

# Atonement

by Thomas Munnell

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of understanding the doctrine of atonement and its necessity for redemption from the eternal consequences of sin.*

**Scripture:** Mark 16:16, John 3:16, Romans 5:8, Hebrews 9:22, 1 Peter 2:24, Revelation 22:11

**Topics:** "Atonement Theology", "Divine Justice"

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## Description

Thomas Munnell preaches about the profound principles of moral government and the necessity of the Cross in reconciling humanity to God. He delves into the concept of sin, emphasizing its eternal consequences and the need for Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice. Munnell illustrates the dilemma between justice and mercy in the salvation of sinners, using analogies from human governments to explain the role of Jesus as the ultimate substitute. He highlights the importance of recognizing the exceeding sinfulness of sin to fully appreciate the atonement and the need for repentance and acceptance of God's mercy.

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## Transcript

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

N approaching the philosophy of reconciliation to God, involving the profoundest principles of moral government, no humble minister will feel very confident of his ability to equal the lofty theme. It is said that Handel, when composing his oratorio of "Creation," always went to the piano with the prayer "that he might praise God worthily;" and the anxious inquiry of every proclaimer of the love of Jesus is,

"How shall I my Savior set forth?

How shall I his beauties declare?

Oh! how shall I speak of his worth,

Or what his chief dignities are?"

If there be such a science as moral philosophy, its length and breadth, and depth and height, are all involved in the Cross of Jesus Christ. Believing that its principles are as fixed and indestructible as those of natural philosophy or chemistry, I propose to show, from evidences wholly undeniable, that the Cross

was not an arbitrary, but a necessary, antecedent to the pardon of our sins. It must [87] be remembered, however, that no analogies, drawn from governments as developed among men, should be required, in all respects, to illustrate the doctrine of Atonement. Notwithstanding this, the purpose is to make our way through the thickest of the difficulties inherent in this deepest of all theological subjects, and to show that, contrary to all skeptical deductions from inadequate premises, it is consonant with all other truths well recognized in the governments of men; and as the necessities that impelled the death of Christ were of a governmental character, we must, first of all, look into the very foundation of government itself, as developed in the several sections that follow.

1. Most men will admit, without argument, that, when God made man, it was necessary to place his moral as well as his physical nature under law; that, just as a child is unequal to all his future relations, is unable to project that course of life that will be best for him in old age, to have pursued in youth, and, therefore, needs the wisdom and guiding counsels of parents, so man, being also of himself unequal to all his future interests, and in this life unable to project a course that would prove, a million years to come, to have been the best, surely needs the law of wisdom from the heavenly Father to guide him as a frail child through a perilous future wholly unknown to him. This principle, by following out one of the plainest analogies suggested in common life, plainly says that man needs, and must have, a law to keep him from evil.

It must not be forgotten that a written moral law was necessitated by the physical, mental, and moral constitutions given us by our Creator--was anticipated by these. The fact that our bodies may be injured by gluttony [88] demands a law forbidding gluttony, to shield us from the punishment inherent in that sin. Would it not be unkind in the Lord to form our bodies so that they inevitably would be injured by debauchery, and yet utter no word of warning against it? Again: our moral constitutions are so constructed that falsehood, dishonesty, and all impurity of heart are damaging to the soul; and as the simple child of nature does not know of these results except by a terrible experience, it was both wise and merciful in the Almighty to issue a law, saying, "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not." The presence of the Bible in the world does not create the penalty of sin; it only foretells the natural results of sin, and shows the way of escape. Strong drink would ruin the body just the same as if there was no law in the Bible against it. The penalty is inherent in the sin itself, and not in any arbitrary appointment of God, and unless we go back of our creation and inquire, "Why hast thou made me thus?" why hast thou made my body and soul liable to be affected pleasantly or unpleasantly by good or bad actions? it is useless to complain of the laws of revelation, which were not first, but came in after we were made, and that with a view of meeting our constitutional necessities as already established. The vital practical truth is, that "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God;" then "The wages of sin is death." We have received a law which is "holy, just, and good," the violation of which brings on results more terrible than we are willing to admit.

II. It is readily admitted that the transgression of natural and civil law is justly followed by punishment; nor do the most skeptical as to punishment, as taught in the Bible, ever complain of injustice in this. While it is fully admitted that "the wages of sin is death," both in our [89] natural and civil relations, the human heart is slow to believe the same thing true of the moral law. Man does not wish to believe a bad account of his future, and this may be the reason why the Savior occupied three times as much space in describing the condition of Dives as in describing that of Lazarus. Also in Deuteronomy 28th, nearly four times as many verses are required to tell of the curses as of the blessings. It is pleasanter to believe in heaven than in hell.

That the transgressor of moral law should feel the consequence as expressed in the compunction of conscience in this life is not often denied, but that the results of conduct here should extend to worlds

unseen is a conviction by no means well settled in the minds of many. Whatever may be the nature, intensity, and duration of future punishment, one thing must be admitted: that the value and the necessity of the death of our Savior are to be strictly measured thereby. If he died to save us from an hour's pain, we should feel somewhat obliged to him. If his death should deliver us from a life-long threatened torture of mind and body, we should be very grateful, but could scarcely for that be bound to him through eternal cycles, to serve him and love him with every thought and emotion of our whole being. But if he saved me "from so great a death," from the "worm that never dies," from the fire unquenchable, from the "left hand," and from hell, then will I sing

"Love so amazing, so divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all."

If my sin had incurred the intensest sorrows of the mind, the fracture of every bone, the crushing of every muscle, and the rupture of every blood-vessel, and if this [90] were to be endured for threescore years and ten before my rest should come, even then the death of our Sacrifice would not have been absolutely "necessary," for time would bring me through. But the history of Dives and Lazarus turns heaven and hell both inside out, and reveals the fearful truth that no emigrant ever came out of hell to heaven. The gulf is fixed; the damned can never be redeemed, and, blessed be God! the redeemed can never now be damned. "He that is holy will now be holy still, and he that is righteous shall be righteous still;" but it is equally and fearfully true that "He that is unjust shall be unjust still, and he that is filthy shall be filthy still." The result of sin, then, is not temporary, but eternal, and our obligation to Jesus, therefore, is unlimited, and can only be discharged through endless years.

The very beginning of all true conceptions of the doctrine of atonement is found in a true conception of sin and its consequences. To underestimate the "exceeding sinfulness of sin" is to underestimate the atonement or reconciliation to God. To suppose, also, that the consequences of sin are but trifling, destroys all faith in the necessity of the death of Christ. Hence all parties who, either wholly or partially, deny the doctrine here being treated, will be found with conceptions more or less indifferent as to the nature and condemnation of sin. If sin be a trifle, its effects can not be serious, sin itself can not be "exceedingly sinful." The Savior, consequently, did but little for us in delivering us from it; our gratitude to him is, therefore, weak, and all our notions of the worth of the "unspeakable gift" are brought low. As no patient can feel very grateful to a physician for relief administered if he thought himself in no great danger, so our cheap convictions of sin and its fearful work upon the [91] soul destroy our gratitude and love and faith in Jesus. Our sins seem small, rather innocent, and very pardonable. Being so small as to escape our eyes blinded in their favor, we conclude they escape the eye of God. But Paul has said: "Though I am conscious of no fault in myself, yet am I not hereby justified, for he that judgeth me is the Lord." Our not perceiving our little sins does not prove their absence from us; for David prays, "Cleanse thou me from secret faults"--the smallest, most hidden, and most insidious faults--for the animalcule will in time become leviathan, and the insect sins of this life will rise like mountains before us in the next.

Once more before leaving this point--for here the real difficulty lies. Men would readily accept Christ if they were convinced of the wickedness and deep damnation of sin. They are fond of believing that sin has no eternal consequences; that its wounds will all heal up by the recuperative force of the soul itself, without the aid of a Savior; that it will amount to some inconvenience truly, but even that for no great length of time. "These shall go into everlasting punishment" is not a very palatable saying, but is an exceedingly "faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance," or else Jesus Christ had no great errand into this world. He

came to save us from some thing, or there is no Savior. His greatness as a Redeemer is measured by the greatness of the danger from which he redeemed us, and when we believe that he saved us from "everlasting punishment," we feel that he has wrought out "eternal redemption for us."

Who can prove that the soul will repent and get rid of sin beyond the grave? Dives was still an unbeliever in the power of God's word after death, and thought the spirit or ghost of Lazarus would have much more [92] influence with his five brethren than would Moses and the prophets. Besides, if a man will in this life break over all the barriers placed in his way to hell, is it not reasonable to suppose that after death, when public opinion, self-respect, and Gospel influences can no longer operate, his speed in sin will be accelerated rather than retarded? Sin, then, will remain in the soul, in the will, for evermore; and if sin be the prime cause of pain, the pain itself must be eternal. The flesh will feel the thorn as long as the thorn is in the flesh, and the only redemption from the pain is redemption from the thorn, and the only redemption from death spiritual will be found in salvation from sin, the sting of death. Now, Jesus undertakes to deliver man from sin by his atoning blood, that death may have no sting, and that we may be saved from its eternal consequences. To show on what principles he proposes to accomplish this great salvation shall be our purpose in the pages following, that we, each one, may see

What Jesus Christ "has done for me

Before I drew my breath,

What pain, what labor to secure

My soul from endless death."

III. An impression has been spread wide in the public mind implying that God the Father has always been hard to persuade to pardon the sinner, and that it is only after long and hard pleading on the part of our Advocate that he consents to our release. Poets have worked it into their rhymes, and pulpit orators have made it the pabulum of pathos, but the Bible teaches precisely the opposite. "God so loved the world;" "We love him because he first loved us;" "In this the love of God was manifested;" and many other passages, demonstrate his [93] willingness to forgive as soon as it could be done on principles that would not involve the destruction of moral government. If a civil ruler pardon one who truly deserves punishment, he is as unjust as if he were to punish an innocent person, for justice consists in treating each one just as he deserves. When man had sinned, the problem was to ascertain how he might be pardoned, and yet not impugn the justice of God. If man receives his dues, mercy is "clear gone forever," but if he be pardoned, how can it be reconciled with justice, which demands his punishment? This was a problem which no human governor had ever been able to solve.

In the days of the Roman consuls, it is said that a certain commander, named Brutus, had his army drawn up in form of battle just before the enemy, who confronted the whole length of his lines. Brutus commanded his men not to accept a challenge from the foe to single combat to decide the issues of the day; and knowing how hard it was for his soldiers to be mocked for cowardice, he denounced the penalty of death upon any one who should violate this order. Soon a strong man came forward into the middle space between the two armies, and bantered the stoutest Roman that ever handled a sword or hurled a spear. And after indulging the usual braggadocio and insult for their seeming cowardice for a long time, the martial spirit of one of the sons of Brutus was so stung and aroused by his abusive language that he rushed into the midst, accepting the challenge, fought a terrible duel, slew the enemy, stripped him of his armor, won the day for his countrymen, and returned amid the shouts of all his comrades in arms. But a

certain sadness soon settled over the countenances of all. A military order had been disobeyed. The act could not be ignored [94] with safety. Army discipline, army effectiveness, and consequently national safety, would all be imperiled by passing over this disobedience of martial law. A father's heart cried out for mercy, military necessity demanded justice. Had Brutus spared his son, he could not have punished the son of any other man, and this would have disorganized and demoralized his whole army, and given up the whole nation a prey to the enemy. He resolved that the nation should see that he who spared not his own son would spare no one else, and that strict obedience in the army was indispensable to the safety of all. Here was a governmental difficulty involving a contest between justice and mercy, in which justice took the lead, because no arrangement could be made securing the exercise of both. The question with Brutus was, how he could be just, and still show mercy to his son, which is the same principle involved in the salvation of sinners. How can God be just, and yet the justifier of the unpunished offender? If justice be exacted, every sinner will feel the bottom of perdition; if mercy prevail at the expense of justice and the law, it would ruin the universe, for all intelligences would see the weakness and unrighteousness of the supreme government, and other angels might be found unwilling to "keep their first estate." God must preserve his rule, must magnify his law, and make it honorable before all angels and all men.

I will not say that any illustration, drawn from the governments of men, can fully represent the point just now before us; but I will suppose a case, which I think will explain some of the principles involved in the doctrine of atonement through Jesus Christ. Suppose ten thousand subjects of the English Crown should rise in sedition and rebellion against the lawful authority; that [95] they have been tried, convicted, and sentenced to banishment to St. Helena for ten years. The government would gladly pardon them, were it safe to do so. But the law must be respected; sin must be punished before all, that others also may fear; and while mercy pleads in the heart of the executive, justice demands the penalty of violated law. Now, it is plainly impossible for English law, or any other law, to show mercy, for "law worketh wrath." When Darius had signed a decree that threw Daniel into the lions' den, and yet desired to save him from the penalty of that law, he "labored till the going down of the sun" to harmonize the working of justice and mercy--to save his favored Daniel, and yet preserve his law--but failing in this, the law must take its course, and the penalty be felt in all its force. So, in the absence of what Mr. Jenkins calls an "expedient," the ten thousand must bear their own reward. But, lo! an expedient is suggested, a substitute, one that will suffer in their stead. Who must he be? One of the guilty party? They must each one suffer for their own sins, and have no merit to spare for others. Will the banishment of a common subject of the government, although an innocent one, meet the emergency! Such would not be "found worthy," for his punishment would call no attention sufficient to satisfy an account with the whole empire. But if a son from the throne, the Prince, will come forward, not only innocent as a lamb of any political offense, but governmentally worthy to be a substitute, and will, through love for these offenders, offer to endure the ten years' exile in their stead, the government may, without the least fear of losing its proper tone and authority with the people, accept the noble substitute, and remit the penalty of the transgressors. The Prince, remember, is not in [96] justice bound to do this, but in compassion for his future subjects he kindly makes the offer. The government is not bound to accept him as a substitute, and to release them; but being from the first anxious to deliver them, and now seeing a way in which it may be done, in pity for the convicts, and in the grandest admiration of their noble Prince, the system of mercy is agreed to, and carried into effect.

The Prince returns from his exile amid the acclamations of the whole nation, who are ready to crown him Lord of all. In due time he is coronated king of the realm. He has not only won the admiration of all the people, but the love, unbounded love, of the ten thousand who, if not dead to every noble impulse, will be the most loyal subjects of his empire; because, no sooner had the new king ascended his throne, than he

announced himself as their ransom, having fully paid, in his own person, the debt they owed; and now, upon certain terms honorable both to him and them, he is ready to proclaim their pardon. But if any portion of them, ungrateful for all he has done for them, will now refuse to have him "reign over them," what will be their political status in the eyes of all the world? Can they be forgiven? Was the exile of the Prince alone sufficient to reinstate them without an humble recognition of the proffered mercy, and a grateful acceptance of it? Are not their cordial services due to their benefactor? Their original offense was grievous enough, but if that is to be emphasized by this basest of all ingratitude, it would double the aggregate of their guilt. If they refuse this arrangement for pardon, will any one else try to save them? Will there "remain any more sacrifice" for their political offenses? Or will it not be rather a "fearful looking for" the execution of the [97] penalty of sin now exceedingly aggravated by this meanest exhibition of heartless ingratitude?

The parallel intended is easy, and does not require me to name at length the points already made luminous enough by the figure just used. Jesus is our Prince. He volunteered his humiliation to redeem our souls from hell. He returned from the grave to the throne, and issued his proclamation of pardon to all for whom he died: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved." He died for us, instead of us, in place of us, "bore our sins in his own body on the tree," "took our infirmities, and bare our sicknesses," "by his stripes we are healed," so that whoever now "believeth on him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." The Divine government will not now suffer loss when allowing the sinner mercifully to pass unpunished, for when Jesus had become legally responsible for the sins of the world, even he was not allowed to escape the penalty. Even though in the days of his flesh he, in Gethsemane, "offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears the "cup could not pass from film." Surely, "he that spared not his own son," who was but legally responsible for sin, will spare no other one who is both legally and morally amenable to a broken law. Sin must be punished, whether the substitute or the original offender be responsible for it. If the sinner accept the substitute, he may be forgiven, and in that case both mercy and justice are satisfied. The demands of the law were met, in the Prince, in a way that secures the stability of government, which is now enabled to exercise the desired mercy with safety. If the sinner accept not the sacrifice made for him, he becomes responsible for all his sins in his own person; for no prince could pardon a subject who would not even recognize the mercy [98] sought to be conferred upon him. Atonement, then, is simply reconciliation to God, effected as soon as pardon is conferred upon the sinner; and this is done by every merciful governor as soon as it can be done with safety to the government, the actual realization of pardon being dependent both upon the control of the governmental difficulty and also upon the acceptance of the terms of freedom by the offender.

Ten years' banishment may be sufficient punishment for certain crimes committed against the State; and this has induced some to conclude that moral evil may also be worn out by time and by personal suffering, without the death of Christ. But it must be patent to every fair thinker, that after the civil punishments have been exhausted, the moral obliquity of the criminal may be the same as before. The civil law never takes away the stain of moral guilt, but leaves the offender to settle that account with his God and Judge; for no lacerations of the body, nor sorrows of the mind, nor infliction of civil penalties can ever atone for sin.

"Could my tears forever flow,  
Could my zeal no languor know,  
This for sin could not atone,  
Thou must save, and Thou alone."

Could our own sufferings, either in this world or in limbo, or in purgatory, or in hell, as some believe and teach, dispose of our sins, then would heaven at last be won, not by the Savior, but by our own powers of endurance; then is Jesus Christ no Savior in any sense, for whoever suffers for all his sins is not saved from sin by Jesus, or by any one else. If you owe a relentless creditor a thousand pounds, and instead of granting your prayer, [99] as an insolvent debtor, for forgiveness of the debt, he compel you "to be sold, your wife, and your children, and all that you have, and payment to be made," could it be said that you were saved from the debt? No more can Jesus be called our Savior if we must suffer out our own demerits. Then is the world without mercy, Christ a mere pretender, and sinners left to count unnumbered years in pain. The duration of this must be measured by the continuance of sin in the soul. As long as disease is in the body we must be sick, and as long as sin unrepented of and unforgiven remains in the soul, be that a million years, the sting of death will still be felt. Forgiveness and cleansing from all unrighteousness are promised in this life to all who obey the Gospel. Now, if there be any assurance of mercy beyond the grave, in what chapter and verse may it be found? Jesus said to the Jews: "Ye shall die in your sins, and where I am ye can not come;" from which it is plainly inferable that if a man die in sin, his condition is fixed forever. And this harmonizes with Abraham's language to Dives: "Between us and you there is a great gulf fixed;" they can not pass from you to us. Besides these fearful intimations of the "wrath to come," it is said, in the last chapter of Revelation, after the judgment is past, "the righteous saved, the wicked damned, and God's eternal government approved," "He that is filthy let him be filthy still, he that is unjust let him be unjust still," stereotyped in sin forever. Some one has thrown Solomon's faithful saying into verse:

"Just as the tree, cut down, that fell

Northward or southward, there it lies

So man departs to heaven or hell,

Fixed in the state in which he dies." [100]

The fabled Gorgon head was said to have power to petrify every one who ventured to look upon its horrid face. Some artist, trying to represent this idea upon the canvas, drew a thief who had happened to turn his eye upon the Gorgon just while in the act of stealing, and, lo! with his hand upon his neighbor's purse, he was horrified into a solid statue, petrified in his guilt. Death will stereotype every sinner, for then the seed-time will be gone, the summer ended, and the fixedness of the eternal state be realized. The certainty, then, that some "will go away into everlasting punishment," should alarm the stoutest heart and pale the bravest sinner as he flies on to the bar of God. But to avert the unfathomable woe, and turn the curse away, Jesus "was made a curse for us,"

"To shame our sins he blushed in blood,

He closed his eyes to show us God,"

dwelt among the dead that we might be forever with the living; for by his atoning blood we are reconciled to God, justice is content, the law is highly magnified, while mercy and full forgiveness are proffered to all; for "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, but he that believeth not shall be damned."

Lord, help thy poor servants to preach this Gospel with holy zeal and quenchless love, that sinners may be saved from the wrath to come, and thy great name be glorified through Jesus Christ our Lord. [101]

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