

Limited Atonement

by [Rev. Gordon Girod](#)

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John 17:9

I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.

John 17:1-13

These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the one true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent. I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word. Now they have known that all things whatsoever thou hast given me are of thee. For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me. I pray for them; I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in thy name: those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none

of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the scripture might be fulfilled. And now come I to thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have my joy fulfilled in themselves.

LIMITED ATONEMENT

Second Head of Doctrine: of the Death of Christ, and the Redemption of Man Thereby.

In the latter chapters of the Gospel according to John, Jesus is preparing the disciples for His death and the events which would follow, including His separation from them. He speaks of his departure from them, saying, "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I [will] come again, and will receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (John 14:2-3).

In the fifteenth chapter he seeks to encourage the disciples by explaining to them that they shall never be really separated, for He compares the relationship between Himself and His disciples to the relationship between a vine and the branches which are attached to it and take their life from it. The sixteenth chapter contains an additional word of encouragement which is summed up in one of the most thrilling expressions of Scripture: "Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world!"

In the seventeenth chapter, however, Jesus has ceased to speak with His disciples. Now He is speaking to God. The prayer which He offered upon that notable occasion, with the shadow of His impending death upon the cross hanging over Him, is often referred to as the great "High-priestly Prayer." Many Biblical scholars assert that this is the prayer which ought rightly to be called the "Lord's Prayer." This is His prayer in the truest sense of the word. It was born in His own soul, and one cannot doubt but that he was pouring out His soul before God as He uttered the words of this prayer.

Listen to the words of Christ: "I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me; for they are mine: and all things that are mine are thine, and thine are mine: and I am glorified in them" (John 17:9-10). "I pray not for the world, but for those whom thou hast given me"! The least that one can say of this prayer is that Jesus is drawing a sharp line of demarcation which separates man from man. There is a certain group for whom He is praying. Call them the assembly of the elect; call them the Church of the First Born; call them the household of faith; identify them the redeemed of the Lord; call them men of faith; identify them by any Scriptural term which you may prefer. Jesus Himself chose to speak of this group as "those whom thou hast given me."

More still, He distinctly separates this group from the remainder of mankind. Call this second group the reprobate; call them the children of the devil; call them the bondservants of sin; call them the household of Satan; call them the ultimately unsaved if you so desire. Jesus Himself chose to call them "the world." He said, "I pray not for the world, but for them whom thou hast given me."

The terms by which one may choose to distinguish these groups are not of final importance. One fact is clear: in the totality of the human race Christ saw a distinct cleavage; He saw two distinct groups.

This further fact is also clear. He was deeply concerned about one of these groups. In their behalf He poured out His soul before God in prayer. As far as the other group was concerned, He indicates no interest in them. For while He could say, "I pray for those whom thou hast given me," He could also say, "I pray *not* for the world."

This fact leads one to a consideration of the atoning death of Christ upon the cross, the essential nature of His death upon the cross, and the purpose of that death.

It leads one to ask: Is it possible that the Christ of God, with bended knee and torn heart, could declare on one day, "I pray not for the world," and that on the next He should lay down his life upon the cross for precisely the same people for whom He did not pray?

Perhaps your reaction will be the common one of those who have not given the matter serious consideration. You will ask: But did not Christ die for all mankind? Did He not lay down His life for all men?

Rather than seeking an answer from the rationalism or the rationalization of men, turn to the only authoritative source, the Word of God. Hear the exact words of Scripture.

Turn first to the Gospel according to Matthew. The scene is that of the angel Gabriel speaking with Joseph. The Christ Child has not yet been born. Gabriel is instructing and advising Joseph concerning the Child which will one day soon be born to Mary. These are the words of the archangel: "Thou shalt call his name Jesus; for it is he that shall save *his* people from their sins" (1:21). Note the exact and precise wording. "He shall save *his* people from *their* sins."

This is the first indication in the New Testament of the limits of the atoning work which Christ was to do upon the cross. Paul writes, "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." How true! But here we learn that His purpose is not to save all sinners. On the contrary, He is given the saving name of Jesus, because He will save *His* people from *their* sins.

In the Gospel according to John the same concept finds expression. In the tenth chapter one may read: "I am the good shepherd, and I know mine own, and mine own know me, even as the Father knoweth me, and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep" (vv. 14-15).

You will note the striking similarity between these two passages. In Matthew, Gabriel declares that Christ shall save His people from their sins. In John's Gospel Christ Himself is speaking. He pictures Himself in the familiar role of the shepherd. And He points out, "I know mine own, and mine own know me; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

That Luke and Paul were aware of this fact is decisively clear from the book of Acts. Both of these men were clearly aware of the fact, because Luke is the author of the book of Acts, and Paul is speaking the words which are recorded by Luke in the 20th chapter (v. 28). Listen to the words of Paul: "Take heed unto yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers, to feed the church of the Lord, which he hath purchased with his own blood."

In this passage two facts are evident. First, the flock which is spoken of in John's Gospel and in many other passages is the Church. And second, it is the Church which Christ has purchased with the shedding of His blood.

This fact is further corroborated in Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians where one may read, "Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself up for it . . . that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (5:25, 27).

There are other passages of a similar nature, but these should serve to indicate the essential fact that, when the Son of God laid down His life upon the cross, He did so with the purpose in view of bringing redemption to a certain, specific, select group of people. In one passage they are called the Church; in another passage they are called the flock; in a third passage they are called "his people"; Christ Himself spoke of them as "my own." By whatever name they are called, these are the people for whom Christ laid down His life upon the cross.

Even that passage which is so often quoted by Arminian evangelists bears out this fact. How often have you heard the words quoted that He "laid down his life a ransom for many." Bear in mind the fact that "many" is not all. Whatever the number of the select group may be, it is clear that He did not lay down His life for all mankind.

Now, why should this fact be stressed concerning the atoning death of Christ? For the best of reasons. One can do full honor to the name of God, and give full expression to the glory of God, only if he understands this fact concerning the death of Christ upon the cross.

Calvinists, those who espouse the Reformed Faith, speak of the death of Christ as constituting a "Limited Atonement." You understand the word "atonement." When we speak of the death of Christ as an atonement for sin, we mean that the death of Christ upon the cross paid the price of sin. He atoned for, that is, He paid the price of our sin.

When we say that His death was a limited atonement, we mean that He died for a limited number; we mean that His death atoned for a limited number; we mean that He paid the price of sin for a limited number.

The Canons give the following explanation in the *Second Head of Doctrine Art. VIII*, "For this was the sovereign counsel and most gracious will and purpose of God the Father, that the quickening and saving efficacy of the most precious death of his Son should extend to all the elect, for bestowing upon them alone the gift of justifying faith, thereby to bring them infallibly to salvation: that is, it was the will of God, that Christ by the blood of the cross, whereby he confirmed the new covenant, should effectually redeem out of every people, tribe, nation, and language, all those, and those only, who were from eternity chosen to salvation, and given to him by the Father; that he should confer upon them faith, which, together with all the other saving gifts of the Holy Spirit, he purchased for them by his death; should purge them from all sin, both original and actual, whether committed before or after believing; and having faithfully preserved them even to the end, should at last bring them free from every spot and blemish to the enjoyment of glory in his own presence forever.

Now, we have said that the Calvinists, the fathers of the Reformed Faith, gave this doctrine a name; they called it the "limited atonement." At the same time we must clearly understand that this doctrine was neither created nor originated by Calvin or any other theologian. They found this truth in the Word of God where it was clearly enunciated from the beginning. The angel Gabriel first gave voice to it in the New Testament. Matthew understood it and declared it. Luke quotes it, and Paul gave expression to it again and again. And we shall not properly honor God the Father, nor Christ the Son, nor the Holy Spirit, unless we graciously hold this to be the teaching of the Word of God.

If there were a single soul in all the ages for whom Christ died, but who was not saved, it would mean that the death of Christ had been a failure as far as that man is concerned. And since there are millions of unsaved in every generation, in fact, far more who are not reconciled to God than who are, it would mean that the death of Christ was more a failure than a success.

To say that the death of Christ upon the cross is in any wise a failure is to dishonor that death. To say that Christ set out to save men by His death upon the cross, and then to say that He failed in even one instance is to cast a terrible aspersion upon the redemptive work of Christ.

Yet, the Scriptures declare that the death of Christ was a perfect sacrifice. He accomplished completely what He set out to do. He did not fail to accomplish His purpose for even one soul. He set out to save His own; He paid the price of their sin; and that is exactly what He accomplished on the cross.

Secondly, to say that Christ died for a single soul which has not been saved is to imply that God is not just. If Christ paid the price of my sin upon the cross, then the guilt of my sin is all gone; the condemnation of God is taken away; the wrath of God is lifted from me. If then God were to condemn me, it would mean that I was being condemned for the very sins for which Christ had paid with His life. This could only mean that the price was paid, and yet, that God was not satisfied.

Yet one of the foremost attributes of God is His justice. He is supremely just. Therefore, we cannot believe that God would allow His Son to pay the price of any man's sin and yet condemn that man.

What, therefore, is the truth of the matter as revealed by God? Paul declares that every soul for whom Christ died was "in Christ" even as He hanged upon the cross. These are Paul's words, "I was crucified with Christ"; and this is a statement which every child of God must make, for Paul declares of all the redeemed, "Ye are risen again unto newness of life."

Speaking in the mystical sense, I must know of myself, therefore, that when they nailed the Son of God to the cross, I was there — in Him. When they drove the nails into His hands and feet, I was there — in Him. When they plunged the spear into His side, I was there — in Him. When they took His body from the cross and laid it in the garden tomb, I was there — in Him. And when He rose again and came forth from the tomb, I was there — in Him. This is the essential nature of the new birth: being crucified with Christ and risen again unto newness of life. This, in truth, is the new birth. There is no possibility of regeneration apart from the death of Christ upon the cross. For only those who have been crucified with Christ can be risen again unto newness of life.

This is the only hope of salvation which I have. Unless I have been crucified with Christ, I am eternally lost. Unless the "handwriting of my sins was affixed to the cross," I am eternally lost. Unless I am risen again unto newness of life, I am eternally lost. Jesus said, "Ye must be born again," but no man shall ever be born again unless he be crucified with Christ and risen again unto newness of life.

By the same token, if I have been crucified with Christ, the death penalty has been paid for me. It is still true that the wages of sin is death, but my death has already taken place in Him. It is still true: "The soul that sinneth, it shall die," but I have died and am now made alive in Him. Ah, yes, when He died upon the cross, I died; my old nature died; the sinful man within me died. And when He rose from the grave, I rose, a new man, born of water and the Spirit.

Therefore, I place this inescapable fact before you. It is impossible for any man to have been in Christ upon the cross and yet not to be saved. It is utterly impossible for any man to have had the handwriting of his sins affixed to the cross, and yet not to have the penalty of them fully paid. It is impossible for any man to have been crucified with Christ and yet to be unsaved. It is impossible for any man to have been buried with Christ in the tomb and not to have come forth with Him unto newness of life.

This means the death of Christ was not a failure. By no means. Not in any degree. Every soul for whom Christ died shall be saved. Every soul for whom Christ died shall be found in that last day in the Church which He purchased with the shedding of His blood. Every soul for whom Christ died shall be found in the assembly of the elect. Every soul for whom Christ died shall be found in the Church of the First Born. Every soul for whom Christ died shall be found in that last day standing justified before the throne of God.

The converse, of course, is equally true. If it be true that some were in Christ upon the cross, it is equally true that some were not in Christ upon the cross. If it be true that some were buried with Christ in the tomb, it is also true that some were not buried with Christ. If it be true that some were raised unto newness of life, it is also true that some were not raised unto newness of life.

Some will undoubtedly say, "Oh, but this is terrible. It means that Christ did not die for all. It means that some were eternally decreed unto condemnation. It means that some were lost from before the foundation of the world."

Paul spells out this doctrine in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians where one may read, "Know ye not as to your own selves that Christ is in you, unless indeed ye be the reprobate" (13:5)? These are the alternatives. Either Christ is in you, and ye are in Christ, or ye are the reprobate. It is just that clear. It is just that distinct.

Thus, in the *First Head of Doctrine*, Art. VI, we read, "That some receive the gift of faith from God, and others do not receive it, proceeds from God's eternal decree. `For known unto God are all his works from the beginning of the world' (Acts 15:18; Eph. 1:11). According to which decree he graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe; while he leaves the non-elect in his just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy. And herein is especially displayed the profound, the merciful, and at the same time the righteous discrimination between men, equally involved in ruin; or that decree of *election* and *reprobation*, revealed in the Word of God, which, though men of perverse, impure, and unstable minds wrest it to their own destruction, yet to holy and pious souls affords unspeakable consolation."

You see, election and reprobation are two sides of the same coin. They are counterparts of each other. You cannot have the one without the other. You

cannot accept the one without accepting the other. And this is true, because in the scheme of God's logic, the two are inseparable.

At the same time, one must not fail to give consideration to several propositions which demonstrate that the condemnation of God upon the reprobate is thoroughly and completely just.

First, God causes no man to sin. This is clear from the Scriptures. God hates sin; it is an abomination in the sight of the Lord, and a stench in the nostrils of God. Sin is the cause of death and hell. And men sin, not because God desires that they should sin — far from it — but because of the evil in their own hearts, because of their defiance of God and their rebellion against God. Therefore, men bring condemnation upon themselves.

Second, God allows some to remain in their sin, and therefore, in their lost estate. *But* not because God rejoices in the lost estate of any soul. God Himself spoke through the prophet Ezekiel on this point saying, "As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked" (33:11).

Third, if men are eternally lost, it is due to no hardness in the heart of God. It is due, rather, to the hardness in the heart of man. Paul makes this clear in his epistle to the Romans (1:28) where he writes, "Even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up to a reprobate mind." God gave them up to a reprobate mind because they refuse to have God in their knowledge.

"It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel, and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted. The fault lies in themselves; some of whom when called, regardless of their danger, reject the Word of life; others, though they receive it, suffer it not to make a lasting impression on their heart; therefore, their joy, arising only from a temporary faith, soon vanishes, and they fall away; while others choke the seed of the Word by perplexing cares and the pleasures of this world, and produce no fruit. This our Saviour teaches in the parable of the sower (Matt. 13)." *Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine*, Art. IX.

Fourth, if there be any who shall cry out against this truth of God, let them hear the words of Christ, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own" (Matt. 20:15)? Hear also the inspired words of Paul: "Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God" (Rom. 9:20)?

Finally, there will always be those who will ask: But why does not God save all men? But this is not the question men ought to ask. The fearful, awful, wonderful, marvelous question men ought to ask is this: Why does God save any? This is the question which ought rightly to cause our souls to tremble: Why does God save any?

The *First Head of Doctrine*, Art. I points out, "As all men have sinned in Adam, lie under the curse, and are obnoxious to eternal death, God would have done no injustice by leaving them all to perish, and delivering them over to condemnation on account of sin, according to the words of the Apostle (Rom. 3:19), 'that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God'; (ver. 23) 'for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God'; and (6:23), 'for the wages of sin is death.'"

If God had condemned me to an eternal hell, it would have been better than I deserve. If God had condemned you to an eternal hell, it would have been better than you deserve. No matter how great the condemnation which God heaps upon any man, it is a better fate than he deserves. Therefore, the great question which ought to thrill my soul is this: Why did God save me?

And I shall glorify God the more, not only in this world but in the world to come, because I know that it was only by a sovereign act of grace and mercy that the Son of God laid down His life upon the cross for my redemption.

I shall glorify God the more, because I know that, when the Son of God hanged upon the cross, He did so, not because of just any Tom or Dick or Harry, but specifically because of me, and specifically because of every other child of God.

If we had been permitted to watch as He made His weary way to Calvary that day, and were capable of seeing with the eye of faith, we should have seen that even as the old rugged cross lay upon His shoulders, He carried in His hand the Lamb's Book of Life. Soon they drove a great nail through the flesh of that hand, but His fingers continued to clutch the book, the book in which is written the roll of them that belong to God.

My name was in that book! Yes, it was! I know it was! But not because of anything that I have done. Not because of anything which I have believed. Not because of any word which I have spoken. Not because of anything which I shall ever do. But only because God, in sovereign grace and mercy, wrote my name upon its pages.

I say this makes me to glorify God the more. Because I know that when the wrath of God descended upon Him as He hanged upon the cross, the depth and the violence of the wrath of God were the more fearful, because my sin was added to the load which He bore upon the cross. I know that when the darkness descended as He hanged upon the cross, that darkness was the more deep, the more terrible, because my sins were added to those which He bore in His own body as He hanged upon the tree. When the earth trembled beneath the cross, when land and sea were shaken by the infinite wrath of God, I know that the wrath of God upon my sin was added to the wrath of God upon the sins of all those who were in Christ crucified that day. When He descended into hell, I know that He was made to go an additional step because of my sin, an additional step

into the abyss, an additional step into the lake that burneth with fire forever and ever, an additional step into the bottomless pit of hell — because my name was in the book, because I was in Him when he settled the account of the justice of God.

*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they nailed Him to the tree?
Oh! sometimes it causes me to tremble . . . !
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*

When I realize that He went to the cross because I sinned, because He bore in His own body my sin, because my name was written into the roll of the book, then gratitude wells up within me, and I praise God with a fervor born of His Spirit.

If you are a child of God, you must make the same confession. You must know that the darkness was deeper because your name was written into the book. You must know that the wrath of God was more terrible, the agony He bore more intense, because He carried your sins with Him to the cross.

Is it any wonder that we glorify God for this oh-so-great redemption which He worked in Christ for our sakes? Is it any wonder that we sing:

*Oh, for a thousand tongues to sing my great Redeemer's praise,
The glories of my God and King, the triumphs of His grace.
My gracious Master and my God assist me to proclaim,
To spread through all the earth abroad the honors of thy name.*

Blessed and holy is Thy name: Lord of lords, King of kings, blessed and only Potentate, world without end — into the folds of whose garments are gathered the elect of God.

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