

Marc Roby: We are resuming our study of systematic theology today by continuing to examine soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. We have been discussing the doctrine of limited atonement and the "specific categories in terms of which the Scripture sets forth the atoning work of Christ"¹ according to the theologian John Murray. He lists four categories: sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption. Last time we covered sacrifice. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today with the category of propitiation?

Dr. Spencer: We should begin by defining propitiation. Murray writes that "To propitiate means to 'placate,' 'pacify,' 'appease,' 'conciliate.' ... Propitiation presupposes the wrath and displeasure of God, and the purpose of propitiation is the removal of this displeasure."²

Marc Roby: It is worth noting that you won't find the word propitiation in the 1984 NIV Bible that we use as our primary source.

Dr. Spencer: No, you won't. The translators shied away from using the term. You will find it, however, in four places in the New Testament of the English Standard Version.³ Murray discusses the fact that this term has been troublesome for some. He wrote that "Perhaps no tenet respecting the atonement has been more violently criticized than this one."⁴ But he also notes that this criticism is mostly because the term is misunderstood. He wrote that "It has been charged that this doctrine represents the Son as winning over the incensed Father to clemency and love, a supposition wholly inconsistent with the fact that the love of God is the very fount from which the atonement springs."⁵

Marc Roby: That view of the atonement would certainly be at odds with the Bible. The famous verse in John 3:16 tells us plainly that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."⁶ And it is clear that "God" here refers to God the Father. It is he who loved the world enough to send his Son.

Dr. Spencer: You're quite right. Murray wrote that "To say the least, this kind of criticism has failed to understand or appreciate some elementary and important distinctions. First of all, to love and to be propitious are not convertible terms. It is false to suppose that the doctrine of propitiation regards propitiation as that which causes or constrains the divine love."⁷ In other words, God can love us and still need to be propitiated. It is not the propitiation that brings about his love. He loves us, but because he is holy and just, our sins still require propitiation.

¹ J. Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 19

² *Ibid*, pg. 30

³ Romans 3:25, Hebrews 2:17, 1 John 2:2 and 1 John 4:10

⁴ Murray, *op. cit.*, pp 30-31

⁵ *Ibid*, pg. 31

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⁷ Murray, *op. cit.*, pg. 31

Marc Roby: As a poor analogy we could note that a good human father loves his children, and yet will still be properly angry with them and need to be appeased, or we could say propitiated, when they sin.

Dr. Spencer: That analogy is readily understandable and useful. Murray says that “The wrath of God is the inevitable reaction of the divine holiness against sin. Sin is the contradiction of the perfection of God and he cannot but recoil against that which is the contradiction of himself. ... To deny propitiation is to undermine the nature of the atonement as the vicarious endurance of the penalty of sin. In a word, it is to deny substitutionary atonement.”⁸

Marc Roby: And that is how you very quickly end up with a deviant form of Christianity that views Jesus Christ as just being a good moral teacher and example, rather than the unique God-man who loved us enough to take our sins upon himself, bear the wrath of God, and die to save us.

Dr. Spencer: And such an aberrant form of Christianity is also a false Christianity that cannot save anyone, which is why this topic is so important. I understand the modern thought that it is somehow vulgar and unsophisticated for God to require a propitiatory sacrifice to atone for sins, but we simply *must* recognize how vulgar and offensive sin itself is. It isn't just that we are not always as nice as we should be, or that we are sometimes a little selfish or anything like that. We must recognize that, at its core, sin is rebellion against God. It is a denial of the Creator/creature distinction. We are, in essence, saying that God has no right to tell us how to live.

Marc Roby: Yes, we see that clearly in the Genesis account of the fall of man. God had told Adam and Eve that if they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil they would die. They were allowed to eat from every other tree, they were only forbidden to eat from that one. But we read in Genesis 3:4-5 Satan came in the form of a serpent and said to Eve, “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

Dr. Spencer: And when Eve allowed herself to consider that statement, which directly contradicted God, she was, in essence, rejecting her position as a creature and assuming that she had the right to decide who was telling the truth. It was a rejection of God's authority and it implicitly accused him of lying to them and not treating them well, in other words, of denying them something good.

Marc Roby: It is not pleasant to think seriously about sin. The more you think about it, the worse it appears.

Dr. Spencer: And we never fully comprehend in this life how bad it really is. But let's move on with discussing propitiation as being one of the categories the Bible uses to describe Christ's atoning work.

⁸ Ibid, pp 32-33

Murray notes that in the Old Testament, the concept of propitiation is “expressed by a word which means to ‘cover.’”⁹

Marc Roby: And that makes perfect sense. If something is offensive, we can cover it up so that the offense is no longer visible.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. God is offended by sin. It needs to be covered. We noted last week that in the Old Testament period the high priest would go in to the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement and sprinkle the blood of the sacrifice on the cover of the ark. The ark contained the law of God, which the people had broken and which, therefore, testified against them. The symbolism was that when God, who appeared above the cover, looked down toward the ark, his view of the law would be blocked by the blood. In other words, the blood covered the tablets of the law, which testified against the people.

Marc Roby: One of the uses of the law identified by theologians is to drive us to Christ since it is evident that we have not, and indeed cannot, keep it.

Dr. Spencer: That’s true. And in the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was in use at the time of Christ, called the Septuagint, the Greek word used for the atonement cover is ἱλαστήριον (hilastērion), which can be translated as the place of propitiation.¹⁰

We see this word used in the New Testament. In Romans 3:25 the apostle Paul wrote that God presented Christ as a “sacrifice of atonement”, which is how the NIV translates the Greek word hilastērion. The ESV translation¹¹ is better and uses the word propitiation.

Marc Roby: I think that clearly establishes that propitiation is one of the categories in terms of which the Bible speaks of the atonement.

Dr. Spencer: I agree, but before we move on to the next category, I want to read one more short quote from Murray. He wrote that “the idea of propitiation is so woven into the fabric of the Old Testament ritual that it would be impossible to regard that ritual as the pattern of the sacrifice of Christ if propitiation did not occupy a similar place in the one great sacrifice once offered.”¹²

Marc Roby: That argument makes good sense. And now I assume we are ready to move on and examine the next category, which is reconciliation.

Dr. Spencer: You assume correctly. Murray writes that “Reconciliation presupposes disrupted relations between God and men. It implies enmity and alienation. This alienation is twofold, our alienation from God and God’s alienation from us.”¹³ People often object to the idea that there is enmity, or hostility between us and God or God and us, but this is a completely biblical statement. In Colossians 1:21 Paul wrote, “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies

⁹ Ibid, pg. 30

¹⁰ W. Bauer, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd Ed., Revised and augmented by F.W. Gingrich and F. Danker, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1979, pg. 375

¹¹ i.e., the English Standard Version

¹² Murray, op. cit., pp 29-30

¹³ Ibid, pg. 33

in your minds because of your evil behavior.” And in Romans 8:7 he wrote that “the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so.”

Marc Roby: Those verses certainly make the case that sinners are hostile enemies of God.

Dr. Spencer: And there are others we could use as well, but I think those suffice. But in addition to looking at the attitude of sinners toward God, we also need to look at God's attitude toward sinners. In Romans 2:6-8 we read that “God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done.’ To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.” If you reject the truth – that is you reject Jesus Christ and his gospel, you will experience God's wrath and anger. In fact, by my count the word wrath is used 28 times in the 1984 NIV translation of the New Testament to refer specifically to the wrath of God that will be poured out on sinners.

Marc Roby: And, of course, there is also the difficult verse we have looked at before in Romans 9:13 where Paul quotes from the Old Testament prophet Malachi and tells us that God says, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

Dr. Spencer: That's right. I think the reason people have such a hard time dealing with the idea of God hating anyone is that they don't realize that our hatred is almost always sinful, so you can't think of God hating the way a human being hates. But there is a kind of hatred that is devoid of sin. Murray writes, “If we dissociate from the word ‘enmity’ as applied to God everything of the nature of malice and malignity, we may properly speak of this alienation on the part of God as his holy enmity toward us.”¹⁴

Marc Roby: That is a bit hard to do – to think of enmity without malice or malignity. But God does not wish to do harm to anyone just for the sake of doing harm. When he hates someone and subjects them to his wrath, it is because their sin is, as you noted earlier in a quote from Murray, “the contradiction of the perfection of God”.

Dr. Spencer: It is difficult to remove our sin from the idea of hatred and anger, but we must try. God's anger, hatred and wrath are holy and perfectly justified.

And in making our point so far, we have only quoted from the New Testament because many people incorrectly think that God is not wrathful in the New Testament. But God has not changed. As Paul tells us in Romans 1:18, “The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men”. The God of the Old Testament is the same as the God of the New Testament. He is merciful to those whom he chooses to save, but he sends the rest to eternal hell, which is treating them justly for their sins. As Jesus himself tells us in John 3:18, “whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.”

Marc Roby: And Christ's atoning work reconciles those who trust in him to God.

¹⁴ Ibid, pg. 33

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it does. Paul wrote about Christ in Colossians 1:19-20, “For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” Now, when it says that was pleased “to reconcile to himself all things”, it doesn’t mean that everyone will be saved. Taken in context and interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture, it is obvious that it means all of those whom God has chosen to reconcile.

Marc Roby: There is a question though of whether we are speaking about God changing us to take away our enmity against him, or whether the reconciliation is referring to God’s enmity toward us being removed.

Dr. Spencer: Well, in the verses I just read from Colossians it may well be God changing us, but Murray notes that when you examine the Scriptures carefully, “It is not our enmity against God that comes to the forefront in the reconciliation but God’s alienation from us.”¹⁵ He makes a lengthy argument to support this contention, but I’m only going to give part of it here because I think it is sufficient. Interested listeners can examine the original reference for more details. So, let’s take a look at two passages, beginning with Romans 5:8-11.

Marc Roby: Okay, well let me read those verses. Paul wrote, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.”

Dr. Spencer: Let me point out two of the things Murray notes about this passage. First, we were reconciled to God when we were God’s enemies. That makes no sense unless the word “reconciled” is referring to God’s attitude toward us. Secondly, we see that we have “received reconciliation.” In other words, it is a gift given to us. It is not something accomplished by us.

But the passage in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 is even more powerful in making Murray’s point.

Marc Roby: And in those verses Paul wrote, “All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Dr. Spencer: I will again summarize only a portion of Murray’s argument. Note that it is *God* who is working in this passage, not us. *He* has reconciled us to himself and *he* made Christ to be sin for us. Also note that the passage says God is “not counting men’s sins against them.” That is clearly speaking about his attitude toward us. And it speaks about what we have called the

¹⁵ Ibid, pg. 34

double imputation; namely, that God imputes our sins to Christ and his righteousness to us. Verse 21 says that “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” The fact that this is speaking about imputation makes it clear that it is not speaking about a real change in our attitude.

Marc Roby: Although if we are born again, there certainly will be a change in our attitude.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, that’s very true, but Murray’s point is simply that the emphasis is placed on the removal of God’s enmity toward us, which flies in the face of much of the modern view about God being so nice and loving that he is never angry with anyone.

Marc Roby: Very well. We have now made the case that the atoning work of Christ is categorized as a sacrifice, a propitiation and a reconciliation. That leaves just the fourth category mentioned by Murray, that of redemption. But that will have to wait for next week because we are out of time for today. So I’ll take this opportunity to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org, and we will respond as soon as possible.