

On the Atonement

by Charles Finney

The atonement is a governmental expedient that demonstrates God's love and mercy to sinners, sustains law without the execution of its penalty, and calls for obedience to God's law.

Scripture: Isaiah 42:21, Romans 3:25-26, Romans 5:8, 1 Corinthians 15:3, 2 Corinthians 5:21

Topics: "Atonement", "God's Justice and Mercy"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the profound significance of Christ's atonement, explaining that Jesus died for our sins to demonstrate God's righteousness and love. He argues that the atonement is essential for understanding God's justice and mercy, as it allows for the forgiveness of sins while upholding the integrity of divine law. Finney highlights that the atonement is not merely a philosophical concept but a powerful truth that can transform lives when believed. He calls on sinners to recognize the depth of Christ's sacrifice and respond with a life dedicated to Him, urging them to accept the mercy offered through His death. The sermon ultimately stresses the necessity of understanding and embracing the atonement for true salvation.

Transcript

"How that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures." -- 1 Cor. xv. 3.

"For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." -- 2 Cor. v. 21.

"But God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." -- Rom. v. 8.

"The Lord is well pleased for his righteousness' sake: he will magnify the law and make it honorable." -- Isa. xlii. 21.

"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; To declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just and the justifier of him which believeth in JESUS." -- Rom. iii. 25, 26.

IN this last passage, the apostle states, with unusual fullness, the theological, and, I might even say, the philosophical design of Christ's mission to our world -- that is, to set forth before created beings, God's righteousness in forgiving sins. It is here said that Christ is set forth as a propitiation that God may be just

in forgiving sin, assuming that God could not have been just to the universe, unless Christ had been first set forth as a sacrifice.

When we seriously consider the irresistible convictions of our own minds in regard to our relations to God and His government, we cannot but see that we are sinners, and are lost beyond hope on the score of law and justice. The fact that we are grievous sinners against God is an ultimate fact of human consciousness, testified to by our irresistible convictions, and no more to be denied than the fact that there is such a thing as wrong.

Now, if God be holy and good, it must be that He disapproves wrong-doing, and will punish it. The penalty of His law is pronounced against it. Under this penalty, we stand condemned, and have no relief save through some adequate atonement, satisfactory to God, because safe to the interests of His kingdom.

Thus far we may advance safely and on solid ground, by the simple light of nature. If there were no Bible, we might know so much with absolute certainty. So far, even infidels are compelled to go.

Here, then, we are, under absolute and most righteous condemnation. Is there any way of escape? If so, it must be revealed to us in the Bible; for from any other source it can not come. The Bible does profess to reveal a method of escape. This is the great burden of its message.

It opens with a very brief allusion to the circumstances under which sin came into the world. Without being very minute as to the manner in which sin entered, it is exceedingly full, clear, and definite in its showing as to the fact of sin in the race. That God regards the race as in sin and rebellion is made as plain as language can make it. It is worthy of notice that this fact and the connected fact of possible pardon, are affirmed on the same authority -- with the same sort of explicitness and clearness. These facts stand or fall together. Manifestly God intended to impress on all minds these two great truths -- first, that man is ruined by his own sin; secondly, that he may be saved through Jesus Christ. To deny the former is to gainsay both our own irresistible convictions and God's most explicit revealed testimony; to deny the latter, is to shut the door, of our own free act and accord, against all hope of our own salvation.

The philosophical explanations of the reasons and governmental bearings of the atonement must not be confounded with the fact of an atonement. Men may be saved by the fact if they simply believe it, while they may know nothing about the philosophical explanation. The apostles did not make much account of the explanation, but they asserted the fact most earnestly, gave miracles as testimony to prove their authority from God, and so besought men to believe the fact and be saved. The fact, then, may be savingly believed, and yet the explanation be unknown. This has been the case, no doubt, with scores of thousands.

Yet it is very useful to understand the reasons and governmental grounds of the atonement. It often serves to remove skepticism. It is very common for lawyers to reject the fact, until they come to see the reasons and governmental bearings of the atonement; this seen, they usually admit the fact. There is a large class of minds who need to see the governmental bearings, or they will reject the fact. The reason why the fact is so often doubted is, that the explanations given have been unsatisfactory. They have misrepresented God. No wonder men should reject them, and with them, the fact of any atonement at all.

The atonement is a governmental expedient to sustain law without the execution of its penalty on the sinner. Of course, it must always be a difficult thing in any government to sustain the authority of law, and the respect due to it, without the execution of penalty. Yet God has accomplished it most perfectly.

A distinction must here be made between public and retributive justice.

The latter visits on the head of the individual sinner a punishment corresponding to the nature of his offence. The former, public justice, looks only toward the general good, and must do that which will secure the authority and influence of law, as well as the infliction of the penalty would do it. It may accept a substitute, provided it be equally effective to the support of law and the ensuring of obedience.

Public justice, then, may be satisfied in one of two ways, to wit -- either by the full execution of the penalty, or by some substitute, which shall answer the ends of government at least equally well. When, therefore, we ask -- What is necessary for the ends of public justice? The answer is,

1. Not the literal execution of the penalty; for if so, it must necessarily fall on the sinner, and on no one else.

Besides, it could be no gain to the universe for Christ to suffer the full and exact penalty due to every lost sinner who should be saved by Him. The amount of suffering being the same in the one case as in the other, where is the gain? And yet, further, if the administration of justice is to be retributive, then it cannot fall on Christ, and must fall on the sinner himself. If not retributive, it certainly may be, as compared with that due the sinner, far different in kind and less in degree.

It has sometimes been said that Christ suffered all in degree and the same in kind as all the saved must else have suffered; but human reason revolts at this assumption, and certainly the Scriptures do not affirm it.

2. Some represent that God needs to be appeased, and to have His feelings conciliated. This is an egregious mistake. It utterly misrepresents God and misconceives the atonement.

3. It is no part of public justice that an innocent being should suffer penalty or punishment, in the proper sense of these terms. Punishment implies crime -- of which Christ had none. Christ, then, was not punished.

Let it be distinctly understood that the divine law originates in God's benevolence, and has no other than benevolent ends in view. It was revealed only and solely to promote the greatest possible good, by means of obedience. Now, such a law can allow of pardon, provided an expression can be given which will equally secure obedience -- making an equal revelation of the law-giver's firmness, integrity, and love. The law being perfect, and being most essential to the good of His creatures, God must not set aside its penalty without some equivalent influence to induce obedience.

The penalty was designed as a testimony to God's regard for the precept of His law, and to His purpose to sustain it. An atonement, therefore, which should answer as a substitute for the infliction of this penalty, must be of such sort as to show God's regard for both the precept and penalty of His law. It must be adapted to enforce obedience. Its moral power must be in this respect equal to that of the infliction of the penalty on the sinner.

Consequently, we find that, in this atonement, God has expressed His high regard for His law and for obedience to it.

The design of executing the penalty of the law was to make a strong impression of the majesty, excellence, and utility of the law. Anything may answer as a substitute, which will as thoroughly

demonstrate the mischief and odiousness of sin, God's hatred to it, and His determination to carry out His law in all its demands. Especially may the proposed substitute avail if it shall also make a signal manifestation of God's love to sinners. This, the atonement, by the death of Christ, has most emphatically done.

Every act of rebellion denounces the law. Hence, before God can pardon rebellion, He must make such a demonstration of His attitude toward sin as shall thrill the heart of the created universe, and make every ear tingle. Especially for the ends of the highest obedience, it was needful to make such demonstration as shall effectually secure the confidence and love of subjects toward their Lawgiver -- such as shall show that He is no tyrant, and that He seeks only the highest obedience and consequent happiness of His creatures. This done, God will be satisfied.

Now, what can be done to teach these lessons, and to impress them with great and everlasting emphasis on the universe?

God's testimony must be so given as to be well understood. Obviously, the testimony to be given must come from God, for it is His view of law, penalty, and substitute that needs to be revealed. Every one must see that if He were to execute law on the sinner, this would show at once His view of the value of the law. But, plainly, His view of the same thing must be shown with equal force by any proposed substitute, before He could accept it as such.

Again, in this transaction, the precept of the law must be accepted and honored both by God and by Jesus as Mediator. The latter, as the representative of the race, must honor the law by obeying it, and by publicly endorsing it -- otherwise, the requisite homage can not be shown to the divine law in the proposed atonement. This has been done.

Again, to make adequate provision for the exercise of mercy to the race, it is plainly essential that, in the person of their mediator, both the divine and the human should be united. God and man are both to be represented in the atonement; the divine Word represented the Godhead; the man Jesus represented the race to be redeemed. What the Bible thus asserts, is verified in the history of Jesus, for He said and did things which could not have been said and done unless He had been man, and equally could not have been unless He were also God. On the one hand, too weak to carry His cross, through exhaustion of the human; and on the other, mighty to hush the tempest and to raise the dead, through the plenitude of divine power. Thus God and man are both represented in Jesus Christ.

The thing to be done, then, required that Jesus Christ should honor the law and fully obey it; this He did. Standing for the sinner, he must, in an important sense, bear the curse of the law -- not the literal penalty, but a vast amount of suffering, sufficient, in view of His relations to God and the universe, to make the needed demonstration of God's displeasure against sin, and yet of His love for both the sinner and all His moral subjects. On the one hand, Jesus represented the race; on the other, He represented God. This is a most divine philosophy.

The sacrifice made on Calvary is to be understood as God's offering to public justice -- God Himself giving up His Son to death, and this Son pouring forth His life's blood in expiation for sin -- thus throwing open the folding gates of mercy to a sinning, lost race. This must be regarded as manifesting His love to sinners. This is God's ransom provided for them. Look at the state of the case. The supreme Law-giver, and indeed the government of the universe, had been scouted by rebellion; of course there can be no pardon till this dishonor done to God and His law is thoroughly washed away. This is done by God's

free-will offering of His own Son for these great sins.

This being all done for you, sinners, what do you think of it? What do you think of that appeal which Paul writes and God makes through him, "I beseech you, therefore, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service." Think of those mercies. Think how Christ poured out His life for you. Suppose He were to appear in the midst of you today, and holding up His hands, dripping with blood, should say, "I beseech you by the mercies shown you by God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God!" Would you not feel the force of His appeal that this is a "reasonable service?" Would not this love of Christ constrain you? What do you think of it? Did He die for all that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him that loved them and gave Himself for them? What do you say? just as the uplifted ax would otherwise have fallen on your neck, He caught the blow on His own. You could have had no life if He had not died to save it; then what will you do? Will you have this offered mercy or reject it? Yield to Him the life He has in such mercy spared, or refuse to yield it?

REMARKS.

1. The governmental bearings of this scheme are perfectly apparent. The whole transaction tends powerfully to sustain God's law, and to reveal His love and even mercy to sinners. It shows that He is personally ready to forgive, and needs only to have such an arrangement made that He can do it safely as to His government. What could show His readiness to forgive so strikingly as this? See how carefully He guards against the abuse of pardon! Always ready to pardon, yet ever watchful over the great interests of obedience and happiness, lest they be imperilled by its freeness and fullness!

2. Why should it ever be thought incredible that God should devise such a scheme of atonement? Is there anything in it that is unlike God or inconsistent with His revealed character? I doubt whether any moral agent can understand this system and yet think it incredible. Those who reject it as incredible, must have failed to understand it.

3. The question might be asked -- Why did Christ die at all, if not for us? He had never sinned; did not die on His own account as a sinner; nor did He die as the infants of our race do, with a moral nature yet undeveloped, and who yet belong to a sinning race. The only account to be given of His death is, that He died not for Himself, but for us.

It might also be asked -- Why did He die so? See Him expiring between two thieves, and crushed down beneath a mountain weight of sorrow. Why was this? Other martyrs have died shouting; He died in anguish and grief, cast down and agonized beneath the hidings of His Father's face.

All nature seemed to sympathize with His griefs. Mark -- the sun is clothed in darkness; the rocks are rent; the earth quakes beneath your feet; all nature is convulsed. Even a heathen philosopher exclaimed -- Surely the universe is coming to an end, or the Maker of the universe is dying! Hark, that piercing cry, "My God, my God; why hast Thou forsaken Me?"

On the supposition of His dying as a Saviour for sinners, all is plain. He dies for the government of God, and must needs suffer these things to make a just expression of God's abhorrence of sin. While He stands in the place of guilty sinners, God must frown on Him and hide His face. This reveals both the spirit of God's government and His own infinite wisdom.

4. Some have impeached the atonement as likely to encourage sin. But such persons neglect the very important distinction between the proper use of a thing and its abuse. No doubt the best things in the universe may be abused, and by abuse be perverted to evil, and all the more by how much the better they are in their legitimate use.

Of the natural tendency of the atonement to good, it would seem that no man can rationally doubt. The tendency of manifesting such love, meekness, and self-sacrifice for us, is to make the sinner trust and love, and to make him bow before the cross with a broken and contrite heart. But many do abuse it; and the best things, abused, become the worst. The abuse of the atonement is the very reason why God sends sinners to hell. He says, "He that despised Moses' law, died without mercy under two or three witnesses; of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and counted the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, and hath done despite to the Spirit of grace?"

Hence, if any sinner will abuse atoning blood, and trample down the holy law, and the very idea of returning to God in penitence and love, God will say of him, "Of how much sorer punishment shall he be thought worthy" than he who despised Moses' law and fell beneath its vengeance?

5. It is a matter of fact, that this manifestation of God in Christ does break the heart of sinners. It has subdued many hearts, and will thousands more. If they believe it and hold it as a reality, must it not subdue their heart to love and grief? Do not you think so? Certainly, if you saw it as it is, and felt the force of it in your heart, you would sob out on your very seat, break down and cry out -- Did Jesus love me so? And shall I love sin any more? Ah, your heart would melt as thousands have been broken and melted in every age, when they have seen the love of Jesus as revealed on the cross. That beautiful hymn puts the case truthfully --

"I saw One hanging on a tree,

In agony and blood;

Who fixed His languid eyes on me,

As near the cross I stood."

But it was not the first look that fully broke his heart. It was only when --

"A second look He gave which said,

I freely all forgive;

This blood is for thy ransom paid --

I die that thou mayest live,"

that his whole heart broke, tears fell like rain, and he withheld no power of his being in the full consecration of his soul to this Saviour.

This is the genuine effect of the sinner's understanding the Gospel and giving Jesus Christ credit for His loving-kindness in dying for the lost. Faith thus breaks the stony heart. If this demonstration of God's love in Christ does not break your heart, nothing else will. If this death and love of Christ do not constrain you,

nothing else can.

But if you do not look at it, and will not set your mind upon it, it will only work your ruin. To know this Gospel only enough to reject and disown it, can serve no other purpose save to make your guilt the greater, and your doom the more fearful.

6. Jesus was made a sin-offering for us. How beautifully this was illustrated under the Mosaic system! The victim was brought out to be slain; the blood was carried in and sprinkled on the mercy-seat. This mercy-seat was no other than the sacred cover or lid of the ark which contained the tables of the law and other sacred memorials of God's ancient mercies. There they were, in that deep recess -- within which none might enter on pain of death, save the High Priest, and he only once a year, on the great day of atonement. On this eventful day, the sacred rites culminated to their highest solemnity. Two goats were brought forward, upon which the High Priest laid his hands and confessed publicly his own sins and the sins of all the people. Then one was driven far away into the wilderness, to signify how God removes our sins far as the east is from the west; the other was slain, and its blood borne by the High Priest into the most holy place, and sprinkled there upon the mercy-seat beneath the cherubim. Meanwhile, the vast congregation stood without, confessing their sins, and expecting remission only through the shedding of blood. It was as if the whole world had been standing around the base of Calvary, confessing their sins, while Jesus bore His cross to the summit, to hang thereon, and bleed and die for the sins of men. How fitting that, while Christ is dying, we should be confessing!

Some of you may think it a great thing to go on a foreign mission. But Jesus has led the way. He left heaven on a foreign mission; came down to this more than heathen world, and no one ever faced such self-denial. Yet He fearlessly marched up without the least hesitation to meet the consequences. Never did He shrink from disgrace, from humiliation, or torture. And can you shrink from following the footsteps of such a leader? Is anything too much for you to suffer, while you follow in the lead of such a Captain of your salvation?

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