

The Reign of Grace
Romans 5:12-21

I have to warn you that two weeks from today we will consider Romans 6:12 in which Paul makes a very direct command about avoiding sin:

12 Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts. . .

That command is fairly easy to understand. Our bodies have lusts (strong, sinful desires). If you have a body, you know what he's talking about. If we let them, those desires will rule our lives; instead of obeying God we will obey those desires. Paul commands us, "Do not to let that happen." The command is fairly easy to understand.

But where do we get the will and the power to obey a command like that? Seriously, where do we get the ongoing will and power we need to not let sin reign in our mortal bodies? I hope you agree with me that willpower isn't the answer; you aren't going to be obedient longterm simply by trying harder. Sooner or later you'll be disheartened and you'll think, "Paul's command is unreasonable and impossible. I've been trying as hard as I can. I might as well give in because my body's desires are stronger than my willpower."

But notice that this verse begins with the word "therefore." This command flows from what Paul has written in Romans 5 and Romans 6:1-11. Those passages explain that Jesus had defeated sin on the cross in a way that changes everything for those who believe. In effect, our obedience should flow from a deep place in our lives because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus and because of who we are in Christ.

And so this week and next we're going to study what Paul says is true of those who believe in Jesus. I hope that these two weeks are rich and meaty for each of us. Today we consider Romans 5:12–21. In this passage Paul compares and contrasts the effects of Adam's sin and Jesus' death.

The sin of Adam (*Romans 5:12-14*) Speaking of Adam, the first man, Paul writes this:

12 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—

Genesis 2 records that God had given Adam and Eve freedom to eat from any tree in the Garden except one, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." God told them, "in the day that you eat from it you shall surely die" (2:17). Genesis 3 records how Adam and Eve were tempted; they basically concluded that God was holding out on them by forbidding them to eat from that tree. The day that Adam ate, sin entered the world, and as God promised, "death through sin." Eventually they died physically, but not on that day; that day they died something of a spiritual death. Whereas they were previously fully alive to God, they were now "dead in their sins" (Ephesians 2:5).

Adam's sin not only affected himself; it also affected all of his descendants: "and so death spread to all men." Paul doesn't here say **how** death spread. Later in this passage Paul will argue that Adam's sin corrupted all of his descendants; in essence he will argue that we all sin because we are all born sinful. And because we are sinful, we experience death.

Here, however, he points to sinful **behavior** as the reason we experience death: "death spread to all men, because all sinned." It's really a both/and situation: we experience death both because we are sinful and because we sin. The Evangelical Free Church of America's doctrinal statement on "The Human Condition" puts it this way:

"We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed."

"In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice. . ." (<http://www.faithmanhattan.org/believe.html>). Paul is reiterating what he spent two full chapters arguing (1:18-3:20), namely that Jews and Gentiles alike are "**all** under sin" (see Romans 3:9). Through Adam sin and death spread throughout the entirety of humanity. His sin had humanity-wide implications.

Paul won't pick up his contrast between Adam and Christ until verse 15. Instead, in verse 13 Paul makes an observation about the dynamics of sin between Adam and the giving of the Law. He seems to be anticipating the charge, "How can people 'sin' when there aren't laws to break. Adam broke the command not to eat from the tree, but what command did people break before the Law (which was full of commands)?"

¹³ for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.

Paul admits that there's a sense in which specific sins can't be counted against you if God hasn't communicated that those actions are sinful. For example, before the Law was given, people weren't sinning when they carried a handful of firewood on the 7th day; but after the Law was given, it was a sin to gather wood and make a fire on the Sabbath (see Numbers 15:32ff and Exodus 35:2-3).

But, Paul argues, that doesn't mean that people didn't sin between Adam and the giving of the Law: "for until the Law sin was in the world. . ." In verse 14 Paul explains why he could make such a statement; the presence of death indicated the presence of sin.

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.

Death was not only present from Adam to Moses; death **reigned** from Adam to Moses. In other words everybody died, indicating that everybody sinned. Paul points out that this was true even for people whose sin was unlike that of Adam in the sense that they

didn't violate a specific command such as "Do not eat from that tree." The fact that death reigned from Adam to Moses was evidence enough that all had sinned.

Philip Yancey points out that many people think the world is divided into two types of people, the guilty and the "righteous." But the reality is that the world is divided into two types of guilty people: those who acknowledge their wrongs and those who don't (*What's So Amazing About Grace*, p. 181). The account in John 8 of the woman "caught" in adultery makes the point. Jesus said to her accusers, "Whoever among you who is without sin cast the first stone." Beginning with the oldest first, they all left. They too were as guilty as the woman they wanted to stone. Their sins might have been different from hers (maybe not), but they also were sinful.

Sin is like a plague that has infected the entire human race. It is depressingly obvious that sin has spread to all of humanity. We don't have to teach our children how to be self-centered or angry or ungrateful; it shows up naturally, without fail. We don't have to watch a newscast very long or read very far down the front page of a newspaper to have fresh confirmation that sin and death reign in individual lives and in the structures of society. Most newscasts have one segment where there's a feel-good story of someone doing something virtuous just to break the monotony of all the sin that dominates the news (of course it's not called sin). Here in Romans 5 Paul is giving us a theological explanation of this reality: because of Adam sin and death have spread to all; we now sin by nature and by choice.

The obedience of Jesus Christ (*Romans 5:15-21*) Beginning in verse 15, Paul discusses the remedy by developing the contrast between Adam and Jesus. He uses the same "much more" argument that we saw last week in verses 9 and 10.

¹⁵ 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 contrasts the effect of the "free gift" given in Jesus with the "transgression" committed by Adam. Whereas Adam's transgression brought about death for "the many" (i.e., all humanity), ***much more*** did Jesus' sacrifice bring grace to "the many" (i.e., those who are justified by faith). In other words, in the lives of believers Jesus' gift "more than compensates for the effects of sin" (Kruse). Through Jesus the grace of God abounds/overflows to the many.

Paul continues the contrast in verse 16, making the observation that Adam's action involved one transgression whereas Jesus' action dealt with ***many*** transgressions.

¹⁶ 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.

Paul is building his argument for why the effect of Jesus' sacrifice is superior to the effect of Adam's sin. Whereas Adam's ***one*** sin resulted in condemnation, Jesus' gift

gathered up **a multitude of transgressions** and resulted in justification. Notice how Paul continues to show the superior effects of Jesus (over Adam) in verse 17:

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.

As we saw back in verse 12, because of Adam “death reigned”; death has ruled the entire human race (with a couple of exceptions - Enoch and Jesus). By contrast, those who receive grace and righteousness through Jesus are not only given life; Paul says that **we** “will **reign** in life through the One, Jesus Christ.” We might have expected him to say that “life will reign” after saying that “death reigned.” But he writes that **we** will reign in life through Jesus. He is speaking of the future when the Kingdom of God is fully established and we reign with Christ. We now live in the “in between time”; the Kingdom has been inaugurated, but it hasn’t been fully established.

In verses 18 and 19 Paul draws his conclusion from everything he’s written in verses 12-17. He finally completes the comparison between Adam and Jesus: each one’s actions affected “the many” (or “all men”).

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ 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.

Of course we have to interpret Paul’s statement in verse 18 that Jesus’ act of righteousness resulted in “justification of life to all men” in light of what he’s already said in Romans. He hasn’t all of a sudden become a universalist, claiming that everyone is justified whether or not they have faith in Jesus. Back in verse 17 he mentioned that “those who receive” God’s grace will reign in life through Jesus. And so we should understand “all men/people” here in verse 18 to refer to all who believe - whether Jew or Gentile.

In light of Paul’s discussion of the Law in chapters 2, 3, and 4, we shouldn’t be too surprised that Paul feels the need to mention the significance of the Law in his discussion of Adam and Christ. In verses 20 and 21 Paul writes this:

²⁰ The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, ²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In verse 20 Paul gives one reason (not the only reason) that the Law was given: so that transgression would increase. He’s not saying that God thought up a bunch of picky laws in order to trip up the Israelites; it’s not like God was baiting a trap with the Law. But Paul **is** saying that one reason God gave the Law was to expose just how sinful humanity is.

NT Wright gives a helpful analogy: “Think of sin as a small color transparency; the law puts a bright light behind it and a large screen in front of it. That is what Paul means by ‘[so that the trespass would increase].’” As we saw in verse 13, there was sin before the Law was given. But once the Law came in, that sin became all the more obvious because it was illuminated by specific commands. In chapter 7 (verse 7) Paul will admit that he “would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, ‘You shall not covet.’”

Paul mentions all of this to point out that “where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (v. 20). Grace increased far more than sin; if sin abounded, grace **super-abounded**. In other words, the death of Christ provided more than enough grace to overcome the sin exposed by (and generated by - see 7:5) the Law. [John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, entitled his spiritual autobiography *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners* based partially on this verse.]

Paul wraps up this discussion in verse 21 by explaining the net result of the super-abounding grace we have in Jesus.

²¹ so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

When you have someone or something “reigning” you have a king, and where you have a king you have a kingdom. And so Paul is depicting two kingdoms in this verse: the kingdom of sin and the kingdom of grace. These are not two equal kingdoms with two equal kings. Grace is far superior to sin in power and effect. Therefore, the life that grace produces trumps the death that sin produced: “so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

While it is true that we presently experience eternal life, Paul quite often spoke of eternal life as the reward we are given at the return of Christ. That seems to be his thought here. Those who trust in Jesus alone have the confident expectation that God will give us eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Grace will trump sin; life will trump death.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus, one of the most important things you will ever do in your time on earth is consider what Paul is saying here. He is saying that you are born into the kingdom of sin and death. Sin has polluted every part of your life. That diagnosis is probably a hard one to swallow, especially if you tend to compare yourself to others and think, “I may not be perfect, but I’m not as bad a **him/her!**” But being “better” than lots of other people doesn’t address the fundamental problem of sin. Only the death of Jesus addresses that problem. And so the remedy is to admit to God that you’ve sinned (just come clean) and then put your trust in Jesus’ death. Trust that when He died on the cross He died for your sin. You simply receive this “free gift of grace” by faith. This transaction is very simple, but it’s also very radical. It is a radical reorientation

of your trust. Instead of trusting in yourself you are trusting in the One who died and rose again.

If you are a believer in Jesus, do you think about the grace of God the way Paul has described it in this passage - as far superior to sin in power and effect? More specifically, do you believe that God's grace is greater than your sin? Or do you believe that it's like a flu shot that's only effective 25% of the time?

What we believe about the grace of God and our salvation really mirrors what we think about God Himself. In his classic book *Knowledge of the Holy* A.W. Tozer makes the statement that "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us" (p. 9). He argues that while our creeds (or doctrinal statements) are important, it is more important what we secretly, inwardly believe about God. What we believe about God affects how we think and speak and live our lives.

Whether or not we believe that our God is One whose grace is greater than our sin will affect whether or not we can obey a command like we find in Romans 6:12, "Do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies that you should obey its lusts. . ." As long as you believe that your sin is greater than God's grace that command will seem unreasonable and impossible. But if you believe that **God is a God whose grace is greater than your sin**, you're in a place to experience that grace and begin to understand how it applies to your specific sin.

I would encourage you to wrestle with this question this week: Do you believe that God's grace is greater than your sin? Instead of believing that your sin is all-powerful in your life, allow God to convince you that His grace trumps your sin through Jesus Christ. Read and ponder this passage, pray and invite God to show you the depths of His grace, and talk with others about these truths.

Whether you have this question fully settled or not, I hope you can come back next week to hear the rest of Paul's argument. Brian will be teaching from Romans 6:1-11.