

## For Whom Did Christ Die?

Can we truthfully say to anyone “Jesus Christ died for your sins”? While many Christians say we can, there are some who disagree.

Those who disagree argue that Jesus Christ did not die for everyone, but only for those who are the elect or chosen by God. Jesus did not die for the non-elect (the unsaved) because God did not will to save them. They claim that if Christ died for all people it would make a mockery of the death of His Son (as ineffectual) and the non-elect because they are unable to respond to an offer of salvation. This view is known as *limited atonement* or *particular atonement* because it teaches that Christ’s sacrificial death was limited in its provision. The opposing view, *unlimited atonement* or *universal atonement*, says that Christ died for all people in the world. A deeper look into limited atonement reveals many problems with that view.

### Some theological problems

The theological system of Five-point Calvinism teaches that human beings are totally dead to God in the sense that they cannot respond positively to Him at all. That erroneous view of man’s sinfulness is the first step toward a view of limited atonement. This theology argues that since man cannot respond positively at all, God’s saving grace must be totally unconditional such that man cannot be responsible even to believe. Man is saved because God sovereignly decrees it. Since not everyone is saved, God does not want everyone to be saved, therefore Jesus did not die for everyone. Furthermore, God must first regenerate a person and then give that person faith to believe in Jesus Christ for salvation. The problem with this line of reasoning is that it starts with an unbiblical view of man’s depravity. Man is capable of responding positively to God through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. (For a more complete discussion, see GraceNotes no. 46).

Another problem with limited atonement is that the Bible teaches Jesus Christ is the counterpart to the first Adam (Rom. 5:14-19; 1 Cor. 15:45-47). Christ remedies Adam’s sin and its consequences of death and condemnation for the whole world (not some of the world). As the last Adam, Christ provides freedom from sin, life, and righteousness to any and all who believe.

The Bible clearly says that God loves everyone and desires all people to be saved (John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9). He paid the price for the sin of all mankind so that all can be saved—if they believe. Jesus did not die just for *all sinners*, He died to pay the penalty for *all sin* which is the problem of all mankind (Isa. 53:10-12; John 1:29).

If limited atonement is true, God’s character is impugned. Someone condemned to eternal hell for not believing in Christ could object, “But it’s not my fault; God didn’t choose me!”

### Some biblical problems

A number of Bible passages show clearly that Jesus Christ died for the sins of the whole world and wants everyone to be saved. Some selected passages are summarized with their pertinent truth:

- John 1:29 – The Lamb of God takes away the sin of the world.
- John 3:16-17 – God loves the world and gave His Son to save the world.
- 2 Corinthians 5:19 – God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself.

- 1 Timothy 2:3-6 – Because God our Savior desires all men to be saved, Christ Jesus gave Himself a ransom for all.
- 1 Timothy 4:10 – God is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe.
- Hebrews 2:9 – Jesus tasted death for everyone.
- 2 Peter 3:9 – The Lord is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.
- 1 John 2:2 – Jesus is the propitiation not just for the Christian’s sins, but for the sins of the whole world.
- 1 John 4:14 – The Father sent the Son as Savior of the world.

Those who believe in limited atonement try to argue that in these passages “world” means “the elect” and “all” means “all the elect,” but that is not what the text says so it is imported artificially by their theological system. The word “world” is used 80 times in John, but it never means “the elect.” They want to argue that Christ did not die for all people (*without exception*, everyone), but for all *kinds* of people (*without distinction* between races, sexes, etc.). But the meaning of “all” is “all.” The Bible couldn’t be clearer.

Jesus’ death was for all; He died for Christians, some of whom may dishonor Him, and even non-Christians who reject Him. Consider these passages summarized:

- Hebrews 10:29 – Some who are sanctified trample the Son of God underfoot, count the blood of the covenant a common thing, and insult the Spirit of grace.
- 2 Peter 2:1 – The Lord bought false teachers who deny Him and who will be destroyed.

## Some practical problems

If limited atonement is true, then we cannot truthfully say to everyone “God loves you and Jesus died for you.” We cannot tell everyone that God offers them eternal life. We cannot tell them to believe, because if they are not elect they could not. We cannot legitimately offer the gospel to “every creature” (Mark 16:15). Of course, if we hold to limited atonement we cannot know who the unsaved elect are, so evangelism is quagmired in confusion and contradiction.

## Conclusion

Limited atonement comes from an erroneous understanding of total depravity and unconditional election. When allowed to speak for itself, the Bible does not support limited atonement, but affirms an unlimited atonement. It is not a mockery of Christ’s work on the cross or of the unsaved for God to love them and pay for their sin. The validity and value of God’s love and gracious offer of eternal life is not determined by the potential recipient but by the Giver and His motive. It is the highest love for God to give His Son to pay for the sin of those who would reject Him. We can boldly tell people that God loves them, Jesus Christ paid the price for their sin, rose from the dead, and offers them eternal life if they believe His promise. Jesus’ atonement was sufficient and available to all people, but is only realized by those who believe. “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek” (Rom. 1:16).