

THE LETTER THAT CHANGED THE WORLD - The Biblical Theology of Romans - Part eleven

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Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

THE WIDENESS OF GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST

Romans 5:12-21 - "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned— [13] for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. [15] But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. [16] And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. [17] If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.[18] Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. [19] 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. [20] Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, [21] so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

I view this as perhaps the central passage in Romans. Everything else in the letter seems to orbit around it. I enjoy reading those great sovereignty of God chapters - 9 through 11 - with this great text in mind.

My own view is that, in many ways, this passage forms the heart of the letter to the Romans. That these verses are linked with those immediately preceding is obvious from the opening **"therefore" (12)**. I take that to mean these verses provide the **reason**, the **explanation**, for the assurance that we **are** justified and **do** have peace with God (5:1).

Also, this text gives the explanation for the **"much more"** phrases used in 5:1-11: **"...More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings...." (3)**, **"...much more we shall be saved by him from the wrath of God...." (9)**, **"...much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life...." (10)**, and, **"More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ...." (11)**.

So, everything is **bigger** in Christ. Everything is **more**. Whatever has been ruined by the Fall, whatever my own wickedness has forfeited, whatever negatives are stacked against me through Adam, Christ has done **more** than just made up, or evened the score. He doesn't just bring creation back to **neutral**. His **gain** is bigger than Adam's **loss**. His **life** is more potent than the curse of **death** in the Fall. And no text says it better than our text today. It is truly one of my favorites. And I think it also one of the most undervalued and neglected, passages in the study of the church today.

1) JUST BY WAY OF BACKGROUND, NOTICE THAT PAUL'S ARGUMENT IS TIED TO A FACTUAL READING OF THE ACCOUNT OF ADAM AND EVE AND THEIR FALL IN GENESIS 1-3

Romans 5:12 - "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned...."

Paul seems to put a fairly literal spin on the creation account. This is a very important point. Adam and Jesus are presented with equal historic seriousness. In other words, Paul doesn't even hint that he's treating

Adam *symbolically* and Jesus *literally*. Both *Fall* and *Cross* are spoken of alike.

Somehow, if Genesis falls, so does Romans. If the life of Adam falls, so does the life of Jesus. If the effect of Adam's sin is eliminated so is the redemption in Jesus. Almost everything Paul has to say about God's grace in Christ is predicated on the reality of the Fall through Adam.

This isn't the only time the New Testament does this. Almost everything Jesus taught about marriage He based on what the Creator God had done in the Genesis account of Adam and Eve.

2) **SIN WAS PRESENT IN THE WORLD, AND TOOK ITS TOLL EVEN BEFORE SIN WAS CODIFIED IN SPECIFIC COMMAND OR LAW**

Romans 5:13-14 - "...for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. [14] Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come."

When Paul says "*sin is not counted where there is no law*" (13) and then maintains "*Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses....*" (14), he is not contradicting himself. Death still reigned *between* the time God spoke a specific command to Adam (which Adam broke) and *before* the law was given through Moses because people still committed sin. Paul has already dealt with the fact of the presence of sin even when the Mosaic law wasn't known or yet given. Sin was still punished because mankind still sinned against the *inward law* of conscience and the *revelation* of God in creation:

Romans 1:18-23 - "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. [19] For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. [20] For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. [21] For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. [22] Claiming to be wise, they became fools, [23] and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles."

Romans 2:1-3 - "Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. [2] We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who do such things. [3] Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who do such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God?"

There is no mention of the Mosaic law in these verses. But these people were "*without excuse*" in their sin. And they come under the "*righteous judgment of God*." This is Paul's point. Wherever there is death, there is sin. Certainly the Mosaic law *intensifies* and *heightens* awareness of sin. It makes sin more *official* - **Romans 5:20** - "...Now the law came in to increase the trespass...." But all people in all ages sin and fall short of the glory of God. The universal presence of death proves it.

3) **SOMETHING HAPPENED THROUGH THE REDEEMING WORK OF CHRIST THAT CHANGED THE SITUATION OF EVERYONE WHO HAS EVER DRAWN A BREATH**

Romans 5:15-19 - "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus

Christ abounded for many. [16] And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. [17] If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. [18] Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. [19] 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."

Of course, Paul briefly states the obvious in these powerful verses. He quickly sweeps out of the way the fact that there are striking *differences* between what Adam accomplished through his sin and what Christ accomplished through his obedient life and death. Adam brought "*condemnation*" (16), while Christ brought "*justification*" (16).

Also, "*death*" came through Adam, while "*life*" came through Jesus Christ. Then again, through Adam's disobedience "*many were made sinners*" (19), so, through Christ's obedience unto death, "*many were made righteous*" (19).

But that's not the thought I want to focus on from this great text. Because, for all the *differences* Paul points out between Adam and Christ, he seems to labor to point out one very important *similarity*. Both Adam and Christ did something that affected *everybody*. Lest anyone should doubt Paul's intent, he makes himself perfectly clear in a shocking statement in verse 18 - "**Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation *for all men*, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life *for all men*.**"

This verse is incredible. We have to decide what we're going to do with it. Is Paul saying everyone is automatically saved because of Christ's redemptive work? We *know* this can't be the case because of what Paul has already said so clearly in Romans 2:6-8 - "**He will render to each one according to his works: [7] to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; [8] but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.**"

Clearly, there are different ends for different people. So what does Paul mean when he says "**Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men**" (5:18)? How is the redeeming work of Christ just as *co-extensive* as the sin of Adam? We need to think about this because Paul repeats this idea no less than *four times* in this text (15, 16, 17, 18).

Starting with what we know for certain, Paul isn't describing automatic *universal salvation* in this passage. He makes this especially clear in verse 17 - "**If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ.**"

Grace and the *gift of righteousness* (note the emphasis on imputed *righteousness* in this verse, not just supplied *faith*) must be *received*. Salvation is never *automatic*. Human reception plays a role here. But while this is true, it doesn't quite explain everything in this text. Paul still says there is *something* accomplished through Christ that is co-extensive with the effects of Adam's sin. And we *know* how far the effects of Adam's sin were. We know they reach *everyone* who has ever breathed, apart from Christ Himself. So even though the effects of Christ's work are said to reach "*many*" (15, 19) this is also said of the number of those effected by Adam's sin. And we *know* how many that was. It was *everyone*.

So it seems there is no consistent way to get away from saying Christ's redemptive work does *something* for

everyone without automatically **saving** everyone. And that's exactly what I think Paul is teaching in this pivotal section. Christ has done something for **everyone**.

And here's what I think He has done. He has extended **universal prevenient grace** to all. He has made it possible through His own work for sinners like us to choose **not to resist** the light we receive about Christ. We could never do even this while we were "**dead in trespasses and sin**." Without God doing something for us in Christ we would never - **any** of us - be able to do anything **but** resist God's redemptive embrace.

Let me be clear. Not one of us possesses **free will**. We have all been divinely given **freed will**. I **don't** mean by that we are all redeemed. I mean Christ has made a turning to God **possible** for **all** of us, though not **inevitable** for **any** of us. Paul clarifies this by saying the "**...one act of righteousness leads to justification**" (18). And all of this was of **grace**. We brought nothing whatsoever to the table. We have all been **preveniently graced** through the mighty work of Christ. All of us.

There are other places in the Scriptures that point to this rarely discussed truth:

1 Timothy 4:10 - "For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the **Savior of all people, especially of those who believe**." Christ has done a mighty work for **all** people, and this is particularly the case for those who **respond** to this work in faith.

John 1:8-9 - "He was not the light [John the Baptist], but came to bear witness about the light. [9] The true light, which enlightens **everyone**, was coming into the world."

Read that carefully. It **doesn't** say, as some assume, that Christ **provided** light by His **teaching** or **message** or by providing a **way** for salvation. All of that is true, of course. But this passage describes an **inner work** - an **enlightening** of **all** people on the **inside**. John gives no more details than that, but it fits perfectly with Paul's teaching in Romans chapter five.

Some people feel this point is in conflict with the hopeless plight of some Paul describes in Romans chapter seven. In a few weeks I'll try to set out why I don't think that is so.

4) **THE LIFE CHRIST BRINGS IS AS ETERNAL AS THE LIFE HE NOW LIVES**

Romans 5:21 - "...so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Of course, we're not all the way home yet. The Fall is not totally undone. Our world is marred by sin and stubborn rebellion and unbelief in spite of all of God's overtures of grace and mercy. But the reign of sin and death will come to an end. And here Paul reveals the greatest contrast of all between what **Adam** unleashed on this world and what **Christ** has accomplished. The life and Lordship of Jesus will result in an **eternal dominion** over the tragic **temporary rule of sin and death**. His work, unlike Adam's, will never end or be undone.