

## Introduction

In the book of Romans (5.19), Paul seems to develop the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 20.28, our text for today. Note the reference in both passages to “many.” **For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous** (Rom. 5.19). . . **even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many** (Mat. 20.28).

In the view of a small minority of commentators, these passages teach an important doctrine that most Christians ignore, misunderstand, deny, or even despise, namely, the doctrine of limited atonement. Although people react like this, the fundamental importance of the doctrine is evident in the fact that *the vital core of limited atonement is something that Christians universally embrace wholeheartedly*. Accordingly, I want to make the point today that, in essence (and where it counts most), all Christians believe in limited atonement. To make this point stick, it will be necessary that we work with our text in its context in widening circles that include the OT. It will also be necessary to draw out some practical implications regarding limited atonement as a subject of discussion in the church and as a powerful motive to Christian service. Both of these major points will give development to the title for today, which is “The Efficacious Ransom of Many.”

### 1A. Biblical basis for efficacious ransom

Before we do anything else, we need to define our terms clearly. Unlimited atonement means that what Christ did on the cross He did equally for every human being without exception. It therefore means that His death did not secure the salvation of everyone for whom He died; it did not secure the salvation of anyone in particular. Limited atonement means that what Christ did on the cross secured the salvation of everyone for whom He died. It means that His death secured or obtained eternal redemption (deliverance from sin by the payment of a ransom) for the people for whom Jesus gave His life. We can speak like this, without accenting the scope (all or some) by talking about those for whom He died. Therefore, this doctrine teaches that the ransom is efficacious: in the death of Christ as a ransom, God accomplishes (effects) the purpose of freeing the people for whom the ransom was paid. The term “limited” is problematic; it has limited use, but it does reflect the idea that God’s intention in the death of Christ focused solely on His elect people (it is limited in design not power). The term efficacious is better, accenting saving power that cannot be thwarted, that accomplishes the saving of all for whom Jesus died.

Does limited atonement, or better efficacious ransom, surface in the words of Jesus in Matthew 20.28? A number of points support an affirmative answer.

#### 1B. First, the ransom is an actuality

The text speaks of an actual ransom, the payment of a price that delivers a slave to sin and death from his slavery. For example, in the book of Exodus, the payment of a ransom delivered each one for whom it was paid from death. **When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them** (Ex 30.12). The ransom was an offering to the Lord (30.14) that was for the sinner: **for his life**. Furthermore, Jesus paid the payment that delivers (frees and saves from death) *in the place of many (for many)*, just as the ransom in Exodus was “in exchange for a life that was forfeit” (Ridderbos, *Matthew*, 372). It is an actuality and not merely a potentiality.

#### 2B. Second, the ransom executes the *pactum salutis* (the pact of salvation)

In the context in Matthew, Jesus referred us to the covenant with the Father that He came to execute in submission to the Father’s will (20.23). Can we think that such a transaction (a divine transaction in which Christ submits to the Father to fulfill the covenant of salvation) takes place without effecting redemption?

In other words, Jesus came to fulfill the covenant of redemption with respect to the people God chose for Himself and gave to Christ (Jn. 17.1-5). The agreement within the trinity in this *pactum salutis* (or pact of salvation) included the voluntary sacrifice of Christ on the cross in order to realize that covenant. How can we then think that Christ was a ransom for many as the service He would render for them to fulfill the eternal covenant in an ineffectual way? He came to serve many by dying in their place as an actual substitution. If it is an actual substitution, then in the death of Christ an actual exchange took place: He gave His life for the many, and by that exchange, the many have His life. Thus, *in time, when a person becomes a Christian and receives newness of life, that life flows effectually to him from the efficacious ransom of Christ on the cross*. In the language of John, it is by the lifting up of Christ on the cross that He will draw people of all nations to Himself (Jn. 12.32; that “all men” refers to people of all nations is clear from the context of Jn. 12 and the Great Commission beyond the cross and resurrection, Mat. 28).

3B. Third, the ransom makes the many righteous

“Ransom” only occurs twice in the NT, here in Matthew 20.28 and in the parallel in Mark 10.45 within Mark’s presentation of the *gospel* (Mk. 1.1). The *gospel* is what is at stake here. In the Gospel of Mark, the narrator presents the Son of God as an active servant in his accent on the deeds of Christ that follow one another “immediately.” Thus, the gospel concerns the Son of God who came to serve. Notably, Mark gives us a final view of this servant: on the cross in this self-sacrifice for sinners (that is the last view we have of Christ in the story line). On the cross, Jesus pays the ransom price to deliver captives in sin; this is why He came: to serve the many.

Mark connects the coming of Christ with Isaiah (1.1-8 and following). Thus, Jesus, Son of God, who pays the ransom for many on the cross, is *the suffering servant of Isaiah*. In the book of Isaiah, chapter 53 presents the coming suffering servant in a profound and complete way. Furthermore, this text decisively indicates that the sacrifice of God’s suffering servant is efficacious for the people for whom He pours out His soul.

**Who has believed what they heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed? <sup>2</sup> For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. <sup>3</sup> He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. <sup>4</sup> Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. <sup>5</sup> But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed. <sup>6</sup> All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. <sup>7</sup> He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. <sup>8</sup> By oppression and judgment he was taken away; and as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people? <sup>9</sup> And they made his grave with the wicked and with a rich man in his death, although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. <sup>10</sup> Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him; he has put him to grief; when his soul makes an offering for sin, he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days; the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. <sup>11</sup> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. <sup>12</sup> Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors.**

Clearly, Isaiah anticipates the Lord’s teaching that He came to give His life, His soul, as a sacrificial substitute (a ransom *offering*) for many. Isaiah says, God “laid on him the iniquity of us all...he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people...” (vs. 6, 8). However, His substitution is efficacious because “**he shall see his offspring...he shall see and be satisfied; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities**” (vs. 10-11). In other words, the many are His offspring and the people of God. He will bear their sins as their intercessor, and not only make them righteous, but He will divide the spoils of His victory with the many. Jesus is teaching us that in His reference to the ransom for many (Mk. 10.45), He is referring to the efficacy of His saving death as the suffering servant. He is fulfilling

the *pactum salutis* and making the actual exchange to give life to the many by the actual substitution of His life for theirs.

Matthew and Mark teach the same thing, but Matthew's over all emphasis is on Christ as king. For Matthew, Jesus is the servant *king* who secures the salvation of the many by His sacrificial death. Thus, Matthew's presentation of Christ as the ransom for many is even stronger than Mark's because for Matthew the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 is sovereign Lord!

Therefore, in the NT, the only two places where "ransom" occurs (Mat. 20.28 and Mark 10.45) both teach the same thing, namely, that the death of Christ secured the release of the many as the justified offspring of Christ. Mark's context pictures Christ as servant, while Matthew's context stresses Christ as king. Matthew has the sovereign king serving the many. How can that be anything less than doing the good to them He seeks for them in His death?

## 2A. Practical implication of efficacious ransom

Some argue that limited atonement cannot be true because even texts that seem to teach it are few. However, that is like saying that the atonement cannot be true because even texts that seem to teach it are few. Recall, that in the Gospel of Matthew, this text (Mat. 20.28) is a rare text that teaches the meaning of the death of Christ. This rarity actually makes the teaching on efficacious ransom even more important for our meditation and sanctification.

Two areas of practical implication that I want to address are the history of doctrine and the context in Matthew.

### 1B. Lessons from the history of doctrine

History teaches us that God's people have great difficulty understanding Scripture regarding the efficacy of the atonement on one hand and great difficulty accepting it on the other hand. So much so that many theologians, past and present, stumble at it. In fact, it might surprise us to learn that there are many differences on the doctrine of efficacious ransom or limited atonement within reformed theology (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III, 460).

The reasons for the difficulties are many and diverse. We cannot negatively paint all who have difficulty here with the same broad brush.

#### 1) Open-heartedly welcome re-study

History should help us here. From history, we can ask, "Why is Calvin not as clear as Dort (the Canons of Dort, 1618) on limited-efficacious atonement? Why do many reformed writers differ with one another on this subject and on specific passages related to it? They differ on the terms to use, how to define them, how to deal with problem texts, and on how to relate efficacious atonement to the free offer of the gospel. Granted, sometimes the doctrine of free will (that man makes the ultimate decision in his salvation, that why one man is saved and another is lost ultimately depends on man and not on God) drives doctrine of unlimited atonement. However, that is not always the case. When it is the case, the discussion needs to center on human depravity in Scripture; but even when it is the case, you must welcome any argument that draws from context and takes us into Scripture. That is, you must welcome it for further study and reexamination. Where you get confused and lack perspective, there you must suspend judgment for a season. Until things fall into place by meditation and prayer, you must remain open and wait on the Lord. If you have a truly open spirit, you can never claim to have all the arguments. You can never say, "I do not need to study further in a reasonable way with reasonable priorities in place."

History teaches that this doctrine is a jewel that the Lord's people will not find unless they seek with openhearted determination. In this light, you can back up for a minute and grant, for sake of argument, that limited atonement may be true or false. No matter which side of the discussion you are on, you should be able to say, "This doctrine is either true or false." I can believe that it is true and say, "It is true or false and I need to study it and find reasons to confirm its truth or falsity." Pointedly, someone who believes that it is false ought to be able to say, "It is true or false and I need to study it and find reasons to confirm its truth or falsity." If we cannot go onto this playing field, whatever our view may be, then we are closed-minded and we run the

risk of quenching the Spirit. We cannot take an open stance with a prideful spirit for that too displeases the Spirit. We must be sincerely and genuinely open to whatever truth other Christians may have on this topic, especially, regarding any passage of Scripture. Even if what they say seems to contradict what we believe, we must be fair, open, and willing to dialogue. This is the Berean spirit; it is the cluster of OMH graces (open-minded humility).

I am not just saying that “the other guy” has to be open; we must be open too. Of course, we must take this stance with all our critical thinking skills at work because we are to love God with all our minds. We must believe that we have attained some level of understanding, but we must season it with the desire for more and better understanding. We can believe that efficacious redemption is true at the same time that we wholeheartedly subject all the ways that we state this doctrine to examination by Scripture. We can do so in a public way in relation to the people of God at large. The prayer of openness, “Lord, I am ignorant, teach me,” must always be on our lips whether we are studying church discipline, forgiveness of someone for an offense, baptism, or the ransom payment of Christ.

### 2) Exercise great patience

You need to be very patient with other professing believers who oppose our teaching on this subject. If you find yourself boxed in a corner by questions and denials that run all over the place in an overwhelming way, you must say to yourself, “This is not new in the history of the church; these reactions may be the doorstep to growth in understanding, even if that comes about through reluctance initially.” On an even deeper level, you must recognize how much sanctification depends on the work of the Spirit, and how sanctification may be necessary in many other ways before we can make headway along the lines of efficacious atonement. This involves patience with others and patience toward God (cf. 1 Cor. 13.4).

### 3) Apply a wise strategy

Here are some things to do that put wisdom to practice regarding this subject.

#### a) Define your terms

Good definitions serve clarity and truth. Clarity is fundamental in gospel proclamation of the truth. Prayer for gospel preaching has the core that it be clear as well as bold.

#### b) Stress context

You should always have a willingness to go to the text, repeatedly. In that spirit, you can call others to read in context. Scripture is the final authority and not the reformed tradition. God’s word is the final authority and not our knowledge of the arguments. Furthermore, Scripture is our final standard and testing all things by Scripture is pleasing to the Lord. Therefore, the reminder to take great care with context is something you must take to heart as you call others to it as well.

#### c) A key element of wisdom here is to stress nature and not number first.

In other words, the real issue is the nature of Christ’s accomplishment on the cross. The first the question is not, “Did He die for all or for some, for all mankind or for the elect?” Instead, the first question is, “Did Jesus actually endure the punishment of sin in the place of sinners; did He actually satisfy the wrath of God against the people for whom He died? Did the ransom on the cross actually pay the price of exchange, His life for the lives of the many? Did the death of Christ secure finally (“once and for all”), and forever, the salvation of the people for whom He was a substitute? Did He actually accomplish the salvation of those for whom He died or did He potentially accomplish the salvation of those for whom He died.

How you answer these questions, which concern the nature of the work of Christ on the cross, determines how you will (how you must) answer the question of all or some (all mankind or the elect). Wisdom will have you emphasize the fact that an efficacious ransom has at its core an actual substitution. You can wisely stress the good news that Jesus is the actual payment, His life is the actual substitute in the place of many. Thus, He saves them as the outflow of this exchange. Without an efficacious ransom, there is no actual substitution. Thus, the efficacious ransom of many is at the heart of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant promised by Isaiah.

## 2B. The lesson of practical Christian service

We must seek to do what we can do. Granted, our love is not efficacious in the way that His love is efficacious. However, we are to be determined and active in our love for His sake trusting His work, its efficacy and certainty. There are times when we must simply let go of people and cease trying to serve them. Committing them into God's hands, we remain open to help, but because they remain unwilling to receive our help and because they are unreasonable and unwilling to dialogue, then we must shake that dust off our feet and move on to serve where we can serve by the grace of God.

It accents the model of service to think that Jesus took my sins and bore the punishment for them in His own body on the tree. His ransom payment in fact paid what justice demands of me. He did not do something for people in general and for me in general; He did not merely make a provision for a ransom on my behalf. In that case, He did not give His life in service as a ransom for many, but as potentially a ransom for many. Then, what He did on the cross was provide for a ransom that might serve to save, but it was not an actual ransom. He made a provision for the redemption of sinners, but He actually accomplished nothing. He made a ransom possible; He made no ransom. It does not help this discussion to claim that making a ransom possible is what He accomplished. For practical application in line with the text, it does not help to frame Christ's example as a potentiality. What we have is actualization, action, work, and practical loving service. We need to follow Him by practical loving service and not mere potentiality. What sense does it make to follow Christ and potentially serve others? This would be more like serving in word but not deed contrary to 1 John 3.18, **Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.** The exhortation of our Lord loses its practical power, unless we understand that He is speaking of an efficacious ransom.

Per the context, the efficacy of the atonement adds fire to the exhortation to seek greatness in the kingdom of Christ by serving the people of God. On one level, I can reason that if He gave His life for sinners (slaves to sin needing redemption by the ransom payment of His own life), then in loving gratitude to Him, in obedience to His command, and following His example as the supreme model, how can I do any less than give myself away to Him in the service of others. I should do this even for ungrateful sinners that will often show no regard but only contempt for my efforts to serve them)? On another level, now, to a heightened degree, I can reason that if He gave His life *efficaciously* for sinners (for slaves to sin that would perish if He did not *actually secure* their release from sin by the ransom payment of His own life), then in loving gratitude to Him, in obedience to His *sovereign* command, and following His example *as the supreme model of determined, active, saving love*, how can I do any less than give myself away to Him in the service of His brothers and sisters bound to Him eternally by the covenant of redemption?

**May we fall down before the majesty of our God in humble acknowledgement of our need of the suffering servant of Isaiah; may the Spirit teach us true thankfulness for the accomplishment that Christ secured for us by the ransom exchange of His life for ours. To Him be all glory, amen.**