

The Doctrine of Actual Atonement, Part 1

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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Well, how many of you have always wanted to go to seminary? You're about to go tonight. I'm going to challenge your thinking a little bit as we talk about this issue of the question, for whom did Christ die? We have been looking over the last number of weeks at some very important doctrines: The doctrine of perseverance, or the preservation of the saints; the doctrine of sovereign election in salvation. We have looked at the doctrine of total or absolute inability, that is the depravity of the sinner which renders it impossible for him to respond to the gospel. And tonight I want to talk to you about what I've chosen to call, trying to give it a more accurate name, the "doctrine of actual atonement." The doctrine of actual atonement.

Now, you need to understand that these doctrines we're talking about are at the very heart and soul of our theology. They are the very doctrines that were dealt with in the great Reformation and rescued out of the darkness of Roman Catholicism. Now it may seem obvious to most Christians for whom Christ died, but it is because we tend to take things at a rather superficial level and not think about them deeply, and thus we miss the very essence of some of these glorious truths that we need to dig a little more deeply. And I'm going to try to do that tonight, and obviously the preliminaries took a long time and rightly so, those were wonderful testimonies and a great time of singing.

So I'm sure this is going to spill over to next week, so please, I'm going to leave you hanging a little bit tonight, and I know many of you are going to rush me afterwards with all your questions of things I didn't cover. But if you'll hold it until next Sunday night, we'll get there.

Let's begin in a simple way. And I hope this is clear to you. You know, as I tell young preachers, it's very easy to be hard to understand. That's really easy. All you have to do is not know what you're talking about, nobody else will either. And somebody might say, "Well, it was too deep." But it might have been only an illusion that it was too deep, it was just that he didn't understand it, so how could you. It's hard to be clear. To be clear, you have to really understand the subject and work hard to get it to an understandable way, and understandable format. And that's what I've tried to do, and I hope it's clear to you.

But let's start with some simple things. If I ask the average Christian "For whom did Christ die?", the traditional answer would be, "Everybody. Everybody. Christ died for the whole world, He died for all sinners." And most people then in the church believe - and I'm sure many people outside the true church, many people associated with Christianity believe - that on the cross, Jesus paid the debt of

sin for everyone because He loves everyone and He wants everyone to be saved. That's pretty much the common evangelical view. Jesus died for everybody. He paid the price for the sins of everybody. And all we have to do is tell sinners that He loves them so much that He paid the price and He wants them to be saved, and all they have to do is respond.

Now if that is true, then on the cross Jesus accomplished a potential salvation, not an actual one. That is, sinners have all had their sins atoned for potentially, and it's not actual until they activate it by their faith. So, what we need to do is to tell sinners that they need to pick up the salvation that's already been purchased for them. Since Christ died for everybody, everybody therefore can be saved. It's just a matter of them coming to receive that salvation. And so, our responsibility is to convince people to come and take the salvation that's been provided for them, to convince them to come and accept the gift.

This is so deep in the fabric of evangelical theology that the most popular book on the church currently - *The Purpose Driven Church* - in it the author says, "I can lead anyone to Christ if I find the key to that person's heart." The assumption is that if you can just figure out the technique of getting to some emotional point, you can win anybody on the planet to Christ because, after all, He's died for all of them. That's the popular idea.

And I know many of you are thinking, "Well. Well, it seems to me that that's what I've always believed in. That's what I've been taught." Well we may be taking you some places you've never gone before, but that's good. That's the popular idea.

The fallout of that would be like this. Hell is full of people for whom Christ died. I'll say it another way. Hell is full of people whose sins were paid for in full on the cross. That's a little more disturbing when you say it like that, isn't it? Another way to say it would be that the lake of fire, which burns forever with fire and brimstone, is filled with eternally damned people whose sins Christ fully atoned for on the cross. God's wrath was satisfied by Christ's atonement on behalf of those people who will forever stay in hell.

Now by the way, heaven will also be populated by the souls of those for whom Christ died. So, Christ did exactly the same thing for the occupants of hell as He did for the occupants of heaven. That makes the question a little more disturbing. The only difference is the people in heaven accepted the gift, the people in hell rejected it. That's pretty much the traditional evangelical view.

But it just sounds strange when you start to kind of pick it apart a little bit, doesn't it? That Jesus died and paid in full the penalty for the sins of the damned, and died and paid in full the penalty for the sins of the glorified, that Jesus did the same thing for the occupants of hell that He did for the occupants of heaven, and the only difference hinges on the sinner's choice? That is to say, the death of Jesus Christ, then, is not an actual atonement, it is only a potential atonement. He really did not purchase

salvation for anyone in particular. He only removed some kind of barrier to make it possible for sinners to choose to be saved.

So the message then - the typical evangelical message - is to sinners, "God loves you so much He sent His Son who paid in full the penalty for your sins. And won't you respond to that love, and not disappoint God, and accept the gift, and let Him save you since He already paid in full the price for your sins?" The final decision is up to the sinner.

And it kind of carries the notion that God loves you so much, you're so special, He gave His Son and He paid in full the penalty for your sins, and that's supposed to move you emotionally to love Him back and accept this gift. And so you kind of work the sinner, and kind of manipulate the sinner in that direction, trying to find a psychological point, a felt-need point, play the right organ music, sing the right invitation hymn. You know, grease the slides and get him moving in the direction of making the choice.

Now we've got a problem here, folks. We've got a big problem. We saw in our last study that no sinner on his own can make that choice, right? This is the doctrine of absolute inability. He can't make it. He cannot make that choice. All people - all people - are sinners, and all sinners are dead in their trespasses and sins. All of them are alienated from the life of God. All do only evil continually. All are unwilling and unable to understand, to repent and to believe. All have darkened minds, blinded by sin and Satan, all have hearts that are full of evil, all are wicked, desperately wicked. All desire only the will of their father who is Satan. All of them are unable to seek God. They are all trapped in absolute inability and unwillingness.

So how then can the sinner make the choice? I don't care what felt need you might find. I don't care what you might think you see "in his heart" that will let you lead anyone to Christ. I don't care how many invitation verses you sing, or how much organ music or mood music you play to try to induce some kind of response, the sinner on his own cannot understand, cannot repent, and cannot believe.

Remember what we saw in John 1? To as many as believed He gave the authority, "the right to become children of God but not by the will of man or the will of the flesh. Ephesians 2:8-9. "By grace are you saved through faith; but that not of yourselves." It is through Him that you are in Christ, 1 Corinthians 1:30.

Salvation is from God. We saw that. He has to give life to the dead. He has to give sight to the blind. He has to give hearing to the deaf. He has to give understanding to the ignorant. He has to give repentance to those who love sin. He has to give faith to those who can't believe. He has to move the heart to seek Him who otherwise would not. So that all the elements that caused the sinner to come to Christ are God-ordained and God-induced.

And as we have learned, the doctrine of absolute inability means that people will only be saved if God saves them, and therefore salvation is based upon the decree of God, the sovereign doctrine of election. No one could be saved unless God saved him, and God saves those whom He chooses to save. You cannot expect the sinner on his own, no matter how he's emotionally prodded or psychologically prodded, no matter how he's threatened, no matter what you say to him, on his own, you cannot expect him to "decide for Christ." Those who will come to Christ are those whom the Father draws and the Father gives to the Son because He's chosen to do so.

Now with that in mind, looking back at those doctrines, the doctrine of election, the doctrine of absolute inability, we can ask the question again. For whom did Christ die? Did He die a death that is a potential salvation for everyone, and therefore on the largest part it was useless? Or did He die a death that is an actual atonement, not a potential one? For those who would believe because God calls them and God grants them repentance and faith, because God in eternity past chose them?

Well, the only answer to the question that makes any real sense is that Jesus Christ died and paid in full the penalty for the sins of all who would ever believe, so that His atonement is an actual atonement and not a potential one that can be disregarded. If Jesus actually paid in full the penalty for your sins, you're not going to go to hell, that would be double jeopardy.

Now someone is going to say, "Well wait a minute. That sounds like limited atonement." You say the word "limited atonement" and people's antennas go up. Because we're used to that kind of evangelical idea that Jesus paid the sins in full, paid the price for the sins in full of everybody. But that is fraud with so many obvious problems. But that's what the evangelical church believes, and that's why it uses manipulation to move people emotionally, and according to felt needs, and by what other means it might come up with, believing that the penalty is paid in full for everybody, so that most of the people that Jesus died for are in hell. Then what in the world kind of atonement did He provide for them?

And so you say, "You must believe the atonement is limited." Of course. So do you. You say, "I believe in an unlimited atonement." Well, then you must be a universalist. A universalist believes that everybody's going to heaven. There is no hell. Everybody is going to heaven. And that's consistent. If you believe that Jesus paid in full the penalty for all the sins of all the people who've ever lived, then you have to be a universalist.

But we know better than that. We know the atonement is limited. We know not everybody is going to heaven. To be a universalist, you have to ignore Scripture. So let's just - let me give you just a handful of points, okay? And we'll see how far we go.

Number one, the atonement is limited. And by "atonement" I mean the sacrifice of Christ, by which He paid the penalty for sin. The atonement is limited. Now let's look at this in just some obvious passages. Matthew 10. Matthew chapter 10. And I'm not going to wait for you, so you might want to write these down. Matthew 10:28. We've got to go. Verse 28. Gird up your loins, here we go. Matthew 10:28. "Do not fear. Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell." That's also quoted in Luke 12, as we've been learning. There is a hell and God is going to send people there. That tells me the atonement is limited. There is a hell and God is going to send people there.

In Mark chapter 9 - and these are just samples that tell us that the atonement is certainly limited. In Mark 9:43, "If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it's better for you to enter the life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell into the unquenchable fire." And some texts say, "where the worm doesn't die and the fire is not quenched." Again, another reference to hell.

Verse 48 again repeats verse 47 and 48. "If your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; better to enter the Kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell where the worm doesn't die and the fire is not quenched."

You come, as I noted, to the gospel of Luke chapter 12, you have the same statement as in Matthew 10:28. But go to the Gospel of John, and I just want to take you sort of briefly to this gospel and a few glimpses of the obvious reality of the atonement being limited.

It is limited. Chapter 8 makes it very clear, 8:12. "I am the light of the world;" Jesus said, "he who follows Me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the Light of life." Here's a condition. You have to follow Christ. It is limited, then, to those who follow Christ. You find over in verse 24 a similar saying. "I said, therefore, to you that you shall die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am *He*, you shall die in your sins." There is a hell and people are going there. In fact, Matthew 7 says, "Many are going there." And the only way to avoid going there, the only way to avoid dying in your sins, that is dying without a sacrifice for your sins, the only way to avoid that is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

How could Jesus say you could die in your sins if their sins had been paid for? They had not been paid for if they died without believing in Him. And there are other parts of John. If you go back to chapter 3, "God did not send His Son - " verse 17, " - to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; but he who does not believe has been judged already, because he's not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God."

There is a hell and people go there who don't believe in Jesus Christ. And then there are so many other places where you can see this very same emphasis made. I don't want to burden you with an endless list of them, but there are perhaps a couple of others maybe to think about. Matthew 22:13. "The king said to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and cast him into the outer darkness; in that

place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' ” A further description of horrific punishment and judgment. 25:30. “Cast the worthless slave into outer darkness; in the place where there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

And then in a Pauline letter, 2 Thessalonians chapter 1, it talks about the coming of the Lord Jesus from heaven. Second Thessalonians 1:7, “With His mighty angels and flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and the glory of His power.”

So the Bible promises there is a hell. The only way to avoid it is to not die in your sins. And to not die in your sins, you have to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you don't, you're going to pay the penalty of eternal destruction. That proves that the atonement is limited. It does not apply universally. God did not intend to save everyone. He is God. He could have intended to save everyone. He could have saved everyone. He would have if that had been His intention. The atonement is limited.

Now we all have to accept that or be universalists. We know not everyone is going to heaven. In fact, it is a little flock, it is the few which, if we were to hold on to this sort of evangelical idea, means that the vast majority of people for whom Christ died and paid in full the penalty for their sins are going to go to hell. And that's just something very difficult to believe. So we do believe in a limited atonement. It is limited to those who believe.

How is it limited? That's the second point. Number one. Is the atonement limited? Answer: Yes. Number two. How is it limited? Well, first of all, it's limited because not everybody is saved, only those who repent and believe. That's how it's limited. Only those who believe in Christ and confess Him as Lord are saved. Only those have their sins atoned for. It is limited to those who believe. That's how it's limited, okay? Very important that you grasp that. We'll come back to that.

Now here comes the key question. By whom is it limited? By whom? We know it's limited. We know how it's limited. It's limited to those who believe. It is only applicable to those who believe. “If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord, believe in your heart God raised Him from the dead, you'll be saved.” Now by whom is it limited?

And the popular view would say this, “The atonement of Jesus is unlimited, but sinners limit its application.” And we're back to what we said before. It is a potential atonement, the actuality of which is limited by the sinner. Now we have to believe, then, that God has provided a sacrifice for sins in His Son that, in and of itself is not sufficient, in and of itself is not actual, in and of itself is not real, because the sinner can neutralize it.

I don't mind believing God can limit the atonement. God does limit the atonement. But listen carefully to me. He limits the atonement as to its extent. You have to believe that. Because He didn't choose everybody and not everybody's going to heaven. And that's in the divine mind, and that's the decree of God, and that's the purpose of God, and you have to come to grips with that.

I don't have any problem at all saying the atonement is limited. I don't have any problem at all saying how it's limited. It's limited to those who believe. And I have no problem saying and those who believe are those whom God grants faith. And therefore, the atonement is limited because God limited it. I'm much more comfortable with that than that sinners can limit the atonement that Christ has provided, or that the atonement that Christ has provided is wasted on the vast majority of people.

If you say that God provided an atonement which is only potential, which only removes the barriers so that the sinner can be saved if he chooses to be, you know what you've done? You have said that God not only limited the atonement as to its extent, and you have to believe that, but He limited it as to its effect. Okay? In other words, if you believe in an unlimited atonement, and you think you're one of those magnanimous people who believed Jesus died for everyone. Then by saying the atonement is unlimited as to extent, you have just also said it is limited as to effect. It covers everybody, but not potently. It covers everybody, but not powerfully.

A little while ago you sang a hymn, "Jesus - " what? " - paid it all." Do you believe that? Well, potentially. Did He pay it all potentially or actually? Did He actually bear in His body your sins on the cross or only potentially, if you decide that He did? If you're going to say that the extent of the atonement is unlimited, then the effect of the atonement is limited. If you're going to say that the extent of the atonement is limited, then you're going to say the effect of the atonement is unlimited. For those to whom it extends, it has no limits.

So when you say you believe in a limited atonement or unlimited atonement? I believe in a limited atonement as to its extent. It is limited to those who believe, who are those who are called, who are those who are chosen. But I believe it is unlimited as to its effect. For those to whom it is granted, it is a full atonement. Jesus did pay it all.

So, you know, these people who want to say, "Well, you know, we believe the atonement is unlimited." You say, "Well, well, wait a minute. You mean Jesus died for everybody in the whole world?" Yes. "Well, you may think it's unlimited as to its extent, but you have just confessed that it's limited as to its real effect, because people are going to go to hell even though He died for them. What kind of an atonement is that?" But even people who say, "We believe it's unlimited," don't believe that. They don't mean that. They know God limited it to those who believe, and they believe that sinners limit it by making wrong choices. And then they believe there's some limits in the very atonement itself, so that it really doesn't do the work of atonement, it just makes it possible for the sinner to activate it.

You know, you look at the Bible and it's pretty clear. The hymn writer got it right. And that hymn is a pretty simple hymn. And I don't know what was in his mind when he wrote it but when he wrote, "Jesus paid it all," he meant that. What He did on the cross was not a partial atonement. What He did was not a potential atonement. It was not some kind of virtual atonement. It was a real actual atonement.

It was limited in its extent to those who would believe, who are the called and the chosen. But it was unlimited in its effect. For them, it was a full and complete atonement. There is no such thing as an atonement by Jesus Christ on the cross that is less than a true and actual atonement. There is no such thing as some kind of potential atonement, some kind of half-way atonement. There's no such thing as Jesus paying in full for your sins and then you paying in full for your sins forever in hell. That diminishes the work of Christ, that mocks the work of Christ.

What are you saying? You're saying Jesus only partially activated this and it's up to the sinner to fully activate it? If Christ paid for the sins of everybody and everybody doesn't go to heaven, then whatever He paid wasn't the full price. So we've got to change our hymn and say, "Jesus paid half, the rest is up to you." That would be a good line. "Jesus paid the first half. The rest is up to you."

I just can't bring myself to believe that hell is full of millions of people whose sins were paid for in full by Christ on the cross. I cannot see the Father fully punishing the Son on the cross for the sins of people who will then be punished for those sins forever in hell. What is the point? What Christ did on the cross was a true, and full, and complete atonement for the sins of all who would believe, and since no one can believe unless God grants them faith, it is the sins of those whom the Father has chosen to call to Himself.

You hear people say, "Well, you know, when you say the atonement is limited, people don't feel very special." Well, I'll tell you what. I don't feel very special if you say to me, "Christ died for you, He loves you just like He died for the millions in hell." That doesn't make me feel very special. That's kind of a hard way to do evangelism. Christ died on the cross for your sins, and all the people in hell, too. That's not special. That's anything but special.

You mean to tell me He paid for my sins and I'm paying for them forever? Then I'll tell you, whatever His payment was, it was bogus. You see, it's not biblical to limit the atonement as to its power. It's not biblical to limit the atonement as to its effectiveness. It's not biblical to limit the atonement as to its accomplishment. If He paid in full the penalty for your sins, you will receive that salvation.

The atonement of Jesus Christ on the cross has to be in perfect harmony with the eternal decree. It is not biblical to limit the atonement by making it potential and not actual. It is not biblical to limit the atonement by the will of the unwilling and unable sinner. The atonement is limited by God to the elect.

But it is unlimited as to its effect. For them, it is a full and complete atonement.

Now, the sum of it comes down to this. Is the death of Christ a work that potentially saves willing sinners, or is it a work that actually provides salvation for unwilling sinners who by God's sovereign grace will be made willing? The only possible answer is that God provided a sacrifice in His Son, a true payment in full for the sins of all who would ever believe, and all who would ever believe will believe because the Father will draw them, and He will grant them repentance, and faith, and regeneration. Jesus' death, then, is to be understood as a full satisfaction to God's holy justice on behalf of all whom God will save.

I didn't invent this. This doctrine goes way back, back to the Reformation, back to John Owen, and even back to Charles Spurgeon. Listen to what Spurgeon said. "We are often told that we limit the atonement of Christ because we say that Christ has not made a satisfaction for all men, or all men would be saved. Now, our reply to this is that on the other hand our opponent is limited. We do not. The Arminians say, 'Christ died for all men.' Ask them what they mean by that. Did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of all men? They say, 'No, certainly not.'

"Or we ask them the next question, did Christ die so as to secure the salvation of any person in particular? They say, 'No.' They're obliged to say that if they're consistent. They say, 'No. Christ has died that any man may be saved if - ' and then follow certain conditions of salvation.

"Now who is it that limits the salvation of Christ? Why you. You say that Christ did not die so as infallibly to secure the salvation of anybody. We beg your pardon. When you say we limit Christ's death, we say, 'No, my dear sir. It is you that do that.' We say Christ so died that He infallibly secured the salvation of a multitude that no man can number who, through Christ's death, not only may be saved but will be saved, and cannot by any possibility run the hazard of being anything but saved. You are welcome to your atonement," said Spurgeon. "You may keep it. We will never renounce ours for the sake of it."

The atonement is an actual atonement, not a potential one. It is a real atonement, not simply a barrier removed. And it is in behalf of all who would ever believe, and since the sinner is unable and unwilling to believe apart from divine intervention and regeneration, it comes, then, down to the power of God based upon the decree of God.

Now, are you with me? I have listed here about 50 passages of Scripture, 5-0. And this is really the rich part of this. I just kind of set it up tonight and I'm going to leave it there. Because if I get into this, we'll be here till the rapture of the church, I'm afraid. So, you understand the issue and how to think it through reasonably, and logically, and fully.

And next Sunday night, I want to take you down into the depths of what the Scripture has to say to support this marvelous view of an atonement that God has by His own sovereignty limited to those who believe, but an atonement which in itself is unlimited to all for whom it is provided, salvation will be given in its fullness.

Now, I want to add hastily to that. People say, "Well, how do you know whether Christ died for you?" The answer is, "That whosoever will may come, and if you come and believe in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, then the death of Christ was for you." And don't hold back, come to Christ.

You know, there was a preacher in London when I was over there doing that conference and he pulled me aside and he said, "Do you actually encourage people to come to Christ?" And I said, "Yeah." He said, "I find it so hard. I'm so restrained in my spirit." That's where your theology has plugged up in the wrong place. Look, we don't know who it is, other than those who have already come. We don't know who's out there to complete those for whom Christ paid a full atonement. So we plead with sinners.

And I said to him, "Paul said, 'We beg you in Christ-stead.' Paul said, 'I could wish myself accursed for my own people Israel that they would come to know the Savior, the Messiah.' " We plead with sinners. We take the gospel to the ends of the earth, and we leave the secret things to the Lord, but we follow the responsibility to call sinners to faith, knowing that those who come will have had a full atonement provided for them. And we're here to talk to you about that in our prayer room.

Father, thanks for a great day and the glory of our faith and our salvation coming more and more clear to us in those things we've learned today. And we bless Your name and thank You. Amen.

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