

Why We Need Atonement

John 3:14-21

- ¹⁴ And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up,
- ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.
- ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
- ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.
- ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not **condemned**, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.
- ¹⁹ And this is the **judgment**: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil.
- ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed.
- ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

Properly Distinguishing the Word

Go back to the very first shoot of the Reformation. It had two branches: Lutheran and Reformed. These two branches had many things in common, but one of the most

important was how it read God's holy Word. Rather than OT vs. NT, it saw the main difference as being between law and gospel. Rather than pit Jesus against the God of the OT as is so common today, it pitted two ways of salvation against one another: salvation by our works or salvation by Christ's works alone. It took this from the Bible itself. Today I want to show you how these two words lead you to the cross in **John 3:14-21**.

John has a distinction here too. It is **belief vs. unbelief**. He uses the word "believe" in **vv. 15, 16, and 18**, so it is a major idea in this part of his Gospel. I'll tell you more about what this belief consists of a little later. For now, it is enough to say that belief stems from good news while unbelief remains upon anyone not heeding the good news. This is not good news, but it leads you to it, if you are able to hear.

The Bad News

You must hear the bad news first. The reason is simple. As Jesus put it, it is the sick that need a doctor. People who are sick, but refuse to seek help, will often die. If the cause of death was preventable, then the person died needlessly.

Often, people will not seek help because they fear hearing bad news. They don't want to be told that they have cancer. The problem is, whether they hear the news or not, it does not change the condition. But **hearing the bad news often motivates people to seek a cure.** That is perhaps the main function of the kind of bad news I'm talking about now. Therefore, you must hear the bad news first.

Condemnation

The bad news according to our passage is that someone has a serious problem that will result in their eventual death. The news is that someone is “condemned.” Some translations say “**judged.**” This is the language of **John 3:18.** What does it mean to be “condemned?”

Condemnation or judgment is **courtroom language.**¹ To condemn someone is to sentence them to a particular punishment, especially death. Courtroom language is used throughout John's Gospel with other terms like “**testify,**” “**testimony,**” “**judgment,**” and “**verdict.**” **Vs. 19** uses the term “**verdict.**” **Condemnation is the verdict** (or “judgment”). It is the sentence of the court. The gavel has

¹ Those who say salvation is never put into legal language, that “justification” for example is not legal language, have not dealt sufficiently with John's Gospel.

dropped. The Judge has spoken. The next section ([John 3:22-36](#)) will continue the Gospel length “testimony” of witnesses that declare the truth of Christ’s person and work in a legal sense. The point is, to be condemned is to be a [criminal](#). It is to stand before a Holy Judge on trial for High Crimes.

Evil Works

These High Crimes are called “[evil works](#)” ([John 3:19](#)). What is an evil work? Evil works have to do with law. But, thinking about law is difficult for many people today because they make, as I said earlier, an improper division between OT and NT. Let me give you an example from a piece someone posted this week on their blog called, “[Is Christianity Liberal or Conservative?](#)”²

After scorning anyone who uses the OT to as their source of contemporary law, the author writes, “[Treating both sections of the Bible equally elevates the teachings of the Jewish prophets to a level equal to the teachings of](#)

² Vern Jones, “[Is Christianity Liberal of Conservative?](#)”, Tuesday, Feb 7, 2012. <http://principiamedia.com/blog/125-is-christianity-liberal-or-conservative>

Jesus.” When you forget (or don’t realize) that Jesus gave the law of the OT to Moses and that Jesus is the God of the OT, this kind of unbiblical reading of Scripture leads to all sorts of trouble. He adds, “When asked to identify the greatest commandment, Jesus ignored the Ten Commandments, and created two new commandments: to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself.”

This comment could not be any more wrong; but it sadly reflects the way many professing Christians think. This has led to absolute disaster in the Church and our culture, for it makes almost all moral law relative. Jesus is not inventing new laws. He is quoting two Old Testament laws, which the Rabbis themselves believed were a good summary of the Ten Commandments. In giving these two laws, Jesus is helping people understand in the most basic terms what the whole OT corpus of laws is about. It is about loving God (Deut 6:5) and neighbor (Lev 19:18).

The love of God is our duty to God, and this summarizes the first four of the Ten Commandments. The love of neighbor is our duty of each other, and this summarizes the last six of the Ten Commandments. All the rest of the

law is but the working out of these ideas in the civil and ceremonial life of national Israel. In trying to identify the “evil works” people do then, we could go to any of the over 600 individual laws in the OT; we could go to the Ten Commandments; or we could simply go to these two. Its all the same. Ultimately speaking, when God is not loved completely with all of the heart, mind, soul, and strength, the result is law breaking. The same is true when you do not love your neighbor as yourself. Anything that violates this, be it in the form of breaking one of the Ten Commandments outwardly (unlawful killing, adultery, etc.), breaking them inwardly (hate, lust, etc.), or breaking any of the other moral laws ... this would be to commit an “evil work.” The law itself says that you must be careful to do “all” this law, then it will be well for you.

The Whole World

This is all very bleak, and that’s the point. But now the worst news of all comes when you consider who it is that is condemned, who it is that commits evil works. John could not be any clearer than he is, for he explains it in multiple

ways. Let me give them to you in reverse order from the way they come to us in the passage, so that we build up to the total number.

He says they include “everyone who does wicked things” (vs. 20). Someone who doesn’t understand the law might think that this does not include them. He calls them, “people who love the darkness rather than the light” (vs. 19). People that do not understand what light he is talking about might think that this also does not include them. He refers to them as “whoever does not believe” (vs. 18). People who do not understand the context of that belief might think that it does not include them. He refers to them as “the world” (vv. 16, 17). People from outer space might think that this does not include them.

All levity aside, these ideas all refer to the same people. Let’s look at why that is, then we can identify who they are. First, “everyone who does wicked things.” Who does this include? When thinking about doing wicked things, most of us create a scale. Anyone who does more good things than wicked things, we think, does not really do wicked things. The popular language is that they are “basically good.” But there is no scale here. It is simply

refers to the doing of wicked things. A wicked thing is an evil work, and we've already seen that an evil work is any violation of the law of God. So if it is simply wicked things apart from a scale, and if wicked things are a breaking of the law, then “**everyone who does wicked things**” refers to ... everyone that has ever broken a law. And the Bible says no one is without sin.

What about **people who love darkness rather than light**? This is not talking about people who like to stay up late or people that like to crawl around in caves or people that enjoy vampire movies. It is directly related to the previous idea of those who do wicked things, for it says “**people loved the darkness**” ... “**because their works were evil**” (**John 3:19**). Darkness is therefore a moral category. People do dark deeds, like thieves who break into homes at night. Therefore, the two ideas are parallel. To do wicked things is to love darkness. All people do wicked things are therefore also the people who love darkness.

The third category is “**those who do not believe.**” We need to look carefully at this idea. This is not talking about some general belief in a god (for the gods of the nations are actually included in the “darkness”), as if Deists or Hindus

or anyone who believes in any kind of god is OK. It is not even talking about belief that the true God exists, for even demons have this kind of belief and they remain in darkness. Rather, it is referring to the specific belief that the “giving of the Son” (John 3:16) in his being “lifted up” at the cross (14), will save you (15) from God’s wrath (36) and bring you to eternal life (15-16).

Take the idea of darkness again and you will see how it is related to unbelief in this specific work of Christ. The people in darkness are not in the Light. But what is the “Light” in John’s Gospel? Light refers to “Christ.” John 1:5 says that the Light came into the world. It goes on to explain that this light is the Word made flesh. You can therefore see the connection between darkness and unbelief. So all three phrases help interpret the others. So far we have unbelieving, workers of evil, who live in darkness.

The final term in this chain is “the world.” The world is connected to the idea of unbelief via this word “condemned.” “Whoever does not believe is condemned” (vs. 18) is parallel with “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world” (vs. 17). “World” is parallel with “whoever does not believe,” which further defines

“people who loved darkness,” which and those who do “evil deeds.” “World” thus means any living person in a state of unbelief as defined by the text. The point is, there is not a single person living in unbelief that has a right to say, “**God didn’t send his son for me.**” Everyone in a state of unbelief is condemned, but Christ was not sent to condemn (people are already condemned), but that those in a state of unbelief might be saved.

Good news

This brings us to the good news. If you can understand that you are included in the world, that is in the group of unbelieving, darkened, wicked people, who are under God’s wrath, then you are ready to hear the remedy.

Let us work our way backwards with this as well. Starting in **John 3:21** we learn that “**whoever does what is true comes to the light.**” This is an important point both in what it says and in what it does not say. First, **it says** that there are **people who do what is right**, and it says that there are **people who come to the light**. These people *do* something. This speaks volumes about the kinds of people that

God creates in the new creation. They are people that know what is right and like to do it. They are people who no longer desire to hide in shadows, but to flee to Christ as their shelter and refuge, knowing that when their evil deeds are exposed, he forgives them. This tells us about the nature of a Christian's will. We have wills. We are not robots. We do what we want to do. But the Christian now desires things he never desired before.

Yet, it does *not* say something important. It does not say that these people came to God of their own **freewill** as that idea is usually understood—in the sense that they hated God, but suddenly had a change of heart and ran to the light, only then to be changed by him and born again. The verse continues by showing that freewill is not in view, “**So that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God.**” Notice that doing the truth is a work that is only carried out “**in God,**” or “**in Christ.**” As **D. A. Carson** says, “**This strange expression (“done through God”) makes it clear that the lover of light is not some intrinsically superior person.**”³ There is no reason to

³ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press; W.B. Eerdmans, 1991), 207-08.

brag here saying, “I came to the light and you didn’t, because I’m smarter or wiser.” Rather, one must first be in God in order to do the works of God. That is exactly what Jesus told Nicodemus about being born by the Spirit. So the verse actually teaches the opposite of freewill. God saves you through the hearing of the gospel, then you begin to do good.

This idea stems from the fact that the new birth is a gift of God’s grace. It is not something we earn or merit through running or working or willing. Vs. 18 says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned.” Belief removes condemnation. But what is this belief in? It is belief that says, “God sent his Son to save me.” This is vs. 17. “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” The key word here is the verb “might be saved.” It is not in a future indicative verb, but a subjunctive verb. Why is that important? As David Alan Black says in his Greek intermediate grammar, “The future indicates what will take place, whereas the subjunctive

indicates what may take place.”⁴ The verse does not teach that everyone will go to heaven (universalism). Since we know that the future as God knows it is a certainty, John must not be talking about things *as God perceives it*, but rather *as we perceive it*.

Therefore, you mustn't collapse this published desire of God into the eternal decrees which remain a secret. For **God has two wills**.⁵ One will is his hidden plan in determining events. We call this predestination, and the reasons for it are ultimately known only to him. This will refers to **what God has determined**. And since we are not privy to all of the information, we are not able to call this will into question or say to him “**what have you done**” (**Dan 4:35**). The other will is **his revealed will** which expresses his published desire for us. This will refers to God's holiness. This we are privy to, for God has told us what kind of a God he is. He does not delight in the death of the wicked (**Ezek 18:23**). Yet, he has often decreed it. He does not delight when you sin, but would rather you turn from

⁴ David Alan Black, *It's Still Greek to Me* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), P. 99. This is technically a “final subjunctive” which “indicates the purpose of an action.”

⁵ See John Piper, “Are There Two Wills in God?” <http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/articles/are-there-two-wills-in-god>

your sin and live (**Ezek 33:11**). Yet, he has clearly decreed that sin should be part of this fallen age. As one of my friends puts it, “**God wills what he also sometimes nills.**” John is expressing God’s published desire that you should look to the Son, and this desire is grounded in his love for the world which is fully expressed in Christ’s death on the cross.

This takes us back to **vv. 14-15**. Here, Jesus refers to his death as being “**lifted up.**” He gives the analogy of Moses’ serpent in the wilderness, which was hung before the people so that they **might** live and not die. I want to take the rest of our time looking at what Jesus’ death on the cross was intended to do. To do this, I want to talk about views in church history that get at the **nature of Christ’s atonement**. Jesus’ death on the cross was an atonement. The easiest way to remember what atonement means is to put dashes in the word: “at-one-ment.” At-one-ment means reconciliation (see **Rom 5:10-11 KJV**).⁶ The atonement does not itself bring reconciliation, but it ensures that anyone whom God’s chooses to believe in it may have it.

⁶ Dabney, *Five Points of Calvinism*, 60.

Just now, I want to look at different views of the atonement in church history. If you can understand the atonement properly, then you will be better able to see God's love for you in Christ's death. And if you see this, then you will more fully desire to believe it more and more with each passing day. There is a reason people get so passionate about this subject. It strikes at the very heart of our love and desire to know Christ.

Theories of Atonement: Example

There are historically about five views of the atonement. The first is the most liberal. We might call this the **Example** theory. This view sees the value of Jesus' death as being nothing more than a “beautiful and perfect example of the type of dedication we are to practice.”⁷ Jesus died to be our example. We don't need him to die for our sin. We just need a little help seeing how we should live our lives as he did. You probably wouldn't be surprised to find out that this view was created in the 16th century by a group of

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1998), 801.

Unitarian Pelagians called the Socinians. Now, Jesus' death *was* an example, as Peter says, “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2:21), but this is the least important of the many things that Christ's death does. That's probably why it has only this one reference in the entire Bible to back it up.

Theories of Atonement: Moral Influence

A closely related view is the **Moral Influence** view. This was the view of **Peter Abelard** (1079-1142 A.D.), the famous antagonist of the much more theologically honest **Anselm** (1033-1109) in the middle ages. This view emphasizes the love of God and “regards Christ's death as an example of the love we are to show for God.”⁸ While John 3:16 and God's love might be called to uphold this view, it denies any kind of justice or holiness in God that needs to be satisfied in a sacrifice. We need all of these things to understand the atonement fully.

Theories of Atonement: Governmental

Of course, Jesus' death does display God's love, and so like the first view, this one has it partly right, yet mostly

⁸ Ibid., 802.

wrong. A better idea is that of the **Governmental** theory. This is the view of **Hugo Grotius** (1583-1645). It takes sin much more seriously. Grotius grew up a Calvinist, but became an Arminian. This view says that “the major effect of the death of Christ was to demonstrate the holiness of God’s law and the seriousness of transgressing it.”⁹ This view sees sin as a violation of God’s law, but it is an attack on God’s form of government rather than on the person of God himself. God can relax the law so that he need not exact a specific punishment or penalty for each violation. Christ’s death was needed to show us how seriously God takes sin, but it isn’t a substitution for our own death.

Theories of Atonement: Ransom

Of course God takes sin seriously and of course God rules over a kingdom and his kingdom has laws. But God is also a king and those laws are a reflection of his himself. God is the all-sovereign king of the universe. And yet, in his wisdom he has decided to let humans and angelic beings rule over parts of his created universe as beings under his

⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Rev. ed., 1st Crossway ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001), 17-18.

authority. This leads to a fourth view which is often called the **Ransom** view.

This is the oldest view of the church. It basically says that Christ paid a ransom to Satan in his death and that this ransom delivers humans from his control. In light of the divine council theology, I think parts of this theory deserve a closer look. For even in the book of John, Satan is called the Prince of this world (**John 12:31; 16:11**). The dominant theme of this idea is that the cross was a victory over Satan and brought us deliverance from his chains. This view has much to commend it, especially because it helps us see the cosmic implications of Christ's death which Paul says put to shame the rulers and authorities in heavenly places. And yet this view does not do enough justice to the fact that sin is ultimately a breach against God and his law.

Theories of Atonement: Penal Substitution (Satisfaction)

Thus, the dominant view since Anselm has been one of a **Penal Substitution** or a satisfaction for sin. This view says that Christ's death is a sacrifice offered in payment of the penalty for our sins. It is accepted by God the Father as a satisfaction in place of the penalty due to us. But a penal substitution has often been confused with a **commercial**

transaction. Both are satisfactions, but they are not the same.

When you go to a store and buy a television or you eat out at a restaurant, you owe money for the good or service. When you go to bank to get a loan, you become a debtor and the bank the creditor. Satisfaction is rendered at the point that the good or service has been paid. At that moment, there is no more debt. The payment *in and of itself* brings justice. The payment itself gets rid of any further obligation. The person paying the debt is irrelevant. The emphasis is on the thing paid.

Let's say that we are eating at a restaurant. I order a fillet mignon, but don't realize I left my wallet in the car. You could pay my bill and the owner wouldn't care at all. Let's say that my father happened to be there eating and found out I couldn't pay the bill. He could pay the bill and that would be fine. A further point is that in such cases, no grace is involved on the part of the one receiving the payment. It is not a matter of grace for the restaurant owner to let me go if someone else pays my bill. It is a matter of justice. In fact, if he held me and called the cops

because I didn't pay while someone else did, the police would never show up.

Most of us Calvinists have been taught that Christ's death is a commercial transaction; so much payment for so many sins. So much suffering for so much sin. But there are problems with this. In Christ's death, it really matters who it is that is paying the debt! The issue is as much on the person as it is on the payment. Since the penalty of sin is death, it stands to reason that anyone could die and pay the payment for anyone else, if the atonement is a commercial transaction. But the Bible gives no hint that just anyone could satisfy this debt we owe.

Furthermore, when God saves any one of us, it is a matter of grace, not pure justice. If it were a commercial transaction and Christ paid our sins like you would pay my bill in a restaurant, then the Father would not be gracious at all to let a person go. Furthermore, if Christ's death is a commercial transaction, then whomever it was for would be free immediately, but we do not find this in Scripture. Rather, God's wrath remains upon people for whom Christ died until they believe by faith in Him (Eph 2:1-3). As John says, "The wrath of God abides on him" (John

3:36), that is, upon everyone who does not believe. Everyone in a state of unbelief is under condemnation. Believe frees you from that sentence.

That's why the Reformers all viewed the atonement through the much older lenses of a **penal substitution** rather than a commercial transaction. "Penal" refers to crimes and law courts (think "penal code"). As we have seen, John 3 uses courtroom language. We are not in a restaurant here, or a Best Buy, but a court of law. John set the stage for us. Christ's death is the solution to the "verdict" and sentence rendered in a court of law, not a bill of sale or a loan from a bank.

In crime, the punishment is not usually eye for eye (literally), but equal compensation. Even in the Torah, God does not literally demand that one person pluck out his eye if he has injured another person's eye. For example, if a man knocks out the tooth of a slave, he is to let the slave to free, not knock out his own tooth (**Ex 21:27**). We are talking about equivalent things here, not identical things (i.e. I owe \$40, I pay \$40). As such, the Judge has the right to set what he believes is just equivalence for a crime. In

the case of sin, the he sees the ultimate sentence as death and eternal punishment in hell.

But in crime, the emphasis is on the person, as much as the thing being paid.¹⁰ This makes is very different from a bill I get at Chilies after dinner. If we are speaking commercially here, we would say the punishment is death and Christ died. This much is true, but does it do *enough* justice to it?

Let's look at the one who died on the cross and compare him with ourselves. We are finite beings with a finite number of sins. But Jesus death is not a commercial transaction, so much suffering for so many sins. His suffering was infinite, not finite; for the infinite Son died on the cross and was separated for a time from the fellowship of the infinite Father. It is not quantity, but quality that is in mind.

Jesus' death cannot be compared to what we deserve or even to what the worse sinner in hell will receive! Even though their punishment will last forever, they as beings are not of the same quality of being as Christ. This is a

¹⁰ For much of what follows see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:470-72, but you also find it in A.A. Hodge, Robert Dabney, William Shedd, and others.

profound point. Hodge says, “He did not suffer either in kind or degree what sinners would have suffered. In value, his sufferings infinitely transcended theirs. The death of an eminently good man would outweigh the annihilation of a universe of insects. So the humiliation, sufferings, and death of the eternal Son of God immeasurably transcended in worth and power the penalty which a world of sinners would have endured.” Do you see how great Christ’s suffering was compared to ours? To say that Christ only suffered so much for so many does infinite damage to the infinite suffering he endured. Christ’s death is not an equal compensation, it is an infinitely greater compensation that anyone of us could ever pay. Jesus did not suffer exactly what was due us (no more no less), but infinitely more, for he is of infinitely more value than we are, for he is God in the flesh. The eternal God suffered separation on the cross, suffered the wrath of God on the cross. This is mind-blowing and not to be compared with even a person suffering the same thing in hell, because they are not God.

And now you can begin to see the grace of God in the death of Christ. Christ’s death is of infinite value to take away the sins of anyone whom God desires, because it is a

substitution for them. In a sufficient sense, God desires that we all turn to Christ in faith and if we do, he will save us. But in an efficient sense, God ordains that some of us actually will! And this is the grace of God: he applies Christ's death to many that would never turn to the light because their deeds were wicked. These are those who will believe. These are those who will seek God. These are those who will be born again. These are those who will do deeds of light, for they are done "in God."

God is pleased by the proclamation of this news to announce that all without hearing distance that his Son has met the requirements of justice. He is pleased to tell you that a way has been provided by which you may be saved from God's wrath. He is pleased to tell you that though you are hiding in the darkness, afraid of the Light, the Light has come into the world and satisfied the demands of justice. He is pleased to tell you that Christ went to the cross of his own accord, because it was promised to him in heaven that he would have a church, saved by the Father, sanctified by the Spirit, and Christ's death would be applied to them so that they might live. And he is pleased through the proclamation to accompany this announce-

ment with power, so that those who have a stirring from the Spirit within them, may be able to believe these things are true for them.

Therefore, consider your condition today. You were born in sin. You inherited a sinful nature. You were under God's wrath. You were born condemned. You have rebelled against the kingdom and the King. You were in slavery to Satan. There is nothing you could do to save yourself. But God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Such is the grace of God towards sinners. Believe that Christ's death infinitely satisfies the demands of justice for you, and God will be pleased to save you. Continue believing, so that you may come to enjoy your savior, seeing better both his love and justice satisfied in the death of Christ on the cross. Then know that God has given you eternal life, life already begun, because the Son was raised from the dead and you have become a partaker in his Life.