

It's Time to Address This False Doctrine Regarding Jesus' Atonement

We need to understand the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ in order to lay hold of the full benefits made available to us by His death and resurrection. We also need to understand His atoning death so as not to misapply or abuse His atonement as do universalists and some who are called "grace teachers." One place to start in understanding Christ's atoning death is the Old Testament Day of Atonement, which is a type and foreshadowing of the atoning death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Full and Complete Atonement for Humankind

September 18-19 is *Yom Kippur*, or "Day of Atonement," the most holy day of the year on the Jewish calendar. *Yom* means "day" and *Kippur* is probably derived from the Hebrew *kofer*, meaning "ransom." It falls on two of our calendar days because the Jewish day begins and ends at sunset.

It was on this Day of Atonement that the Old Testament high priest went into the holy of holies, and with animal sacrifices, made sacrificial atonement for the sins of the people of Israel (Lev. 16). Interestingly, there was to be absolutely no work on this day. This day was God's idea and God's work, with the high priest being the one carrying out the proceedings.

The Old Testament Day of Atonement was a type and foreshadowing of the atoning death of Jesus Christ, not just for Israel, but for the world. Jesus Himself said in Mark 10:45 that He had come "to give His life a ransom for many." Paul speaks of the death of Christ as a sacrifice, even referring to Him as our Passover lamb (see 1 Cor. 5:7).

Matthew 27:50-51 tells us that at the point of Jesus' death, the heavy curtain, or veil, that cordoned off the holy of holies was torn from top to bottom. The holy of holies was the place where God dwelt, and only the high priest was allowed to enter there once per year on the Day of Atonement to offer sacrifice for the sins of Israel. It was a fearful and awe-inspiring place.

This rending of the veil was an act of Almighty God showing that the way into His presence had been opened by the ultimate and final sacrifice of His Son. No longer were the masses to be cordoned off and kept at a distance, but all are now free to come into His presence through the atoning heath of Jesus Christ. As the writer of Hebrews said, "Therefore, brothers, we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus ... let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:19-22a).

As both fully God and fully human, Christ's death was vicarious and efficacious for the whole world, making it possible for humankind to be reconciled to God. Just as on Israel's Day of Atonement, God did not ask or require our help in Christ's atoning work. We have nothing to add. We can only come to Him and in faith and receive the benefits of the work He has already done.

The Benefits of the Atonement Must Be Appropriated by Repentance and Faith

One serious misunderstanding of the atonement is the idea that its benefits are automatically applied regardless of attitude or behavior. This idea seems to run parallel with the popular teaching that since Christ has paid for my sins, I do not have to confess sins I commit or be watchful concerning sin.

This way of thinking downplays the need for repentance and has been labeled by opponents as "hyper-grace," but is actually based on a misunderstanding of the nature of the atonement.

The reasoning goes something like this. Jesus paid the penalty for all sins that have ever been, or ever will be, committed. Therefore, any sins I have committed in the past, or am committing now, or will commit in the future, have already been paid for, and borne away, by Christ. I, therefore, do not have to confess sin or be concerned with sin. There is no longer a sin problem for me or for the human race.

For many, this theory has an attractive ring to it, but it is at odds with so many passages of Scripture. For example, Simon the sorcerer, who had been baptized in the great Samaritan revival led by Philip, offered Peter and John money in return for the authority to lay hands on people to be filled with the Holy Spirit. Peter's answer to him was very telling.

Peter said to Simon, "Peter said to him, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could purchase the gift of God with money!" (Acts 8:20). Peter went on to say, "Therefore repent of your wickedness, and ask God if perhaps the intention of your heart may be forgiven you" (Acts 8:22).

Simon's request had revealed the awful condition of his heart. Peter said that Simon, even though he had been baptized, was in a state of perishing and he called on Simon to repent of his wickedness and ask God for forgiveness.

Peter obviously did not see the benefits of the atonement being automatically applied in Simon's case. He did not take Simon's sin lightly. There was a need for repentance and contrition of heart on Simon's part if he was going to experience the blessings and benefits of Christ's atoning death.

Yes, the forgiveness and blessings of Christ's atoning death are available to all, but must be appropriated by repentance and faith. This is why Paul, when speaking to the Ephesian elders, reminded them how he had testified to both Jews and Greeks, "repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus

Christ" (Acts 20:21).

This is why Paul expressed concern to the Corinthians about unrepented sin in their midst and said he feared that when he would come to them,

"My God will humble me among you, and that I shall mourn for many who have sinned already, who have not repented of uncleanness, sexual immorality, and lasciviousness which they have committed" (2 Cor. 12:21).

No, the atoning merits of Christ's death are not automatically applied across-the-board. The New Testament is filled with passages about the importance of repentance and faith in appropriating the forgiveness and blessings provided through Christ's atoning death. This understanding is vital for another Great Awakening in our land.

The Atonement Was Not a Commercial Transaction

We must realize that the atonement of Jesus Christ was not a commercial transaction in which He paid the aggregate penalty for every single sin that ever was, or ever will be, committed. If this were the case, there would be no mercy or forgiveness on God's part. God would be like an ice-cold businessman who demands exact payment for every debt and obligation.

If such were the case, the sinner would be in the position of being able to demand his/her salvation from God since the precise debt for any sins they have committed, or ever will commit, has been paid. Salvation would not be a gift from God but something He owes and must give to every person regardless of their attitude, because the precise debt has been paid.

Instead, however, God is presented in Scripture as a merciful and caring being, willing to forgive those who come to Him in reverence and faith. The word "forgive" means "to remit" or "to cancel" or "to write off." Because of what Christ has

done, God is willing to “remit” or “write off” our sins when we put our faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning work through the cross.

We, therefore, should not think of the atonement in terms of a quantitative payment for every individual sin. We should, instead, think of the atonement in terms of “quality.” It was the quality of the sacrifice—Jesus Christ being God incarnate—that made His sacrifice acceptable in the sight of God and the basis for God to offer amnesty and pardon to a race of rebels, if they will only come to Him in repentance and faith.

The death of Christ on the cross was a public demonstration of God’s love for humanity and a public showing of His willingness to grant forgiveness and new life to those who will come to Him in repentance and faith. It also, however, showed the terribleness of sin and provided satisfaction for the just nature of a holy God who cannot wink at sin.

The Blessing of Repentance and Confession of Sin

On the Old Testament Day of Atonement, the people were instructed to “afflict their souls.” In other words, they were to examine themselves and repent of wrong and sinful attitudes and behavior. But is such an approach appropriate for a New Testament believer?

In 1 Corinthians 11:27-32, Paul cautions the Corinthian believers about taking communion in an “unworthy manner,” that is, with unconfessed sin in their lives. Communion is a celebration of Christ’s atoning death and sin is not to be treated in a light, trivial manner by those who participate. Paul then instructed, “let a man [person] examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (v. 28). In verses 31-32, he says, “If we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord, so that we would not be condemned with the world.”

As New Covenant believers with the indwelling Holy Spirit, we judge ourselves by opening our hearts to the Lord and inviting Him to show us anything in our lives that is displeasing to Him. As He brings attitudes and behavior to our attention, we then acknowledge, or confess, our sins before the Lord as we are instructed to do in 1 John 1:9, a passage and letter written to believers. The results of such repentance and confession can be astounding.

This was the experience of a church, described by Charles Finney, that led to great revival. Through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, the leaders of this church came to realize that in seeking numbers and recognition from the culture and community leaders, they had compromised their commitment to Christ. They, therefore, formulated a public statement concerning their “backsliding and want of a Christian spirit” (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 177).

It was submitted to the congregation for their approval and then read before the congregation. As the confession was being read publicly, the entire congregation stood to its feet with many of its members weeping. Finney said that, from that moment on, the revival went forward in great power, and the opposition, which had been bitter, was silenced.

Jesus Provides a Picture of True Repentance

Jesus told the parable of the Prodigal Son to reveal the merciful, forgiving heart of God. However, the parable also reveals the attitude of heart in which the wayward son or daughter must return to the Father.

After coming to the end of himself in the pigpen, the prodigal departed for home with a different attitude. He determined that on arriving home, he would say to the Father, ““Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants'” (Luke 15:18-19).

The prodigal was not perfect. He probably smelled like a pigpen. He probably had pig manure on his shoes and straw in his hair. But he had left the pig pen with a changed attitude and was headed in the right direction, back to the Father's house. That is a picture of true repentance.

When the Father saw him afar off, He ran and fell on his neck weeping. He then brought him into the house, completely restored him to his place in the family, and initiated a time of rejoicing for his safe return.

Appropriate the Atonement Blessings Today

God rejoices today when erring sinners return to Him in faith and sincerity of heart. If you have never appropriated the wonderful forgiveness and blessings of Christ's atonement, I urge you to do so today. Come to Him now in faith and sincerity of heart. He will receive you with open arms.

If you are a believer, I urge you to invite the Holy Spirit to search your heart for any attitudes, or any compromise with the world, that are displeasing to Him. As He brings these sins and weights to our minds and we confess them before Him with contrition of heart, I am convinced that we will see a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon our lives, our churches, our nation and the world. {eoa}

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