

Limited Atonement

Introduction. As we saw in the last lesson, one of the cornerstones of Calvin's theology was the dogma of predestination. This is the notion that, consistent with His own sovereignty, God, before the foundation of the world, predetermined who would be saved and who would be lost. In view of this, when Christ died, His death was effective only for the "elect." This concept of "limited atonement," hence, limited grace, is so foreign to the teaching of the scriptures that it is difficult to see how anyone with a knowledge of the New Testament could accept it.

I. **Limited Atonement Explained By Calvinists**

- A. The atonement of Christ is limited only to certain individuals. Steele and Thomas, in *The Five Points Of Calvinism*, write, "Historical or main line Calvinism has consistently maintained that Christ's redeeming work was definite in design and accomplishment -- that it was intended to render complete satisfaction for certain specified sinners and that it actually secured salvation for these individuals and for no one else ... It would have required no more obedience, nor any greater suffering for Christ to have secured salvation for every man, woman, and child who ever lived than it did for Him to secure salvation for the elect only. But He came into the world to represent and save only those given to Him by the Father."
- B. The perfect righteousness of Christ is transferred to those chosen by God. "Christ, acting on behalf of His people, perfectly kept God's law and thereby worked out a perfect righteousness which is imputed or credited to them the moment they are brought to faith in Him. Through what He did, they are constituted righteous before God. They are also freed from all guilt and condemnation as the result of what Christ suffered for them. Through His substitutionary sacrifice He endured the penalty of their sins and thus removed their guilt forever. Consequently, when His people are joined to Him by faith, they are credited with perfect righteousness and are freed from all guilt and condemnation. They are saved, not because of what they themselves have done or will do, but solely on the ground of Christ's redeeming work" (ibid.).
- C. It is very difficult to find a clear statement of the doctrine of limited atonement in the writings of Calvin himself.
 1. The teachings of Calvin would, however, inevitably lead to such a conclusion.
 2. For example, "Human nature possesses none of the gifts which the elect receive from their heavenly father through the Spirit of regeneration" (*Institutes*, Vol. 1, p. 239).

- D. One can fully and fairly infer the doctrine from the teachings of Calvin about the elect and about Jesus' death for them.
 - 1. In chapter 16 of book II, Calvin teaches what Jesus did in redemption, but from his other teaching, we know that all the things Jesus accomplished to save the lost were things that only the elect will enjoy.
 - 2. Since the elect were predestined by God before eternity, and the number is fixed and cannot be changed, then these are the only ones who will or can receive the saving benefits of His blood.
 - 3. Since the death and redemption of Jesus were also planned by God and foreordained, they were foreordained for the elect.
 - 4. According to Calvin's doctrine regarding the elect, God would not have provided salvation in Christ and then allow men to respond to it. God would have predetermined it all. Therefore the atonement of Christ was limited to the elect from eternity.
- E. The imprint of Calvinism on the religious world is not that this system of theology is always accepted in its purest form; it is not.
 - 1. Nevertheless, many who reject its basic doctrines have unwittingly accepted the logical conclusions which spring from these original propositions. Such is true with the doctrine of Limited Atonement.
 - 2. Most Bible students oppose this doctrine which affirms that Christ did not die for everyone. However, the offspring born by this doctrine has been accepted by many.
 - 3. The dogma of salvation by faith "only" and the concept that God does not put sins to the account of a Christian are two of the faulty conclusions derived from this fundamental tenet of Calvinism. If the root of the tree is bad, then the branches and fruit will likewise be faulty. Such is true with Calvinism.

II. ***Proof Texts Examined***

- A. "The Lord hath laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6).
 - 1. Calvin says that the "all" is the elect.
 - 2. This is an improper and vague interpretation of "all men" in Isaiah 53. The death of Christ was for every man (Hebrews 2:9).
 - 3. Christ died for as many as were under the consequence of Adam's sin (Romans 5). Think about the statement in 1 Corinthians 15:22. To make these two "all's" mean two different "all's" is to do violence to the verse. If the first "all" is the elect, then did the non-elect die in Adam? The balance of the verse between Adam and Christ demands that the "all's" be equivalent.
 - 4. Calvinists fail to distinguish between the provision and application of the atonement. Atonement is provided for all, but the choice is

- for every man. "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17).
- B. "Thou shalt call His name Jesus, for he that shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21).
1. His people are the elect.
 2. Yet Jesus Himself said that He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).
 3. Jesus cried to Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37-38. Was Jesus trying to gather those who could not come? What He said was, "Ye would not."

III. **Other Arguments To Consider**

- A. A number of passages teach that Christ's atonement has been provided for all men, not just the predestined elect. Remember the point made earlier, that Calvinism fails to distinguish between the provision of atonement and the appropriation of atonement. As we study these passages we will note Calvin's explanation of them, if he has one.
- B. If limited atonement is true then there is no need to preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15-16).
1. In Book II, chapter 14 Calvin argues, using Augustine's words, that the gospel is preached to all in order to find the elect. "Because we know not who belongs to the number of the predestinated, or does not belong, our desire ought to be that all may be saved; and hence every person we meet, we will desire to be with us a partaker of peace. But our peace will rest upon the sons of peace" (*Institutes*, Vol. 2, p. 238).
 2. Jesus said, "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned." Jesus makes the difference between salvation and damnation a matter of whether one believes the gospel or not (cf. Romans 1:16-17), whether one repents or not (Luke 13:3, 5) and whether one is born again or not (John 3:3-5).
 3. Jesus also taught that everyone is taught of the Father. "Everyone that hath heard and hath learned cometh unto me" (John 6:44-45). The thing Jesus says makes the difference between people is how they choose to respond to the teaching, not whether they were elect in eternity or not.
- C. If God is not willing that any should perish, then why did He consign a large number of people, without regard to anything they did, to perish (2 Peter 3:9)? Why is the atonement limited?
1. Calvin responds that the answer to the problem is found in the second half of the verse, "For His will that they should come to repentance cannot be used in any other sense than that which is uniformly employed. Conversion is undoubtedly in the hand of God,

- whether He designs to convert all can be learned from Himself, when He promises that He will give some a heart of flesh, and leave to others a heart of stone (Ezekiel 36:26)."
2. Basically Calvin argues that repentance is limited to those whom God directly influences through the operation of His Spirit. "But I hold that no man approaches God unless previously influenced from above. And if repentance were placed at the will of man, Paul would not say, 'If perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth' (2 Timothy 2:25)" (*Institutes*, Vol. 2, pp. 255-256).
 3. Therefore the "all men" that God would have to be saved are the "all men" whom God moves to repent.
 4. It should be clear that Calvin constantly begs the question and interprets every verse by his assumptions.
 5. When he reads of God giving someone a heart of stone, he thinks only of God's doing such a thing directly without using means. If God gives someone repentance, it is only by a direct operation of the Spirit.
- D. If God would have all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:3-4), why is the atonement is limited?
1. Calvin's interpretation is simply that this passage means that God would have all orders of men to be saved, even the rich and the noble (*Institutes*, Vol. 2, p. 254).
 2. Calvin also uses the fact that God chose Israel and deprived the other nations of the light of the gospel, and that some hear the gospel and others do not, to prove that it is totally up to God whether men will be saved or not.
 3. God manifested Himself to all men, but men put God from their minds, and men are willing to accept a lesser god (Romans 1:18-32). It was not that God rejected men first. Romans 1 shows that it was men who rejected God first (Romans 1:24, 26, 28).
- E. If the atonement is limited, then why did John write that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2)?
- F. Neither Adam's sin nor Christ's righteousness is transferred to mankind.
1. The glue of Calvinism depends on the assumption that sin is transferred (or imputed) from Adam to all men.
 - a) In order to uphold the doctrine of Limited Atonement the Calvinist usually refers to Romans 4:1-11, and from this passage he mistakenly alleges the doctrine of imputation to mean: (1) a transference of Christ's goodness to the sinner (Conclusion: "Once saved, always saved"); and (2) that righteousness is at-

tained solely by belief and by no other act of obedience (Conclusion: "Saved by faith only"). However, the Calvinist chain of erroneous conclusions is based on an incorrect interpretation of the word "impute."

- b) The word "impute" means to "reckon" or "put to one's account," but it does not mean to "transfer" or "infuse" into another.
 - c) God does impute sin (Romans 4:8), but this means only that God puts sin to the account of the one who commits it. If sin is transferred to each successive generation since Adam, and every individual is unable by his own ability to choose spiritual good or evil, then Calvinism would be true in its claim that God must decide who will be saved and who will be lost. "Limited Atonement" for those individuals only whom God has chosen would also be a necessary conclusion. However, this doctrine is fundamentally false because of the fact that God does not transfer sin from one person to another (cf. Galatians 6:5; Ezekiel 18:4, 20).
2. Calvinism also claims that the sins of man are transferred to Christ.
- a) Calvinists teach that in order for man to be free from the guilt of sin, sin must be transferred to Christ.
 - b) If sins were transferred to Christ, He would have been a sinner (just like we would be sinners at birth if Adam's sins are transferred to us).
 - c) Christ did not become a sinner. He was holy and undefiled (Hebrews 7:26-27). He took our punishment upon Himself but not our guilt (2 Corinthians 5:21; Romans 8:3; Isaiah 53:4-6).

Conclusion. Our faith is imputed (counted) for righteousness when we obey or work righteousness (Romans 4:3; Acts 10:34-35; 1 John 3:7). It is true that God cancels out our guilt and treats us as if we had never been guilty, but we must through faith obey and then continue living in keeping with the divine precepts essential to the character of a Christian (Titus 2:11-14; 1 John 1:6-10). This atonement by the blood of Christ is not limited to a select few, but is free to "whosoever will" (Revelation 22:17).