



GUILT AND GRACE

SERIES: GUILT, GRACE, AND GLORY

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Romans 5:12-21

Twelfth Message

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In Romans 5 this morning we will be dealing with the subject of why we die and what to do about death. Why do we have to die? Why can't we just go on living?

As we study these ten verses, some of you will be asking, "What in the world is the apostle Paul taking about here? This story about Adam's sin and how it relates to Jesus doesn't seem to make any sense." The problem is that Paul does not complete a key sentence. That is why this passage is so hard to understand. However, as we will see, he actually does finish this sentence later in the passage. He begins by making a profound statement, and halfway through his thought realizes that his statement has given rise to certain questions so he answers those, and then completes the sentence. Knowing this, the passage is much easier to understand.

We can complete Paul's sentence by connecting the end of verse 12 with the second clause in verse 18: *"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned — so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men."*

Everything that comes between these verses is parenthetical. When someone begins a statement with the words "just as," he is expected to continue later by saying "so." In this instance, Paul takes a while to complete his thought.

This passage is one the great theological sections in all of Scripture. A lot of truth is condensed into these ten verses, which are set out like a carefully constructed musical composition. Paul's brilliance is evident in the craftsmanship of his writing and his ability to make a sweeping, comprehensive overview summarizing the theology of the previous chapters about our fallen humanity (chapters 1-3), and God's gracious provision and rescue through his son Jesus Christ (chapters 4-5). Here in just a few words we have the philosophy of history and man set out by the inspired apostle.

The passage divides into three short sections, and the progression of thought can be traced in one verb which is repeated throughout the passage. (We saw the same thing last week in the repeated use of the verb "to exult," or "to boast.") The main verb in this passage is the verb "to reign." It is used five times: in verse 14; twice in verse 17, and twice in verse 21. Paul uses this verb to summarize each of the three main sections of this passage. If I were one who wrote in my Bible, I would underline those verbs, because they are a great help in fol-

lowing Paul's thought: sin reigns, death reigns, grace reigns, and we reign. You will notice also in the text that there are a series of comparisons and contrasts between what Adam did and what Christ has done. Paul is referring to the effect that one person had upon the whole world. Adam acted and the whole world suffered the results of his action; Jesus acted and the whole world enjoys the result of his action.

As we study this passage it will be helpful to understand its context, i.e., its relationship to what has gone before. Paul has just described the magnificent benefits accruing to those who have been justified by faith. We have peace with God; we stand in a relationship of unconditional acceptance with God; we can rejoice in our present sufferings knowing they are producing our future glory; we are assured of our final salvation, and we rejoice in the person of God. And it is through Christ that all these blessings become ours. At this point Paul anticipates someone who has heard all of the results of justification asking, "How could one man's actions affect the entire human race?" So he launches into his argument about the one and the many.

My purpose this morning is to try and simplify this complex, condensed and extremely important theology. It is easy to get lost in the details of the argument and miss the main point which the apostle wants to make. The great expositor Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse, of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, preached every Sunday for seven months on these ten verses. Though the text is certainly worthy of such an in-depth analysis, it is possible to get lost in the forest while analyzing the trees. We will take all ten verses in one message, summarizing and focusing on the main points.

Romans 5, verses 12-14:

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world; but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. (NASB)

Verse 12 sums up the ruin of mankind, the fall of man, stated in three logical steps: sin entered the world through one man, sin leads to death, and death spread to all men because all sinned. Paul's logic is very much like the law of transitivity: $A > B, B > C, \text{ so } A > C$. The logic is clear: Sin led to death, death spread to everyone,

therefore everyone sinned. Although Paul doesn't name Adam yet, he introduces him, and will compare him with Christ throughout the passage.

At this point someone might well be saying, "You don't really believe in the myth of Adam and Eve, do you?" To that I would say, yes. I very much believe that Adam and Eve were historical figures who lived in space and time.

Let me take a moment to share with you some of my reasons. If Adam and Eve are not to be regarded as real human beings, than I have a difficult time with the genealogies of the Bible. Oftentimes these will begin with Adam, who seems to be just as real as anybody else in the list. The Book of Chronicles begins with Adam's name. In the New Testament, Luke traces the lineage of Jesus and goes all the way back to Adam. In fact, the details given in the Genesis story lead us to believe that the author wants us to take it that way. In chapter 2, the author takes great pains to tell us where the Garden of Eden was. And the literary style of Genesis 1-11 is the same as that of Genesis 12-50, which no one challenges as history.

But the primary, overwhelming reason I am compelled to believe the story of Adam and Eve is that Jesus and the apostles believed it. The apostles spoke with the authority of Jesus, and in this passage and in a number of others it is quite evident that they believed that Adam and Eve were real human beings who lived in time and space here on the earth. Thus as believers we are compelled to believe it too.

Some Christians may have different views about Genesis—whether the days in Genesis 1 are 24-hour periods, whether the tree was real or symbolic, etc. We may have to be agnostic about some of those issues. But Adam and Eve were historical beings, because Jesus and the apostles said so. Everything depends on that. Paul argues that Adam was real, and Adam's sin was real. Genesis 2 records the prohibition given to Adam, that he was not to eat the fruit from that one tree, whatever it was, and Adam trespassed. He sinned.

The second thing we learn from reading Genesis is that Adam died (Gen 5:5). Eve said to the serpent when the serpent seduced her, "God told us that if we eat of the fruit, we will surely die." The serpent told her, "You will not die." But Adam died, and death entered into the world. That is what Paul means when he says that sin and death entered the world through one man. Adam sinned and Adam died. And now we have that same bias. We would rather do our own thing, not God's. It is that inclination to choose our own way rather than God's way that the Bible calls sin. We have inherited it from Adam. This is one of the clearest statements in all of the Bible on what is called "original sin." We come into this world with a deviant twist, an inclination toward evil. We got this from Adam.

How did we get it? There are many theories, but I agree with my friend Dave Roper, who put it this way:

"The Scriptures teach that Adam passed on to us a genetic flaw. Sin is seminal; it is in the seed. It is passed on from one generation to the next. We come into the world tainted and flawed by this genetic tendency to do what we please and go our own way."¹ The results of that inward condition of sin (the self centeredness, and self sufficiency that says to God, "I don't need you") are the outward "sins" that we commit. Perhaps in Silicon Valley we should say that Adam's sin was "downloaded" to the next generation. We have in our nature the same inclination. We are like loaded dice. We have an inherent tendency to roll in a certain way, to go in a certain direction.

I attended a birthday dinner last week for the two-year-old daughter of good friends. The birthday girl is a beautiful, delightful little tot with a mesmerizing personality, but during dinner her mother told me of the frustrating times of discipline and training. Her daughter is only two years old and she already knows how to resist instruction and command. She wants to do what she should not do.

I think this universal tendency to evil has been stated most clearly by a totally secular agency. The most revealing statement on original sin that I have ever read comes from the report of the Minnesota Crime Commission. In studying humanity, the commission came to this frightening and factual conclusion:

Every baby starts life as a little savage. He is completely selfish and self-centered. He wants what he wants when he wants it — his bottle, his mother's attention, his playmate's toy, his uncle's watch. Deny him these wants and he seethes with rage and aggressiveness, which would be murderous, were he not so helpless. He is dirty. He has no morals, no knowledge, and no skills. This means that all children, not just certain children, are born delinquent. If permitted to continue in the self-centered world of his infancy, given free reign to his impulsive actions to satisfy his wants, every child would grow up a criminal, a thief, a killer, a rapist.

Although Scripture does not speak much to this issue it seems clear that a child's sins are covered by the grace of God. But there comes a time, and I don't know when that time is, when we begin to understand our actions, and then that inclination becomes a conscious choice on our part. We choose to deny the truth and to break away from God; and sin then begins to reign. We think the unthinkable and act in terribly destructive ways—all because we are dominated by sin. "Total depravity," is what the theologians call this. That term troubles some people, because they don't like to think mankind is totally depraved. What do we mean when we say that? We mean that sin has touched the totality of our being. If sin were a color, we would be that color all over. This is what we have inherited from Adam.

And because we have a sinful nature, Paul says, we die. That is why we die—because we are sinful.

Death is not natural. It is the result of sin, the judgment of God upon us because of our sin. Adam sinned and he died; that was the judgment of God. And Adam passed on to us the proclivity to sin. We sin and we die. The reason no one has been able to solve the problem of death is because no human being has been able to solve the problem of sin. That is why science will never come up with a solution to the problem of death. Someone else had to do that.²

At this point Paul gets derailed. He imagines someone putting another question: "Well, all right. We agree that death is the result of sin. But there wasn't any law from the time of Adam until the time of Moses. How could there be sin when there wasn't any law to define sin?" Paul responds that before the Law came into the world sin was still in existence, even if there was not an exact description of every sin. So he concludes, in verse 14, "*Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.*" Even though the revelation was not as complete from Adam until Moses, we know that sin still reigned because people died. Death is the reason we know sin is universal—because death is universal. That is the evidence.

Paul concludes this section with a word of hope. He states that Adam was a type of one who was to come. From Genesis on the hope was that Someone was coming who would solve the problem of sin and death, breaking their dominion and setting us free. Like Adam, the coming one would be the head of a whole humanity.

Verses 15-17:

But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Having said that Adam is a type or a pattern of Christ, Paul is quick to point out that it is only a superficial similarity. In fact, the only similarity between them is that what each of them did affected countless numbers of people. There is no other similarity between the Lord of glory, our Savior, and the agent of death. So Paul ends up contrasting Adam and Christ, declaring that both the character and the effects of their actions are very different. Paul says the free gift was not like the trespass. Adam's act was a trespass, a transgression. He insisted on going his own way. Rather than being

self centered, however, Christ's gift was an act of self sacrifice.

Adam did give us a gift of sorts, but it was like getting booby-trapped. He gave us sin and death. He injected into our genes the fatal flaw that is killing us, this decaying, degenerative force. But Jesus gave us the gift of righteousness. One man sinned and gave a gift to the whole world: the gift of sin and death. Jesus came, and acted in righteousness. He gave to the whole world the gift of himself, and the result was life. He not only did away with death, he restored what had been destroyed.

Notice how Paul highlights the miracle of God's grace. He says that God's judgment followed only one sin. We would say that is proper and fair. But God's gift followed "many transgressions." One would think that would bring greater judgment, but grace operates on a "new math" basis. Instead of judgment and condemnation, our transgressions were taken care of in a single act of righteousness: the cross of Christ, the central point of all history. Jesus' death brought forgiveness for billions of transgressions. So the ultimate effects of the two actions are very different: namely, life and death. For all of history one tyrannical king, death, has ruled with an iron fist over all of humanity. Death is the one who stalks us all and will claim us if the Lord tarries.

And not only physical death, but the absence of life in all its forms: depression, emptiness, boredom. Martin Lloyd Jones put it this way: "Ever since Adam fell death has reigned over all mankind, world-wide. The world is a place of cemeteries; it is a place of death and gloom and end."³ But into that world God sent a little baby boy. He grew to be a man, lived a life of total obedience, and died on the cross to offer a way of salvation. The cross was the greatest coup in history. At the cross Jesus defeated sin and by his resurrection defeated death and ushered in an eternal reign of grace. He delivered us so radically from that rule of death that we not only exchanged it for a kingdom of life, but we will reign in that kingdom, sharing the kingship of Christ, with death under our feet and one day destined to be destroyed.

Paul concludes with one final comparison emphasizing Jesus' act of obedience. Verses 18-21:

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. And the Law came in that the transgression might increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

One man's disobedience brought condemnation and death. One man's obedience brought justification and life. It is as though Adam passed on to us a hideous,

shocking disease, injecting into our genes this fatal flaw that is killing us. But Jesus came and brought life.

Paul emphasizes that Jesus' death on the cross was an act of obedience. It wasn't an easy decision for the Lord, but not because he was afraid to die or that he lacked love for you and me. He understood the implications of what it would mean to become sin for us. We are told that when Jesus was in the garden, he became "heavy." The word literally means to be "away from home." He began to feel homesick. He was already feeling the weight of our sin and the Father was beginning to withdraw from him. He had never before experienced this. The horror of it is summarized in his cry from the cross, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?" Through his obedience, Jesus solved the problem of sin and death.

In closing, let me trace these verbs once again. Paul says that sin reigns, death reigns, grace reigns, and we reign. Whose reign are you living under? Paul sees two archetypal men, Adam and Christ, at the head of two lines. All of humanity falls in one line or another. If you have never received the grace of God, then sin and death are reigning in your life, dominating everything you do. But if you have received that grace you have been freed from the disease of sin. God the Father has received you into his grace, through Christ, who has delivered you from sin and death.

The hymn writer put it well:

*Sin and despair, like the sea-waves cold,
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;
Grace that is greater—yes grace untold—
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.*

*Grace, grace, God's grace,
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within,
Grace, grace, God's grace
Grace that is greater than all our sin!*

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1. David H. Roper, *Romans 5* (sermon preached at Cole Community Church, Boise ID, Nov. 29th, 1987).

2. Roper.

3. D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 5* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan) 261.

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