

O Perfect Redemption!

An Introduction to the Extent of the Atonement

Selected Scriptures

Mike Riccardi

Introduction

Well, it is an immense privilege to be back in the GraceLife Pulpit. I've said it before and I'll say it again: of the all the responsibilities that I have—from Local Outreach to teaching at the Seminary—opening the Word of God to the dear saints in GraceLife is the most treasured privilege of my ministry. And so it was difficult for me, over these past few months, to take a bit of a sabbatical from preaching in GraceLife. As I sat listening to the sermons that the brothers preached, it was all I could do to not jump up and say, “Yes! And *this* verse, and *that* exhortation, and *this* application!” Good preaching always makes preachers want to preach. And the men did such a wonderful job; I'm so grateful to them for their labors. But even so, as I say, it *was* difficult for me to sit on the sidelines for the past several months.

But it was necessary. Just a brief comment by way of reminder, and to inform those of you who *don't* know, that time away from preaching responsibilities was necessary as I worked on a very key portion of my PhD dissertation. (Many of you have asked what the topic is for my dissertation, and it takes a bit of time to explain it thoroughly, but my broad topic is the extent of the atonement—the question of, “For whom did Christ die? Did Christ die on the cross for every single individual who has ever lived throughout human history, or did He die on the cross only for those whom the Father chose and gave to Him—those who will eventually come to faith in Christ and be saved?”) And this chapter was the second of four—so I still have two more to go, plus a conclusion, and so you can keep praying for me.

But this was a very key chapter for me, where I made a thorough positive presentation for the doctrine of particular redemption—the teaching that Christ died on the cross only for those who will finally be saved, that is, all those the Father had given Him; namely, the elect of God. And I knew going into it that it was going to be a disproportionately large chapter; my first chapter was about 60 pages; I thought this chapter *might* get to around 100. By the time I was finished writing, Chapter 2 had clocked in at a cool 174 pages. Those of you who know me well are not surprised. When it came time for my doctoral colloquium—where I present my progress before the faculty and they decide whether I've passed or failed—the first thing they said to me was, “Well, Mike, this is a record.” But the good news is, I passed, and I'm on to working on the next chapter.

And I really want to extend my heartfelt thanks to you, for being so patient with me while I was away. The kind of writing that that kind of project requires I'm not able to do without being totally consumed by it. And combining that chapter with regular preaching preparation—where I have to be just as consumed—would have proven to be a greater challenge than I think I could've met. And so I thank you all, for giving me that time.

And I'm happy to report that it was not only a productive time, but it was a rich time for me as well. I certainly had done enough research to know what I was going to say, but there's something about actually having to sit down to write it out that wrings the extra drops of truth out of the text. I learned so much in these last few months. There were things that I had believed before that I began to see so much more clearly—in so much sharper relief than I had ever seen them. Precious truths about the Triunity of God, about the priesthood of Christ, about the believer's union with Christ, about what it means for Christ to be the head and mediator of the New Covenant, and about the glories of what Christ accomplished in His death on the cross. There was so much more of my Savior that I got to enjoy as I set my mind on Calvary's cross, and meditated upon what the Triune God designed and what the Son of God achieved when He died on the cross to atone for our sins.

And as I've prayed and sought counsel about what to preach next, I've not been able to get away from the fact that I so strongly desire to share what I've seen during this time of intense study with you, the people the Lord has given me to shepherd and care for. It was being away from this pulpit that allowed me to dive as deep as I was able to dive, and to enjoy as much as I was able to enjoy, and so now I can't shake the desire to bring the benefit of all that study and worship to the people I love most.

And so, after seeking the Lord in prayer and talking with Phil and some of the other leaders in GraceLife, I've decided to do a series on the atonement, and specifically, on the *extent* of the atonement—on the issue of, “For *whom* did Christ die?” Now, I'm not just going to preach my dissertation; I wouldn't do that to you; I'm not that cruel. But I want to spend a series of sermons digging into Scripture with you about what the Bible teaches concerning the **design**, the **nature**, and the **extent** of the atonement. That is to say, (a) what God intended for the cross to accomplish, (b) what the cross actually accomplished, and (c) for whom it was accomplished. All of those realities—the design, the nature, and the extent of the atonement—are inextricably linked. What you believe about any one of those issues necessarily affects what you believe about the other two. What you believe about for whom Christ died has necessary implications about what you believe God has intended in Christ's atonement, and about what you believe the atonement itself actually is.

And so this morning's sermon is going to be an introduction to this series on the atonement, which I'm entitling, “O Perfect Redemption!” That's a lyric from the second verse of one of our

most beloved hymns, *To God Be the Glory*, which we sang just a bit earlier: “O perfect redemption, the purchase of blood! / To every believer the promise of God.” The redemption that Christ accomplished on the cross is a *perfect* redemption. It is *perfectly* efficacious. Nothing needs to be added to it to give it its power or efficacy. It is so perfect that saving power and efficacy flow *from* it. Christ’s blood *of itself* saves those for whom it is shed. And we can only affirm that—we can only consistently affirm the perfection of the redemption that Christ accomplished—when we affirm that it perfectly saves each and every one for whom Christ died. And since we know that not everyone will finally be saved, we are constrained to conclude that Christ has not died for all without exception, but for His people alone. This *perfect* redemption must be a *particular* redemption. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

And so in this our introductory message, I want to ask **two broad questions**—two questions that will set up our series, and prepare us to dig in to the glories of Christ’s cross. And those two questions are: **what**, and **why**. Number one: What exactly are we talking about when we talk about the extent of the atonement? And number two: Why should we care about the extent of the atonement?

I. What: The Issue at Hand

Well, let’s consider that **first question: What** exactly are we talking about when we speak of the extent of the atonement? And the answer to that question is: the issue of the extent of the atonement concerns for whom Christ died in His atoning death on the cross. As I put it earlier: “Did Christ die on the cross for every single individual who has ever lived throughout human history? Or did He die on the cross only for those whom the Father chose and gave to Him—those who will eventually come to faith in Christ and be saved?”

To put it another way, we know that Christ’s atonement was a substitutionary sacrifice. Hebrews 9:26 calls Christ’s death a sacrifice when it says, “Now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the *sacrifice* of Himself.” And more passages than we can count describe that sacrifice as a work of substitution—that is, that in His death Jesus was standing in our place and bearing the punishment for our sins. Isaiah 53:4: He bore our griefs; He carried our sorrows. Verse 5: “He was pierced through for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our well-being fell upon Him, and by His scourging we are healed.” Verse 6: “The Lord has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him.” So, we know that Christ’s atonement was a substitutionary sacrifice. To ask what the extent of the atonement is, then, is to ask, “In whose place, and on whose behalf, did Christ offer Himself as a substitutionary sacrifice to the Father? Whose punishment did Christ bear? Was it the punishment due to every individual sinner who has ever lived or will live—even those who do not trust in Christ and experience eternal punishment in hell? Or was it the punishment of the elect alone—those who trust in Christ and so who will never bear that punishment?”

To use another motif, we know that Christ's atonement was a work of *propitiation*. Romans 3:25: "God displayed [Christ Jesus] publicly as a *propitiation* in His blood through faith." Hebrews 2:17: "He had to be made like His brethren in all things, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to *make propitiation* for the sins of the people." Now, propitiation is a term that simply means the satisfaction of anger—the appeasement of wrath. And so, if the atonement is a propitiation, to ask what the extent of the atonement is is to ask, "Against whose sins did Christ satisfy the Father's wrath?" Did Christ satisfy the wrath of God against the sins of every individual sinner who has ever lived or will live—including those Old Testament unbelievers like Pharaoh and Goliath, who were in hell suffering the wrath of God at the very same moment that Christ was bearing the wrath of God on the cross? Or did He satisfy the wrath of God against the sins of the elect alone—those who will never experience the wrath of God for themselves?

And we could cycle through all the motifs of the atonement in the same way. Reconciliation: Romans 5:10 says, "while we were enemies we were *reconciled* to God through the death of His Son." Whom did Christ reconcile to God? Every person in history, including those who will be banished from the presence of God forever in hell? Or the elect alone, who will enjoy peace restored with their Creator forever in heaven? Redemption: 1 Peter 1:18–19: "You were *redeemed* with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ." Which slaves did Christ purchase out of the slave market of sin by the price of His blood? Whom did He set free from captivity and deliver from bondage by His redeeming death? All without exception, including those who perish eternally in the bonds of their sin? Or the elect alone, who will walk in freedom on the New Earth, apart from a hint of the presence of sin?

That is the question we're asking when we deal with the matter of the extent of the atonement. The revered theologian Louis Berkhof has framed the issue in a way that is quoted by just about everyone who engages in the discussion of the extent of the atonement. He asked, "Did the Father in sending Christ, and did Christ in coming into the world to make atonement for sin, do this with the design or for the purpose of saving only the elect or all men?" (394). That is the question before us.

And in the history of theology, the answers to that question have typically fallen into the two broad categories you've heard me present several times already. The first is answer has been called "universal atonement" or "unlimited atonement." That is to say, on the cross Christ paid for the sins of every human person who has ever lived or will live, without exception. And some people see this as an absolutely uncontroversial position. After all, if Scripture says that Christ gave His life as a ransom for *all*, 1 Timothy 2:6, and that He is the propitiation for the sins of the *whole world*, 1 John 2:2, and that He desires *all* men to be saved, 1 Timothy 2:4, and if He

commands us to preach the Good News of salvation to *all* without exception, how could there even be a debate? Christ died for all men and every man!

The second category of answer is known as “particular redemption,” or “definite atonement,” or, somewhat unhappily, “limited atonement.” “Limited atonement” refers to the notion that the extent of Christ’s atonement is limited to the elect. That is, on the cross Christ paid for the sins only of those whom the Father has unconditionally chosen in eternity past to receive salvation—who, as a result of the Father’s choice, will eventually be regenerated by the Holy Spirit, will be granted faith in Christ, and will finally be saved. Within a few years of that position being called limited atonement, advocates of that view offered alternative names for it, because they recognized how open to misinterpretation the language of “limitation” is. “How can you *limit* the death of Christ?!” And of course, those who hold this position do not at all mean to suggest that the worth, or merit, or value, or sufficiency of Christ’s death is restricted in any way. It simply means that its extent—the number of persons to whom it extends—is limited to those who actually partake of its saving benefits: the elect alone rather than all people without exception.

And so people began calling this position “*particular* redemption,” insisting on the idea that Christ died for individual sinners *in particular*. Particular redemption holds that Christ didn’t die for a faceless, nameless category of people who would eventually decide to believe in Him, but rather He died to pay for the sins of specific sinners in particular, whom the Father gave to the Son, and whom, as the Good Shepherd, Christ knew by name.

Another term for this view, as I said, has been *definite* atonement. What does that mean? Well, while there are certainly some exceptions, those who believe that Christ died for all without exception usually do not believe that all without exception will finally be saved. According to them, universal atonement does not entail universal salvation. The fact that Christ died for you doesn’t guarantee that you’ll be saved. You have to accept the gift; you have to receive the provision. And so the atonement of Christ gets reimaged to be not an efficacious accomplishment which guarantees salvation, but a resistible provision which makes salvation possible. Proponents of a definite atonement reject that, and say: No, Christ’s atonement is not an indefinite provision by which He makes salvation possible; it is a definite achievement by which He makes salvation inevitable.

And so those are the two broad camps. On the one side you have universal atonement, which says that Christ dies for all without exception and makes their salvation possible. And on the other side you have particular redemption or definite atonement, which says that Christ dies for the elect alone, and by that death makes their salvation certain.

That is the issue at hand. The issue is not about whether we can preach the Gospel to all people. Both sides agree that Christ genuinely offers Himself as Savior to everyone who would turn from

their sins and trust in Him for righteousness, and that we have a duty to call all people without exception to come to faith in Christ. There is no contradiction between a particular redemption and a universal offer of the Gospel.

Neither is the issue to ask, “For the forgiveness of whose sins is Christ’s work sufficient?” Both sides agree that Christ’s death was sufficient to save every individual who ever lived, and more, if that was God’s intention. If somehow God were to add one person to the number of His elect, Christ would not have to suffer any more than He did 2,000 years ago on Calvary.

Nor is there disagreement on who will finally be saved. As I said, for the most part, even those who believe Christ died for all without exception do not believe that all without exception will be saved. Both sides agree that the benefits of Christ’s salvation are only applied to those who repent and believe.

And finally, this isn’t a dispute over whether any non-saving benefits resulting from the atonement accrue to the non-elect. Both sides agree that even the non-elect experience mercy as an indirect result of the atonement. But particularists observe that Christ does not have to pay for the sins of the non-elect for them to receive some indirect benefit as a result of His atonement for the elect.

Instead of all these issues, the precise question that we’re asking is: “In whose place did Christ stand as a substitutionary sacrifice when He bore the full fury of His Father’s righteous wrath against sin?” In whose place? And to that question, we answer: “Only those who will never bear that wrath themselves, namely, the elect alone.”

Now, one of the reasons this debate frustrates people has to do with the methodology that people usually employ. Too often, proponents of universal atonement throw out proof texts that contain the words “all” or “world” and consider the matter closed. “What are you, blind? ‘For God so loved the *world*!’ ‘Ransom for *all*!’ Stop trying to force your theological system on the plain reading of Scripture!” But that kind of approach is simply not helpful, because it fails to read these texts in their immediate context, as well as in the broader context of the rest of Scripture. Too often, what is claimed to be the *plain* reading is really nothing more than a *superficial* reading.

And we’ll devote an entire sermon to understanding those universalistic passages in their contexts, but there are several texts where “all” and “world” simply cannot be interpreted to be speaking of every individual without exception. For example, in John 12:19, when the Pharisees said of Jesus, “Look, the *world* has gone after Him,” we understand that they didn’t mean that everyone alive on the whole earth at the time had begun to follow Christ. “World” has to be

interpreted in its context. It's an exaggeration by the Pharisees that refers to a lot of people, but not to all without exception.

The same thing is true for the word "all." In Mark chapter 1 verse 5, we're told, "And *all* the country of Judea was going out to [John the Baptist], and *all* the people of Jerusalem; and they *were being baptized* by him in the Jordan River, confessing their sins." But in Luke 7:30, it says, "But the Pharisees and the lawyers rejected God's purpose for themselves, *not having been baptized by John*." Now, surely the Pharisees and lawyers were part of Judea and Jerusalem. But Mark says *all* were baptized, and Luke says *they* weren't baptized. Either we have a contradiction in Scripture, or we must realize that the word "all" does not always mean "all without exception." In fact, it rarely means "all without exception." Instead, it can and often does mean "all without distinction," or "all of a certain group."

These examples teach us that universal language—words like "all" and "world"—are not self-interpreting. When we see those terms in Scripture, we shouldn't automatically read them to mean "all without exception," as if any other interpretation is just systematic theology running roughshod over the text of Scripture. Like anything else in the Bible, universal language needs to be properly interpreted according to its context and in harmony with the entirety of biblical teaching.

It's a bit like the way we understand the Trinity. The biblical doctrine of the Trinity isn't a product of any particular texts or set of texts that explicitly state, "God is one indivisible essence eternally subsisting in three coequal consubstantial persons." No, that is a formulation based on texts that (a) God is one, that (b) the Father, Son, and Spirit, are each God, and that (c) the Father, Son, and Spirit are not each other. And so, passages that emphasize Jesus' subordination to the Father according to His human nature have to be harmonized with texts that emphasize Jesus' equality to the Father according to His divine nature. In a similar way, the biblical doctrine of the extent of the atonement is not a product of any particular text or set of texts that explicitly state, "Jesus died for all people in history without exception," or "Jesus died for the elect alone and no one else." It is a product of holding together all of the Bible's teaching not just on the *extent* of the atonement, but also on the *design* and *nature* of the atonement. And so texts that speak of the atonement in universalistic terms have to be harmonized with (a) texts that speak of God's intention to save a particular people, and (b) texts that teach that the Father and Son are perfectly united in their saving intentions, and (c) texts that Christ's atonement is not a hypothetical or potential provision for salvation but an efficacious accomplishment of salvation.

And that's what we're going to do in this series. We're not going to engage in a game of proof-text volleyball: "This verse says *all*!" "Oh yeah?! Well *this* verse says *many*!" That gets us nowhere. For example, in Mark chapter 10 verse 45, a familiar verse, we read: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a *ransom for many*." But then

in 1 Timothy 2:6, Paul says, Christ “gave Himself as a *ransom for all*.” Both verses use almost identical language: “give His life a ransom,” and “gave Himself a ransom,” right up until the comment on the extent of that ransom. And one verse says “many,” and the other says, “all.” Now, if both sides simply stack the commentators who say “all” means “many” against the commentators who say that “many” means “all,” people get frustrated and the discussion reaches a stalemate.

But the way around that stalemate is actually to recognize that, ironically, we’re focusing too exclusively on the extent language—many versus all—without giving enough consideration to the nature language. That is to say, in Mark 10:45 and 1 Timothy 2:6, what does it mean to give oneself as a ransom? Does it mean to make captives rescuable by the provision of an offer? Or does it mean to set captives free by the payment of a price? And not only nature language, but design language. What was the design of the Father in sending Christ to give His life as that ransom? Was it to try to ransom as many captives as possible? And if so, has the Father failed in His design? Has Christ failed in His mission? Or was the Father’s intention to actually achieve the ransom of all those and only those who will finally come to faith in Christ and be saved?

You see, those who hold to a universal atonement misinterpret “all” and “world” preeminently by failing to see the scope of the atonement as a function of the scheme and the substance of the atonement. There is a rush to declare whom the atonement is for—“Don’t you see?! It says, ‘*whole world!*’”—and then to make that the interpretive lens through which we decide what the atonement is, and why the atonement is. “Yes, it says ‘whole world,’ but it also says *propitiation*. And propitiation does not mean *potential* propitiation, but the *actual* efficacious satisfaction of wrath. And so if ‘whole world’ means ‘all without exception,’ then everybody’s going to heaven.” “Yes, it says ‘all,’ but it also says that Christ Jesus came into the world to *save* sinners, not to make sinners savable.”

So you see, in coming to the question of the extent of the atonement, we must first understand what the Bible teaches concerning the Triune God’s intention for the atonement, and what the Bible teaches concerning the nature of what Christ accomplished, and then interpret the scope of the atonement in light of its scheme and substance. And that is what we’ll do in this series.

II. Why: Reasons We Should Care

Well, so much, then, for the what question. Now, let’s ask **why**. Why should we care about the extent of the atonement? “I mean, isn’t this just theological hair-splitting? Isn’t it just a controversy for overly-intellectual types and people who like to argue about words? Aren’t there good people who come down on both sides of the issue? It’s not like if you get this wrong you’re not a Christian, right?” So what does it matter? **Why** would we devote *any* sermons to this subject, let alone a whole series? Well, I want to give you **four reasons**.

First, **sound doctrine ought to be the delightful pursuit of every child of God.** There is nothing more important than the truth. And we who have turned from our sins and put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ—we who claim to be disciples of the One who said, “I am the *Truth*”—ought to be eager to devote all our energy to searching out the divine mind as He has revealed the truth to us in the Scriptures. If it is in the text, it ought to be our delightful preoccupation. It used to be said that theology is the queen of the sciences. By that it was meant that there is no higher, nobler, more worthwhile inquiry for the human mind to be occupied with than the contemplation of God and the glory of His attributes and actions. Disciplining our minds and hearts to patiently and faithfully dig through the Word of God in order to accurately and adequately understand who our God is and what He has done for us through Christ is what it means to have a relationship with our God. It is the substance of the Christian life.

And that reality is represented in the New Testament—especially in those three letters of Paul to Timothy and Titus that we call the Pastoral Epistles, the books that focus so precisely on what it means to be the church in this world as we await the return of our Savior. And one thing we can take away from these letters is that sound doctrine is the lifeblood of the church.

In Titus chapter 1, Paul calls upon young Pastor Titus to appoint elders in the churches, and so he gives him the list of qualifications for the one who would serve as an overseer and under-shepherd of Christ’s flock. And he says, in Titus 1:9, that the overseer must “be able both to *exhort in sound doctrine* and to refute those who contradict.” A fundamental function of spiritual leadership is to instruct and exhort the believers in *sound doctrine*. In Titus chapter 2, verse 1, Paul says, “But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for *sound doctrine*.” *Declare* these things, Titus! Verse 5: “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you!” Verse 7: “In all things show yourself to be an example of good deeds, with *purity in doctrine*.” The Word of God commands us to maintain purity in our doctrine—to not let our understanding of the teachings of the Christian faith become polluted with error. And that means we must devote ourselves to be ever examining our doctrine, ever subjecting it to the searching light of Scripture, constantly conforming our thoughts to what we see in the text, repenting of our faith in falsehoods, and eagerly embracing the truth. In 1 Timothy 4:6, Paul says to Timothy, “In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, constantly *nourished* on the words of the faith and of the *sound doctrine* which you have been following.” Sound doctrine, friends, is the *nourishment* of the child of God. It is the food for your soul.

And so if you’re one of these people who says, “I can’t stand all this doctrine! I’m not a fan of all this theology! We should just be preaching the Bible!” friend, you don’t understand the Bible! You have an entirely different understanding of the Bible than the Apostle Paul did. Sound doctrine precisely that which God has breathed forth *in* the Bible, which He then gifts faithful

preachers to draw out of the text and proclaim to His people! J. I. Packer wrote a book called, *A Quest for Godliness*. It's a fantastic book on the life and ministry of the Puritans. And in his chapter on Puritan preaching, he notes that one of the distinctives of Puritan preaching was that it was doctrinal in its content. And what he says is insightful. He writes, "Theology—truth about God and man—is what God has put into the texts of Scripture, and theology is what preachers must draw out of them. To the question, 'Should one preach doctrine?', the Puritan answer would have been, 'Why, what else is there to preach?'" (284–85). I love that! That is absolutely right! God has given us nothing to preach *but* doctrine! What is Bible exposition if it is not bringing forth the teaching of the text of Scripture—teaching about God, teaching about Christ, teaching about man, teaching about sin, teaching about salvation, teaching about godly living—and then to bring that teaching to bear on the minds and hearts and lives of believers?

Packer goes on, "Puritan preachers were not afraid to bring the profoundest theology into the pulpit if it bore on their hearers' salvation, nor to demand that men and women apply themselves to mastering it, nor to diagnose unwillingness to do so as a sign of insincerity. Doctrinal preaching certainly bores the hypocrites; but it is only doctrinal preaching that will save Christ's sheep. The preacher's job is to proclaim the faith, not to provide entertainment for unbelievers—in other words, to feed the sheep rather than amuse the goats" (285). So **why** do a series on the extent of the atonement? Because it is a matter of sound doctrine. And sound doctrine ought to be the delightful pursuit of every child of God.

A second reason: **there is no more worthy pursuit in the world than the knowledge of Christ and Him crucified**. If, as we said before, theology is the queen of the sciences—and it is—then the atonement of Christ is the *crown* atop the queen's head. To know Christ is the essence of eternal life. Jesus Himself said this in His high priestly prayer. In John 17:3, the Son says to the Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Eternal life is to know Christ! And Christ is most intimately known where He is most thoroughly revealed. And He is most thoroughly revealed in His work as our Great High Priest, wherein He stands as Mediator between God and man, and satisfies the wrath of God against our sins.

I want you to turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 2, and to read 1 Corinthians 2:2 with your own eyes. Paul says, "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Now, the Apostle Paul was no one-trick pony. He was not a hobby-horse preacher. In his farewell sermon to the elders of the church of Ephesus, he said in Acts 20:27, "I did not shrink from declaring to you the *whole counsel* of God." But here in 1 Corinthians 2:2, Paul boils down the content of his entire ministry, and he says it can all be summed up—the sum and substance, the very marrow of his ministry—is Jesus Christ, and Him crucified! And this is not hyperbole. This is not a hasty rhetorical flourish. Look at the texts: "For I *determined*." The Puritan John Flavel comments on this. He says, "It is as if he should say, it is my stated, settled

judgment; not a hasty, inconsiderate censure, but the product and issue of my most serious and exquisite enquiries. After I have well weighed the case, turned it round, viewed it exactly on every side, balanced all advantages and disadvantages, pondered all things, that are fit to come into consideration about it; this is the result and final determination, that all other knowledge, how profitable, how pleasant soever, is not worthy to be named in the same *day* with the knowledge of Jesus Christ.” Glorious!

As high a place that the study of sound doctrine ought to have in our lives, the study of the doctrine of the atonement must stand perched atop the rest! There is no doctrine more excellent, no knowledge more pleasant, no study so worthy as the doctrine of Jesus Christ and Him crucified—as the knowledge of the person of our Savior, and the work He accomplished on the cross to be our Savior. “I count all things to be loss,” Paul says, “in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord,” Philippians 3:8. All other knowledge in the world is nothing but rubbish—nothing but dung—in comparison to knowing Christ! In Him, Colossians 2:3, “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge!” Oh, how we must give ourselves to the knowledge of Christ! Flavel says again, “Take away the knowledge of Christ, and a Christian is the most sad and melancholy creature in the world! [And yet], let Christ but manifest himself, and dart the beams of his light into their souls, it will make them kiss the stakes, sing in the flames, and shout in the pangs of death, as men that divide the spoil.” The knowledge of Christ is the marrow of life! And we know Him most intimately from the greatest of His works: His great work of atonement for sins.

The atoning work of the Lord Jesus Christ on the cross stands as the very epicenter of Christianity. It is no exaggeration to say that the cross-work of Christ is the very heart of the Gospel. Scripture calls the Gospel message by which we are saved, “the word of the *cross*,” 1 Corinthians 1:18. The Apostles call unbelievers, “enemies of the *cross* of Christ,” Philippians 3:18–19. When Paul wanted to summarize for the Corinthians the Gospel that he preached, he encapsulated it by speaking of the work of Christ on the cross, 1 Corinthians 15:3: “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.” The cross is the very content of the Gospel itself, for Paul says, 1 Corinthians 1:23: “We preach Christ crucified.” Paul summed up his entire Christian life in Galatians 2:20, saying, “I have been *crucified* with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.” It was the atonement of Christ that established Paul’s identity! “I live by faith in the One who gave Himself for me on the cross!”

In Revelation chapter 5 verse 9, the Apostle John gives us a window into heaven, where we get to see what occupies the saints who behold Christ face to face in glory. And we find that the atoning work of Christ on the cross will be the subject of our eternal praise: “Worthy are You, O Christ, to take the book and to break its seals, *for*”—You are worthy, *because*—“You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and

nation.” Dear Christian, unto eternity, you will never get over the cross of Christ! The cross will be the subject of your eternal praise of the Savior! O, how it ought to be the preoccupation of your praise to Him now!

John Newton gave us wise counsel when he said, “I advise you by all means to keep close to the atonement. The doctrine of the cross is the sun in the [solar] system of truth.” And the Scottish preacher Hugh Martin captured it well when he wrote, “The Church flickers in her divine life, and becomes shallow in her divine knowledge, when she thinks she has ascertained all that is implied in the death of Christ. ... She ought to be filled with a habitual and holy astonishment in her daily believing contemplations of ‘that wondrous cross on which the [Prince] of glory dies.’”

O friends, there is no more worthy pursuit in the world than the knowledge of Christ and Him crucified. And what hypocrites we would be, if the praises of the cross are on our lips—“Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross,” “When I Survey the Wonderous Cross,” “In the Cross of Christ I Glory,” “Sing O Sing of My Redeemer,” “Lift High the Cross” “Jesus Paid It All,” “And can it be that I should gain an interest in my Savior’s blood,”—what miserable hypocrites we would be if the praises of the cross were on our lips, but the *thoughts* of the cross were absent from our meditations, and the *proclamation* of the cross absent from our pulpits! Our doxology will only rise as high as our theology goes deep. How eager we should be for a series of sermons on the cross!

A third reason: **our position on the extent of the atonement has necessary implications for our understanding of the nature of the atonement**. Some people would listen to that previous point and say, “Amen! The cross should be our daily focus! The atonement ought to be our *perennial* object of meditation! But the atonement and the extent of the atonement are two different things. *That* Christ died for sins is the very heart of the Gospel. But *for whom* He died—isn’t that just a fine point of doctrine?” And my answer to that is: absolutely not. If we agree that the nature of Christ’s cross work runs to the very heart of the Gospel, we’re not straying very far from the very heart of the Christian faith when we ask, “For whom has Christ accomplished these things?” If the Son of God has destroyed the power of sin—if He has purchased the redemption by which sinners may be freed from divine judgment—can there be any more important follow-up question than, “For whom has He done these things?” Sinclair Ferguson says it well. He writes, “How one thinks about the nature, effects, and extent of the atonement has an inevitable impact, directly or indirectly, on preaching, teaching, and pastoral counseling. If part of the minister’s task is to help his congregation to sing in joyful wonder in response to the gospel, ‘Amazing love, how can it be, That thou my God should’st die for me?’ then the meaning of his dying ‘for me’ cannot be ignored” (*FHHC*, 608–09).

And that is exactly right. Because, as I’ve been saying, you simply cannot divorce the extent of the atonement from the nature of the atonement. What you believe about for whom Christ died

has necessary implications about what you believe the atonement itself actually is. Without fail, when someone says that Christ has atoned for the sins of all people throughout history without exception, unless they believe all people will finally be saved, they necessarily redefine the nature of what Christ accomplished on the cross. Now, the cross doesn't *save* men; it makes men *saveable*. It makes their salvation *possible*—available—if they can summon the wisdom to accept this kind offer. And so what has happened? By universalizing its extent, they limit its efficacy. Because now, since the atonement has been made on behalf of all people without exception, and not all people without exception go to heaven, something other than the atonement becomes the decisive determining factor for salvation. Namely, the depraved sinner's response to the atonement. And at that point, it is not Christ who saves. It is not the cross that saves. It is our *response* to the cross that saves. And that, friends, strikes at the very heart of the Gospel itself. And so Professor Stephen Wellum puts it well when he writes, "Ultimately what is at stake in the debate over the extent of the atonement is a Savior who saves, a cross that effectively accomplishes and secures all the gracious promises of the new covenant, and a redemption that does not fail" (*FHHC*, 539).

And so you see, those of us who hold to a particular redemption—and who treat the issue as a matter of consequence rather than indifference—our chief concern is not to exclude people from the benefits of redemption! Like, "We believe in a *limited* atonement! And it's not for *you*! So go stand over there!" No! Our chief concern is to safeguard the achievements of Christ's cross from being robbed of their power. And so this is no trifling matter, friends. We need to get this right.

A **fourth** and final **reason** for studying the extent of the atonement: because **doctrine shapes life**. The strength for holy living is rooted in our understanding of the Gospel—of who are in Christ because of what He has accomplished on our behalf. Have you ever noticed that the very first command of the Book of Romans doesn't appear until chapter 6 and verse 11? There is not a single command in the Book of Romans until the middle of chapter six! Why? Because the child of God is not set upon a proper foundation to make progress in sanctification until he is utterly assured of the truth about himself as a sinner condemned before God and rescued solely by the grace of Christ.

Five-plus chapters of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of both Jew and Gentile, the condemnation of all people under God's law, the revelation of God's righteousness in Jesus Christ, the efficacy of His propitiatory sacrifice on the cross, justification by the imputation of the righteousness of Christ received through faith alone apart from works, union with Christ in His death and resurrection—and then, in 6:11, the first command after all of that doctrine is, "Even so *consider* yourselves to be dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus." *Think* of yourselves this way! Bring all of this doctrine to bear on your understanding of your identity! And "Therefore," Romans 6:12, on that basis, "do not let sin reign in your mortal body." If, in order to fight sin, I have to consider myself to be a certain way on the basis of what Christ has

accomplished for me on the cross, ignorance or error concerning what Christ has accomplished for me will inevitably hamstring my obedience. If I am to conduct myself in a manner worthy of the Gospel, Philippians 1:27—if all of my life is to be shaped by the Gospel by which I’ve been saved—then a misunderstanding of the cross, the very heart of that Gospel, will necessarily sabotage my growth in holiness.

And I can tell you, friends, there is so much of Christ to be enjoyed, and marveled at, and worshiped, because of what He’s accomplished on the cross. So much that can’t be seen when we have an unbiblical view of the extent of the atonement, and therefore, the nature and design of the atonement. How interconnected the work of Christ is with all the great doctrines of the Bible—the Trinity, the doctrine of Union with Christ, the priesthood of Christ, the New Covenant—these are the things into which angels long to look! We don’t want to just rake leaves, as it were, across the surface of the Scriptures. We want to dig into the Scriptures, and mine diamonds. And those diamonds that show forth the glories of your Savior are a feast for the soul, that strengthens it for all manner of faithfulness and holy living.

And ultimately, friends, what we’re after is that Christ would receive the glory He is worthy of. We want to worship Christ for what He’s *done* on the cross—not for what we’ve *reimagined* Him to have done! He deserves to be praised for the Savior that He *is*, not the Savior that our mistaken interpretations and fallen notions of fairness have re-envisioned Him to be. And so we’re going to dig in.