

T.U.L.I.P.*

(The Doctrines of Sovereign Grace)

Limited Atonement

So far in this mailer, we have looked at the Biblical doctrines of Total Depravity and Unconditional Election. The reality we have seen so far, is this: In the fall in Adam, mankind has made itself *guilty* before the law of God (Rom. 5:12). Man transgressed God's clear commandment (Gen. 2:17), and became legally *guilty* before God. As a result, man received the legal *punishment* that God said would fall upon man – spiritual death (Gen 2:17). That punishment included this: that man, by nature, became totally depraved – he became wholly incapable of doing any good works, and inclined to all evil (Rom. 3:9-18). He became a slave to sin and Satan. This was part of man's *punishment* for his guilt. This is all *bad news*.

The *good news*, however, is this: God, in pure grace, has decreed to save an elect people in Jesus Christ (Eph. 1), to raise them to spiritual life (Eph. 2:1), and to make them His peculiar people (1 Pet. 2:7-9). This is the gospel.

But there is a very big problem here: If man is legally guilty before God for his sins; and the legal punishment for this is that man becomes spiritually dead and totally depraved, a slave to sin; then, how can God maintain His legal justice, while at the same time raising certain men back to spiritual life? Is God not unjust in raising some men to life, if they deserve to be dead in sins? (Col. 2:13-14)

Enter the glorious truth of Limited Atonement.

The word "atonement" in the Bible has this main idea: to make things legally right. God makes "atonement" for the sins of His people, so that

their sins are covered before His sight, and so that God's people are reconciled to God.

How does God make this atonement? Through the cross of Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:6-11). How does this work, *legally*? This is how it works: Jesus Christ took upon Himself the guilt of His people (Gal. 3:13), so that He became *legally responsible* before God for the sins of His elect people (Rom. 4:25). Then, Jesus Christ went to the cross, and suffered the *legal punishment* for those sins – God's holy wrath against sin (Matt. 27:46). He endured *all* the punishment for *all* the sins of God's people (John 19:30). His suffering for the sins of His people was the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice, that satisfied God's perfect justice, and that made God's people once again legally right with God (Rom. 3:24-26; Eph. 1:5-7; Heb. 9:28).

This is the biblical idea of Atonement. This truth stands at the center of the gospel.

This atonement, the Bible makes very plain, is limited. What that means is this: Jesus Christ died only for a certain limited people, only for a *particular, definite* number of people. He did not die for the sins of every man, woman, and child, head for head. He died *only for some people*.

Who are these particular people? This is the language that the Scriptures use: "He shall save *His people* from their sins" (Matt. 1:21); "I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for *the sheep*" (John 10:11; compare with John 10:25-28!); "I lay down my life for *the sheep*" (John 10:15). Also, there are many passages in the Scriptures where the language "for us" is used, where the elect people of God are referred to (Titus 2:13-14; Col. 2:14; Isa. 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24-25; Eph. 5:2, 25).

For whom did Christ die? The Scriptures are clear: His elect people, His beloved bride, His Church.

Surprisingly, this biblical teaching of limited atonement is controversial. Many, in fact, would openly deny limited atonement. What they would say is this: Jesus Christ died for every person, and salvation is made available to everyone through the death of Christ. However, they would say, only some people benefit from Christ's death, namely, those who make their own decision to accept Jesus Christ as Savior.

This kind of thinking is simply not Biblical. The truths of total depravity and unconditional election deny this kind of teaching (we have already looked at these doctrines in the past).

But even besides those truths, when we properly understand what Jesus' death on the cross actually accomplished, then we also see that this kind of thinking is unscriptural. The Scriptures are clear: Jesus *actually atoned* for sin on the cross (He did not just make atonement *possible or available*) (see Isa. 53:5d). And so, if, as some say, Jesus actually made atonement for the sins of *everyone* on the cross, and He died for *everyone*, then, logically, *no one* deserves to go to Hell anymore! If Jesus, through His death, made everyone legally right with God, then, in fact, everyone must be going to Heaven. For God would certainly be *unjust* if He *first* poured out His wrath upon *Christ* for all the sins of a man, and then would pour out His wrath *again* upon that man in Hell. That would mean double the punishment for the sin committed. And that would make God truly unfair in His dealings with men. Why should someone still suffer in Hell, if Christ already suffered Hell for them on the cross?

And furthermore, if Christ died for all men on the cross, as some teach, and yet not all are saved, then Jesus Christ quickly becomes a weak and incomplete Savior – He is only half a savior... and then, in fact, no savior at all! (But see Matt. 1:21.)

Hence, the glorious truth of *Limited* Atonement.

What is the appropriate response to this doctrine?

This is what the Scriptures say: “O the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Romans 11:33)

*T.U.L.I.P. is an acronym for what is commonly called the five points of Calvinism. We will be going through these doctrines topic by topic in this mailer.

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