

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 in our last session we finished with the four specific categories in terms of which the Scripture sets forth the atoning work of Christ according to the theologian John Murray.¹ He lists the following: sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption. So, Dr. Spencer, how would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we have covered what is meant by atonement, which is far more comprehensive and glorious than many modern Christians realize. But we now have to deal with that troublesome word “limited”.

Marc Roby: And, of course, the only other options to a limited atonement would be either no atonement at all, or a universal atonement.

Dr. Spencer: That’s very true. We’ll ignore the logical possibility of no atonement because the whole of biblical Christianity deals with the fact that God saves his people and, therefore, has atoned for their sins. If God didn’t provide an atonement for our sins, then everyone, without exception, would be doomed to hell.

But we do need to deal with the other possibility. There are people, even some professing Christians, who believe that ultimately, everyone will be saved, which would require that the atonement be universal, rather than limited. But such a notion is completely unbiblical.

Marc Roby: Although, shockingly, even the current Pope believes in universal salvation.

Dr. Spencer: He certainly seems to. The Apostolic Exhortation he wrote soon after becoming Pope in 2013, called *Evangelii Gaudium*, which means the joy of the gospel, displays his universalism rather clearly by speaking of God’s love to all men without distinction and by saying that Jews and Muslims worship the same God as Christians. I’ve written a brief analysis of the Pope’s exhortation, which is available on the web. It’s useful to see how a humanist philosophy can cause a person to pervert the gospel. And the link is in a footnote to this podcast transcript.²

Marc Roby: And the Pope’s view is shocking because, as you noted, the idea of universal salvation is completely unbiblical. For example, we read in Matthew 7:13-14 that Jesus himself said, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”³

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

² Dr. Spencer has written a brief analysis of the Pope’s declaration, which is available here (<https://gracevalley.org/teaching/pope-francis-an-analysis-of-his-apostolic-exhortation-evangelii-gaudium/>).

³ All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® (1984 version). Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com The "NIV" and "New

Dr. Spencer: And, of course, Jesus is speaking in that passage about eternal destruction and eternal life. He makes that absolutely explicit in the 25th chapter of Matthew where he talks about the final judgment. We read in Verses 32-33, “All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”

Marc Roby: And the sheep represent Jesus’ chosen people, for whom he is the Good Shepherd as he tells us in John 10:11.

Dr. Spencer: That’s right. And continuing with Matthew 25, in Verse 34 we read that Jesus said, “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’” But, to those on his left, the goats, we read in Verse 41 that he will say, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.” And he makes the eternal nature of both completely clear in Verse 46, where he says that those who are cursed “will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”

Marc Roby: People don’t like the idea that anyone is cursed by God, but it is a clear teaching of Scripture.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, many people will deny it because they don’t like it, but we can’t let what we like and don’t like determine what we think is true. We need, instead, to change what we like and don’t like to conform to what God says is good and true.

We are all rebels who deserve to be cursed by God, but the amazing thing is that he chooses to save some. But he does not save everyone, and there are many more Scriptures that show the idea of universal salvation is completely unbiblical. For example, in Revelation 20:12 John wrote, “And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life.” And in Verse 15 he wrote that “If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” He also tells us that the lake of fire is the second death, in other words, it is not just the physical death of this body, it is eternal death. It is hell. In Verse 10 of that Chapter he called it a lake of burning sulfur. He wrote, “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night for ever and ever.”

Marc Roby: That is the most terrifying thought imaginable.

Dr. Spencer: It certainly is. We need to be serious about our salvation. And this question about how the atonement is limited is a very important question. We’ve dismissed the idea that Christ didn’t atone for the sins of anyone, and we’ve shown that the idea that Christ atoned for the sins

of everyone is unbiblical, so now it's time to look at the precise way in which Christ's atonement is limited.

Marc Roby: And, although the phrase "limited atonement" is usually associated with Reformed, or Calvinistic, theology, the truth is that all true Christians believe that Christ's atonement is limited in some way.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, because all true Christians will admit that not everyone is saved. Therefore, either Christ's atonement was not efficacious in saving everyone, or it was never meant to save everyone. But either way, it is limited.

Marc Roby: And, of course, when our Arminian brothers and sisters claim that Christ's atonement made salvation possible for everyone, they are, in essence, admitting that it was not efficacious for everyone.

Dr. Spencer: That's a great point. John Murray makes the same point in his excellent book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, which we have used a number of times. He wrote, "If some of those for whom atonement was made and redemption wrought perish eternally, then the atonement is not itself efficacious. It is this alternative that the proponents of universal atonement must face. They have a 'limited' atonement and limited in respect of that which impinges upon its essential character. We shall have none of it."⁴ We could put this another way; if the atonement has universal applicability, in other words, if Christ died for all men, then his death didn't really save anyone, it only made salvation possible. Our response then becomes the deciding factor.

Marc Roby: But in Matthew 1:21 we are told that the angel spoke to Mary's husband, Joseph, and told him that "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." The angel didn't say that Jesus would make salvation possible.

Dr. Spencer: And this issue is so important that I want to take some time to look at it in reasonable detail. And before we do that, we need to make an important distinction. We need to recognize that there are two completely different kinds of debts that we can owe.

Marc Roby: And what are those?

Dr. Spencer: We can have what is called a pecuniary debt, or a judicial debt. The word pecuniary comes from the Latin word for cow, or money. A pecuniary debt is a financial debt. So, for example, if I purchase a car without paying the full amount up front, I incur a debt for a particular amount of money. Let's say that I owe \$10,000. Now if some generous person, such as my good friend Mr. Roby, chooses to go to the bank and pay the \$10,000 I owe, my debt is paid in full and the bank has no right to expect any additional payment from me or anyone else.

Marc Roby: That would indeed be a very generous thing for me to do.

⁴ Murray. op. cit., pg. 64

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it would. But my point is that the bank is not being generous or gracious in any way by accepting your payment on my behalf. They only have the right to be paid \$10,000, it makes no difference who pays it and they have no right to expect any additional payment, the debt is paid in full. In fact, if I didn't know that you had paid it in full and I sent in a payment of \$1,000, the bank would be obliged to pay the \$1,000 back to me.

Marc Roby: That's all clear, but what about the other kind of debt, what you called a judicial debt?

Dr. Spencer: A judicial debt is forensic, meaning that it has to do with justice, and courts of law. If someone murders another person, for example, there is no exact payment in kind possible. Even if the offender is put to death, it doesn't bring back the person who was murdered. In this case, we are really talking about punishment, not repayment.

Charles Hodge explained the difference this way, "In the case of crimes the matter is different. The demand is then upon the offender. He himself is amenable to justice. Substitution in human courts is out of the question. The essential point in matters of crime, is not the nature of the penalty, but who shall suffer."⁵

Marc Roby: That is an important point, the essential thing is punishment. As you said, it isn't a matter of repaying some financial obligation.

Dr. Spencer: Hodge also brings out another important difference between financial obligations and crimes.

Marc Roby: What difference is that?

Dr. Spencer: That the penalty cannot be paid by someone else. As Hodge said, "Substitution in human courts is out of the question." If I commit a crime and am sentenced to a year in jail, you cannot serve the sentence on my behalf.

Marc Roby: Yes, that too is an important difference.

Dr. Spencer: And now let's apply this to the topic of the atonement. When we speak about our sins being paid for, we are not talking about a pecuniary debt. There is no exact payment possible. If I offend God and violate his law in some way, there is no way for me to satisfy that debt with some kind of equivalent payment in kind. In fact, as we have noted before, since God is infinite in his person and glory, when I sin against him my debt is, in some sense, infinite.

Marc Roby: Which is an insurmountable problem for us as finite beings.

Dr. Spencer: Exactly. But – and here is where God's amazing grace, wisdom and love come into play – God does two things to solve this problem. First, he graciously accepts a substitute in my place, which is something a human court of law will not do. I am the one who deserves to be punished, but God allows my punishment to be taken by another.

⁵ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, Eerdmans, 1997, Vol. II, pg. 470

Marc Roby: There is still a problem though, this substitute has to be capable of satisfying the infinite debt. And no mere creature can do that. We can spend eternity in hell and the debt is still not paid.

Dr. Spencer: And so, the second amazing thing God does is to provide an acceptable substitute, one who can pay an infinite penalty. In other words, he provides a substitute who's sacrifice has infinite worth. Jesus Christ, the unique God-man is that substitute. We will see several times as we move on with our discussion why this distinction, namely that my sin leads to a judicial debt rather than a pecuniary debt, is so important in discussing the substitutionary atonement of Christ.

Marc Roby: Alright, so then we are ready to move on with discussing whether Christ's work of atonement made salvation possible for everyone or if it was only for those who are actually saved.

Dr. Spencer: We are. And the first point to make is that because this is a judicial debt, not a pecuniary debt, and because Jesus Christ is infinite God as well as fully man, his death was of sufficient *worth* to pay for all the sins of every human being who has ever existed or ever will exist. Arminian and Reformed believers agree on this point. Therefore, the real question in dispute is not over the worth of Christ's atoning sacrifice.

Rather, the real question could be put this way, "For whom did Christ die?" Did he die to pay for the sins of all men? That is the position taken by Arminians, Lutherans, Dispensationalists and others, which I am calling the Arminian position for brevity. Or, did Christ die only for the elect? That is the Reformed and, I would say, biblical position.

Marc Roby: How do you want to approach resolving this question?

Dr. Spencer: Let's begin by looking at some of the evidence usually adduced in favor of the Arminian position.

Marc Roby: Very well. I know that Arminians often cite 1 John 2:2 in support of their position. In that verse the apostle wrote that Jesus Christ "is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

Dr. Spencer: That is one of their strongest pieces of support, but when you examine it carefully in context it really doesn't directly argue for their position at all. This verse alone is perfectly agreeable with either position.

Marc Roby: Okay, can you explain how that is so?

Dr. Spencer: Certainly. First of all, phrases like "the whole world" can mean different things in different contexts. For example, in Luke 2:1 we read that "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." I've used the English Standard Version here because it renders the Greek more literally. The question is, obviously, what is meant by "all the world" in this verse. The 1984 NIV that we usually use renders the verse this way, "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." The word Roman is not in the original Greek, but it is certainly an accurate translation

nonetheless. It is obvious that Caesar Augustus did not issue a decree that a census should be taken in China for example. So, given the context, “all the world” means the entire Roman world.

Marc Roby: Yes, that’s pretty obvious.

Dr. Spencer: And so, in the same way, we need to ask what the phrase “the whole world” means in 1 John 2:2. The verse says that Jesus Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” Notice that “the whole world” is contrasted with a smaller group, of which the apostle and his readers are members. He refers to “our sins”, so we need to know who this group he refers to with the word “our” is.

R.C. Sproul does a good job of looking at this verse in his book *What is Reformed Theology?* And he notes that the word “our” could possibly refer to Christians in contrast with non-Christians. And, if that were the case, then “the whole world” would refer to non-Christians and the verse would support the Arminian position.⁶

Marc Roby: What is the other option that Sproul mentions?

Dr. Spencer: That the word “our” could refer specifically to Jewish believers. Sproul writes that “One of the central questions of the church’s earliest formative period was this: Who is to be included in the New Covenant community?”⁷ If you take the word “our” in this sense, then the phrase “the whole world” would simply refer to non-Jewish believers. There would be no reason to assume that it refers to unbelievers at all.

Marc Roby: That makes good sense, and certainly shows that this verse is consistent with either view and does not, by itself, point us one way or the other. I look forward to continuing this discussion, but we are out of time for today. So, I’d like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. And we will do our best to respond.

⁶ R.C. Sproul, *What is Reformed Theology?*, Baker Books, 1997, pg. 176

⁷ Ibid