

## 61 Mark 10:45

### The Extent of the Atonement

#### Text

45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

#### Introduction

One of the hottest theological debates today is over the question of the extent of the atonement. This is a discussion that usually generates a lot of heat but very little light. Why is it such a big issue? It is not as though scripture does not speak on the issue. Indeed, scripture talks more about the atonement of Christ than many other doctrines. It is not as though there were only a couple of obscure verses. There are many passages that speak with clarity on the matter. Why then the debate? The reason for the debate is two-fold:

First, we are dealing with the atonement of Christ. This is a very important doctrine. This is not like many other less important theological debates. The atonement of Christ is the very heart of Christianity. Thus people often view this as a massive attack on the work of Christ and therefore get very upset.

Second, the number of passages, and the clarity with which they speak is actually part of the problem. There are passages on both sides of the debate that seem quite clear-cut. Thus for the other side to not bow the knee before such obvious passages is a sign of not taking the Bible at face-value. It is an indication of inserting the traditions of man into sacred scripture. Thus, we have the perspicuity of scripture, the inerrancy of scripture, and the atonement of Christ all at stake. This is a debate where emotions run deep.

#### A War of Words

The first thing that we need to get our minds around is the *biblical* meaning of certain words. In debate and rhetoric, the swapping out meaning for the same term is called equivocation. Here is a fun example.

Imagine that we have two boxes. In the left box there is a normal cat. In the right box there is no cat. How many more tails are there in the box on the left? One. Would you further grant that no cat has 8 tails? Then, if there is no cat in this box, and you grant that no cat has 8 tails, and if there is one more tail in this box with the normal cat than this box with no cat, the it follows that a normal cat has 9 tails.

It follows by irresistible logic does it not? Right now you probably feel a bit bamboozled. You know that is not correct, but you are retracing everything in your head to figure out just where I have pulled a fast one. This is how theological debates often go. One or the other side often feels bamboozled. Something is not right, but I'm not sure where it went wrong. This is why it is so important to define our terms. Then we go to scripture to see how it is defining its terms. When we look at this particular debate we see that terms like "all" and "world" are thrown about, and each side understands something different by them. Thus they end up talking past one another rather than to each other. So the question we need to address is "What does scripture mean by these terms?"

## **World**

Many people will point to passages that say that Jesus died for the world and assume settles the matter. If he died for the world, then he died for every single individual that has ever lived. On the surface, this seems like a compelling argument. The term "world" comes from the Greek term *kosmos*. This is where we get the the word "cosmology." What is interesting is that cosmology has nothing to do with people does it? It is about stars and planets and comets and nebula. Kosmos actually has many different definitions. Its primary definition is "order" or "adornment." You may be able to imagine how it came to mean other things. For instance, it also can refer to the universe. After all, the stars and planets and galaxies do adorn the heavens. It can refer to mankind as that which adorns earth. It has no less than 10 different definitions. Sometimes it refers only to the elect, sometimes it refers only to unbelievers. Sometimes it refers to the world order - this system of things, and sometimes it refers to all of mankind. It is really not so simple as simply saying, "Look, it says world." You have to let the context define it for you. Do not read into it your theology.

1. The Entire Universe - John 1:10; 1:3; 17:5
2. The Physical Earth - John 13:1; 16:33; 21:25
3. The World System - John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11 (see also similar usage in Gal 1:4 – Paul)
4. All humanity minus believers - John 7:7; 15:18
5. A Big Group but less than all people everywhere - John 12:19
6. The Elect Only - John 3:17
7. The Non-Elect Only - John 17:9
8. The Realm of Mankind - John 1:10; (this is very probably the best understanding of the word "world" in John 3:16 also)
9. Jews and Gentiles (not just Israel but many Gentiles too) - John 4:42
10. The General Public (as distinguished from a private group) – not those in small private groups - John 7:4

We do not have the time to examine each occurrence. There are enough different definitions that you need to look at the literary context, and the cultural, but also the redemptive-historical context. What was happening at this point in the history of God's redemption? Previously, in the Old Covenant, who were the people of God? Israel. And if anyone wanted to be saved in that era, they had to become Jews and join themselves to the nation of Israel. But with the inauguration of

the New Covenant, all of that changed. We have already seen in our study in Mark, and outward focus on the Gentiles. Already, seeds are being sown for the gospel to go into all the nations. Does this mean that everyone in every nation is going to be saved? No, not at all. It does mean that as the gospel is preached God will be saving people out of every tribe, nation and tongue. So if you wanted to communicate this to 1st century Jews, how could you do it? Salvation is not for Israel only, but for the whole world. The context is national, not individual. It is not saying every individual in the world, but nationally it is for the whole world and not just Israel.

## All, Everyone

The same kind of thing confronts us with the term "all." As with kosmos "world," it is exceedingly rare that it means every single person that has ever lived. It almost always means, "all of a certain group." If you ask me, "Who is coming to your party?" and I reply, "Everyone." Do I mean, "Everyone who has ever lived or ever will live?" Obviously not. It is everyone in our circle of friends or all of the class, or all of a certain group. So the question that needs to be answered in each context is to which group does "all" or "everyone" refer?

## The Many

On the other side of the discussion are terms that seem to limit the scope of those for whom the atonement was made. While we have seen that there are terms which indicate a massive expansion, indeed, and explosion of God's grace to people everywhere, yet there are passages that demonstrate that this expansion is not all-inclusive. Although it now goes out to all the nations, not every individual in every nation is included.

The suffering Servant of Isa 53 is the exact passage that Jesus quoted in our text this morning.

12 . . . he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many,

Not all, but many. It is linguistically possible for many to mean all, but that is clearly not the case here. As Lane notes, "In rabbinic literature, and even more strikingly at Qumran, "the many" is a technical term for the elect community, the eschatological people of God."<sup>1</sup>

Examining Isa 53 more closely, we also see these passages:

8 . . . he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of *my people?*

11 Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, *make many to be accounted righteous*, and he shall bear their iniquities.

Throughout this chapter, the prophet always speaks of "us" and "we" and "our." He was stricken for who? My people. Who is made righteous? The many. If many refers to all people, then this is universalism. Whose iniquities did he bear? The many. Once more in verse 12 he bore the sins of the many. This same group. He is not constantly switching back and forth between people

---

1. Lane, 384.

groups. Thus when Jesus alludes to this passage it carries with it the same notion.

There is more:

**Hebrews 2:16-17** For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of *Abraham*. 17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of *the people*.

He helps who? The offspring of Adam (meaning all mankind)? No, but the offspring of Abraham. He makes propitiation for the sins of the (definite article) people. Not all people or even people, but the people. There is a certain group in mind.

**John 10:11, 15-16** I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for *the sheep*. . . . 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for *the sheep*. 16 And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.

Again, he lays down his life, not for the goats, but for the sheep. While words like "world" are very often used in a restricted manner, there is no way that the sheep can include all of humanity.

Ephesians 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her,

Again, there is no way that the church can include all of humanity. Some people will say, yes the church, but not only the church. But that does not fit the context. Husbands love your wives, Yes, love your wives, but not them only, also love other men's wives." No! It is sinful to love another man's wife in the same way you love your wife! The same problem holds true for the sheep analogy in John 10.

**John 10:24-28** So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." 25 Jesus answered them, "I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me, 26 but you do not believe because you are not part of my flock. 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish,

The whole point of the sheep was to point out things that were true of them and not true of everyone else. "My sheep hear my voice..." "Yes" says the objector, "but not the sheep alone." Yes, actually, the sheep alone. "You do not hear" Jesus says "because you are not my sheep." He gives eternal life to his sheep and them alone. This cannot extend to everyone.

There are many more passages that demonstrate that the atonement was for a definite people group, but we have not the time to explore them. Let me quickly mention a few other places where an argument can be made for a definite atonement.

## The Office of High Priest

The office of high priest had a very definite function to it. The priest would sacrifice an animal to atone for the sins of the people. He would lay his hands on the animal to symbolically transfer the sins of the people to this animal. He would then sacrifice it in their stead. This was never separated from his offering of this sacrifice to God. So closely were they tied that it was called offering a sacrifice, or more simply to make an offering.

Jesus, as our high priest, performs these same functions. Indeed, the only reason that these

offices existed in the past was to point to Christ. Thus Jesus, not only dies for his people, but he intercedes for them. Christians who do not embrace the doctrine of definite atonement insist that Jesus only intercedes for believers. We agree, but how is it that they can separate these roles? How can he be sacrificed for all people but only intercede for the elect? Whoever the sacrifice was made for, that was who the priest interceded for. There was no such thing as bringing a bull or goat for the priest to offer on your behalf, he kills it, and the intercedes for someone else. This leads to the second aspect of this priestly intercession: it was not for all people. The priest wore a breastplate that had 12 stones in it representing the 12 tribes of Israel. Thus when he went into the holy place he was representing the 12 tribes. He represented only God's people. He did not represent all of humanity. He did not intercede for Egypt or Assyria, only for God's covenant people. Both the unity of the office of the priest as well as the covenant people for whom he interceded show that Christ, as our high priest, does the same.

## **The Unity of the Trinity**

We may also examine this from the standpoint of the unity of the Trinity. In John 6:37 we see that the Father gives a certain people to Christ. In verse 44 the Father draws a certain people. The Spirit regenerates certain people. Only the elect are born again by the power of the Spirit. The Spirit does not sanctify everyone; he only sanctifies the elect. God does not glorify everyone; he glorifies only the elect. God does not call everyone (Rom 8:30). So here we have the Father giving the Son only a certain group, the Spirit regenerating only a certain group, the Father only drawing a certain group, then Jesus goes off and does something completely outside of the working of the rest of the Trinity. And without the rest of the work of the Trinity, Jesus' work is futile. He died for a bunch of people that will never be drawn, never be regenerated, never be sanctified, never be called, never be glorified, and that not even Jesus will intercede for. What possible sense can we make of such an act that is completely outside the activity of the rest of the Trinity and that accomplishes nothing anyway? It makes no sense.

## **The Nature of the Atonement**

Finally, we must consider the nature of the atonement. And as with everything else we have touched upon thus far, we can only give this a brief sketch. Did Jesus die for the sins of the world? If by that you mean that he died for the sins of all the people that have ever lived, then no one will be in Hell. Everyone gets into heaven. All people everywhere are saved. For if there is no sin in a person, for what can God possibly punish them? Our God is a just God, and he will not punish the innocent. Thus, if Jesus took away the sin of the world, then the world no longer has sin that God can punish. This is universalism. Perhaps some will say that Jesus just made a large deposit that we can one day draw on for our salvation. Thus he didn't actually save anyone, he just made salvation possible. And when people believe, they tap into his massive Swiss bank account and draw out what they need to pay their debt. As popular of a notion as that is, it has no biblical foundation whatsoever. We may examine our text from Mark as an example. Jesus came to lay down his life as a ransom. If we grant that "the many" actually means all people everywhere (which it doesn't), the

stated purpose is that of a ransom. So did Jesus fail? If the design was to ransom all people, then he failed to accomplish what he intended to do. He did not secure their release. There is nothing in this passage about a potential ransom.

Luke 19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Ro 5:10 For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

Re 5:9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast ***redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;***

Ac 20:28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, ***which he hath purchased with his own blood.***

Mt 1:21 And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Ro 3:25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;

There is nothing potential about the sacrifice of Christ. It is always spoken of as an actual atonement, actual propitiation, actual ransom, actual redemption. If it was only potential, how could Christ say on the cross, "It is finished?"

Let me close with the words of J.I. Packer:

So far from magnifying the love and grace of God, this claim dishonors both it and Him, for it reduces God's love to an impotent wish and turns the whole economy of "saving" grace, so-called ("saving" is really a misnomer on this view), into a monumental divine failure. Also, so far from magnifying the merit and worth of Christ's death, it cheapens it, for it makes Christ die in vain. Lastly, so far from affording faith additional encouragement, it destroys the Scriptural ground of assurance altogether, for it denies that the knowledge that Christ died for me (or did or does anything else for me) is a sufficient ground for inferring my eternal salvation; my salvation, on this view, depends not on what Christ did for me, but on what I subsequently do for myself. Thus, this view takes from God's love and Christ's redemption the glory that Scripture gives them, and introduces the anti-scriptural principle of self-salvation at the point where the Bible explicitly says: "not of works, lest any man should boast." You cannot have it both ways: an atonement of universal extent is a depreciated atonement. It has lost its saving power; it leaves us to save ourselves. The doctrine of the general ransom must accordingly be rejected, as Owen rejects it, as a grievous mistake. By contrast, however, the doctrine which Owen sets out, as he himself shows, is both biblical and God-honoring. It exalts Christ, for it teaches Christians to glory in His Cross alone, and to draw their hope and assurance only from the death and intercession of their Saviour.