

Do Not Be Ashamed of “Limited Atonement” – Romans 5:17-19

Introduction – It is Reformation Sunday where we celebrate our great Protestant heritage, the five solas, the emphasis on salvation by grace through faith and not of any works, liberty from tyrannical popes and bishops, and gospel freedom from guilt and bondage to sin. Yet there is a doctrine that most Protestants in our day are ashamed of – and they try to distance themselves from. It has been caricatured as the mean part of Calvinism: that God only sent Jesus to die for the elect and not for each and every sinner. “Limited” Atonement. It gets a bad rap, and no help from the shortcut title given to it.

If it is a false doctrine, then not only should we be ashamed of it, we should correct it. But if it is true, and it is, then we should be able to glory in it unashamedly. And we can.

An Abundance of Grace (Rom 5:17-19) – In Rom 1:18, Paul sets the stage for the gospel by affirming that *“the wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.”* Summarizing Romans 1-3, Jews and Gentiles are all under sin (Rom 3:9-19). This is where the gospel must start: every man in his natural state lives in the reality, whether he is aware of it or not, that he is under the active anger of God and stands exposed to the wrath of God, both in its present and future manifestations. God’s wrath is as much a personal quality as His love, for without it, He would cease to be righteous. When we deny His wrath over sin, His love becomes little more than sentimentality. Therefore, in order to act according to His righteousness (His wrath and His love) God set forth Christ as a propitiation, turning aside and appeasing God’s holy, righteous wrath (Rom 3:21-26). We were *“justified freely by His grace.”*

Romans 4 shows us that Abraham’s faith, and not his works, was the vehicle by which God imputed Christ’s righteousness, and in the fifth chapter, Paul draws parallels between the First Adam and the Last Adam (Christ) in order to demonstrate that this grace, Christ’s obedience on the Cross, actually saves. Adam, through His disobedience, plunged all his descendants into death-stained sinners (Rom 5:17a, 18a, 19a). Similarly, Christ, through His obedience, brought all his descendants into eternal life, grace, and righteousness (17b, 18b, 19b). This abundant grace did not bring about the possibility of salvation in the same way that Adam’s sin did not bring about the possibility of a fallen race. Christ’s death really procured a righteous propitiation, a real redemption, a real ransom,

All Atonement Is Limited – A popular understanding of the gospel is that Christ died for each and every person; but what did He die for? In that popular understanding, He died to provide an opportunity for each and every person to be saved – if they apply for the benefits. This limits the nature of the atonement and in fact makes Christ’s work impotent without the additional work of men. But that is like saying Adam’s sin only secured the possibility of sin and death. The crucial point of Paul’s comparison is the efficacy of the two covenant Heads’ respective actions.

Sheep and Not-Sheep (John 10:15, 26) – The Atonement is limited, but not in efficacy. It is limited in its extent and Jesus makes this abundantly clear. Jesus says He knows the identity of His sheep, and He gives His life for them. He also says that there are certain ones who are not His sheep. He does not say that they are not His sheep because they do not believe; they do not believe because they are not His sheep. If Christ laid down His life for His sheep and if He told certain hearers that they were not His sheep, then He did not lay down His life for them.

The Logic Problem – In addition, if Christ paid for the sins of those who will one day go to hell, for what sin will they go to hell? For unbelief? Didn’t Christ die for that one too? Is that the unforgiveable sin? Well, weren’t some of us guilty of unbelief once?

A Propitiation for the Whole World (1 John 2:2) – One of the reasons this teaching makes many Calvinists sheepish (play-on-words-intended) is that while they believe that Christ died only for the elect, they tend to believe that number to be quite small. This makes them a bit red-faced when those holding to the popular view of the atonement mention that Christ made propitiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2) or that God so loved the world (John 3:16).

But John did not say that Christ was the potential propitiation; He is the propitiation for the whole world. God did not send His Son into the world to eventually condemn the world, but to save the world (John 3:17). Abraham was told to count the stars (Gen 15:5). Isaiah promised that the nations (not a representative from each nation) would stream to God (Is 55:5). John the Baptist announced Jesus as *“the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.”* (John 1:29). John the Apostle saw the vision of the elect, a number he could not count (Rev 7:9-10). There will be many who will be lost (John 3:36) but the grace-abounding love of God is such that, having judged this race in Christ, we are to preach the reconciliation of the world.

An Abundance of Grace (Rom 5:15) – The Gospel is the story of the Great Reversal. God was successful in His purposes in Jesus Christ. *“But the free gift is not like the offense...”* (notice the difference here is a difference of extent) *“...For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many.”*

What we have is a Definite Atonement that is going to bring forth the saving knowledge of the Lord that will cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. That Atonement is True and Glorious.