

## 12: Atonement

Thus far, we looked at the basics of Aquinas's ethics, metaphysics, and understanding of human nature. We began our final section, on the philosophical theology of Thomas Aquinas, in the previous lecture about the Incarnation. This final lecture will examine Aquinas's understanding of the atonement, a central aspect of Christian theology.

**I. Atonement and a Broad Orthodoxy:** In the previous lecture, we examined the Chalcedonian Christological formula, establishing Jesus' fully human and fully divine natures for all Christians. When handling the issue of the atonement, there is no such binding formula. As such, there are a variety of theological interpretations of the atonement, and despite their variety, they are all orthodox.

Bearing that in mind, we will examine Aquinas's theology of the atonement, but there are others (e.g., the Satisfaction model of atonement by Anselm). This is not to say that there is no limit to orthodoxy when interpreting the atonement. What must be accepted is that Christ came into the world to save humans from their sins, bearing the sins of humanity on the cross, that by Christ's life, passion, death, and resurrection we are reconciled to God. Those are the essentials, how to interpret them is more flexible.

**II. Atonement and the Problem It Implies:** The very word "atonement" implies the existence of a problem. The root meaning of atonement is "at-one-ment," implying the absence of unity - there is a divide between God and humanity. The cause of this disunity is human proneness to moral wrongdoing. Moral wrongdoing is not in accord with goodness, which, as you recall, is a correlate to being. As God is a perfectly good God, our moral wrongdoing is sin against him.

At the heart of this problem is the human propensity to sin itself. We are prone to sin, which is a defect of character, and against the nature of God. It is important to note that our proneness towards sinful action is enough to alienate us from God. Even when one manages not to do a sinful act, that does not reconcile one to God. A person's character is subject to moral appraisal, not exclusively one's actions. As such even when avoiding direct, sinful action, we are still prone to sin, which is still a problem. This is beyond the problem of actualized wrongdoing which is a problem in our lives as well.

This is the problem that atonement must solve: We have a disposition towards sin - a bentness of the psyche - that damages us and the world around us, which must be mended; and we have the consequent guilt of past sinful acts we have all

committed.

**III. The Remedy to the Human Situation:** Human salvation requires a remedy to the problem as described. What is required is not necessarily the payment of a debt, or that a punishment must be imposed for wrongdoing. After all, if one person forgives another, that is an act of mercy, not injustice. What is necessary for human salvation is a remedy for the sinfulness innate in human beings. Christ's grace provides this remedy for all people who surrender to God's grace and love.

Christ's atonement provides the grace enabling people who surrender to God's love to begin the process of sanctification. This process of sanctification heals the sinful "bentness" of our human will. Christ's atonement makes this available so long as one does not refuse the love and forgiveness of God. God forcing God's self upon us would be an abrogation of our free will.

It is through Christ's passion, crucifixion, and resurrection that we see Christ with arms open in love to us, calling us out of our brokenness. It is through Christ that we can know God not just as "God," but as "God with us," bringing us to that point of Christ the Redeemer surrender into grace, love, and the unity that "at-one-ment" seeks to restore.

Therefore, here at the end of the course we find ourselves back where we started, regenerated as a person of grace, indwelled by the Holy Spirit who infuses us with the virtues and gives us the gifts of the Holy Spirit as we are united with the God that is the foundation of all that is, Being itself, and yet a still a being with whom we are in second-personal relationship.

### **Review Questions**

1. There seems to be more flexibility in our understanding of the atonement than in the natures of Christ because there is no council formula defining the issue. Is this a good thing? Why or why not?
2. How does Thomas Aquinas understand sin?
3. How does this affect the atonement?