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Romans 5:12-21

Eleventh Message

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## A NEW DESTINY

I was approached by the Board of Education for the Cupertino School District to be on a committee to study AIDS education for our junior high and elementary schools. In light of that, three weeks ago, I went to Cupertino Junior High to hear a panel discussion regarding the AIDS epidemic. One of the panel members was my friend Dr. Arthur Halliday who has worked in an AIDS clinic for many years.

The scariest thing about the AIDS virus is that it can remain dormant for years without showing any symptoms. For every visible case of the virus, there may be as many as 100 infected people who show no signs of the illness. Dr. Halliday shared that even though there are only 300 reported cases of AIDS in the Santa Clara valley today, the number could go as high as 225,000 in ten years.

When our discussion turned from medicine to ethics, the parents became quite resistant. My friend finally said, "You need to tell your kids that the only safe sex is no sex." This challenges a philosophical lie that has entrenched itself in our individualistic culture. This lie tells us that we can do what we please without affecting anyone else. The AIDS epidemic has taught us that all of humanity is inter-related. My actions can have disastrous consequences on countless others not just in this generation but in the one to come. We must remember John Donne's famous words:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a man or of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (Meditation 17)

This is the theme the apostle Paul picks up in Romans 5. In the beginning of the chapter, he explained the glory of the gospel—how one man, Jesus Christ, opened the door to forgiveness for all mankind and offered them gifts of peace, access to his grace and the hope of the glory of God.

In verses 12-21, the question is asked: "How can one man bring so many benefits to so many people?" Paul answers by comparing Jesus Christ with Adam. One man's actions can affect the destiny of many. After the Battle of Britain in World War II, Sir Winston Churchill said regarding the pilots: "So many owe so much to so few." Our text would say, "So many owe so much to just one, Jesus Christ." Paul reveals that life is really made up of two men, Adam and Christ. These two men inaugurated two humanities with two distinct destinies. As one commentator says, "There are two men—Adam and Jesus Christ—and these two men have all other men hanging at their girdle strings."

I must give you a personal note on this text. Of all of Romans, I find this text the most difficult to teach. In fact, I was dreading it. For years I taught this material without discovering a clear outline or an understanding of Paul's argument. But as I meditated on this

truth this week, I realized that our difficulty lies in the fact that we do not approach this passage with the mind of Paul. Because we do not think as he does, we cannot fully comprehend the thoughts of God. By changing my way of thinking, the magnitude and the glory of the work of Christ revealed in the passage became greater than ever before. I pray that this might happen for you as well.

In verses 12-14, Paul introduces Adam and the destiny of his race. Let us begin by looking at verse 12.

### I. Adam and the Destiny of his Race (5:12-14)

**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... (Rom 5:12 NASB)**

This one verse gives the entire history of mankind with its three stages. First, Adam sinned. In Genesis 3, sin is defined for us. In the beautiful garden of Eden, God offered Adam all of life. He could eat from any tree except one. When Adam took fruit from that one tree in a high-handed transgression, he was saying, "I can live my life independent of God. I can be autonomous at the center of my universe. I can relate life to myself and still live." This is sin—turning away from trusting the Creator for life and trying to grasp it in our own strength, putting ourselves at the center of the universe.

The second stage is death. Romans says death is the penalty for sin. Again, Genesis 3 reveals that this death is both physical and spiritual. When man turns his back on God, his life is separated from God and he dies. Physical death is the reversal of our history. Man was taken from the dust, and he goes back to it. There is no growth or advantage in his history. He merely returns to what he was.

At memorial services and funerals, no matter whether life was interrupted at 5, 30 or 75 years, there is always a sense that death is alien. It is never natural. The human heart knows that death is alien to us because we were not created for it. We were created to be eternal, to live with God forever. Therefore, death is horrible.

Adam also died spiritually. This can be seen in his relationships with himself, God and his wife. He first realized that he was naked. Since he had been naked before, how was this different? Instead of relating life to God, he became selfish and was filled with self-consciousness. Paralyzing introspection enslaved him. This is death's effect on self. Second, when God approached him for their customary walk in the cool of the evening, he hid. Fear had replaced trust in his relationship to God. This is death. When he was confronted with his misdeed, he accused his wife, "It was the wife you gave me. It's her fault!" What a difference from Genesis 2! There they were trusting, naked, vulnerable, and transparent with each other. Now Adam was defensive and hurled blame at his wife and even God. That is death.

Paul continues. Sin leads to death, and death leads to universal death. It spreads to all men because all have sinned. What a tragedy! Every child born after Adam would grow up self-centered, relating

life to himself. If you do not believe me, have a child of your own. I did not teach my girls how to lie, deceive and follow the crowd. This is natural behavior for them. What I want to teach them, righteousness, runs against the grain of their selfish natures.

The point is that Adam is far more than the first historical man. He is what his name means in Hebrew—"Mankind." All of humanity is seen as existing in Adam and sinning with him. As a result, all of human history lies encapsulated in Genesis 3. Will Durant could have saved himself ten volumes of world history if he had just read these verses. He could have written a Readers Digest version.

Now look at verses 13-14:

**...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 Adam's offense, who is a type of Him who was to come.**

A Jew might ask, "What about those who lived before Moses and did not have the Law? Was sin in their lives?" Paul makes a brilliant observation: "Even though those living before Moses did not sin in the same manner that Adam did, violating a known commandment of God, the fact that sin was felt by them is quite evident. They all died!" This is shown in Genesis 5 where Moses records the genealogy of Adam. After telling us how many years each man lived, the text reads, "...and he died." Sin was obviously reigning.

Second, Genesis 6 reveals the depravity of sin in the human race: "Every imagination of their heart was evil." Bruce Waltke helped translate the New International Version of the Bible. While visiting here, he shared with us that the committee constantly had to throw out what used to be considered common English words such as "gay," which has now become associated with homosexuality, because they have taken on double meanings. The more the committee worked on the translation, the more words they had to eliminate. Because of this, Waltke began to understand how the imagination of the heart is evil. Sin has so escalated in the human heart that almost every word has a double-meaning. In fact, our television industry is dedicated to taking good things and perverting them for laughs. This is the condition of the wicked imagination of the heart.

Romans says death reigned. With or without the Law, sin and death were evident. The conclusion is that "death is visited on all men today not just because they sinned like Adam but because they sinned in Adam" (John Stott). Imagine the impact his one act of disobedience had. All philosophies and most religions refuse to face this one fact about Adam—that he sinned and that through him sin entered the human race. Because of this fact, we are all doomed to die.

At the beginning of the year, our pastoral staff took a trip to Israel and Egypt. In the Cairo museum, I saw over 3500 articles of gold, bronze and silver that were found in King Tut's pyramid. There were even gold-encrusted boxes for holding all of his treasures. His wrappings alone contained more jewels than in all of Beverly Hills! The ancient Egyptian culture spent 95% of its gross national product on the grave, pretending that death does not exist. They really hoped that Tut who was murdered when he was 18 would be able to enjoy his possessions. I am here to tell you that I saw all of the articles, and he was nowhere to be found. What a waste! The culture tried to deny death but failed.

In America, "death" is not part of our vocabulary. It is not even in our religious vocabulary. Someone has well said that our age is

the opposite of the Puritan age. They were obsessed with death and never mentioned sex. We are obsessed with sex and never mention death.

Christians are to be like prophets. We understand that this world and every human in it is under judgment. We can see beyond the world's glitter and sham and know that it is going to die. Therefore, as we walk through life, there is a realism about us. God's prophets truly grieve. While the world celebrates its glitter, we see its death. Beneath the facade are broken homes, hurting marriages, battered children, and life-threatening epidemics. We cannot go around in life without being like Jesus who was described as "a man of sorrows." We sorrow because we see what sin does.

Paul goes on to say that Adam was a type of him who was to come. In saying this, he is presenting an argument consistent with Old Testament theology. The Old Testament carries the theme that when one man falls short of God's purpose God raises up another to take his place. Joshua followed Moses, David replaced Saul, and Elisha took over for Elijah.

But who can take Adam's place? Who can undo the mess he created? There is only one man who is adequate. There is only one man who can create a new humanity, one man who can clean up the moral pollution of Adam—Jesus Christ. In verses 15-19, Paul compares Adam with Christ. He shows their dissimilarities in verses 15-17 and their similarities in 18-19. Look at verse 15.

## II. The Contrast between Adam and Christ (5:15-19)

**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.**

Paul introduces this material with the expression "the free gift was not like the transgression." Here he contrasts Adam and Christ in terms of the breadth of their impact. Through the one act, the one transgression of Adam, many died. The entire race was affected by this one act. Through Christ's one act of obedience, much more did the grace of God and the free gift abound to the many. In both cases, the "many" were affected, but there is a difference. Whereas death was given as a consequence for Adam's act, grace abounds much more in Christ. The point is that both impact the whole, but Christ is more powerful to save than Adam was to ruin.

From the breadth of their impact, Paul looks at the magnitude of their deeds. Here is where the comparison is extremely striking. Look at verse 16:

**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.**

Adam did one deed which ruined all. When Christ came, all were in death. Sin's pollution had covered the entire planet. It is much more difficult to create life out of the ruin of many than it is to ruin life in one act.

Imagine you live in North Dakota by a small stream. Next to that stream is a sign which reads, "Don't throw chemicals in this stream!—By order of God." One day, while cleaning the engine of your car, you use a chemical mixture to clean the parts. No one is looking; you decide to dump the chemicals in the stream. Later

you find out that this stream is the headwaters of the Mississippi River which supplies the drinking water for the entire Midwest. In the newspaper, you read that the enzymes in your chemical mixture have started to multiply and are killing the fish. Then you hear that all the people who drank the contaminated water are becoming ill. But the effects continue! The second generation is plagued with birth defects. Finally, the third generation is born sterile. Life in the area is doomed because of one misdeed. But it does not end there! The evaporation of this water spreads the malady to the rest of the United States through rainfall. As a result of one small act, the entire nation is doomed.

Which is more difficult—to do that one act or to clean up the mess it created? Who can remove the pollution and repair the lives that were destroyed? This is the magnitude of what Jesus Christ has done. Who can clean up after the reign of a Hitler? Who can straighten up the mess in Central America? Who can heal the lives that have been destroyed by abortion or child abuse? Who can create a new heavens and earth better than the old? Jesus Christ! And he did it in one act.

Can you see the difference in the magnitude in these two deeds? Where sin abounded, grace abounded all the more! We cannot outsin the grace of God. There is no moral pollution or spiritual damage done to the soul that his lavish grace cannot redeem and make new.

Last week a woman shared with me about the difficult times she had experienced in her marriage. With tears of joy, she shared the verse in Joel which says, “I will make up for you the years the locusts have eaten.” God has not only healed her marriage, he is using her to offer healing to many other women going through similar difficulties.

Now Paul turns to the ultimate result of each deed. Look at verse 17:

**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.**

What was the result of each man’s deed upon mankind? Adam’s sin led to judgment, judgment led to condemnation and condemnation led to death. In the Bible, condemnation is more than being declared guilty. It is the sentence of slavery to be served as punishment for the crime. This is what is diabolical about sin. It is not that we commit acts of sin and then suffer guilt. We become slaves to our sin. Adam’s act caused man who was a king reigning in life to become a slave. Death became king, and man became ruled by his various impulses like a slave.

But the one obedient act of Jesus Christ brought life to all, not just forgiveness. He took man who was now a victim and made him king again so that he can reign in life. We are kings and can now bridle our passions. They are not to control us any longer. Through Christ, we can return to a state of beauty and majesty.

What a contrast in terms of breadth, magnitude and results! Paul concludes his comparison with a look at the similarities of Adam and Christ in verses 18-19:

**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.**

There is only one point where Paul dares to compare Adam and Christ positively. Just as everyone who was born in Adam finishes Adam’s course, so everyone who is born again in Christ will finish his course. Our destiny is sure because the life of God is stronger than the life of man. If you are born in Adam and naturally finish his course, how much more will you finish the course in Jesus Christ! The joy of this passage is that as believers in Christ we do not stand forgiven while being condemned to live a life of slavery to our sins. The text says that every Christian is designed to reign in resurrection life as a king.

Last November, Peninsula Bible Church presented a seminar on human sexuality. I was deeply impressed by the main speaker John White who openly shared about how he had been sexually molested as a young boy by a Christian youth worker. The experience deeply wounded him and left difficult scars, destroying his sense of self-worth and his understanding of his own sexuality. He shared how he had been set free from these scars through redemption in Christ. He was now free to be a man, father and husband. He held out his arms and said, “I am sexually free today.” The life of Christ can take one who has been damaged, restore him and cause him to reign in life.

As Christians we see the implications clearly. First, as we look at Adam, we can be blatantly honest about life and sense the grief in our souls. But all too often we stop there. In the midst of wars and rumors of wars, plagues, sin, violence, and famine, we feel the gloom and try to hide.

Our text says we are not to stop with Adam. Look at the glory of Christ! If Adam brought ruin, how much more has Christ brought life. The prophets in the Old Testament not only had a sense of grief, they were also alert to the new work God would do. God will not recreate the old order, patching and repairing the damage done. He is going to destroy it. Out of the death of the old, he will birth something new. The new was so amazing to the prophets they lived in hope. They saw reality and offered life to the people of Israel.

Today we are prophets. We can feel the grief and woe. Yet, in the midst of God dismantling the old order, we ought to have a sense of expectation, hope and joy. We can offer life to people in Jesus Christ. We need to see the glory and the magnitude of the work of Christ and meditate on his benefits.

In this text, Paul anticipates another question. An orthodox Jew raises his hand and says, “In this discussion, you have talked about Adam and about Christ. Where are Moses and the Law?” The Hebrew Bible puts Moses halfway between Adam and Christ. Many Jews felt that there were three humanities instead of two. They thought one was inaugurated by Adam, one by Moses, and one by Jesus. A Jewish friend even told me that he thinks Christ brings salvation to the Gentiles while the Jews are still saved by Moses and keeping the Law. What is Paul’s answer? Look at verses 20-21.

### III. The Role of the Law in relation to the Two Humanities (5:20-21)

**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.**

Paul says, “You know why Moses came and God gave the Law? The Law came in to increase transgression.” This word “came in” means the Law “came in beside.” This word is used in Galatians of

false teachers infiltrating the ranks to spy out the apostolic camp. In other words, the Law slipped in secretly. It had no permanent significance in salvation history. Its purpose was to cause us to sin, to bring the dormant sin in our lives to the surface, so that we might say, "I need grace! I do not just have sin in my heart, I am enslaved!"

As a gymnast in college, I was under law. The law was a diet. Our coach used to tell us, "One ounce of fat is a pound of pain when you get on the apparatus!" We weighed in every day, and I was the heaviest guy on the team. I weighed about 148 while most of the guys were shorter and only weighed 120. I went on one diet after another. I had a protein diet that consisted of drinking a powder in water. It tasted so bad you did not want to eat anything for a week! Then I had an egg diet in which I consumed eight eggs in the morning and nothing else the rest of the day. I found that no matter how many diets I pursued, I always binged. I was so under the law that sometimes I would eat two dinners, grab some candy and eat until I became sick. Then I would hear the words of my coach, "One ounce of fat is a pound of pain!" When I got married, I never had trouble with weight again. Because there was no law and no coach provoking me to sin, I was no longer tempted.

This is why the Law came. If you want to learn how to sin, go under the Law. Imagine a doctor discovering you have cancer. He would normally put you through chemotherapy to force your cancer into remission, to slow the growth of the cells. What if the doctor gave you medicine to speed up the growth in order to see how far the cancer had spread throughout your body? Then you might see your need for life more clearly. This is how the Law works. We can clearly see our need for Christ when we face the Law.

This Law is still operative in our society today. God puts pressure on the community and on humanity to increase their transgressions so that they might open their hearts to the radical solution. This is how my wife's sister received Christ as her Savior. She would have never accepted Christ if she had not contracted AIDS. When she found out her condition was terminal and when she saw what sin had done in her life, she gave her heart to Jesus Christ. For 31 years, she made all the wrong choices. She left a trail of devastation behind her that is appalling. But in one minute, in one act of obedience, she gained the new heavens and earth.

As Christians, we can face the reality of sin and death. We can grieve as Jesus did at Lazarus' tomb. On the other hand, we can also live with joy and amazement at the gift of Christ. We do not need to be fearful when God uses the Law to dismantle the old creation because we know he will not let people go to hell comfortably. He would rather make them face hell on earth rather than go to hell for eternity. Therefore, as Christians, we can go into the gates of hell to offer the gospel of Jesus Christ and the glory of his kingdom.

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