

What is Limited Atonement?

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

1 Timothy 4:10

a-tone-ment:¹

1. satisfaction or reparation for a wrong or injury; amends.
2. (sometimes initial capital letter) Theology, the doctrine concerning the reconciliation of God and humankind, esp. as accomplished through the life, suffering, and death of Christ.
3. Archaic. reconciliation; agreement.

Atonement is the bringing together of Creator and creature. Purposed and purchased in Christ, believers are reconciled through His blood.²

The doctrine of a limited atonement is somewhat concerned with the question of for whom it was that Christ died. To be more specific, the issue is one of the effectiveness of the sacrifice. Did the Lord's death actually save or did it enable believers to be saved? The position of limited atonement is that while Christ died for the entire world in some sense, His death was effective for the elect.³

The Bible certainly teaches that God desires the salvation of the world and that Christ died for all in some manner. This is made explicitly clear in the following passages:

- *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.*

John 3:16

¹ From Random House Unabridged Dictionary, 2006.

² See "What is Reconciliation?"

³ Also called "particular redemption" in that His death was efficient for the particular group known as the elect.

⁴ His sovereign will is also known as His efficient, secret, will of decree while His moral will is also known as His permissive, revealed, will of command.

⁵ We realize that some would point to Pharaoh's hardening of his own heart. However, it is important to keep in mind that God's intention of hardening his heart is made clear long before Moses appears before Pharaoh (Exodus 4:21).

⁶ A view known as universalism.

⁷ A few other instances of the usage of this particular word include Acts 25:6; 1 Timothy 5:8, 17; Titus 1:10. moral will is also known as His permissive, revealed, will of command.

- *The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.*

2 Peter 3:9

- *But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves.*

2 Peter 2:1

- *For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies," declares the Lord GOD. "Therefore, repent and live."*

Ezekiel 18:32

While the Scriptures contain such language of the universal purpose of God's redemptive plan, they also speak of a select application. Some theologians refer to this as evidence of two wills in God. On one hand, God takes no pleasure in the death of any (2 Peter 3:9) and on the other He desires to put some to death (1 Samuel 2:25). He commands repentance of all (Ezekiel 18:32) and yet doesn't grant repentance to some who seek it (Hebrews 12:16-17). These two wills are known as God's sovereign will and His moral will. His sovereign will includes all that will certainly occur, while His moral will includes all that He commands.⁴ This is especially seen in the story of Pharaoh in Exodus in which God commands that he let the Israelites go and yet God hardens his heart that he might not obey the command.⁵

Importantly, even Arminians believe in some form of limited atonement. While they hold that Christ died for all, they do not therefore claim that the sins of the world are atoned for and that all are consequently reconciled to the Father.⁶ Only believers truly experience atonement.

Ultimately, we confess that Christ is the savior of all men in some manner (1 Timothy 4:10). His obedience purchased a flood of grace and mercy for the entire world and every day that wrath tarries could be said to be a result of His righteousness. At the same time, we must confess that He is especially the savior of those who believe (1 Timothy 4:10 again). The word "especially" is taken from a Greek word meaning "particularly" or "in a distinct manner" or "most specifically".⁷ Christ is the savior of all, especially of those who believe.