

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."
- C. It is difficult to find a clear statement of "limited atonement" in Calvin's writings.
 1. However, his teachings would inevitably lead to this conclusion. For example, he wrote, "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).

2. Since the elect were predestined by God before eternity, and the number is fixed and cannot be changed, then the elect 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 allowed men to respond to it. God would have predetermined it all. Therefore the atonement of Christ was limited to the elect from eternity.
- D. 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. Most Bible students oppose this doctrine which affirms that Christ did not die for everyone. However, the offspring, or logical conclusions, born by this doctrine has been accepted by many.
 2. 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 (Matthew 7:17-18). The same is true with Calvinism.

II. ***The Results Of Limited Atonement***

- A. 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 makes the difference between salvation and damnation a matter of whether one believes the gospel or not (Mark 16:16; 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 (John 6:44-45). What makes the difference between people is how they choose to respond to the teaching, not whether they were elect in eternity or not.
- B. If God does not want any to perish, then why did He consign a large number of people, without regard to their actions, 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 repen-

- tance 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. When he reads of God giving someone a heart of stone, he thinks only of God doing it directly without using means. If God gives someone repentance, it is only by a direct operation of the Spirit.
- C. 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 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 hearts, and were 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 (vss. 24, 26, 28).
- D. 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)?
1. Neither Adam's sin nor Christ's righteousness is transferred to mankind. 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 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) righteousness is attained

solely by belief and by no other act of obedience (Conclusion: "Saved by faith only").

- b) However, the Calvinistic chain of erroneous conclusions is based on an incorrect interpretation of the word "impute." The word "impute" means to "reckon" or "put to one's account," but it does not mean to directly "transfer" or "infuse" into another.
- 2. God does impute sin (Romans 4:8), but this only means that God puts sin to the account of the one who commits it. God holds him accountable (1 John 3:4). 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 "limited atonement" for those individuals whom God has chosen would be a necessary conclusion.
 - a) However, this doctrine is fundamentally false because of the fact that God does not transfer sin from one person to another (cf. Ezekiel 18:4, 20; Galatians 6:5).
 - b) Calvinism furthermore claims that the sins of man are transferred to Christ.
 - (1) Calvinists teach that in order for man to be free from the guilt of sin, sin must be transferred to Christ.
 - (2) 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).
 - (3) Christ did not become a sinner. He was holy and undefiled (Hebrews 7:26-27). He was our offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10; Romans 8:3).
 - (4) Those who hold this view of "imputed sin" also incorrectly contend that the "righteousness of Christ" is imputed to the pardoned sinner.

III. ***Prooftexts Examined***

A. Isaiah 53:6.

- 1. Calvin says that the "all" is the elect. This is an improper and vague interpretation of "all men" in Isaiah 53. The death of Christ was for every man (Hebrews 2:9).
- 2. Christ died for as many as were under the consequence of Adam's sin (Romans 5:18-19; 1 Corinthians 15:22).
- 3. Calvinists fail to distinguish between the provision and application of the atonement. Atonement is provided for all, but the choice is for every man (Revelation 22:17).

B. Matthew 1:21.

- 1. Calvinism maintains that "His people" are the elect. Yet Jesus Himself said that He came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).

2. Jesus cried to Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37-38. Was Jesus trying to gather those who could not come? He said, "Ye would not," implying the process of decision.

C. John 10:15-16.

1. Calvin argues that Jesus died only for His sheep or the elect.
2. But in verse 16, Christ taught that there are "other sheep not of this fold" who would come into the fold. Calvinists deny that one can change from "sheep not of the fold" to "sheep of the fold." But there are numerous Bible examples of those who made that change (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 1 Timothy 1:13-14).

D. Acts 20:28.

1. Calvin said that Christ died only for those who are saved; again, the elect.
2. Christ died to purchase the church, and the church is composed of the saved. What Calvinists overlook is that any man or woman can become a part of the Lord's church (Acts 2:38-41, 47; Hebrews 5:8-9).

Conclusion. Our faith is imputed (counted) for righteousness when we obey or work righteousness (Acts 10:34-35; Romans 4:3; 1 John 3:7). It is true that God cancels out our guilt and treats us as if we had never been guilty when we are justified, 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".

I am deeply indebted to Robert Harkrider for the use of his material.