

A Long Walk in the Same Direction

1 John 2:3-6

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Does Jesus' Propitiation Apply to Everyone?

Last week we trembled and rejoiced in what John writes in 1 John 2:2 about propitiation—God's wrath toward us being turned into favor by and through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. His death satisfied God's holy requirements for sin and turns the eternal anger into eternal favor. Propitiation. The cross of Christ was and is the propitiatory offering for our sins. It's a wonderful truth and I won't preach the message again. Our main text today is 1 John 2:3-6. However, before we get to it, I want to comment on the last phrase of verse 2 which we didn't have time to study last week. We need to because it is an often quoted verse in an ages old doctrinal controversy.

Let me read it: He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for our sins only but also for the sins of the world. (1 John 2:2)

You may say, "Well, what is the controversy in that?" Here it is. If Christ is the all-satisfying sacrifice for the wrath of God toward sin, which John calls "our sins," to what extent is that propitiation applied? "For the sins of the whole world" on the face of it would suggest Jesus turned away God's wrath for all sins. Yet, clearly not everyone is saved and hell is eternal for a reason. So did Jesus' death make moral payment for everybody's sins, or for the sins of those who believe, or for the sins of those who would believe?

- The Universalist says, yes, all sins means all sins. Everyone's sins are covered and therefore, everyone is saved. No one is eternally condemned. No one goes eternally to hell. Everyone including Hitler, the 9/11 terrorists, and the mass murderers are, in the end, forgiven and given eternal life. Hell is empty. Heaven is full. Love wins.
- Jesus paid the price for everyone's sins, but only those who believe benefit – they would see in 1 John 2:2 the word "world," which they take to mean individuals in the world. So Jesus made a moral payment sufficient for all sins in the moral bank account, but only those who believe withdraw from that atonement account and are saved.
- Jesus made payment for all who actually will believe. Since God himself is eternal and sovereign, applying redemption to all who believed prior to the cross and would believe after is divinely doable. The first position is Universalism. The second is Arminianism. The third is the Reformed position.

All of Orthodox Christianity says the Universalists are doctrinal wackos and I would agree.

The real debate is between whether Jesus paid the moral payment and propitiated God's anger for people who in the end don't believe, OR if he made moral payment for those who already did believe in the Old Testament (then dead) and would in the future believe in the New Covenant.

A helpful picture is the three crosses of Calvary. There were thieves on both sides of Jesus. One believes in him and one doesn't. Did Jesus bear guilt and make payment for both thieves (Arminianism) or for the one who believed (Reformed)?

I am going to tell you what I think. I think that the reason there is a debate is that the Bible doesn't have a passage that crystal clearly answers that one way or the other. That doesn't mean that there isn't an answer because both cannot be right. One is right and one is wrong. While it is not clearly spelled out, it is more logical and biblically consistent that in the eternal purposes of God, Jesus made payment for all who would actually believe. This is a conclusion based more on logic than on a 100% biblical mandate. I think we will get to heaven and find out the reformed position held the higher ground.

Practically speaking, it doesn't change much in terms of ministry as long as we stay biblically balanced. As the apostles did, we can share the gospel with everyone confident that whoever believes, Jesus' atonement is available and will be applied to all who come to God by faith in Jesus.

How Can I Know if I am a Christian? The Test of Obedience

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:3-6)

Over and over in 1 John, John will say something like, This is how we can know. Remember, John's aim is to distinguish between the real and the fake, the genuinely saved and the Christian pretenders.

You see John's purpose is revealed in verse 3: by this we know we have come to know him. He does this throughout the letter and these tests or evidences of genuine salvation revolve around three points:

- The Social Test Do I love?
- The Doctrinal Test Do I believe?
- The Moral Test Do I obey?

This passage is about the last test; the test of obedience. He doesn't actually use that specific word here; in verses 3 and 4 he uses, keep his commandments; verse 5, keep his word; verse 6, walk as Jesus did. These are all saying the same thing. Verse 3 is the positive statement—keeping his commandments is one way we can know we have come to know him. Verse 4 is the negative—if we don't keep his commandments, no matter what we claim about knowing God, we are liars.

So John focuses on the particular claims of the false teachers who separated fellowshiping with God and obedience to God. We are back to the claim of 1 John1:6 saying I have fellowship with God but walk in darkness. That cannot be because God is light and in him there is no darkness nor any fellowshiping with people living in darkness.

So the focus of this test is the moral direction of the Christian's life and how obedience evidences genuine salvation.

What is Obedience?

Obedience is the fruit and evidence of regeneration which treasures God's will inwardly and fulfills God's will outwardly.

Here are some passages that speak to the role of obedience as evidence of salvation.

- But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed. (Romans 6:17)
- You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? (Matthew 7:16)
- By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. (1 John 5:2)
- "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." (John 14:15)

These and many other passages speak of the importance of obedience in the Christian life. Please hear me: obedience is not the condition to meet for salvation, but rather the evidence of it. It is so critical that this distinction is made or you may leave here either religious or legalistic. Religion celebrates obedience as the condition of salvation, or at least requires more moral obedience than disobedience. Legalism tries to prove salvation by performance. Both of these miss that a changed life of obedience is the byproduct of God's grace. For obedience to be pleasing to God, it has to come from a heart made alive by him. Hebrews 11:6 says, Without faith it is impossible to please [God]. John 14:15 says, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments."

Real God-pleasing obedience is the evidence of salvation because apart from grace, that obedience will not last and the kind of persevering obedience, especially self-giving love, cannot be self-manufactured in the long term.

Here is a simple definition of obedience that acknowledges both the change that salvation will produce and the inconsistencies our sin nature reveals:

Obedience is a Long Walk in the Same Direction

Before salvation, the sinful nature of our hearts led us directionally toward sin and self and idolatry and immorality and basically the worship of me. In salvation, God does in me what I cannot do. He places upon the throne of my heart a new king—Jesus—and puts in me a new heart with new desires, and these desires set my life in a new direction. Rather than living with the idolatry of me, a Christian's God and Lord is Jesus and that transformation changes the overall moral and spiritual direction of my life. New heart. New desires. I begin walking in a new direction.

Obedience is the moral and spiritual walking in the will of God as outlined in his Word. His Word is his will and it is the hiking map for this new walking. It is direction, not perfection. Like any hike, I sometimes get off the path or take a wrong step. However, I am still going in the overall direction of the will of God. If I was to walk from here to Ohio, I may take a few wrong turns, but my direction is east. If I say I am walking to Ohio but I resolutely ignore the map and walk west, I really can't call myself a hiker, can I?

As I make progress toward Ohio, I can look back and see that my direction has so definitely changed from spiritual west to spiritual east that I can know I have really changed. What is the explanation? God has saved me and set my life in a different moral direction and I am on a long walk in the direction of God and his glory and generally away from sin.

This is how we can know we have come to know him; we observe ourselves inwardly wanting God and outwardly obeying him.

Similarly, if I say I am a Christian living with Jesus as the Lord of my life and yet I look at the hike of my life and it's directionally NOT toward the keeping of God's commands, but directionally (morally and spiritually) away from that, I should not have assurance that I am saved no matter what I claim and no matter what my past experiences are.

Now let's see it from this passage...

How Obedience Indicates Salvation

Assures us of inward change

And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
(Verse 3)

You see, John is making this connection between the inward spiritual reality of knowing God through his Son and the outward indication of that inward knowledge being obedience to God. Remember, the outward change is the fruit of the inward change. It's inside out, not outside in.

This is why religion fails to save. Religion changes the outside by rules and principles, moralism and legalism, good works and acts of religious kindness that the individual hopes will save them in the end.

A good example of this is Les Misérables. Many people have seen the play or the recent movie. There has been lots of buzz about it. The overarching story is one of redemption where the thief seeks to redeem his former sins by caring for an orphan. He sees this as his redemption and gives his life and wealth to see her grow up and be happy. It is touching and I'll admit I cried. I must be going to heaven because I cried at Les Mis.

While there are many redemptive themes about brokenness and justice, if you think about it, what sort of redemption is Les Mis offering? The hope that by my good life I can make up for and redeem my bad one. It resonates because we all identify with Jean Valjean the sinner and we hope to identify with Jean Valjean the saint.

The last thing John would say is, do good works and redeem your past. He just got done saying that Jesus is the propitiation and atonement for our sins. We can't propitiate ourselves and we cannot save ourselves and all the good works we may do will not save us and will not change us on the level God requires.

Real obedience that John describes begins on the inside and is the fruit of a regenerated heart. If you love me, you will keep my commandments (John 14:15); NOT if you obey my commands, you will love me. One is the dog and one is the tail. One is the engine and one is the caboose.

As I walk directionally over a period of time on the path of the will of God, I can look back at the path of obedience and see it as evidence of the spiritual transformation that only God can produce.

Obedience doesn't save but it can assure. Similarly, a life lived disregarding God's will provides assurance that we are NOT Christians. "The Christian cannot experience high levels of assurance while he participates in low levels of obedience." (Donald Whitney, How Can I Be Sure I'm a Christian? p. 139.)

We see increasing evidences of God's love in us

...but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. (1 John 2:5)

John touches on what will become a major theme: love as an evidence of salvation. We will spend much more time on this in the series, for now just see that God's kind of love, agape, self-giving for the good and joy and others kind of love, is perfected in us.

Transforms us into Jesus Juniors

By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (1 John 2:5-6)

The keeping of commands and the inward perfection of God's love may seem a bit esoteric. John puts out a living, breathing example. Him. John doesn't use his name, but it must be Jesus. Walk describes a way of living. Walk as Jesus did. Walk in the same manner. Walk in the same moral and spiritual direction as Jesus walked.

Does that mean we imitate everything Jesus did? Impossible. Let me know when you turn water into wine and walk on Lake Michigan. It's not that we have to wear tunics and sandals and name 12 disciples. Jesus is the perfect example of a long walk in the same direction. He never veered from the path of obedience and thereby inspires us by his example.

"Our conformity to Christ consists not so much in an imitation of what he did as in obedience to what he prescribes; the example of Christ is not our rule without the precept of Christ. Some actions of Christ are unimitatable, but all his commands are obeyable." – (Charnock, S. WORKS IV:589)

This is what God is doing in the life of the believer. He is making us into the likeness of his Son. That includes Jesus' desire and commitment to obedience. How obedient was he? And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8). Jesus' long walk in the same direction took him to the cross. To walk as Jesus did is to walk morally and spiritually guided by the will of God.

He did it perfectly. We will not. But the overall direction must be the same. And as we walk on, over time the qualities of Jesus' walk will be seen in us as we obey the same will and Word that Jesus did.

I have a friend that pastors in Iowa. I was able to see him over Christmas break. He posted this week the obituary of a man in his church he knew well and for whom he preached his funeral. I want you to see it through the grid of long walks in the same direction as evidence of genuine salvation.

"Mark Paul Lobb was born October 10, 1957, in Virginia, MN... Mark was a selfless provider; always giving and never demanding. He led a life of intentional servitude, modeled after Jesus, his savior, friend and redeemer. He was earnestly devoted to becoming more like Jesus, even when it pushed him out of his comfort zone. He was a pillar for his family and church.

He was a man's man. He almost single-handedly built his family's first home, taught his sons how to hunt, rebuilt a car after it was totaled, convinced his family to camp in the Boundary Waters two years in a row, piloted small planes, slalom water skied

like a boss, and rode his Harley. He was a dad and husband who could accomplish almost anything, but always deferred recognition or praise. He was quick to tell everyone how blessed and lucky he was. Always humble, always loving.”

Obituaries tend to be glow and this one does. Many people do wonderful things, but this profession of faith shows a life of good and love. For this family, how assuring was it to see in Mark a long walk in the same direction? Toward God. His will. His glory. We will have missteps and misguiding and failures along the way, but we always get back on the path as we walk toward the Celestial city.

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