

Romans: The Hope of Righteousness (part 3 of 9)

Christ's Triumph Over Adam's (and Our) Trespass

Romans 5:12-21

Mark Vroegop

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— 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 For 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. Romans 5:12–21 (ESV)

The very first line of the first commentary I picked up this week to study our text was not very encouraging. Thomas Schreiner said this: "Romans 5:12-21 is one of the most difficult and controversial passages to interpret in all of Pauline literature."¹ Just before I read that line, one of staff guys sent me a teasing email asking if I knew that John Piper preached seven sermons on this passage when he preached through Romans. And when I was reading Martin Lloyd-Jones' sermons on this text, I realized that there were fourteen different sermons on verses 12-21. It has been an intimidating week.

What's more, when I sat down with a group of guys this week to study the text together, we listed out all the doctrinal issues in this text. We identified at least seven major theological themes: substitutionary atonement, original sin, the imputation of righteousness, universalism, federal or seminal headship of Adam, the historicity of Adam, and the role of the Law. Needless to say, there is a lot in this wonderful passage, and I am going to do my best to help you understand what is here and what it means to your life, and then we are going to end in worship. Hard texts are helpful because they answer complex questions, and they make us work hard to wrestle ideas to the ground.

My hope is that today's message will serve to spur you on to think more, read more, and respond more to what is in Romans 5. To that end there is blog post by Dustin Crowe at

¹ Schreiner, Thomas R. *Romans*. Vol. 6. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 267.

yourchurch.com/blog to serve as a guide if you would like to dig even deeper. I commend it to you.

The Message of 5:12-21

I am a “whole-to-part” person, which means that I operate best when I understand where “North” is or when I know the big-picture message. It has helped me to keep in mind the following summary of what is in this passage:

- It is the conclusion to chapter 5, as Paul unpacks what it means to be saved by the life of Jesus (Romans 5:10).
- The passage sets up a comparison and a contrast between Adam and Christ for the purpose of showing us the difference between being “in Adam” and “in Christ.”
- The main point of this passage that “what Christ has done for all who are in him is far greater than what Adam did for all who were in him.”²

Paul is trying to help us comprehend two categories of people in the world: those who are “in Adam” and those who are “in Christ.” Following his treatment of reconciliation and God’s love in verses 6-11, he now explains what it means for reconciled enemies to share in the life of Christ. Or to put it in the form of a question: “What are the hopeful implications for human beings in Christ’s triumph over Adam’s trespass?” To get to that answer, we have to look at Adam, Christ, and us.

Adam’s Trespass (And Ours) (vv 12-14)

We begin by looking at the connection between Adam, sin, and death. Paul talks about sin and death, first not only because they are problematic, but also because sin and death threaten to squash the hope of believers as we look to the future.³ In verses 12-14 Paul takes us back in history to help us understand why human beings need reconciliation and why we can have hope. The word “therefore” takes the prior themes of being weak (v 6), ungodly (v 6), still sinners (v 8), and God’s enemies (v 10), and connects them to sin’s entrance into the world. We go back to Adam.

To understand this passage, you have to see a few things in terms of its structure.

- Verse 12 contains the main point: Sin and death came into the world through one man (Adam), and the effect was the spread of sin and death to the entire human race
- Verse 13-14a is a parenthetical thought that answers an unspoken question, “Could people really be guilty of sin if there was no official law?”
- Verse 14b identifies that Adam is a type of another kind of person, one who will do something like he did, but even better. In the same way that Adam served as our

² <http://www.desiringgod.org/sermons/adam-christ-and-justification-part-1>

³ Schreiner, 267.

representative in bringing sin into the world, Jesus was a representative to bring the possibility of righteousness.

What do we learn about Adam and our trespass in verses 12-14?

1. Sin came into the world through one man. Genesis 1-3 tells us that God created the world, including human beings, in a perfect and sinless state. Fellowship with God was initially unbroken because God's holiness was in perfect harmony with His holy creation. There was only one restriction: Adam and Eve were not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. And when they violated this command, the holy creation fell into sin. Sin entered the world.

2. Death also came into the world. The effect of the violation of God's holiness (sin) was death. Sin and death are tragically linked together. When it talks about "death," the Bible means more than just physical death. That is certainly included, but death also includes basic separation, enmity, and alienation from God. This is the characteristic of the natural relationship between God and mankind. As we continue in Romans 5 and then into Romans 6, you need to see "death" as more than just a physical reality. "Death," the anti-God realm and power, which was introduced into the world through Adam's sin, is still operating today and results in physical death and eternal damnation. So when you see "death" in the Bible, do not just see it as physical.

3. Death spread to all men because all sinned. The text moves from focusing only on Adam to identifying how the entire human race was affected. The Garden of Eden trespass resulted in death not only for Adam but for all human beings. Further, death spread to all men because everyone sinned in Adam. What does that mean?

The theological idea expressed is often called headship or representation. There are typically two views as to how the human race sinned in Adam. The first view is called seminal headship, and it posits that sin is passed to all mankind through the physical connection that every human being had to Adam, and that we participated in Adam's sin because he is our biological father. The other view (which is mine) is called federal headship, and it holds that Adam sinned as the representative of the human race. As a result, Adam's sin and his guilt have been counted to all of us.⁴ When Adam sinned, God considered every human being to have sinned. When he fell, God considered that everyone fell.

Now you might wonder, "How is that fair?" Good question. First, we should quickly acknowledge that our sinful condition is not only about Adam. Who among us has not willfully sinned? Adam is not the only problem. Second, if we protest our representation in Adam, then it becomes problematic when we come to the solution of Christ's representation.⁵ In other words, our definition of "fair" needs to be seen in light of the "unfairness" of Christ dying in our place. So be careful before you protest too loudly about being treated unfairly by God through representation because that is the essence of the gospel message.

⁴ Some people call this "original sin." The better term is "inherited sin," because original sin often is taken to mean the first sin or Adam's sin. The point in Romans 5 is not only [to](#) explain the origin of the first sin, but to explain how all mankind became sinners. Inherited sin speaks of more immediate and personal consequence.

⁵ Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1994), 495-496.

4. Sin is real even when the law is not written. Remember that verses 13-14a are a parenthetical thought, written to show that sin and guilt are real, even if there is no Law to disobey. Since people died during the time between Adam and Moses when there was no Law, and if they died without having the specific infractions of the law, then it proves that there is guilt and culpability connected to our position in Adam, not just with the Law. In other words, guilt is not just a matter of breaking the law, but it is the imputed condition that all humans received from being in Adam.

5. Adam is a type of one who is to come. This last statement foreshadows what is coming in verses 15-21. In the same way that Adam served as a representative, so Christ serves as a representative. Jesus becomes, in effect, the second Adam. But we will see this more fully in what comes next.

Before we move on to the next section, let me just emphasize to you the importance of the truths that we have just talked about. First, the Bible is clearly giving us two categories through which we can understand the world. Every person on earth is either “in Adam” or “in Christ.” Every person in our sanctuary is either “in Adam” or “in Christ,” and it is eternally important to consider to which realm you belong. Second, understanding the idea of inherited sin could be the missing link for some of you who are searching for spiritual answers. Have you ever wondered “Why do I desire bad things or do things that are destructive?” Or “Why is there so much bad behavior in the world?” The Bible gives us a category for this, and it helps us to see that our problem is not just what we do, but it is actually who we are. Our problem is that without Christ we are “in Adam.” Third, the fact that sin is more fundamental to law means that more rules and more laws do not solve sin. There are more laws on the books than we have ever had in history, and yet, are they working? Now, the answer is not anarchy, but the Law only serves to make guilt worse. However, guilt is not just because of Law; it is because we are “in Adam.”

Finally, this also means that you can see people through this “in Adam” lens. People who are “in Adam” are powerless to do anything but sin. So if you are hanging out with “in Adam” people, do not be surprised if they act like “in Adam” people. As parents, instead of getting angry with your “in Adam” kids, have pity on them, pray for them, and use parental correction, not to unleash your frustration, but to point them to the category of being “in Christ.”

Adam’s trespass ruined everything and everyone. But that is not the whole story.

Christ’s Triumph (And Ours) (vv 15-21)

The second realm of “in Christ” is really what this passage is all about. Paul has set up this contrast between Adam and Christ in order to show us how sin and death, the two most powerful human enemies, are defeated through Christ’s triumph. Keep in mind the main point of this text that I shared at the beginning: “what Christ has done for all who are in Him is far greater than what Adam did for all who were in him.”

The Principle

Verse 15 identifies the main thought for verses 15-21. The entire text is designed to show the superiority of grace, and the contrast begins with the statement “the free gift is not like the trespass.” In other words, it is similar but not the same thing.

Then the principle is stated quite clearly: “. . . 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.” (Romans 5:15b) The point is simply that Jesus reversed Adam’s failure. Adam brought separation and destruction to the created order, while Jesus brings reconciliation and restoration. In the same way that Adam’s failure was applied through representation, so too Christ’s triumph over sin and death can also be applied through representation.

While Adam’s work and Christ’s work are similar, it is clear that they are not equal in terms of their power, beauty, and effect. After all, it is much easier to destroy than it is to restore. Verse 15 is worded to begin to highlight the beauty and celebration of Christ’s triumph. Notice the following words: “free gift,” “much more,” “grace of God,” “free gift” (again), “grace” (again), and “abounded.” Don’t miss the full beauty of this concept.

The work of Christ is doubly beautiful because it was not only unmerited and free, but it was also more powerful than the effects of Adam’s failure. Previously in Romans Paul has talked about the terrible spiritual plight of human beings, and he has talked about justification by faith. But now he shows us that God rescues sinners through grace that they did not deserve, and this grace sets in motion the reversal of sin and death. In this respect grace is doubly glorious and doubly effective.

Now we will talk about this more when we get to Romans 6, but this is part of the stunning beauty of this passage and the work Christ. The Hymn “Rock of Ages” captures this:

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,
Let me hide myself in Thee;
Let the water and the blood,
From Thy wounded side which flowed,
Be of sin the double cure;
Save from wrath and make me pure.

The “double cure” is to be saved from wrath and to be made pure. The double cure is the cancelation the judgment against and the deliverance from the power of death and sin. John Calvin stated it this way:

“Christ was given to us by God’s generosity, to be grasped and possessed by us in faith. By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ’s blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ’s spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life.”⁶

⁶ <http://geoffreyhoare.blogspot.com/2008/06/double-cure-of-sin.html>

Jesus saves and restores. Jesus rescues and renews. Jesus forgives and changes us. He reverses the failure of Adam.

The Results

What follows in verses 16-21 is an unpacking of the contrast between being “in Adam” and being “in Christ.” Let me highlight four contrasting results:

1. Justification over condemnation – We find this result, something that we have seen often in Romans, in verses 16 and 18. After repeating the uniqueness of the gift of grace in verse 16, Paul states that Adam’s actions created condemnation, whereas Jesus’ actions brought justification. Adam’s transgression placed the created order, especially human beings, under the wrath and judgment of God. Jesus’ obedience made it possible for a new legal standing to be given.

Now I say “made it possible” because in verse 18, the justification/condemnation contrast is highlighted again, but it is stated in such a way that it would seem that if everyone died in Adam, then everyone will be saved in Christ. This is an errant doctrine called universalism, which teaches that everyone is saved by the death of Christ, regardless of their response to Christ’s death.

However, verse 18 is not teaching universalism. The focal point of verse 18 is not on the phrase “all men,” but rather on “one trespass” and “one act of righteousness.” Paul is highlighting the means by which condemnation and justification happen, not the extent to which it is applied. In other words, he is saying that every person who is condemned is condemned through Adam, and every person who is justified is justified through Christ. Or to say it more succinctly: Everyone is condemned through Adam, and everyone is justified through Christ. There are only two realms, but being “in Christ” is far superior to being “in Adam.”

2. Life over death - Verse 17 highlights the second result of Christ’s triumph. Remember that we talk earlier about “death” being more than just physical death? Well, here we see that even more clearly because death is said to have a reign that is connected to it. Sin and death collude to become the oppressive masters of a broken, anti-God universe. Just think of all the things connected to this devil-inspired, Adam-creating reign: the lies, the crimes, the broken relationships, the abuse, the cruelty, the sickness, the tragedies, the greed, the self-centeredness, the pride, and the unrepentance. The creation groans under the weight of this reign.

In light of that, listen to the compelling hope of verse 17:

¹⁷ For 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. Romans 5:17 (ESV)

This is not only a statement about the future (i.e., eternal life). The idea here is that Christ inaugurates a restoration that is effective now. In Romans 6:4 we will hear “just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.” Being “in Christ” brings life to life.

Therefore, if you are not “in Christ,” or if you are not living in light of being “in Christ, dream with me as to what could be in your life. If you have marriage troubles, imagine not just no longer fighting and arguing, but being truly joyful and happy and “giddy” in your love for one another. If you are struggling with an addiction, imagine not only not falling off the wagon, but helping others to find true freedom. If you are in financial trouble because of your poor decisions, imagine not only financial freedom, but the ability to give such that you could joyfully say, “I was a part of that!” Jesus offers us the restoration of what it really means to be happy humans. He offers us life over death.

3. Righteousness over sinfulness – the third result is a restatement of what we have already seen throughout our study of Romans so we will not spend much time here. The comparison is between Adam’s disobedience in breaking God’s command and Christ’s obedience in following the Father’s will, leading to the cross. The contrast is between the condition of being full of sin and being full of Christ’s righteousness. Adam brought sin; Christ bought our righteousness.

4. Grace over law – the fourth and final result is the connection of sin to law and grace. According to verse 20 the effect of the entrance of the law was an increase in sin. By outlining and detailing what sin actually was, the law served to make sin more apparent and rampant. The law was not the ultimate solution; it only served to make sin more obvious. But in contrast to the law, grace was able to deal with sin. The work of Jesus made it possible for sin to be fully addressed – “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” If you look back to verse 15, you will see grace and the work of Christ in the same sentence.

*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. (Romans 5:15- emphasis mine)*

Grace abounded because sinful people can be declared righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ. The reason that grace is effective over and against the law is because Christ has fulfilled the requirements of the law and has become the punishment for our sin. That is why, throughout Romans 5, we keep hearing terms like “through Jesus Christ” (5:1), “through him” (5:2), “Christ died for the ungodly” (5:6), “saved by him” (5:9), “justified by blood” (5:9), and “saved by his life” (5:10). The point and the glory of these statements is the simple and glorious fact that grace abounds to sinners because Jesus died for sinners. Ungodly, rebellious, and hard-hearted people are changed because Jesus has conquered their hearts. Jesus has done more than give them grace; He has given them grace that is greater than all their sin. If you are “in Christ,” Jesus did more than just give you grace; He gave you grace that surpassed, conquered, and eclipsed your sin.

So there are many wonderful results of the principle that Jesus reversed Adam’s failure, but the text does not end there.

The Conclusion

Verse 21 brings this chapter to a beautiful conclusion. With two words – “so that” – Paul helps us understand what all of this means. Christ reversed Adam’s failure so that death would no longer reign. For those who are “in Christ,” grace now reigns! Listen to the power of verse 21:

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

The hope of being “in Christ” is that while you still live in a realm that is filled with the powerful forces of sin and death, they are not in control of your life or your eternal destiny. To be “in Christ” means that we are in the world but not of the world (Rom. 12:2), that we grieve but as those who have hope (1 Thess. 4:13), that we count sufferings as not worth comparing to the glory to be revealed to us (Rom. 8:18), and that we are sorrowful but always rejoicing (2 Cor 6:10). Why? Because grace reigns!

Sin and the flesh and the devil and even death itself do not have the final word. Christ has triumphed over Adam’s failures and my failures in Adam. And to be “in Christ” means that His triumph has become my triumph.

Understanding this deeply within your soul is how Christ becomes your life. Understanding Christ’s triumph as my triumph changes how I see my past and my present imperfections, and it provides hope for the future. Embracing Christ’s work changes how we see suffering, and it serves as the motivation for sharing Christ or reaching out to resistant people. Living in the beauty of “in Christ” makes you humble, kind, patient, and gracious. It causes you to be easily entreated and to receive rebuke.

But it also means that the single confession of my life is “All I Have is Christ.” Why? Because Jesus triumphed over my trespass! Death no longer reigns; grace reigns. And it is all because of Jesus.

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