

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 Dr. Spencer, in our last session you made a solid case for the Reformed, or biblical, position that Christ only died to save his elect. How would you like to proceed today?

Dr. Spencer: We could go on examining more verses that support the biblical case for limited atonement, but I really don't think there is any need to do that. If you read through the New Testament with this question in mind, the biblical teaching is clear. I think most people who reject this doctrine do so for reasons other than biblical exegesis. Therefore, rather than continuing down that course, I would like to look at the major objections usually raised against this doctrine of limited atonement, or particular redemption as it is sometimes called.

Marc Roby: Very well, what objection do you want to handle first?

Dr. Spencer: That this doctrine makes the offer of salvation somehow disingenuous. In other words, that if this doctrine is true, we cannot make a free offer of salvation to someone honestly, which would be deadly to the great commission given to us by Christ when he commanded us in Matthew 28:18 to "go and make disciples of all nations"¹.

In order to think about this objection, let's first consider the case of the apostle Paul and his companion Barnabas preaching to the people in Pisidian Antioch.

Marc Roby: We know that the first thing they did was go into the synagogue and preach to the Jews. In fact, we are told in Acts 17 that doing so was Paul's custom (Verse 2).

Dr. Spencer: That's true. And their preaching drew large crowds, so we read in Acts 13:45-48, "When the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and talked abusively against what Paul was saying. Then Paul and Barnabas answered them boldly: 'We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us: "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.'" When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honored the word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed."

Marc Roby: That passage is yet another one that teaches the doctrine of limited atonement, it clearly says that those who were "appointed" for eternal life believed. But what does it have to do with the objection about the gospel offer not being genuine if limited atonement is true?

Dr. Spencer: Well, consider all of those who heard Paul and Barnabas and yet were *not* appointed for eternal life. They also had the gospel preached to them. Back in Verses 38-39 of Acts 13 we read that Paul had told them, "through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to

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you. Through him everyone who believes is justified". So, the question is, was that a lie? Was the forgiveness of sins not really being offered to them at all? If it wasn't possible for some of them to believe because of their unregenerate nature, was it a genuine offer?

Marc Roby: Well that is definitely an objection that you frequently hear. How would you respond?

Dr. Spencer: I would first point out that the question has a hidden assumption built into it.

Marc Roby: What assumption is that?

Dr. Spencer: That our ability limits our responsibility. In other words, if we are unable to respond positively to the gospel call to repent and believe, then according to this view we cannot be held responsible for failing to repent and believe.

Marc Roby: I think that is a very common notion.

Dr. Spencer: I agree that it is common, but we need to be very careful and think this through. It is a topic that can get very emotional and we can be easily led astray if we don't think carefully and, as Christians, we must not only think carefully, but biblically.

Let's begin by dealing with one case that you might think is pretty obvious and easy. If I am physically forced to do something, I am not morally responsible for that action.

Marc Roby: That seems perfectly reasonable and I suspect all of our listeners would agree.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure they will. But now try and come up with real examples and you will see that it becomes much more difficult. For example, suppose I work for a bank and know the combination to the safe. Now suppose a robber comes in and puts a gun to my head and tells me to open the safe. I think we would all agree that I am not guilty of theft if I open the safe for him. No rational person would expect me to surrender my life to save some of the bank's money.

Marc Roby: Agreed.

Dr. Spencer: But now think about a soldier in the German army in World War II being commanded to help run the gas chambers at Auschwitz. He would have every good reason to believe that if he refused, he would be killed. Is he now morally responsible if he participates?

Marc Roby: I think almost everyone would say that he is, although they might disagree about the extent of his guilt.

Dr. Spencer: I agree. And yet, what if a gun was actually pointed at his head and he was told to pull the handle that would release the gas? I think most people would still say that he should refuse, and could be held accountable if he didn't, but we all start to get a little nervous about it because we realize that he is, in a sense, being forced. The reason most people would say the soldier is responsible, whereas the bank employee is not, is that the crime the soldier is being forced to commit is not just stealing money, but killing innocent people. Therefore, most people would say he should refuse even if it costs him his life.

I bring this up only to show that it is much more difficult than you think to decide some cases. But, even here, we would clearly not hold the person accountable if someone much stronger than he grabbed him and physically made him pull the handle even though he did his best to oppose the act.

Marc Roby: I think we can all agree to that.

Dr. Spencer: OK, so we've done away with the easiest case, which was still not *always* as easy as we might like. Now let's get to a harder case. What about the person who is an alcoholic and, even knowing that he is, goes into a bar, gets drunk, and then causes an accident that kills someone as he's driving home? Is he guilty of murder?

Marc Roby: I'm sure that most people would say he is responsible, although he is clearly not guilty of pre-meditated murder since he never intended to kill anyone.

Dr. Spencer: That's true. But it was, in another sense, premeditated. He deliberately went into the bar *knowing* that he would get drunk and *knowing* that he was going to drive home afterward and therefore he *knew*, or certainly should have known, that it was entirely possible he would kill someone in a car accident. And this gets even more difficult if you believe, as many people do, that alcoholism is itself some kind of illness for which the person himself is not responsible.

Marc Roby: Yes, that view is very common as well.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And whether it is right or not isn't important for our present discussion. Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that there is some genetic predisposition to alcoholism. Even with that assumption, the man was not forced to go into the bar, he was not forced to drink and get drunk, and he was not forced to get into his car and try to drive home. Therefore, most people, while perhaps feeling very sorry for him, will still hold him accountable for his actions.

Marc Roby: Although the penalty will be far less severe than if he had killed the person deliberately.

Dr. Spencer: That's true, and quite appropriate. But my point for the present discussion is simply this; even if a person's nature is such that there is a strong tendency to act in a certain way, we hold the person accountable for his actions.

Marc Roby: I suspect that our listeners can all agree that that is the case.

Dr. Spencer: And now let me point out something else. We all know what it is like to have a very strong desire to say or do something that we know we shouldn't. Some situation presents itself and we have a desire that we ourselves judge to be inappropriate. Now some of those desires are only mildly inappropriate and would, at most, garner a disapproving look from others, but some of those desires are far more inappropriate and would lead to serious consequences.

Marc Roby: Unfortunately, I'm quite confident that everyone knows what you are talking about.

Dr. Spencer: I'm sure we all do. But most people are able to say "no" to such desires, especially the ones that are seriously wrong. Now, we may say "no" more out of the fear of the consequences than from some more noble motive, but we say "no" nonetheless. However, the

daily news bears clear witness to the fact that not everyone is able to quell their worst desires all the time. People steal, assault, rape, murder and so on. We do, of course, in our legal proceedings take mitigating factors into account, but we don't just say the person is not responsible because he or she was doing what they desired, even though we may have, at one time or another, experienced a similar desire ourselves.

Marc Roby: Of course not. Getting angry and wanting to punch someone is something we can all relate to, but actually acting on that momentary urge is something far more serious.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, that's clear. And so I finally come to the point I wanted to make. We do consider our internal nature to be something for which we can be justifiably judged. We do it ourselves when we judge some desire to be inappropriate and therefore don't act on it, and we do it as a society when we judge someone for acting on an inappropriate desire. The key point is that we can, in fact, be held morally accountable for our actions even though we may not be 100% responsible for our own nature, which produced those actions.

Marc Roby: And so, I assume your conclusion is, that when someone hears the gospel and fails to respond in repentance and faith, he can be justifiably held accountable because he is not being forced to refuse.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. Even though his nature prevents him from repenting and believing. As Paul wrote in Colossians 1:21, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior." That statement is true for every one of us. We were all born enemies of God. It is the sinful nature we inherited from our first father, Adam. But in terms of our behavior, we are free to do what we want to do and we can, therefore, be reasonably held accountable for that behavior. God's offer of salvation in the gospel is genuine, the fact that people who have not been born again cannot respond because of their sinful nature and enmity against God does not do away with the sincerity of the offer. God will save all who come to him in true repentance and faith.

The idea that we can't be responsible for our decisions unless they are absolutely free decisions, meaning that we have the ability to choose any possible option, is simply not true.

Marc Roby: I see your point just based on our own understanding of human behavior and responsibility, but, of course, the most important question for a Christian is this, what does the Word of God say about it?

Dr. Spencer: That is the most important question, and the Bible makes it clear that God *will* hold *everyone* eternally accountable for how they respond to whatever revelation they have received. If someone has never heard the gospel message, he will still be held accountable for not having sought God, because as Paul tells us in Romans 1:18-20, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse."

Marc Roby: In other words, there is no innocent native in some far corner of the earth who is free from condemnation because he has never heard about God.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. That person simply does not exist. *All* men are without excuse. But, of course, there will be even greater judgment for those who have heard the gospel and still do not repent and believe. Jesus himself told us in John 3:18 that "Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."

Marc Roby: That is not a popular verse in our society, which treats religion as if it were just a part of culture and that every religion therefore, is as good as every other.

Dr. Spencer: It is a monstrously unpopular idea. But that doesn't decide the case, does it? The facts that we all get sick and die are also universally unpopular, but they are true nonetheless.

We got into this question about whether our ability limits our responsibility because I said that it was an unstated assumption behind the accusation that the doctrine of limited atonement prevents us from making an honest offer of the gospel to people we meet. I would now like to address that objection head on.

Marc Roby: Very well, how would you respond to that objection?

Dr. Spencer: I would say that the exact opposite is true. If the atonement was not limited in its applicability, in other words if Christ died to pay for the sins of every single human being, then the atonement *would* be limited in its effectiveness as we noted in Session 136. And in that case, we would not be offering the full powerful salvation that God offers to sinners. Let me quote John Murray's book *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. He wrote that "The truth really is that it is only on the basis of such a doctrine", by which he means the doctrine of limited atonement, "that we can have a free and full offer of Christ to lost men. What is offered to men in the gospel? It is not the possibility of salvation, not simply the opportunity of salvation. What is offered is *salvation*. To be more specific, it is Christ himself in all the glory of his person and in all the perfection of his finished work who is offered."²

Marc Roby: That is an important point. We read in John 19:30 that just before Jesus died on the cross Jesus himself said, "it is finished." He could not have said that if he only made salvation possible. He would then only have been able to say that *his* part in the work was finished, but we still had work to do.

Dr. Spencer: That's quite true. Let me offer an analogy that has been used before. Picture someone drowning in the ocean. He is being swamped by waves and is on the verge of going under for the last time. The idea that Christ died to make salvation possible for all is analogous to simply throwing this drowning man a life saver. It doesn't actually save him; he still has to find the strength to reach out and lay ahold of it. But that is not the biblical picture of salvation. The biblical idea is that we aren't just drowning, we are already on the bottom of the ocean dead. A

² John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 65

life saver will do us no good. God reaches down and brings us up from the bottom and gives us new life in Christ.

Marc Roby: I think you have used that analogy before, but it is a wonderful illustration of the true, powerful offer of salvation contained in the gospel.

Dr. Spencer: It is a great picture, yes. We do our part when we present the gospel to the people we come in contact with. We have no way of knowing which of them have been chosen by God for eternal life, but we know that those whom God has chosen will be born again by the powerful working of God's Holy Spirit and will then respond to the gospel call with true repentance and faith. They may not respond right away, but that is all in God's hands. The fact that his power is at work in saving people gives us the confidence to preach the gospel. That is why Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes". He knew that the gospel is the instrument through which God brings people to salvation. It isn't just an offer that they can accept or reject, it is true salvation for the elect.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful truth. God will save his people from their sins. Our confidence is in God and his great power, not in our faith, or our good works, or anything else in all creation.

Dr. Spencer: Which is why Paul wrote to the church in Philippi saying, as we read in Philippians 1:6, that he was "confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." Salvation is the work of God from beginning to end. He began it in eternity past by choosing a particular group of people whom he planned to save, he brings it about in the life of every individual believer by causing him or her to hear the gospel, by regenerating them so that they can respond to the gospel in repentance and faith, and then working with them to sanctify them and, ultimately, to bring them into heaven to spend eternity with him.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful and powerful salvation to be sure. I know you have another objection to the doctrine of limited atonement that you want to address, but I think it will have to wait until next week. Right now, I'd like to remind our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We will do our best to respond to you.