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The Extent Of The Atonement - Part 2

Last week we started four points on the extent of the atonement. We want to conclude these four points and move into other issues related. Point one is that the atonement is the sole legal basis of all grace. Whenever God is gracious to anyone in human history, it is because of the cross of Christ. When God was gracious to Old Testament saints He could be gracious to them without compromising His holiness. I'll give you an example so we can see this in a concrete way. Let's take one specific example to show how God was gracious in the Old Testament.

Take Abraham. Had Jesus Christ died when the Abrahamic Covenant was made? No. So there was no death of Christ then. Was God still holy and righteous and just? Yes, because He never changes. In 2,000 BC when God entered a covenant with Abraham, God was righteous and God was just, and He entered into a covenant with a sinner. How did He do that? If holiness demands death for sin, how could God enter into a contractual agreement with Abraham? It had to have been, and Paul raises the argument in Rom 4, because in some way something happened so that Abraham was clothed in righteousness before God. The problem is in the Old Testament it's not clear how this imputed righteousness comes about. What's the source of it? God is the source of it, but how can God do that? There's always this tension in the Old Testament how you have this holiness of God and yet He's being gracious to people. How can He be just and the justifier? It's not resolved, it's one of those problems like we have - how can a loving God allow babies to die cruelly? People can really get bent out of shape by that. The answer to that question is the same as the answer to this one. He does it, and someday we will see how. Until He reveals it, we stand here and have to accept it. The Old Testament saints had to then. So when it came down to the basis, the basis of all grace is the atonement.

The second point is that God calls mankind to Himself with an atonement sufficient for all. The cross is sufficient to save every man, woman and child, no matter what continent they live on, what people group they belong to, etc. If you don't believe that, here's what's going to happen to you. You will never be able to evangelize or witness because you haven't got good news; there is no good news because if you go to some person at random, how do you know Christ died for them? How do you know the cross is relevant to that person? You don't know that. So if you hold to a limited atonement it begins immediately to affect your evangelism, missions, etc. That's why the Church has struggled over this; this is not a side issue. This is central to the gospel and witnessing. We want to make sure that we understand that there's an atonement that is sufficient for all.

The third point, let's get these down: the cross is the basis of all grace, the cross is sufficient for all to be saved and the cross is always appropriated by faith. It's never appropriated by works; it's not an exchange program. The cross is accepted always and only through faith, never through works. It's not what promises you make to God; it's not dedicating your life to Christ, that doesn't give you the results of the atonement. It is simply receiving the benefits of the cross by faith. You can't do it, of course, if you're not convinced that Christ died for you, and the Holy Spirit has to bring that conviction. You can hear people say it to you; maybe you heard it for years and years before you became a Christian. And one day it just clicked with you. When that happened it was the Holy Spirit that drew you to that understanding; it happened this way with all of us. You can say you believe, and maybe you really do, but when the Holy Spirit draws you to Christ and you believe, it's at that point that you know you're saved. That's the promise of the gospel. That's at the core of what's going on in this argument over limited and unlimited atonement, so that's why we want to be very, very careful. Can we know we're saved or not? It sounds like a big theological mess but keep your eyes on the target. What does it do to the gospel?

The fourth point may sound theologically obtuse to you but I assure you it's not. This is the point that God's judgment and salvation are asymmetrical, i.e. there's a difference in how He involves Himself in judgment and salvation. He is directly involved in bringing good about. How does good fruit grow on a fallen creation and a cursed ground? How do you bring forth good

fruit from cursed ground? It's by direct intervention of God. So whatever good there is is due to Him. Whatever evil is, and the cross is related to both good and evil, evil is a rejection of God and He is not accountable for that evil. He is sovereign over it, but not responsible for it. However, God is accountable for all that is good. So God's sovereignty as expressed in Scripture is asymmetrical. You can prove it from the way the Scriptures describe it.

For example, turn to Matt 25. We want to be sure of this asymmetry because we'll get into it later on in this discussion. Matt 25 is an example among several in the text of Scripture where you see this asymmetry. Look at verses 34 and 41. This is speaking of a divine judgment of the nations at the return of Christ and the Lord Jesus Christ judges each, those who believe and those who don't. But look at the language with which He describes both of them. Look carefully at verse 34, "Then the King will say to those on His right," i.e. those who believe, those who enter the Kingdom, He "will say to those on His right, 'Come you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.'" So from all eternity the Kingdom was prepared for those blessed by the Father and they enter the kingdom. This is very obviously that they were chosen; obviously God has a say in this thing.

Now look at the language and look at the shift in emphasis in verse 41, "Then He will also say to those on His left, 'Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for' you? No, "prepared for the devil and his angels." Why doesn't it say prepared for those who wouldn't believe or prepared for the non-elect? Because there's asymmetry between verse 34 and 41. In verse 34 those chosen for entering the kingdom were chosen by God from all eternity. He gets the glory. But in verse 41 those who depart into eternal fire were not chosen for that end, they end up there but not because God chose them to go there, it's because they reject what Christ did for them on the cross, the lake of fire was designed not for them but "for the devil and his angels." Unbelievers just wind up there. We could say more but all we're looking for is the asymmetry between vv 34 and 41? Do you see that?

I'll show you another place it comes out. Turn to Rom 9:22-23. Once you catch on to this you'll see it again and again in Scripture, I'm just showing two obvious ones. Verse 22, "What if God, although willing to demonstrate His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience vessels of

wrath prepared for destruction?” In the Greek there’s different tense verbs, whereas in English we have an active and a passive tense, active voice, I kill; passive voice, I am killed, or I died. Middle could be I died, it’s a weak kind of a mix of active and passive, or it could be reflexive, I kill myself. The Greek syntax is a lot more precise in this area than the English. It’s not that the human brain is different; it’s just that in some languages it’s easier to follow this way. John Kothmann used to sit in here with his German Bible and he’d point out occasionally how the German was so straightforward and if everyone knew German I wouldn’t have to go into all this detail to explain some English translation that fell short. It’s not that English is a bad language, it’s just that some languages carry certain things better than others. The point is in verse 22 the verb “prepared” is not in the passive, it’s in the middle voice. That means there’s not a heavy stress on them being prepared, as in verse 23, which says “And He did so in order the He might make known the riches of His glory upon vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.” See the difference? God does the preparing directly. Verse 23 is not quite the same as verse 22; they are not mirror images of each other. You’ll see this again and again in Scripture. That’s what we mean, God is directly connected with the good, and He’s more or less kind of remote from the evil though He never loses His sovereign control over the evil. He’s disconnected from it in the sense of responsibility for it. That’s His asymmetrical sovereignty.

Turn to Rom 3. We want to spend some time in the text preparatory to getting into the argument. This is not new stuff; this has been going on for centuries. You run across people who are Christians in one extreme or the other and you wonder sometimes where are they coming from? This will help you in that. One thing I want to point out before we get to Rom 3, this is a Protestant debate. To my knowledge it doesn’t come up in Roman Catholic circles. There’s a reason for that. The Protestants did something at the Reformation that split them away from the Roman Catholic Church on a major point, several major points. One of the major Protestant points was that the cross fully satisfies the justice and wrath of God, *fully* so that “there is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.” NO condemnation, not 90%, not 85%, not 50%, and you have to fill the rest in from Mother Mary and some penance, rubbing the beads, etc. It’s 100%, “there is now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus.”

Immediately the Catholics, the Roman Catholic theologians came back to the Reformers and they had some good questions. They said wait a minute, the Catholic counterattacked the Protestants and said if Christ's atonement satisfied everything, what about the people who are unsaved, that go to hell, they're still being punished for their sins, the cross of Christ never solved their problem so how can you say that the cross of Christ totally satisfies. They said also there's something else, they raised the question isn't it true that every believer dies physically? Doesn't that mean we're still under the condemnation in Adam? Doesn't that mean we're under the death sentence of Gen 2? So how can you Protestants argue that the cross of Jesus Christ fully satisfies? Isn't it true that when Christians sin we get disciplined? Isn't it true that we have to confess our sins in order to be forgiven? If that's so, then how do you say, Protestants, that the cross of Christ fully satisfies? And what do you do about those who profess to be Christians and go for a little while in the Christian life and then flake out? What are they?

So the Catholics came back on the Protestants over this issue, because the Catholics were arguing that Luther and Calvin had opened a door and all the animals were going to get out of the barn because it was an open door to licentious living, to think that the cross of Christ was so satisfying to God that I have now no condemnation. We must not allow people that freedom, because if they get that freedom, they're going to abuse it; that's too dangerous a gospel to preach. So what happened historically is that you have the Protestant Reformation, you have the Catholic counter-reformation, and at the same time the Catholic counter-reformation is going on, you're also getting what we call the second generation of the Reformers who are trying to answer this and qualify what Luther and Calvin said. That's where we get into limited atonement and everything else. It didn't come with Calvin and Luther, it came with the second generation who were dealing with the Catholic counter objection that you Protestants are preaching a gospel of license, you have no discipline, you have no standard to hold people to, you've removed from all people the terror of the holiness of God by your doctrines, this perverse Protestant doctrine of justification by faith and faith alone.

That's the set up for this discussion. We're at the cross of Christ, we're at the heart of the whole Protestant Reformation. We want to refresh our minds to what the text says in Rom 3; we'll use these observations for the next few lessons. Verse 20 ends the section that Paul begins in Rom 1:18, from 1:18-

3:20 Paul has made the point that all men are sinners and he concludes in verse 20, that “by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight;” Look carefully at the language. Where’s the justifying occurring? Where’s the focus of the justification? In man or in God? It’s important to think about this because this is where the Protestants and the Catholics part company. Right here is one of the places. In Protestantism, if you read the biography of Luther you can imagine how this happened.

Luther was a Catholic monk who was so conscious of his sin that the first time he offered mass and his father was sitting out in the church he froze, he got up to the point of the transubstantiation and the wafer and the cup and he froze, he couldn’t finish the mass. The reason was that he felt so utterly under the condemnation of God. Luther had a very poignant view of sin. Some would say that he was psycho that way, that’s what the Roman Catholic people would argue. But Luther was tremendously convicted of sin. He would go confess his sin to the other priest’s dozens of times a day and he realized I never can get rid of this; I never can get rid of this! Something’s wrong here, and he started to study the book of Romans and he suddenly realized, oh, I’ve got it wrong; I can’t look at my heart and be assured of my salvation. Why can’t I? Because what do I always see when I look at my heart? I always see the yet to be sanctified crud that’s in all of us. I don’t see sinlessness in me and if I don’t see sinlessness in me, how do I have assurance that I please this holy God?

The message that he saw in the book of Romans was that when I look to Him I’m justified before Him, not because of Martin Luther but because of Jesus Christ, it’s Jesus Christ in the presence of God that makes the difference. So what had happened in his focus is taken from here, internal, here, to external, there. Remember that; that is fundamentally the difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestant Reformation. I’m sad to say that in our own evangelical churches we have people teaching sanctification that is a resurgence of Roman Catholicism, because they’re making salvation contingent on the fruit in your heart. That is not the Protestant position; that is Catholicism. A lot of guys trying to be godly, trying to be honest to the word, are leading us right back to Rome. We are to look outside of our hearts at the Father where Christ is our righteousness. You look at yourself and you’re going to be depressed, you’re going to see a big mess. That’s not the place to get assurance.

When we read here in verse 20, that's what Paul is talking about, he says "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight," remember we said the issue in the whole thing boils down to Jesus Christ satisfying God's just nature. That's the center of the action, up there, so that's where Paul says "because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" he doesn't say we'll feel good, or we'll be justified in men's sight, he says "justified in His sight," that is adjusted to His justice. Stop and think about what a tremendous thing this is. This is dynamite. It means that the transcendental standard of righteousness and justice is fully satisfied by Christ, and that ends the condemnation. That's why we have access to God. That's why we don't have to go through intermediary saints; that's why we don't have to go to Mary, hoping that as the mother of Jesus she'll put a good word in for us. We come directly to God through Christ. Why? Because the center of the stage is up there, it's not down here inside man's heart, it's up there. That's where the action is.

Let's follow the text, as Paul now shifts in verse 21 away from the fact that no one on the basis of his works can be justified before the Law. "But now," notice, "apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested [or revealed], being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets." So he's not saying that the righteousness of God violates the Old Testament, rather the Old Testament points to it. The point he's making though is that this is something that the Law and the Prophets pointed to but did not reveal. Think, did the Law and the Prophets in the Old Testament reveal something of God's righteousness? Sure. The Exodus, Passover, the judgments upon the nation, wasn't that all the righteousness of God? Yes, but why do you suppose that it can't be said that this righteousness, the righteousness in Christ, could have been revealed in the Old Testament. What had to have happened... and this is why we study the Bible chronologically because before we got to the death of Christ, what did we have to study? The birth of Christ and the life of Christ. And what is the righteousness revealed? In this perfect man. Was there ever a perfect man before Jesus, after the fall? No. So how could the righteousness of God be fully revealed in history? Where can we get a model, today everybody wants a model or a mentor. Where can we get one? It wasn't Moses. Every biography in the Old Testament has warts. Right? Is there a sinless biography anywhere in the Old Testament? No. But do you get

the idea that because they are condemned there's gotta be something better waiting in the wings? That's the point.

Jesus Christ, as perfect God and perfect man walks around and perfectly obeys. Now has righteousness been revealed? Yes, that's what he's talking about. The righteousness in verse 21 is not just talking about the attribute of God. The attribute of God was somewhat revealed in the Old Testament, but what he's talking about, the righteousness of God here means that the Messiah has come, and humanly speaking we have perfect righteousness now, displayed through a person, displayed through a man, created in God's image. This is good news! It never occurred before in history. Now the righteousness of God has been [made] clear, "being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets."

Verse 22 says "even the righteousness of God," and how does it come, "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction." What do you suppose the distinction is that he's talking about in context? Jew and Gentile. This is the primary people group division in all of Scripture. That means by implication, it doesn't matter what your race is, what your sex is, what your genes are, that's not the issue here. There's only one issue and that is, do we or do we not conform to the righteousness and justice of God. And if we don't, how do we talk to Him? How do we carry on a relationship? He says the righteousness of God comes through faith in Jesus Christ. It isn't faith in my promises to God, I'm going to do this or I'm going to do that, or my vows, or my dedication, it is faith in Christ Jesus, not faith in Jeremy Thomas or whatever your name is, believe in yourself and what you're going to do for God. That's not the access point. It's faith in Jesus Christ.

Verse 23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Now look at verse 24, "being justified" that means that it's a state. Let's pick up on this language here. "Being justified," equals a state, that's not an ongoing action, that's a status. "Being justified..." we're not becoming justified through faith in Jesus Christ, we stand in a justified state. Rome says no, justification is a process of becoming righteous. Protestantism disagrees and says justification is a state of being clothed with Christ's righteousness. So right here we have a difference, a major difference between Rome and Protestantism. Despite what the Lutherans and the Evangelicals and Catholics together have been

doing over the last two decades, if Luther knew what compromises the Lutheran church was making he'd do more than shudder, he'd turn over in his grave because I assure you Rome has not and will not change its position on justification. Justification they argue is a process and if anyone is going to budge it's the Lutherans and that's exactly what's happening, not in all Lutheran circles but in many Lutheran organizations they're returning to Rome.

What's the thing that comes out of the Roman Catholic position on justification? Let's look at that before we go into some other questions. If Rome says that justification is a process then can I ever know I'm saved? Rome has never clarified the potency of the cross as a total salvation package. Even to this day, in a Roman Catholic culture if you say that you are saved and you dare claim that you know you're saved, you're going to get some pretty interesting looks, because they do not believe, in actual practice, that it's a question you can know for sure. Assurance is not linked in with faith in Christ because they are looking at justification as an elongated process throughout your life and into purgatory and finally you come out justified. You can never get assurance.

Luther was arguing that I see corruption in the church and he was trying to fix those; he wasn't trying to break with the Roman Catholic Church, he was just trying to clean out the house and then he had some breakthroughs, he discovered some Biblical truths and one of them was justification by faith, that the only way that man can be accepted with God is to receive by imputation the righteousness that Jesus Christ generated by faith and when we exercise faith, His righteousness is credited completely and fully to our account; that's justification by faith. I look out to Him, I'm clothed in His righteousness, not my own, I look in my heart and I see a wreck, I look out and I see perfection and I access that perfection through faith.

Then after that, because we are justified, now the motive from this point on..., from the point of justification when somebody becomes a Christian, from that point on the motive to live the Christian life is one of thankful reflection upon what God has done for me back here at justification. We're looking back at what God has done for us and we're thankful; coupled with that we have tremendous assurance that what He has done for us is a complete work. Think about it, if you weren't assured of your justification

how could you be thankful? That's where Roman Catholicism is at. There's no assurance you are justified and therefore you don't have a ground motive to be thankful. I mean, there were men that were thankful, but not like this. This is an order of magnitude different. This is thankfulness for our so great salvation that I know. It's not thankful to God for a pretty sky and pretty creation, medieval Roman Catholicism was thankful for that. But this was a different kind of thankfulness, and it became the basic motive for living the Christian life. The Christian life wasn't seeking to become acceptable with God by the end of life, it wasn't seeking to develop merit, it was expressing by way of a thankful walk what He had accomplished on my behalf.

So there were some fundamental changes that happened, but because of this emphasis on justification by faith alone, it turned out that the cross became very much central to the whole issue. Hence after this there came to be tremendous emphasis on what did Christ do? And in this debate what I'm trying to do is show that it took the church time to appreciate what happened in the Birth, the Life and the Death of Christ. Remember when we dealt with the Birth we looked at the hypostatic union; Jesus Christ is true humanity undiminished deity united in one person without confusion forever, and we can say that nice and glibly but it took 400 years before we got there. Same thing with the Death, we say Christ died for us, and we say that glibly, but what we want to do is take you on the torturous pathway through all the argumentation that went on about what did Jesus Christ do on the cross? Can you come to a non-Christian and genuinely say Christ died for you. Can you do that? A good segment of Protestantism to this day does not believe you can do that; they say you have no right to say that because you're not sure that Christ did die for that person. So this is fundamental and it's wrapped up in the question of the extent of the atonement, for whom did Christ die? And how is His death applied?

As with all these great debates in church history you learn to come to Scripture. The end product isn't just to learn church history. The end product is to appreciate the fact that God the Holy Spirit has taught other generations of believers. We're not the first people to knock heads over this issue. We can learn a lot by listening to what prior believers talked about because they raised deep questions, and when we capture the essence of their questions, we go back, we open our Bibles and say hmm, I never thought of that question, let's see what the text says. That's the proper response to

church history. From church history we learn the questions that we use back in our Bible study. The questions concern four areas of Bible doctrine, three of which were introduced with Abraham; election, justification and faith, the fourth was sanctification.

I don't want to mislead you; I'm not saying that the atonement issue was the sole factor in all these. Other issues were going on. It's just that I'm using the cross and the death of Christ as a foil to bring all this stuff in right now. If you look under the doctrine of election, justification, faith and sanctification, just look at some of the questions. What I've tried to do is paraphrase the questions that believers were debating. "If then God intended," notice the verb because it turned out in a lot of the discussions that we really weren't clear when we asked the question what we meant by that verb. The question is: "If, then, God intended to save all men by having His Son die for their sins, but in the end all are not saved, what does this fact do to our view of His sovereignty?" If God intended to save all men and all men aren't saved, doesn't that imply that there's a force other than God, outside of God, that somehow is thwarting His sovereignty? That's the issue raised in the Reformation, the second and third generations.

Another question, "Are His intentions," if you don't believe that, "in conflict with His sovereign choice? And how can He remain sovereign if men's decisions to accept or reject the Cross in the end control the extent of the atonement?" Do you see what they're getting at? Who's finally controlling this thing? "If we say that He elected upon the basis of His foreknowledge of men's response to the Cross, isn't this saying the same thing—that men initiate the action and God 'seconds' it? Suppose we take the other approach and postulate that the atonement is limited to only the elect. Then, the preaching of the Cross to those who reject, to the non-elect, cannot be a valid 'call.' In other words, if you know who the non-elect were would you even bother giving them the gospel? Obviously, the extent of the atonement is closely linked to the truths of election.

Let's go to justification. These are interesting questions that were raised. "If justification is somehow based upon the atonement and it is not sufficient to remove all my sin when I initially believe in Christ, isn't the atonement in some fashion limited in my life?" In other words, if I have to confess my sins in order to be forgiven, isn't that an added action that happens; is that added

action not included in the original atonement? These are the questions that were being raised. Here's a good one: "If we die physically after being justified, aren't we still under the Edenic death sentence for sin?" In other words, how does justification work when it doesn't remove the sentence of death on my body, an interesting question? These weren't light weight questions. "If we all have to appear before the judgment seat of Christ in the future, aren't we still in some way identified with sin? If the atonement is thus limited in those who believe and apparently only partially effective, how can we ever be sure we are wholly justified before God?" A whole segment of people raised that last question.

Now the doctrine of faith. "If the atonement is limited and saving for the elect, what role does faith play in appropriating salvation? Is it necessary? Or, from our human perspective how do we know that we are of the elect? If false faith of mere 'professing' Christians exists, how is genuine faith to be distinguished from the false? If, to answer this question, I must ponder my faithfulness, then what role does the cross play as an object of faith? On the other hand, if the atonement is unlimited but ineffective without faith, then isn't faith again the center of action rather than the cross? In this case, doesn't faith somehow become a meritorious good work?" to be added to the cross, to make the cross effective.

Finally the doctrine of sanctification. "Are post-salvation sins covered in the atonement, or is it limited in this respect? If the benefits of the atonement must be appropriated by faith, what happens when this faith fails? Do these benefits fluctuate with the ups and downs in the Christian life? If, however, the atonement is not so limited, why must we forgive in order to be forgiven, confess our sins, repent, and be disciplined when we sin?"

All these were issues that were raised. These people were faced with some challenging questions. Today, 500 years later, we've answered some of these questions because of more Bible study, but there's still debate and division within Protestantism. But for them it was all new because they were looking at the cross in a new light. Alright, we're out of time, next week we'll go into the history of how these questions surfaced and how we got where we are today.

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