus tells us that we are to take up our cross and follow him (Matt. 16:24).

The atonement of Jesus Christ was not based completely upon love, but the manifestation of the work done to accomplish that atonement was out of pure love. John 3:16 *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

Now how do you know that you were atoned when Jesus died on the cross? You can know it for sure, but there is only one way to know it personally. You must repent of your sins (Luke 13:3), and you must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved (Eph. 2:8-9; Acts 16:31).

If you are not saved today, it does not matter whether Jesus died for one person or all the people in the world. It matters if he died for you. Did he? Trust him with all your heart, turning from your sins and putting your whole faith and trust in the work that he did on the cross, and he will save you. Then you will know that he died for you. That is the main thing.