

The Atonement of Jesus Christ

by William Booth

William Booth's sermon explores the true meaning of the Atonement, addressing misconceptions and affirming God's justice and mercy through Christ's sacrifice.

Scripture: John 14:16, Romans 3:23, Titus 2:11, Hebrews 2:9

Topics: "Atonement", "Salvation"

Description

William Booth emphasizes the significance of the Atonement of Jesus Christ, explaining it as the reconciliation between God and humanity achieved through Christ's sacrificial death on the Cross. He addresses various misconceptions about the Atonement, particularly rejecting the ideas of limited salvation and imputed righteousness, asserting that Christ's sacrifice is sufficient for all who repent and believe. Booth argues that the Atonement reveals God's justice and love, maintains the dignity of the Law, and opens the door of mercy for all mankind. He encourages believers to hold firmly to the doctrine of the Atonement as it is central to their faith and the foundation of their hope for salvation.

Transcript

What do we mean by the Atonement? The word itself simply means at-one-ment, the uniting of two beings who had been separate or apart. In everyday language the word is used to signify something done by the wrongdoer to make amends for injuries he has inflicted on others. In religion the word Atonement is used to signify the sacrifice which Jesus Christ offered for our sins by His death on the Cross, by which offering the reconciliation of God and man was made possible.

Some mistaken notions are entertained with respect to the benefits flowing out of the Atonement. The controversies with respect to the character and measure of the benefits resulting from Christ's sacrifice have been many and bitter, although the intensity of feeling aroused by these differences has been greatly modified in recent years.

While the controversies of the present day refer to aspects of the subject different from those of former times, the opinions of those days are still advocated with some degree of earnestness. In some parts of the world this is more markedly the case than in others. It is, therefore, of importance that officers should have correct ideas as to what those different opinions are. To several views of this doctrine, entertained by some Churches, we take strong exception.

Salvationists object to the view that Christ by His sacrifice made Salvation possible or certain to a chosen portion only of the human race, leaving the remainder outside the possibility of that Salvation. This doctrine is generally described by the terms "election" and "reprobation," and is more commonly known as Calvinism. It sets forth the belief that one portion of mankind is elected by God to Everlasting Life, and the remaining portion reprobated to everlasting death. This doctrine is condemned by Salvationists on various grounds:

It is in opposition to the emphatic declarations of the Bible that Christ died for all men. "For the Grace of God that bringeth Salvation hath appeared to all men" (Titus 2: 11). And again: "That He by the Grace of God should taste death for every man" (Heb. 2:9).

It is in opposition to what we know of the nature of God, as set forth in the Scriptures. He is described in the Bible as a just and benevolent Being, which this doctrine seems most emphatically to deny.

It is in opposition to our natural sense of justice. That multitudes of human beings should be appointed to suffer everlasting death, independently of any choice or action of their own, is revolting to our conceptions of right and wrong, to say nothing about our natural sympathies with suffering.

Neither do we mean by the Atonement, as is maintained by some Theologians, that Jesus Christ, by His sacrifice, met and satisfied the claims of the Law man had broken, so as to render any further obedience to that Law, by the entire human race, unnecessary. This view of the Atonement implies that every man you meet - whether you find him drunk in a public house, or wallowing in the filth of a brothel, or expiating his murderous offenses on the gallows - is on his way to Heaven, the punishment of his sins having been endured by Jesus Christ on the Cross. Such an idea is emphatically contradicted by the plainest declarations of the Bible. For the Bible has no meaning at all if it does not reveal a difference in the final destiny of the good and the bad - of the "Saved" and the "unSaved."

Whatever may be the character of the punishment of the wicked, the Bible repeatedly, explicitly and emphatically states that it will be everlasting in its duration. It says that the wicked are to "go away into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into Life Eternal."

A third view of the Atonement from which the Army dissents maintains the theory that Jesus Christ paid our debt; by which is meant that He satisfied the claims of the broken Law for every human being and secured the Salvation of all men - on the simple condition of their believing the glad tidings. This is known as "the payment of debt theory" or "only believe and you shall be Saved."

This view of the Atonement will, I think, be seen to be an impossible one. If it were true, it would secure the entrance of every human being into Heaven; because if Christ has satisfied all the claims which the Law has upon those who transgressed it, He must have satisfied also the claim involved in the unbelief entertained down to the last moment of life. Consequently, "if the debt is paid, the obligation is discharged, and the debtor is free." It would follow inevitably that, whether I believe the good tidings or not, my unbelief cannot affect the fact; and whatever wickedness may be involved in my refusing to believe, that wickedness itself is also paid for if all my debt is discharged - I am free.

As the hymn sung by the believers in this doctrine says:

The payment of my debt cannot be twice required;

First at my Surety's hand, and then at mine.

Another mistaken view of the benefits flowing out of the sacrifice of Christ, although it does not directly refer to the Savior's death, is closely connected with it; this is known as the doctrine of "imputed righteousness." Jesus Christ, this notion says, by voluntarily placing Himself under the Law to which man was subject, rendering a perfect obedience to that Law, and sealing that obedience with His own Blood, thereby not only did purchase the forgiveness of sin for those whom He redeemed, but merited for us through His obedience a perfect righteousness; clothed in this His people will appear at the Judgment Bar, and it will constitute not only a preparation for Heaven but a right of entrance there.

This doctrine declares that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to those who believe on His name, not only to make up for their own unrighteousness, but to create a righteousness which should be regarded as their own. Though they have not obeyed the Law, Christ has obeyed it for them, and therefore they are entitled to just the same blessings as though they had obeyed it themselves. This, I need hardly say, is a mistaken notion, seeing that one being cannot, in this sense, obey the Law for another. Every creature in Heaven and on earth is placed under that Law of Benevolence which claims all the love and service he is able to render, according to the capacity of his nature - whether it be that of an Angel, of a man, or of a little child.

In becoming a man Jesus Christ voluntarily placed Himself on the same level, in this respect, as Peter and John; that is to say, the Law required from Him, as truly and really as it did from them, all the love and service which His powers enabled Him to render. The extent of the Savior's capacity determined the extent of His obligation. Having an infinite capacity He was under obligation to love and serve in an infinite degree.

But if concerning the Atonement we do not entertain these notions, we do believe that Jesus Christ, by His death, offered a sacrifice for the sins of men which was of sufficient value to make amends for the damage done to the honor of the Law by man's transgression. This made it possible for God to forgive the sins of all who truly repent and believe on His Son and determine to live lives of faith and obedience. And we believe that, in virtue of this sacrifice, full forgiveness can be granted to the transgressor, without in any way diminishing, in the estimation of mankind, the honor of God whom he has offended, the majesty of the Law he has broken, or the evil of the sin he has committed. By this Divine scheme God can be just, and yet be the Justifier of him that believeth in Jesus.

I want now to mention some of the reasons which are given for refusing to accept the doctrine of the Atonement in any form. The first of these affirms that this doctrine is a reflection upon the justice and benevolence of God. Those who bring forward this objection say that while the Bible and our natural instincts represent God as a loving and beneficent Father, this doctrine describes Him as a fierce and angry Being, who cannot forgive a poor sinner without His Son coming from Heaven to suffer the shame and agony of the Cross. But this is a false representation of the subject; it is not the doctrine of the Bible, nor the doctrine of The Salvation Army. The true doctrine is just the opposite. The Atonement was not necessary to create compassion in the bosom of God for sin stricken man; it was the compassion of God that generated the Atonement. The Sacrifice on the Cross was not offered to appease the angry wrath of the Father; it was in the compassionate bosom of the Father that the sacrifice of the Cross was born.

Christ's sacrifice was devised to maintain the dignity of the Law man had broken, and at the same time to rescue man from the penalty he had incurred. So far, therefore, from the Atonement being a reflection on the justice and benevolence of God, it is perhaps the greatest evidence we possess both of His unswerving justice and of His boundless love.

In the second place, the Atonement is declared by these objectors to have been unnecessary. This objection is taken on three grounds: The objectors deny that in man's conduct any serious offense has been committed. They affirm that nothing has been done that could correctly be described as sin - meaning by sin the transgression of the Divine Law. They say that the offenses which the Bible describes as sins are not really sins at all, but merely irregularities resulting from errors of judgment; or, that they are involuntary, the working out of man's unbalanced nature or that they are the inevitable outcome of some hereditary inclination or disposition for which the individual cannot justly be held responsible.

Let us look carefully at this statement that no real sin has been committed, assuming several simple truths, to which I do not think these objectors would demure God is, as we all believe, a benevolent Being, and the Author of our existence. Having arranged for our coming into the world, God must be desirous of our well being. Knowing that our well being must be largely dependent on our conduct, and knowing the kind of conduct which is likely most surely to lead to the happiest and most useful existence, it is certain that God would prefer that we should adopt that course of conduct. These preferences and judgments with respect to the conduct of our lives God has caused to be written in the books of Providence, conscience and Scripture; and they constitute the rules, that is the Laws, by which He seeks to control that conduct.

The transgression of these Laws constitutes sin - which is, therefore, an offense not only against ourselves and our neighbors, but against God. In the everlasting death that is announced in the Bible you have the penalty God has connected with the transgression of His Law. In the gift of Jesus Christ you have the expression of God's compassionate desire to save men from the penalty which is the consequence of their wrong doing. And in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ you have the Atonement, by which act He displayed His high regard for the Law man had broken, His deep hatred of sin, and His boundless compassion for the transgressor. The Atonement enables Him at the same time consistently to rescue all who comply with the conditions attached to it from the doom to which they have exposed themselves.

The second argument in support of the objection that the Atonement was unnecessary is as follows: "If God is the God of mercy that He is represented to be, and if man has sinned against Him, as he is said to have done, and if God did compassionate man, as the Bible says He did - why could He not forgive him, and remit the penalties attached to his wrongdoing without all the humiliation and suffering which is implied in the doctrine of the Atonement?"

To this I reply: There is a real difference between what is right and what is wrong, and this difference constitutes a gulf of infinite width and infinite depth - a gulf so wide and so deep that neither men, nor angels, nor even God himself can disregard it. For God, omnipotent and wise as He is, cannot make right wrong or wrong right. Upon this essential difference between what is right and what is wrong the whole fabric of the moral Law of the universe is based. Thus God must be under the strongest obligation to do all that lies within His power to maintain, before all the creatures under His care, the manifest rightness of what is right and the manifest wrongness of what is wrong. This object God seeks to accomplish by the institution of the Law - the declaration of what is right and what is wrong in human conduct, and the demand for obedience upon all to whom the Law applies.

The needed respect for Law, and the importance of obedience to it, are guarded by the infliction of a penalty bearing some proportion to the magnitude of the transgression. And when Law is broken the infliction of penalty must inevitably follow. In the case of man's sin the penalty included everlasting condemnation as wrongdoers, and everlasting separation from God. Quite possibly, indeed probably, the

same or a similar penalty applies to every transgressor of Divine Law in every part of the universe, seeing that Divine Law is an expression of the Divine nature and will. It is evident that, great as God is, it was morally impossible for Him to remit the penalty due to sin without some sacrifice being found which would have the effect of making the Law appear as honorable, and the offense appear as awful, as would have been the case had the penalty been inflicted.

Now, God's heart yearned over man in his transgression, prompting Him to desire man's deliverance from the consequences of that transgression. How was this deliverance to be effected? Something must be done which would make a similar impression upon the mind of man as to the importance of keeping the Law and the evil of breaking it as the infliction of the penalty due would have done; and which would at the same time awaken in him a sense of the shame and guilt of his transgression, and a desire to cease from his disobedience. This was done by the life and death of Jesus Christ, so that now every sinner who will, on God's terms, accept the deliverance provided for him, may go free.

A third objection to the necessity of the Atonement declares: "If the offense of man was the serious evil that you assert, and if God could not forgive that offense without some remarkable intervention on the part of some great Being who should become a wonderful example of freedom from sin, and yet of suffering for it - then are we not justified in believing that the holy life of Jesus Christ and the death He endured were sufficient to impress humanity with the required sense of the value of the Law, and the evil of the offense that had been committed against it, without our being called upon to regard Him as a Divine Being? That is - could He not have made the needed sacrifice without being more than man?"

No! We do not think He could. If He had been nothing more than man He must Himself have been a transgressor of the Law, seeing that "all have, sinned, and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23), and in that case He would have required a sacrifice for His own sins. Even if that difficulty were surmounted, but Jesus Christ had been only a human being, it would have been impossible for Him to furnish sufficient merit to meet the needs of a world of sinners. Again, in whatever meritorious work Jesus Christ performed, or whatever sufferings He endured, if He had been merely human, instead of being the Savior of the world, as He is presented to be, He would have been only one of the Saviors of the world.

If He were not more than man, the Christian world has been deceived for two thousand years as to the value of the Blood He shed, the intercession He has made and the worship that has been rendered Him. If His work for me were nothing more than human wisdom devised, and human passion compelled, and human nature endured, then I can accept it or reject it as I think fit, without condemnation from anyone. If Jesus Christ were not a Divine Person there would be nothing more to make me condemn myself for not accepting Him as my Savior, than in my refusing to believe in some other human benefactor. Finally, if He was not more than man, and if His life and death have no more bearing upon my destiny than those of any human philanthropist, then His claims are without foundation, and the hopes they have raised in my soul are a delusion: He must have been either the prince of impostors or, what He really was, the Lord of Lords, the King of kings, the Savior of mankind.

The objectors of whom we are speaking argue further that such a transaction as the Atonement was improbable. "How," they ask, "could God weep and be depressed, and feel Himself forsaken, and die, as the Bible represents Him to have done?" These objectors find it difficult to credit that these events occurred, and consequently they find it difficult to trust their souls upon them.

If however, we were to go so far as to admit that the story of the Atonement has the appearance of improbability, that would be no positive disproof of its truthfulness. Many things are constantly occurring under our very eyes, which we should think were most unlikely and should refuse to believe, if we had not had some personal acquaintance with the actual occurrence.

It is argued further that it is an unjust arrangement for one Being to be sacrificed in the interests of another, as in the case of the Atonement.

It seems to me to be most curious that such an objection should be raised in a world that is so full of sacrifice at every turn you take in it. When we look round us it seems as though in this life sacrifice were a Law of existence. It appears as though we could have joy only as a result of the sorrows of others, as if we could have life only by their death.

The material world is full of sacrifice. Matter is sacrificed to propagate and support every sort of vegetable as well as animal life. Coal has to be burned in order to create warmth, prepare food and supply the means of motion. The vegetable world is sacrificed to sustain animal life. And the animal world is sacrificed, with a vengeance, for the maintenance of human life.

Husbands sacrifice themselves for their wives, or ought to do so. Wives are sacrificed for their husbands. Parents are sacrificed for their children. Patriots are sacrificed for their country. And in some Eastern lands one human being is accepted as a sacrifice for another.

On the one hand the highest admiration of men of all stations is given to those who sacrifice their interests or even themselves for the good of others. On the other hand selfishness - taking care of yourself, and allowing other people to suffer or perish, sometimes through your unwillingness to suffer on their account - is everywhere despised; although, alas! alas! Largely practiced by those who hold it in such contempt.

And when we come to the religious world we find sacrifice everywhere taught. No religion has a powerful hold upon the people that has not sacrifice as a principle of its action, if not a main reason for its existence. Without sacrifice religion would not be religion at all.

Why then should it be counted an unreasonable or unjust arrangement for the Son of God to inhabit a human body for a season in order that He might be a Man of sorrows and die a suffering death, to make a sacrifice for our sins and leave behind Him an example for us to imitate?

Another objection to the doctrine of the Atonement affirms that the benefits flowing out of the Sacrifice are not equivalent to the amount of humiliation and suffering that Jesus Christ endured.

In answer to this objection let us consider some of the blessings flowing out of the Atonement, and show that they constitute incontrovertible reasons why we Salvationists should hold to the doctrine with all our might.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the marvelous revelation it affords of the love of God to man.

You have the revelation of that love in the Creation, the provision made for man's health and happiness.

You have a revelation of that love in Providence. All things work together for our good. That we do not understand why things that appear opposed to our welfare come to us does not disprove the fact.

You have a revelation of that love in the Bible. Who would ever have dreamed of many of the things we know about God if they had not been there revealed?

You have a revelation of that love in Grace. Grace is the sign of the infinite compassion, love and beauty of God in the conversion, sanctification, preservation and utilization of His people, and in their filial triumph over death and hell.

But in Christ - in His hanging, dying on the Cross - we have a manifestation of the heart of love which made all this possible, and which, in importance, far transcends it all.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because it forms a strong incentive to us to love God in return.

As I kneel before His bleeding form, and remember who He was, and why He came there, I can do no other than say, from the depths of my being:

Were the whole realm of nature mine,

That were a present far too small;

Love so amazing, so Divine,

Demands my soul, my life, my all.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the picture it presents of the majesty of the Divine Law, and the importance of its maintenance.

As I look upon the suffering Christ, not only am I compelled to think of the high estimate God sets upon the Law that keeps the universe in order, but my heart bounds to render obedience to that Law.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the revelation it makes of the evil of sin.

If I were permitted to witness the agonizing miseries that sin brings upon men in this life; if I could wander over the battlefields and through the slums and prisons and hospitals and other habitations of human vice and crime and woe - I should, without doubt, get some faint idea of what an evil and bitter thing it is to sin against God. If I were permitted to go down into hell itself, and witness the terrible sufferings and listen to the agonizing regrets of the lost, I should gain some further idea of the dreadful consequences that follow the transgression of the holy Law of God. But, altogether, I should not find such a telling expression of the awful nature of sin as I see when I behold the suffering form of my Savior - the eternal Son of God on the bloody Tree, and know that it was sin that nailed Him there.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the door of mercy which it flings widely and gloriously open for all mankind.

Millions have entered the gates that lead to the Celestial City with the sentiment in their hearts which we Salvationists express by our song, "His Blood can make the foulest clean." Millions upon millions more will reach the Golden Pavement who have never heard His precious name before they gained the Heavenly Shores. Sincere souls who by living up to the light they possess, prove that if they had had the opportunity they would have laid themselves at the Savior's feet, will not have to suffer banishment on account of their ignorance. You will remember Paul says, "in every nation he that feareth Him, and worketh righteousness,

is accepted with Him" (Acts 10:35). This shows that God is going to deal with people according to their sincerity. If they are obedient to what they hear, there will be Salvation for them; and if they have never heard but would have been obedient if they had heard, they will not be rejected.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because it justifies us in believing in the transference to the Heavenly Shores of multitudes of young children who have never heard His name below.

More than half the human race die in infancy and, in view of the holy examples set before them by the Heavenly host, grow into celestial maturity in the Heavenly Canaan.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the example the Savior Himself furnishes for imitation.

Nowhere in the history of the human race, from Adam down to the present hour, have we any being, until we come to Jesus Christ, to whom we can point with confidence and say, "Take not only the precepts of His mouth as your guide, but the example of His life and death." The value of such an example is greater, I need not say, than anything human or angelic can calculate.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the material, mental, moral and spiritual blessings which stream from it out into our dark and desolate world.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the fire of compassion and love for the sinning, suffering bodies and souls of men which it kindles in the hearts of those who yield themselves to its influence.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the fulness of the Holy Spirit's influence which it makes possible to men.

"I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you for ever; even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:16-17).

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the preparation for Heaven it makes certain for those who accept it.

Think of the multitude which no man can number, already assembling on the Heavenly Plains, who have washed their robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb, and the multitudes more who have availed themselves of the same preparation and are coming on.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because of the verification it affords of the prophecies, promises and general statements of the Bible.

To take the Atonement out of the Bible would not only rob the sacred volume of its chief, if not its entire interest, but largely destroy its power to bless the souls of its readers. In fact, without the Atonement the Bible would cease to be one of the lights of the world, and would speedily vanish from the earth in the gloom that would surround it.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because its loss would rob multitudes of the honest men and women of the most powerful motive to purity of heart and life.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because it constitutes our most powerful weapon in the fight with the godless crowds.

Whether in the Churches, the market places, the theaters, the music halls, the public houses, the brothels, their own homes or elsewhere, the death of Jesus Christ is our battle cry of victory. Christ weeping, suffering, dying for them, and waiting to wash away their sins in His Blood, constitutes the most powerful motive to submit themselves immediately to God, accept His mercy and commence a new life calculated to please Him, promote their own happiness and ultimately lead them to Heaven, Without this inducement our talking would lose its influence on the conscience of men, and the Penitent form would be banished from the world for ever.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because the loss of it would spoil every song we sing.

If there were no Atonement, we should soon abandon singing all together. Take away the Cross, and the river of our peace would cease to flow; the joy of our religion would come to an end.

We must hold on to the doctrine of the Atonement because it is the greatest, most influential and most soul stirring truth in the universe. Where should we be without the Cross? Comrades, let us avail ourselves to the uttermost of the Salvation and the conquering power that the Atonement of our Lord Jesus Christ makes possible to us in our inward experience; and let us resolve that, with renewed energy and increased enthusiasm, we will proclaim the redeeming virtues of the Cross to the whole world.

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