

Christ, Grace, and Life's Universal Triumph

Romans 5:15-21

"...grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Introduction: Not too many churches, at least modern day versions, have cemeteries attached to them anymore. But that is a relatively new phenomenon. If you travel to historic churches in Europe or the US, many would graveyards outside, a visible reminder of the destiny of everyone who attends. This picture is an anomaly, a church in North Carolina that has a modern building but has kept the headstones



instead of a playground or open field. Having a cemetery is not a good or bad thing, but it does reveal something about values. Perhaps in a good way, modern churches use the space for gathering, education, and purposeful activity, being a place of community and outward focus rather than the awkward inevitability of kids running over the deceased. Maybe the goal is a focus on the living, not the dead, the hopeful rather than the morbid. But it is equally true that there is a measure of loss by NOT having them on sight. Here is what I mean.

Having a cemetery next to a church would remind us of three indelible realities: 1) The absolute *brevity* of life. *"For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes"* (James 4:14). In a world that distracts us to focus on the now, to dwell on the present, and to downplay the future, believers are reminded that we have only a brief time to be obedient, and the day's fly by. Hectic schedules, full calendars, and quick steps will give way to the quiet of the dust. 2) The *inescapability of death* – Death comes for us all, and no matter how strong, vibrant, or energetic we feel right now, we will NOT live in this life forever. 3) We will one day be caught up together and will *always be with the Lord* (1 Thess. 4:17), a reality that should encourage us today. For the believer, the physical separation that we feel and experience from each other but also from Jesus will be bridged, and we will see Him for who He is (1 John 3:2). This is a reality that we often forget as both Christians and Americans: *for us, physical death is the gateway into eternity and the joyful presence we've been longing for* (Psalm 16:11).

Why the gloomy start? As the English theologian and historian Thomas Fuller said in 1650: **"It is always darkest just before the Day dawneth"** (As well as Harvey Dent in the "The Dark Knight"). We started last week with the reality that two twin forces were unleashed on the world in Genesis 3, tyrannical towers of power that effect every human that's ever entered this world. When sin entered the world through the person of Adam, it produced **two lasting effects**: 1) Every person is now **born into sin**, since sin spread to all people through our connection with Adam. We are sinners before we commit a known sin, or violate the law, or rebel openly against authority. From this nature of sin, we continue the path and trajectory of sin in our lives, though we are only judge on what we have done (Rev. 20:13). 2) **Death rules and reigns** as a result. Again, we can run from it, but we will always get caught. Death is a certainty as long as sin is a reality. There is no amount of human effort, desire, resource, or money source that can derail the march to death.

Because of these two dread towers, it leaves us with some cards stacked against us. We not only face **physical death** but are in a state of **spiritual death**, meaning we are by nature and birth separated from

God. Adam and Eve were built to live forever, but in sin they were now subject to death, and our mortal bodies are not built for eternity. That is why the ultimate **Kingdom of God** is still to come. We cannot rule and reign on this earth as kings and queens, but must wait until this natural body is raised a spiritual one, the perishable for the imperishable (1 Cor. 15:42), since flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God (1 Cor. 15:50). Which means there will come a day when death and Hades are done away with that we will truly rule with Christ (Rev. 20:14).

What that means for the present: our greatest ministry, purpose and goal in the gospel is to bring the message of justification by faith alone and the work of Christ alone to the nations. That was Paul's aim in Romans:

Romans 15:15b-16 *"because of the grace given me by God 16 to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the **gospel of God**, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit"*

In other words, we have commands by God that are still at play since the Garden of Eden: *glorify God by filling the earth, doing that through marriage and families, reflecting back the value of His worth, loving our God and our neighbor, etc.* But BECAUSE sin and death are real, our ministry must reflect those realities, and the gospel must not only be for worship and praise but in reaching and proclaiming. We are called to wake the dead! We ourselves need to make sure we *"Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you"* (Eph. 5:14), since we are calling those who are dead in *their* trespasses and sins to life in Christ (Eph. 2:1-3). **But how is this possible? How is the stranglehold of death and sin get loosed? If it is so powerful that no person can break it, what are we left with in hope? That is exactly what Paul reveals in for the conclusion of this section.**

We are going to look at **FOUR CONTRASTS** between the first Adam and the second/last Adam, who is Jesus Christ. Paul frames this section to show the GREATNESS of Christ in contrast to Adam, and the fact that sin and death were **imputed** to all of us IN ADAM, but righteousness and life to all who are IN CHRIST. And the reality for everyone here: we are either IN ADAM or IN CHRIST...there is no other option.

Now, let's read this precious text that at first glance can be confusing, but let me try to point out a few key ideas through the repetition of some key words (see screen):

- 1) Notice the emphasis on **GRACE** – Paul uses two words: *charis*, which means kindness and favor given to someone without earning, and *dorema*, which means something given or acquired without compensation in return. The emphasis on the grace of God in salvation is palpable
- 2) Note the emphasis on **ONE** – There is ONE representative by which sin entered the world, and only ONE representative by which saving grace comes
- 3) Note the emphasis on **MUCH MORE & ABUNDANCE** – Far from being weak or feeble, God's grace in Christ given to sinners give MUCH MORE than sin and death ever could, and even the last word in verse 20 is the word *"super-abundance" or "hyper-abundance"* or as the kids would say today: *super epic fire!*

A Contrast in Repercussions: Sin vs. Gift (15-16)

*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***

Sin and grace both have massive repercussions, and Paul sets a stark contrast between the two. He used a specific word for sin in *trespass*, which means a deviation from the path which God had shown him, insisting on going his own way. At the heart of sin is the desire to be like God, to be in control of one's own life, and have no one to rule over or tell you what to do. The irony, however, is that in desiring to be *like God*, sin made him more **UNLIKE God than ever before**. But the **grace or free gift** was a result of self-sacrifice, the complete opposite of Adam in the Garden.

Now the toughest part of this section is found here and in verse 18, because what Paul states in clear language does NOT necessarily match up with the context. Notice that he uses the word "many" two times here, and "all" twice in verse 18. If either of these is taken out of context or looked at in isolation, it would be a clear teaching on **universalism**. But we remember this: The Bible never contradicts itself, and if we see every word and verse in the larger context, things not only make more sense but fit together perfectly. Paul states here that "**many**" died through the trespass of Adam, and though scholars have tried to make *many* mean *all*, it does not. What Paul employs is **parallelism** in this argument, saying many died in Adam's trespass but grace abounded to **many** in Christ. The second makes sense, but the first part only makes sense in context. Notice that verse 12 already told us that all sinned and thus all died in Adam, so Paul is NOT saying something different. In verse 18, one trespass brought condemnation to **ALL** (which is consistent), but Christ brought justification and life to **ALL MEN** (which is NOT consistent). But if we look at the *context*, verse 17 says the reign of life is for **those who received the abundance of grace**, meaning the "all" here means all who actually received. Though still a bit confusing, it seems the best way to understand what Paul was doing.

Now, **how** is the grace and free gift of God through one man, Jesus Christ different? **2 Timothy 1:10** seems to weigh in a bit:

*and which now has been manifested through the appearing of our **Savior Christ Jesus**, who **abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel**.*

The power of sin, which is death, can and has been broken by Christ, but the power of Christ, which abolishes sin and death through the gospel, **CANNOT BE BROKEN**. Christ's work is over and above what we inherited from Adam, and grace is greater than our sin.

Notice in verse 16 we see the **extent** of the contrast between Adam and Christ. In Adam, the **one trespass through one man** brought condemnation. In other words, God hated sin so much that it only took one sin, by one man, to condemn all men, for all time. God was willing to condemn the entirety of the human race, and cause separation between His creation and Himself, because sin is so vile and heinous to Him.

But the **free gift of grace is different**. Notice that only one sin condemned, but mankind did not stop at that one sin but continued to sin over and over again. God did not only need to overcome the one sin in Adam, but the entirety of sinfulness, all sin committed, whether according to the Law, conscience, morality, intentional, or unintentional. Our hearts are idol factories and produce sin in record number. So what Paul is saying is that *the only force greater than God's hatred of sin is His love for the sinner*, seen in His willingness to die in his place, taking on EVERY sin: past, present, and future, on Himself so

that He can declare us righteous. God's love and abounding grace go hand in hand, and we know the one in a fuller way by looking at the other.

A Contrast in Reign: Death vs. Life (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.*

Grace is God's superlative generosity, an overflowing generosity to those who do not deserve it. God could have stopped at declaring us righteous and left us slaves, and still would have been abounding in love and grace. But God went above and beyond, not only **reconciling us to Himself for an eternal relationship** (John 17:3), but sets us up to rule with Him one day. There is a time now where it feels like death has one since it is so pervasive. In Christ, all who receive the abundance of His grace will **reign in life**. That means that the curse will be reversed and one day we will get back to what we were created to do, reign and rule with Christ. It is why we will be changed, with bodies built for eternity:

1 Corinthians 15:50-53 *"50 I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood **cannot** inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. 51 Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. 53 For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality."*

This speaks to the **security** we have in the grace of Christ – knowing that He who began a good work will be faithful to complete it (Phil. 1:6), and that nothing can separate us from His love (Rom. 8:39). We are reminded that God's grace saves us completely. It rescues us from the **penalty, power, and presence of sin**, knowing that the **penalty has been paid, the power is sin has been broken, and one day, the presence of sin will be vanquished**.

A Contrast in Result: Disobedience vs Obedience (18-19)

*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.*

Adam had one job and one command, and failed miserably. Hebrews 5:8-9 says Jesus "learned obedience through what He suffered, and being **made perfect, He became the source of eternal life to all who obey Him**". He came unlike any other man, NOT born of the union of a man and woman, since if He had, He would have carried the same sin nature we all do. But He was born of a virgin, not from the seed of a man. Not only was He born without a sin nature, but the God of the universe **humbled Himself**, not only coming as a servant, but willing to allow Himself to be nailed to a cross, becoming a curse (Gal. 3:13).

Philippians 2:8-11 *"And being found in human form, **he humbled himself by becoming obedient** to the point of death, even **death on a cross**. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of **Jesus every knee should bow**, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that **Jesus Christ is Lord**, to the glory of God the Father"*

Here is the crux of the section: all of us are products of headship, since we are either IN Adam or IN Christ. We are all born into Adam, and though it does not seem fair that we would be condemned because of what our father did, we are nonetheless connected to Him by birth, just like anyone born of a father. We are born condemned, awaiting judgment. But this only enhances the greatness of the reality of those who **are IN CHRIST**. He obeyed where we could not. He obeyed when we were not equipped to, loving our sin instead. Just like we were **made sinners by Adam, we can be made righteous IN CHRIST**. Because we can be made righteous by faith in Christ, it also points to our **transformation in Him**. Since we have His righteousness imputed to us, where we once had Adam's sin and condemnation, we now have Christ's righteousness in us. That means we not only **bow our knee to His Lordship, but willingly now are slaves of righteousness** (Rom. 6:17-19). There may be no greater news than knowing that we can be IN CHRIST, and that is a permanent reality.

A Contrast in Reason: Law vs. Grace (20-21)

*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***

Finally, Paul brings the issue full circle to the Law. The Law was not designed to **prevent sin** nor was it provided to save people **from sin**. The Law can only condemn (Rom. 4:15), since it shows us God's holiness and our continual inability to attain to it. The Law reveals sin, defines it, displays it. We know by experience this to be true. We sin when we KNOW it is wrong, when we know it violates our conscience (Rom. 2:15-16), and when we are told it is wrong. BUT...wherever and whenever sin increased, **GRACE super abounded all the more!** Sin is no match for grace. Death cannot handle it. And it is lavished on us through the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, possessed by FAITH in Him, not the work of the Law.

What are some reasonable takeaways from this?

1. **Everyone here today needs to clarify this question: are you in Adam or in Christ?** If you are in Adam, you are still walking in condemnation, still under wrath, still unwilling to bow your knee to Jesus Christ. Faith is complete when we come to Christ, willingly yielding and surrendering our life, control, and desire to Him, knowing that we cannot make ourselves righteous. Those who are **in Christ** will not only have assurance, but will experience ongoing transformation, becoming more like Jesus since we have HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS. And here is one massively important issue: we must take Jesus not only by faith, but in how He presents Himself, not in what we think He should be in our mind. Far too many have a view of God that is a figment of their imagination rather than how God presents Himself to us: **Perfect holiness and righteousness**. We must also see ourselves in the reality of who WE really are: born sinners who are destined for death, with no hope in ourselves. So we simply rest in and trust the **grace that is given to us through Jesus Christ in the gospel**
2. **This should be motivating for us to proclaim the gospel to the nations** – We are products of Grace as God declared us righteous out of our sin. Grace we receive, grace we give. We no longer look at people as a sum of their sinfulness but rather as objects of God's grace. And far from being **unmotivated** to know people are condemned from birth in their sin, we are **HYPER-MOTIVATED** to proclaim the gospel of faith in Jesus Christ, knowing that GRACE abounds, bringing life where death had ruled.