

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 addressed the objection raised by some that this doctrine prevents the gospel from being an honest offer of salvation for everyone. Dr. Spencer, what do you want to cover today?

Dr. Spencer: I want to look at another objection brought against the doctrine of limited atonement. Arminians and others will insist that we must affirm that natural man has free will in the sense of being able to accept or reject God's offer. This is really the same objection, just expressed from a different perspective, but it is worth discussing because the different perspective leads the discussion in a slightly different direction.

Marc Roby: Our discussion last week centered on showing that we can be justly held accountable for decisions we make even though those decisions are, at least in part, a result of our own nature, which is not something we ourselves chose or caused.

Dr. Spencer: That's a good short summary. And the core issue was whether or not our ability limits our responsibility. And that is again the core issue in saying that we must affirm man's free will but, as I said, the free will perspective leads us in a slightly different direction.

To be precise, the objection assumes that it is unfair of God to judge someone for not responding to the gospel in repentance and faith unless the person is able to do so. In its most extreme form people are viewed as having what is called libertarian free will, which means that their decisions are entirely uncaused. Not only are they not controlled by God, but they are also not controlled by our nature, in other words our desires. They are absolutely free.

Marc Roby: We discussed this topic before and you pointed out, in Session 84, that this view of human free will is really illogical. Unless our decisions are just random events, there *must* be some reason why we choose one thing as opposed to another.

Dr. Spencer: I think that's true. And not only that, but if our choices were completely uncaused, how could we be held morally accountable for them? They would really just be random events, there wouldn't be any intention, good or bad, behind them. In a very real sense, we would not be responsible for our choices. In fact, I don't think you could legitimately call them choices, they would just be events that occurred, and events that involve us but are not deliberately chosen by us. So, far from ensuring that we can be justly held accountable for rejecting the gospel, the idea of libertarian free will destroys human accountability.

Marc Roby: That's an interesting point.

Dr. Spencer: The theologian John Frame makes essentially the same argument. He has a very good short discussion of free will in his book *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*. He wrote that "if human action were completely uncaused, divorced from our character and desires, it would be a

random accident, not a responsible choice. ... So, in my judgment libertarian freedom is not the ground of moral responsibility; indeed, it destroys moral responsibility.”¹

Instead of libertarian free will Frame argues in favor of what is called *compatibilist freedom*. As the name implies, this is a kind of freedom that is compatible with divine sovereignty. It is also, I would say, a freedom that is compatible with reason and experience.

Marc Roby: Alright, can you explain what this freedom is?

Dr. Spencer: It is the freedom to do what you want to do, within the obvious limits of what is physically possible of course. This is more or less what Jonathan Edwards had in mind in his treatise on free will, which we also discussed in Session 84. In this view, my desires and my logical thinking about consequences and so forth all come into play in my decision making, and when all the factors are considered, I do that which I most want to do.

This freedom is logically compatible with God’s sovereignty because my decisions are *not* random and God, with his perfect exhaustive knowledge of me and all of my circumstances, can predict with absolute certainty what I will freely do. He can then also change my circumstances or put thoughts in my mind as needed to bring about exactly the end he so desires. But in no case does the Bible teach that God forces me to do anything, I do have compatibilist freedom.

Marc Roby: Very well. Do you have anything more you want to say on the topic?

Dr. Spencer: Yes. The topic is so important that I want look at it in a slightly different way. And John Frame has a more in-depth treatment of human responsibility and freedom in Chapter 8 of his book *The Doctrine of God* and I think he makes a helpful distinction there between two different uses of the word responsibility.²

Marc Roby: What two uses are those?

Dr. Spencer: Well, we sometimes use the word responsibility to refer to accountability, and sometimes to refer to liability. Accountability assumes that there is an authority who is going to judge us and hold us accountable, while liability has to do with our incurring a debt of some sort because of the actual results of our actions. But the results of our actions can depend on things outside of our control and we are not, therefore, always fully liable for them. So, for example, if I am in a traffic accident, I am accountable for my own actions, but if wrong actions by others contribute to the accident making it much worse than it would otherwise have been, I am not fully liable for all of the damages.

Marc Roby: How does that distinction apply to the issue of human freedom?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first, we are fully responsible, in the sense of being accountable, for our actions. God is the ultimate judge of all and will hold everyone accountable. We are even responsible for our moral nature. Frame correctly says that “We are responsible for what we are.

¹ John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, P&R Publishing, 2006, pg. 96

² John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, P&R Publishing Company, 2002

We did not individually make ourselves evil by nature, but we are responsible for that evil anyway. Our inheritance from Adam is not the result of our individual choice, but we must bear the guilt of it.”³

Marc Roby: I agree that that is the biblical teaching, but it is still hard for people to accept.

Dr. Spencer: Oh, it definitely is hard for us to accept, but it is true. Therefore, if we are Christians, we must embrace it as the truth. And as we’ve noted before, none of us would have done any better than Adam did anyway. God chose the perfect representative. Therefore, there is nothing unfair about it.

In fact, to give a silly example, but one that helps to illustrate the point, imagine some perverse dictator who decides to have a one-on-one basketball game to determine whether or not I get to go on living. I’m much better off if LeBron James plays for me than I would be if I play for myself. Similarly, I think it is safe to assume that Adam was a *better* representative than I would have been.

Marc Roby: Yes, that is a silly, but nonetheless interesting, illustration. And so we are responsible for our actions in the sense of being accountable, even if those actions are determined by our inherited nature. But what about responsibility in the sense of liability? How does that fit into the discussion?

Dr. Spencer: Well, Frame points out correctly that it is biblical to say that ability may, to some extent, limit responsibility in terms of liability. Let me give a biblical example.

Marc Roby: Please do.

Dr. Spencer: After God gave his people the Ten Commandments, he had Moses give them a number of specific examples for how to apply those commandments. For example, in Exodus 22:2-3 we read that “If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed.”⁴

Marc Roby: The second half of that statement makes it obvious that in the first case, it is assumed that the thief broke into the home during the night. And it would seem that this specific application takes into account the fact that I am more capable of a measured response in the daytime than I would be at night.

Dr. Spencer: I think that is exactly the case, yes. If someone breaks in at night you can’t see as well and may have been awakened out of your sleep and not know if the person is just trying to steal something or is a danger to your person or your family, whereas in the daytime you are better able to properly assess the danger to yourself and your family and to respond in a less

³ Ibid, pg. 120

⁴ 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 International Version" are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™.

drastic way. So, the Bible recognizes that while I am accountable for my actions in both scenarios, I am not equally liable for the results of my actions at night because I am not as capable of properly assessing and responding to the situation.

Marc Roby: That's an interesting example.

Dr. Spencer: And let me give just one more, this time from the New Testament. In Luke 12 Jesus told us about two different servants. In Verses 47-48 we read that he said, "That servant who knows his master's will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

Marc Roby: That short parable makes a clear point that being given more knowledge or ability or whatever increases our responsibility.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, in terms of our liability, but not in terms of our accountability. Notice that both servants were punished, so both were held accountable. But the one with greater knowledge was punished more severely. His liability was greater because his knowledge was greater.

Marc Roby: Alright, so how does this apply specifically to the case of limited atonement?

Dr. Spencer: Well, first of all, without God, there would be no ultimate accountability at all. Therefore, Frame wrote that "Without God's control over the universe, there could be no human responsibility."⁵ And he was specifically speaking about responsibility in the sense of accountability in that passage.

Marc Roby: That certainly makes sense. The whole concept of accountability requires that there be someone to whom we are accountable. But what about liability?

Dr. Spencer: Well, when it comes to liability, I think it is clear biblically that people will be judged differently based on how much revelation they have received. For example, in Hebrews 10:26-29 we read that "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"

Marc Roby: That should be terrifying to anyone who has been a member of a good church and then walked away from the faith.

Dr. Spencer: Yes, it should be. And it isn't the most terrifying passage in that regard. In Hebrews 6:4-6 we read, "It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the

⁵ Ibid, pg. 125

heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”

Marc Roby: You're right. That's even more frightening. And praise God that what is impossible with man is possible with God.

Dr. Spencer: Praise God indeed. We also have the parable of the prodigal son to give us hope for those we know who have walked away from the faith. But the point is still powerfully made that the greater our knowledge and experience of the truth, the greater our liability is for rejecting it.

Marc Roby: That is clear. I can also think of another clear verse about our knowledge or ability influencing our liability before God. James warned his readers, in James 3:1, that “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.”

Dr. Spencer: Well, that is not one of my favorite verses, but it does make the point. And tying this all back into the doctrine of limited atonement, I am confident that those who have never heard the gospel will be punished less severely than those who have heard and rejected it. They will still be punished for not seeking God however. We read in Romans 1:20, “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.” But it is still true that the punishment of those with greater revelation will be worse.

Marc Roby: And so God is not unfair in judging all men, independent of whether or not they have heard the gospel message.

Dr. Spencer: That's right. God is not unfair to anyone. He treats some people with perfect justice and he treats his elect with mercy. But no one is treated unjustly.

Marc Roby: That's a very important point.

Dr. Spencer: It is. And so, to wrap up what I want to say about the doctrine of limited atonement, let me simply point out that those who oppose this doctrine don't do so on the basis of biblical exegesis. Rather, they oppose it because their human reason concludes that it is somehow unfair. Then they try to find biblical support for the position. But, as we saw in our previous sessions on this topic, the supposed support they cite is very weak and is equally compatible with the Reformed doctrine. The biblical position is actually clear if you do not allow yourself to sit in judgment over the Word of God.

Marc Roby: I'm reminded of Paul's response to man's objection that God's electing some people to salvation is unfair. In Romans 9:19 Paul states the objection by writing “One of you will say to me: ‘Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?’” In other words, how can you blame me for not repenting and believing if I am unable to do so because of my sinful nature? And he then Paul gives us God's response in Verse 20, “But who are you, O man, to talk

back to God? ‘Shall what is formed say to him who formed it, “Why did you make me like this?”’”

Dr. Spencer: That is the most definitive answer given to us on this topic. Paul would never have had to ask and answer that question if he had been teaching something other than the doctrine of limited atonement.

Marc Roby: We are just about out of time for today, do you have anything else you’d like to add to the discussion?

Dr. Spencer: Yes, in his book *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* John Frame wrote that “The fundamental point here is not the limited extent of the atonement, though that is a biblical teaching. The fundamental point is the *efficacy* of the atonement.”⁶ In other words, the most important issue biblically is that we uphold the truth that God saves his people. He does not just make salvation possible and leave it up to us, he saves us. We were dead in transgressions and sins as we read in Ephesians 2:1 and God made us alive with Christ as it says in Ephesians 2:5.

John Murray wrote that “when we examine the Scripture we find that the glory of the cross of Christ is bound up with the effectiveness of its accomplishment. Christ redeemed us to God by his blood, he gave himself a ransom that he might deliver us from all iniquity. The atonement is efficacious substitution.”⁷ Jesus Christ’s sacrifice actually accomplished our salvation, it did not just make it possible for us to be saved.

Marc Roby: That is a wonderful conclusion. Now let me close by reminding our listeners that they can email their questions and comments to info@whatdoesthewordsay.org. We’ll do our best to answer you.

⁶ John Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*, P&R Publishing, 2006, pg. 153

⁷ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955, pg. 75