

Sermon 39: Romans 5:20-21: The Triumph of Grace

OUTLINE

The increase and reign of sin

The abundance and reign of grace

INTRODUCTION

How important is it that a Christian has assurance of their salvation? Unlike the Roman Catholic Church we do believe that one can have the assurance that they are in a right relationship with a holy God through the work of Christ; however, unlike the opposite extreme we do believe that it is possible to be a Christian and not have assurance that one is destined for heaven on account of what Christ has done for us. Let me begin by reading you a few quotes that highlight the importance of assurance:

John MacPherson, 'Justification realised is the great vantage ground in striving after personal holiness; a happy consciousness of our acceptance in the Beloved is the great incentive to true obedience. Grasping pardon you grasp holiness. He who receives Jesus receives His Spirit. Love springs from faith; and he who realises most assuredly his standing in grace, walks most steadily in fellowship, works more cheerfully in obedience, and lives most freely in the liberties of holy joy.'

Martyr Hugh Latimer, 'When I live in a settled and steadfast assurance about the state of my soul then I am as bold as a lion.'

Charles Spurgeon, 'It is one thing to *hope* that God is with us, and another thing to *know* that He is so. Faith saves us, but assurance satisfies us. We take God to be our God when we believe in Him; but we get the joy of Him when we know that He is ours, and that we are His.'¹

Obedience, holiness, prayer, joy, love, dying well, and many other things are informed by our assurance, it is most important. Paul knows this fact and has spent most of chapter 5 trying to get us to see the security of our position in Christ. Since this is our concluding message on this chapter let me just gather up the various strands of thought that Paul has employed in the service of assuring us of our salvation.

You will remember that in v1 Paul began to give us a list of all the things that are ours if we are justified. We have 'peace with God,' the war between God and us as sinners is over in Christ since Jesus has taken all the wrath of God for our sins upon Himself. We have access by faith into this grace in which we stand. This means that all of God's ways towards us are grace not law. We have a certain hope of glory. We are able to rejoice in our sufferings because of the benefits that God is working out in them. And the hope that results from this sanctifying process does not put us to shame. Our hope in heaven will not end in

¹ All references taken from Iain Murray's *The Old Evangelicalism*, p171-2.

disappointment because God has grounded our hope in two evidences of His love. We see in v5 that the Holy Spirit ministers the love of God to us subjectively, and in 6-8 we see the love of God objectively in Christ dying on the cross. And since God has done the hardest part in giving heaven's best for earth's worst, it will be nothing at all to finish what He started and glorify those who He has already justified. Paul did not stop there he wanted to argue further for the certainty of our salvation by showing a comparison between Adam and Christ, that we gain more in Christ than we lost in Adam. He showed us that Adam was a type, that is that Adam was a federal head who held the life or death of those he represented, but instead of fulfilling obedience he sinned and killed his children. However, Christ was the Last Adam and succeeded where Adam failed. Not only did Christ undo what Adam did but He brought us into a better position than Adam ever could. All of this detail is in the employ of Paul's purpose to shore up our assurance and show us the unshakable salvation that is ours in Christ. It is verses 20-21 that Paul draws his thoughts on this particular course to a close and it is to these verses that we turn.

'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.'

We will deal with these closing thoughts in 2 contrasting points, The increase and reign of sin, which is overcome by the abundance and reign of grace.

The increase and reign of sin

In all of the details of our wonderful salvation Paul has not lost an earlier train of thought and those he is speaking to. There is an elephant in the room that he has to name and explain, the law. There would have been a significant amount of Jews in the Roman church, in many churches in the 1st Century. And the main issue for them was the law. Many of the Jews of the 1st Century believed that the answer to the fall of Adam was the giving of the law. That we could all obey the law where Adam failed and we could work our own way into heaven by good deeds. The prevailing view of the law is that it was a stairway to heaven that we climbed by our own righteousness. Paul has just pulled the rug out from the Jews feet telling them that the answer to the fall in Adam was Christ's obedience not our law keeping. This leaves a big question mark over the law. Imagine for a moment that you are a Jew, you have arranged your daily life by the law, you have respected it, memorised it, you have dutifully followed it believing that by it you would gain an entrance into heaven. Moses is a significant figure in your mind and now Paul comes along and turns your world upside down. He tells you that the answer to sin in Adam is not the law in Moses but grace in Christ; the natural question that comes to your mind is, 'what about the law?' Paul begins his conclusion by answering this underlying question in v20, 'Now the law came in to increase the trespass....'

Once again Paul repeats a thought that he has made in 3:20, 'For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.' The purpose of the law is not a stairway to heaven but a mirror. It exists not to save, it

never could, but it exists to make sin explicit so that we will see our need for Christ and flee to Him as our only hope. Let's meat this thought out a little, exactly how does the law increase the trespass?

Firstly, let us clarify that Paul is no way saying that God created the law in order to create more sin in us. This is an impossibility, God cannot approve of sin, nor is He the author of it, Paul means something else when he talks about the law increasing sin.

The law increases sin by defining it as transgression against God's law. In other words, you were going along your merry way not giving much thought to your actions, you were following your desires, and then all of a sudden the law crosses your path and tells you that your actions and desires are breaking God's law. The law defines sin so that now everywhere you look in your life you are sinning. Your actions are no longer neutral but negative.

The law increases sin by showing us that sin is not primarily something that we do against another human being or against ourselves. The definition of sin in our humanistic age is anything that hurts ourselves or someone else. The law provides a definition of sin that tells us that sin is against God. Sin is not something we do against ourselves or others but the God who sits enthroned over the universe, who made us with a purpose for holiness, and who we will have to one day face and give an account to.

The law increases sin by revealing that I am not merely someone who does sins, but someone who is sinful in nature. The law acts as a constant voice of conscience telling you that what you are doing is wrong. You try to stop, you try to keep the law and you find that you cant. You have every intention of stopping that sin, but when you are alone and the temptation finds you, you realise that you are enslaved by it, the law reveals that you are a slave to sin not merely someone who acts sinfully from time to time. It reveals that sin is engrained in your nature. Now you can see why unbelievers hate God's law!

The law increases sin by inciting us to sin, this is what Paul says in Romans 7:7-11, 'What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." 8 But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness. For apart from the law, sin lies dead. 9 I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. 10 The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. 11 For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me.' Now we need to be very clear here, the cause for sin is not the law, the root of sin is in our sinful hearts. We are so sinful that even something good like a command from God becomes a suggestion to our sinfulness to sin.

As a result we can take no hope from ourselves, our obedience or the law. The law kills, it exposes our inadequacy and tells us that we need to find salvation outside of ourselves, it points us to Christ.

Paul tells us in v21 that as a result of Adam's sin the condemnation it brought upon those he represented, 'sin reigned through death.' This was a reign we all lived under, like living the tyranny of a wicked dictator. When we were born we were born in a prison, we were born to die, we were born to suffering. When we were born we were born already enslaved and addicted to sin like the child of a heroin addict who used while pregnant. We thought we were free, we thought we had what we needed to make us happy, but it was all propaganda and deception. The freedoms that our society prizes, the freedom to indulge in any sexual activity and preference we desire; the freedom to be intoxicated; the freedom to fill our minds with addictive pornography or destructive opinions; the freedom to put our own selfish desires in the driving seat. These are not freedoms but veiled slavery, they end up destroying us, never satisfying and it all pushes towards death. The law was what helped us see that we are criminals, trapped and worthy of death. It was the law which highlighted our impoverished condition and showed us our need for grace in Christ.

The abundance and reign of grace

Paul has spoken about the reign of sin, not to glorify it but to show that Christ has conquered it. This is where he brings all of the thoughts that he has been weaving in this chapter to a great and triumphant end. He wants to show how sin and its effects are swallowed up by the reign of grace. Like a dictator being unseated and a new benevolent government being put in place, so grace in Christ has overcome sin in Adam, and the result is eternal life in the place of death.

Paul wants to shout about the moreness of grace over sin. We see this initially in the many times that Paul uses the words 'much more/more than that' in chapter 5. We see it as well in the words, 'abounded', 'abundance', 'free', 'gift' and 'reign in life'. Even in these two verses Paul uses a different word for sin increasing and grace abounding all the more. Paul intensifies what grace had done compared to what sin has accomplished. The effect of grace in Christ is not equal to but greater than the effects of sin.

Grace is when God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves and what we don't deserve. If one had to try and make a mention of all the grace that God has employed in saving us in Christ we would be here forever. The whole story line of the Bible is one of grace. It was in grace in eternity past that God chose to set His love upon a sinful people to save them in Christ. It was in grace that He made a world for us to inhabit with its many unearned blessings. It was grace that determined our value as one made in God's image and gave us a purpose greater than all things; to know, serve and love God. It was grace that did not wipe out Adam and Eve when they sinned. It was not deserved that God should reveal His plan to raise up a saviour from fallen Adam's race in Gen 3:15. It was grace that preserved humanity in the flood; called Abraham and raised a people from him; preserved his people and gave them the law preparing them for the Christ. Who raised up David and promised him a Son to sit on his throne forever. And it was grace upon grace that God should become a man in the baby Jesus to live and die for us a most excruciating death, greater than any other any one will ever suffer.

It was grace that caused you to be born and to have the opportunity to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ. It was by grace that the power of the Holy Spirit opened your eyes and caused you to understand the message of your sin and your need for Christ. It was by grace that you experienced the new birth and were enabled to believe and repent. It is by grace that we bear the fruits of Christ's character as a replacement in the place of our vile ones. It is by grace that God finishes His work that He has begun. It is grace that continues to keep us in His ways and won't let go of our hands. It is grace that will glorify us and give us new bodies like Christ's. And it is by grace that we will enjoy perfect joy and peace forever. None of it is because we have earned it, there is no effort we have put in that we can take part of the credit for, 'Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

³⁴ "For who has known the mind of the Lord,
or who has been his counselor?"

³⁵ "Or who has given a gift to him
that he might be repaid?"

³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.' (Romans 11:33-36).

There are three more details about the reign of grace that Paul highlights. Firstly, reigns through righteousness. We are all aware of bad politics where crooked politicians are willing to bend the rules, take bribes, turn a blind eye, and various other nefarious practices. Some governments are built on corruption, others are built on cruelty, some are built on the exploitation of the people, well God's reign of grace is built on righteousness. This is most important when discussing grace. There are notions today about grace which are not based on righteousness. 'God is so gracious He will never send anyone to hell!' Or, 'God is so gracious, He will just automatically forgive everyone's sins.' God does not forgive sin lightly. In fact God cannot forgive sin unless it is fully paid for. We have already discussed how God is a good judge and not a bad judge who just lets criminals off the hook without first satisfying His justice. We saw in Romans 3:25-26 that God is just and the justifier. He in His wisdom has done such a great thing in saving us that sin can be paid for and the sinner can go free.

Secondly, we are told that grace leads to eternal life. There are some today who teach that someone who has been born of God, who has been partaken of the life of Christ's never dying resurrection, who has become a new creation in Christ can actually lose their salvation. These two words deny it, '*Eternal* life.' Christ will never die again, and the life He has made us to taste is the same power that raised Him from the dead.

Thirdly, Paul ends by reminding us how all of this grace is possible, 'through Jesus Christ our Lord.' There is no giving of saving grace apart from Jesus Christ. Saving grace is not found in Islam, Mormonism, Buddhism, etc. Christ is the only one fit to be our mediator and negotiate peace agreements with God. Christ alone is holy enough to offer His life. Christ alone is pure enough to stand as our representative. Christ alone is sufficient for our salvation.

I can think of no more fitting ending than to read these words written by Augustus Toplady

'A debtor to mercy alone
Of covenant mercy I sing
Nor fear, with thy righteousness on,
My person and offering to bring;
The terrors of law and of God
With me have nothing to do;
My Saviour's obedience and blood
Hide all my transgressions from view

The work which His goodness began,
The arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is yea and Amen
And never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now,
Not all things below or above
Can make Him His purpose forego
Or sever my soul from His love

My name from the palms of His hands
Eternity will not erase
Impressed on His heart it remains
In marks of indelible grace;
Yes, I to the end shall endure
As sure as the earnest is given
More happy, but not more secure,
The glorified spirits in heaven'