

Sermon 36: Romans 5:15-17: Grace Abounding

OUTLINE

The abundance of grace
The mathematics of grace
The reign of grace

INTRODUCTION

What would have happened if Adam and Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit? What would have happened if they had obeyed, what would have been the consequences of their obedience, knowing how far reaching the consequences of Adam's sin has been? Let me hypothesize what I think would have happened. I think that Adam and Eve were in a test where if they had succeeded certain benefits would have been theirs. If Adam and Eve had not eaten and had obeyed God killing the serpent and walking in faith and holiness, we would have seen a very different world today. We would not have all the death, decay and disease we have today. We would not have the imbalances of nature and the pain and suffering we presently experience. But most importantly, just as Adam's sin passed on a corrupt nature and a criminal record to all his children, we would have experienced in its place a birth in righteousness not sin, and have been born with access to the tree of life not barred from the garden.

This arrangement has been called the covenant of works. Adam represented the whole human race and had in his power, by God's appointment the ability to either seal the human race in sin or righteousness. He failed to be obedient and plunged the world into sin and death. However, God sent the Second Adam Christ. He was man as Adam was man, His entry into the world was unique as was Adam's preserving Him from the taint of original sin; He too was appointed to the unique role of legal head whereby His actions He could act on behalf of others and save where Adam had killed. He succeeded where the first Adam failed, and so that God man who was the second Adam became the last Adam because there was no need for third Adam to be sent to save sinners.

Let me put another question to you. Would you rather be in Adam's original position in the Garden of Eden with a choice to save yourself by your own works; or would you rather be in the position that we find ourselves in now, sinners who are saved by grace through the obedience of Christ? Who would you rather have as saviour Adam or Christ? Knowing what I know now I would rather be a sinner saved by grace through Christ's obedience than receive what Adam would have won if he had been obedient in Eden. In truth, we now will receive more in Christ than we lost in Adam, and we will receive more than Adam ever could have gained if he had been obedient.

It is this greater grace in Christ than in Adam that Paul is going to draw our attention to in 5:15-17, we will examine his exposition of grace through Christ under three headings: The abundance of grace; the mathematics of grace and the reign of grace.

The abundance of grace

Paul is wanting to demonstrate the fullness of God's grace to us through a comparison between Adam and Christ. He begun by making a comparison that he interrupted in order to clarify for us that we certainly are affected by Adam's sin not only by us inheriting an affected nature, but by us being legally represented by his actions and us being credited with his guilt as well. V15-17 have been called a 'parenthesis within a parenthesis.' In other words, a second qualification to his initial train of thought. Paul is in earnest that we see how much we have received by comparing Christ with Adam. He ended v14 by telling us that Adam was in fact a type of Christ pointing forward to the way in which He would save us. However, once again Paul is very careful in his statements. He does not for one moment want us to think that we are beggared in any way in being in Christ. So in 15-17 he states the comparison between Adam and Christ negatively before he states the original positive statement that he had set out to make in 18-19. And once again we are very grateful to Paul for interrupting himself again, for by showing the differences the greater grace of God in Christ is thrown into stark relief. Where in Adam we see sin abounding, judgement abounding and death abounding; in Christ we see grace abounding.

Let me demonstrate this from the words that Paul uses. In v15-17 we find the words 'free gift' 5 times. The very phrase itself is a doubling for emphasis. 'Free' means something that is not bought but given; and 'gift' refers to something that is given not earned. Also in the use of the word grace which appears 5 times in v15-21 which means 'undeserved favour.' If you read the word 'grace' every time you see the word 'gift' and every time you see the word 'free' v15 sounds like this, 'But the *grace grace* is not like the trespass. For if many died through the one man's trespass much have the *grace* of God, and the *grace grace* by the *grace* of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.' Can you see the message?

V15 then is a general statement about the surplus of grace through Christ and v16-17 are further extrapolations on how that abundant grace is made evident.

The mathematics of grace

V16 tells us about the mathematics of grace. And Paul brings forward for comparison Adam's trespass which resulted in guilt which leads to condemnation; and Christ's obedience which resulted in a 'free gift of righteousness' for justification. V16 in particular brings into view the immediate effects of Adam's and Christ's actions, namely condemnation and justification; whereas v17 brings into view the ultimate effects of their actions, namely the reign of death and the reign of life. As Paul states it the mathematics of grace goes like this, the one sin of Adam = condemnation for all. The mathematics of sin is terrible to behold, it is exponential in its growth. One sin by the legal head brings about death and judgement. This is what Paul is wanting to stress in v16, 'And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. For the judgement following one trespass brought condemnation....' Do you see the mathematics one sin = condemnation for all. With this in mind let me ask you, if one sin affects such destruction what will the many sins following on Adam's produce? This is where we move into Paul's next equation, it goes something like

this: many sins + grace in Christ =? What do you think is to be expected? If one sin = condemnation for all, what would many sins =? Once you add the vital element of grace we see that the expected effect is turned on its head and Paul continues, 'but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification.' Sin + Christ's righteousness = justification.

And so once again we are brought to this grand word, 'justification.' And in this verse we see it standing over against its opposite 'condemnation.' And as we view these terms we need to appreciate the line of thought that Paul is wanting us to pursue. Paul wants us to see that we are better justified than we were ever condemned in Adam. Let me draw this out with just one quick comparison. The condemnation that we received in Adam was not an unchangeable one. God had so staggered the effects of death, mixing mercy with His judgement upon Adam's sin that although we died physically and were separated from God, His mercy opened a window for us. God made it possible that the guilty children of Adam would live and be the recipients of common grace enjoying His good gifts every day. They would be witnesses of general revelation seeing the proof of His existence in creation and knowing it in their hearts and consciences. He sent His Son to die for our sins that we might have the opportunity to believe upon Him and be granted amnesty, being so justified from sin that our legal status can never be reversed. The legal status of condemned that we received in Adam could be reversed to one of justified; but the grace of God to us in Christ is greater in that the legal status of justified will never be revoked, our judgement day verdict has been given and will never be changed. This is the superabundant grace of God, not only has He turned many sins into justification, but He has replaced a changeable legal status with an imperishable one that guarantees eternal life.

It is probably at this juncture since we are talking about justification that we should really specify and draw out what Paul means by 'free gift.' He uses it 5 times, we have shown how its source and nature is grace, but what is the free gift that Paul is constantly talking about in this passage. The best way to get our answer is to view how Paul uses it in context.

At the beginning of v15 we are told that the free gift does not work like the trespass. This is a general statement and not very helpful so we move on to the next mention of the phrase. We see in the second half of v15 that the free gift comes through the grace of Jesus Christ. In other words the free gift comes from grace and is not earned, this is helpful in showing us that grace is the source of the gift and Christ the means by which we receive it, but sheds no light on what it is. V16 is clearer for it tells us that the free gift results in justification. It must therefore be something that enables us to be declared legally righteous in God's presence. Secondly in v16 we see that the free gift is contrasted with the condemnation that resulted from Adam's single trespass. In other words, as Adam sinned and because he was a legal head his criminal actions were passed on to his descendants; like that the free gift works an opposite effect of justification. In other words, just as Adam's actions bought a criminal record for all whom He represented, the grace of God worked it so that through Christ's obedience where Adam failed we might receive not a criminal record but a perfect record of righteousness. This link between Christ's action on our behalf and our justification are stated in v18, 'Therefore as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act leads to justification and life for all men.' So then

when it talks about a 'free gift of righteousness' in 5:17 it is talking about the gift of record of righteousness full of goodness by which we are declared righteous in God's eyes, and by it justified.

Paul speaks about this gift of righteousness in various places:

2 Cor. 5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

Philippians 3:7-9, 'But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.'

Romans 1:16-17, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

This is the righteousness that Luther saw that started the Reformation. A righteousness that is not spun by our own hands but comes to us from outside of ourselves as an alien righteousness. It is this righteousness that comes to us when we are still vile sinners, not fully sanctified or glorified, so that we are *simil iustus et peccator*.

When we began this section is asked you what came to mind when you heard the words 'legal fiction.' I told you that this was the accusation that the Roman Catholic Church made against the teaching of the Reformers. They claimed that for God to call a sinner who has no righteousness of his own righteous/justified, that this is legal fiction and to make liar out of God. Well now that we have laid the foundational teachings down and seen how it is that we are able to be held accountable for the actions of another. That by God's design we were legitimately represented by Adam we were imputed with his guilt and were under a sentence of death which was certainly no legal fiction. Well, by the same token, because Adam was merely a type, and since Christ was give to function in the same way, we are able to be both sinful and yet at the same time righteous. Our righteousness is not in ourselves but in our legal head. And we are as certainly righteous in Christ as we were sinful in Adam.

In fact without the possibility of Christ's righteousness being credited to us, without the institution of God of legal heads representing others for life and death, it would be absolutely impossible for sinners to be righteous in the eyes of God. It is the for us to wonder at the wisdom of God that He can actually and really hold us as righteous in Christ through the institution of federal heads, and yet we are still sinful at the same time. Any other form of teaching that tries to make us acceptable before God but by the imputed righteousness of Christ is heresy. Worse any teaching that tells you that you have to try and whip up the righteousness within yourself by any means, is not only damning you to hell, but it is also inviting you to a life of suffering a torment because you will constantly live

in the knowledge of your total inability and be twice cursed, in this life and the next by this sort of teaching.

And since we are tracing out Paul's thought about us experiencing more grace in Christ than condemnation in Adam, let me quote Lloyd-Jones to you as he highlights another way in which we are better off in Christ than Adam. He points out that the righteousness that we receive in Christ is better than the one Adam had, 'Unfallen Adam was righteous, but it was his own righteousness as a created being, it was the righteousness of a man. Adam never had the righteousness of Jesus Christ upon him. What he last was His own righteousness. But you and I are not merely given back a human righteousness, the righteousness of Adam before he fell—we are given the righteousness of Jesus Christ.'¹ Adam had the righteousness of a man, we have been made the righteousness of God in Christ. Adam had a righteousness that he could lose, we have a righteousness that can never be lost. We have gained in Christ more than Adam ever had or could have had.

The reign of grace

This is a portion of Scripture that is full of contrasts. Sin vs righteousness; death vs life; Adam vs Christ; condemnation vs justification; one vs many. V17 puts before us another contrast, a contrast of the ultimate results of Adam and Christ's actions. They have brought about two opposing state of affairs, a reign death, and the reign of life. '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.'

We are all familiar with the reign of death that Paul is talking about. It is the death that we see on the news where man is killing man. It is the death that we see in our own faces in the morning when we look in the mirror and see ourselves inching towards death. It is the death that we know spiritually because we are separated from the life of God. The death that grips nature causing all the imbalances and diseases we experience. The shadow of death hangs over everything we just entertain ourselves into a numbness that hides away from the nagging reality of death. But once again, Paul is wanting us to see that we are more alive in Christ than we were ever dead in Adam. He talks about Christ bringing in a reign of life by His death and resurrection. So that now in Christ, we are seated in the heavenly places partaking already of the new creation and its life that flows from Him to all that will be made new in Him. Death can no longer kill us, sin can no longer condemn us, satan no longer has jurisdiction over us, we are more than conquerors in Christ. The life we receive in Christ is a life that can never die, it is not a life like Adam's or like the resurrection that Lazarus received. We receive a life that will never die again. So that now even in our sufferings we are filled with a certain joy and rejoice in ours sufferings as God uses them to their opposite satan intended effect—our holiness and God's glory.

¹ P262.

But there is one last word I would like us to ponder in v17 before we close, it is the word 'receive.' We have all been born into Adam, we had no choice in that matter, the Lord in His wisdom has seen fit that Adam should represent us and we inherit his guilt and corruption. And in His mercy He did not wipe out the human race when Adam sinned but staggered the effects of sin so that not only would what Adam did be reversed, but it would be replaced by something better. And now God is offering this reign of life in the place of the reign of death. He is offering a gift of perfect righteousness that is received by faith in the place of your own garment of sin and Adam's. He is offering a life better than any life Adam tasted or could have won. And He calls on us to receive this gift. He commands us to repent. This is the choice that lies before every child of Adam. This is a choice that God is not obliged to offer us, yet He in His mercy has done so, all at the cost of His own Son. And so here it is to be received, but will we receive it.

Firstly, let's emphasize what we are not receiving. When it talks about us reigning in life it not talking about the modern day health and wealth gospel. There are those who have corrupted the truth and distracted many people from the truth. They have gotten Christian caught up in the notion that they are kings kids therefore they should be rich and healthy and problem free. God is not offering you a life free from pain, poverty and failure. He is offering you a new creation through Jesus Christ. Take the most beautiful face and body, the most wonderful work of art, the most entrancing piece of music, the most breathtaking view of nature, and if God were to give you all these things He would be giving you nothing for it is all part of this old creation and subject to rot and death. Instead God is offering us pardon and the promise of a new creation where everything that Adam brought upon us will not only be reversed but bettered.

Secondly, what are we receiving? We are receiving the offer of a gift of righteousness, a life of perfect obedience lived in your place to stand for you in God's judgement fully justifying you fulfilling all the requirements for the payment of your sins, and the requirements of God's law. You are being offered a place in God's family where once sworn enemies you will be adopted and given all the privileges of being God's child. This includes a portion in the new heavens and the new earth, an inheritance won for you by Christ's obedience. You are being offered new life and fellowship with God, and for the Holy Spirit to live inside of you to renovate your soul beginning a the new work of transformation even now, as well as a guarantee of the future hope which is ours.

Thirdly, how do we receive it? How do we receive this gift of righteousness, this call to be adopted, this indwelling of the Holy Spirit? Like a beggar you come with empty hands making no attempt to buy it from God by your own good works. But rather trusting in His goodness and promise to give you ask Him to forgive your sins and adopt, filling you with His Spirit on account of what Christ has done. Putting all your confidence in His work as your sacrifice and as your legal representative, that being sufficient to pay the full debt of your sins and clothe you in a righteousness that will be accepted by a holy God.