

ROMANS

Part 11: "Far As the Curse is Found"

Romans 5:12–21

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Sunday, April 3, 2022 (The Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Scripture Reading

"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—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 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. 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. 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. 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. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 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. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 5:12–21).

Introduction

A few years ago, I had the opportunity to research my family's ancestry. I discovered all kinds of interesting stories that I had never known before. But one of the more fascinating stories I learned was the supposed origin of my family's surname "Ritchie."

Before the first Ritchie migrated to the United States in the early 1800s, the Ritchies lived for centuries in the lowlands of rural Scotland. However, the Ritchies were not originally Scottish. They were political refugees who fled from England after the fall of the Plantagenet dynasty. The last Plantagenet king was a man named Richard III. And because my ancestors either supported or were connected to King Richard somehow, they were branded with the diminutive name "Ritchie," and they were exiled to Scotland.

The Ritchies were seen as united with King Richard. And when he fell, they fell. And, for better or worse, a transfer of power that happened in 15th century England has had an enduring impact on the history of the world in general and my family in particular.

I bring all of this up because today's passage is about a transfer of power. It is about one kingdom coming to an end and another beginning.

Romans chapter 5 reminds us how, in the beginning, God created the cosmos in a state of goodness and perfection. However, God's good creation was then usurped by a tyrant. But the good news is, because of Jesus, creation has been reclaimed.

Romans 5 shows us how Jesus's life, death, and resurrection are not only impactful and life-changing on an individual level. Rather, what Jesus has accomplished is *cosmic* in nature—it has shifted the course of human history and reshaped the very fabric of creation.

One day we will be redeemed. One day creation will be redeemed. One day the true King will return, the light of redemption will shine, and God's blessings will flow ***"Far As the Curse is Found."***

We will learn how this works by exploring five big ideas in this passage.

Exposition

1.) The Powers of Sin and Death

We tend to think of sin as an action that breaks a moral rule. Even more directly, we often think of sin as a transgression against what God has commanded in Scripture. And sin is certainly not less than the breaking of God's law, but it is more.

Look at the peculiar way Paul describes sin in our passage today: ***"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"*** (Rom 5:12).

Notice that sin is depicted not only as an action but as a spiritual force; a spiritual for that seems to possess agency and personality. This is not the only place in the Bible where sin is spoken of in such a manner. In fact, in Genesis 4, God warns Cain against the temptation to murder his brother. But look at how sin is described. God say to Cain, ***"If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it"*** (Gen 4:7).

Sin is viewed as a crouching predator, a beast lying in wait. In Romans 5, this beast is seen as an invader that has intruded into the creation that God has made, bringing a tyrannical dominion and the cancerous presence of another spiritual force named *death*.

This is a pretty radical perspective on how we view reality. We are conditioned by experience to see sin and death as givens of life. We anticipate the presence of sin and death. We accommodate sin and death. We expect sin and death.

Yet, the Bible shows us that sin and death are not integral elements of the created order. They are anti-God powers that have intruded into, distorted, and promoted brokenness in God's good creation.

This shows us something that is easy to miss but that we need to understand. Sin is not just an individual problem but a cosmic problem.¹

Sin manifests through individual sinful acts and self-absorption. But in addition to sin manifesting personally, sin also manifests corporately. So, yes, we can see sin through our individual behaviors. But we also can see sin in our corporate systems and structures. Sin is so destructive that it can be enculturated into society.

Sin manifests in financial systems that are designed to make the rich richer and the poor poorer. Sin manifests in political systems that empower the corrupt and compromised and disincentivize wisdom and integrity. Sin manifests within industries of entertainment and marketing that inflame the sin of lust and treat people made in the image of God as mere objects to be desired and consumed.

The powers of sin and death twist human structures and communities into monstrous entities. These powers perpetuate the fallenness of God's creation and the dehumanization of God's image-bearers.²

However, sin and death are not always easy to recognize. That's lead us to our second point.

2.) The Role of the Law

Let's look at the next few verses in our text today: *"...for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. 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"* (Rom 5:13-14).

The "law" is one of the more complicated ideas in Romans, and we will talk a lot more about the law when we get to Romans chapter 7.

For today, however, when Paul uses the term "law" it most often refers to the "Torah"; the instruction or commands of the Old Testament Scripture. So, in Paul's mind, the law can mean something like the 10 Commandments of Exodus chapter 20, which came

¹ To use the language of the Apostle John. We can see sin in our "flesh," but we can also see sin in the "world."

² For a vivid illustration of this concept, see: Ritchie, *Why Do the Nations Rage?*, 11 -13.

through the Old Testament figure Moses. But the law can also have a broader meaning and refer to any true moral standard of human righteousness.

Paul has shown us already that the law cannot save us. But just because the law can't save us does not mean the law is evil.

No, the law did not create sin. The law is divine revelation that awakens us to the truth about sin. The law defines sin and shows exactly how sin estranges us from God. The law gives sin a name and provides a moral norm against which we can recognize sin for what it is.

This role of the law shows us one of the key roles of the word of God in our lives. The word of God confronts us and convicts us wherever we have been complicit with the power of sin. God's truth shines like a light into our darkness and exposes the tyranny sin has over our lives, which is why, when we are struggling with sin, we want to avoid the word of God at all costs.

As our text says, the law gives us a way to reckon and counts our sins. The law shows us how the end of sin is death. The law of God reveals our need for salvation.

But, the text shows us that even where the law is not known, sin has existed. And through sin, death has reigned. Sin and death, literally, go all the way back to Adam.

Who Adam? That leads us to our next point.

3.) The Sin of Adam

Let's go back to the beginning of today's passage one more time to look at something or someone that we skipped over: *"...sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned" (Rom 5:12).*

Paul reminds his readers that sin came into the world through one man. That one man is Adam. Paul has already taken us back to Abraham in his letter to the Romans. Now we are going back even further to the dawn of time.

Adam refers to the very first human in the Bible. He is the first human ever created and the common father of humanity.

God creates Adam and places him in the earthy paradise named Eden. In Eden, Adam and his wife Eve enjoy unbroken communion with his Creator. Genesis 1 tells us that Adam and Eve are made in the image and likeness of God. That means they are given authority and dominion over God's creation as God's representatives and vice-regents.

Yet, in the beginning, they wholly submit themselves to God's rule and reign. They recognize God is the source of their life, as well as standard of all that is good. They recognize that all authority is dependent on him. All understanding of goodness flows from their relationship with him.

And this is why God tests Adam and Eve by prohibiting them from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This test was designed not only to show Adam and Eve's obedience. It was designed to cultivate dependence and trust in God alone.

But Adam and Eve fail the test. Desiring to be his own God, Adam rebels. He declares his independence from God. And he abdicates his dominion over creation to the powers of sin and death. And when Adam fell, we all fell. When he was estranged from God, we were all estranged from God.

In this way, Adam functions as a representative for all of humanity. And he was a faithful representative.

For we, too, have a desire to be our own God. We have a hunger to be autonomous and completely independent. We, too, desire to define good on our own terms. We have all repeated the sin of Adam over and over again. Our nature is corrupted, and creation is fractured.

The point is that Adam's disobedience had profound implications for his progeny and for all of creation.

This is the Bible's profoundly compelling explanation of why things fall apart, and the center does not hold. It is an explanation of why we know within our bones that the way the world is is not the way it should be.

The story of Adam shows us how we can know what is good and true, how we can even desire the good and true, and yet be radically unable to do what is good.

The sin of Adam was so powerful and pervasive that we, as Adam's children, are drawn to the sinfulness of sin like gravity.

But, thankfully, that is not the end of the story.

4.) The Salvation of Christ

Christians believe the Lord Jesus Christ is "*...the only begotten Son of God; begotten of his Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of God, Very God of Very God.*"

Yet, this same Jesus Christ came down from heaven and truly became man for our sake and salvation. He is the Word of God become human flesh, and he has dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus truly knows our suffering. He knows our vulnerability. He has felt the agonizing power of temptation. Yet, even in his full humanity, he is without sin.

Where every single man and woman has failed, Jesus has prevailed. He took on our humanity so that he could live a perfectly righteous life on our behalf and die a substitutionary death in our place.

And, like Adam, Jesus Christ has become a representative of humanity. But unlike Adam, whose representation opened the door to sin and death, Jesus's representation has opened the door for the grace of God to redeem our brokenness.

As Paul writes, *“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”* (Rom 5:15).

Jesus has become for us the new and better Adam.

Paul is fascinated by the myriad of ways that Adam and Jesus are similar. It's a subject he writes about elsewhere in the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor 15:21–22; 45–49). But, make no mistake: he knows very well that Adam and Christ are not the same. Indeed, the stress point in Romans 5 is how Adam and Christ are different.

Paul declares: *“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. 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. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 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”* (Rom 5:16–19).

As great as Adam's disobedience was, Jesus's obedience is greater.³ Adam was tempted in a garden, and his sin led to our condemnation. Jesus was tempted in a garden, and his righteousness leads to our justification. Adam was rejected by God and barred from the Tree of Life. Jesus was rejected by men and embraced a Tree of Death in our place (cf. Gal 3:13). Adam's rebellion brought the reign of sin into the world. But Jesus's righteousness brings for the reign of grace. And that leads to our final point.

5.) The Triumphant Reign of Grace

Part of what makes the gospel such good news is that the powers of sin and death—the powers that wreak such havoc and pain within our world—are dethroned and deposed in Christ.

As the Apostle announces, *“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also*

³ Some have mistakenly drawn the conclusion of universal salvation by taking this one text in isolation from the rest of Romans. Against this misconception, Moo writes, “This point is that there can be an assurance of justification and life, on one side, that is just as strong and certain as the assurance of condemnation on the other. Paul wants to show, not how Christ has made *available* righteousness and life for all, but how Christ has secured the benefits of that righteousness for all who belong to him.” Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 343.

might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 5:20–21).

Grace will not only win. Grace will “reign” (Βασιλεύσουσιν). The word reign is used multiple times in this passage (5:14, 17, 21). And in the Greek language, the word for “reign” comes from the identical root used for “king” and “kingdom.”

Paul is using kingdom language here. He is heralding an announcement and proclamation that a new king and a new kingdom has come.

Paul is announcing that the abusive reign of sin has ended. The reign of grace has triumphed in Christ. The kingdom of God is at hand (Mark 1:15).

The advent of Christ has broken the rule of evil once held over creation itself. This is news so good that it should elicit joy from our hearts. In fact, we sing of the joy that flows from Christ’s cosmic victory and the newly inaugurated reign of grace every year at Christmas time.

The old hymn of Isaac Watts sings:

“Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King...
No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.”

Conclusion

Adam's sin forever changed the world. But as powerful as Adam's sin was, Jesus's righteousness is greater.

The question is: *are you in Adam, or are you in Christ?*

One of my favorite ways for theology to be communicated is through visual media. Sometimes theological concepts can be big and beyond us. But some of the best artists of the Christian church have found ways to communicate the truth of the gospel in a way that captivates the imagination. Perhaps, the most powerful visual image that communicates the truth that we have been talking about today is found inside a dark side chapel of a small church named San Luigi that happens to be in the city of Rome.

It is a masterpiece titled “*The Calling of St. Matthew*” (1600) (IMAGE 1), painted by the Baroque master Caravaggio in the year 1600.

Here Caravaggio captures *the exact moment* when Jesus calls a tax collector to be his disciple. You can only barely see Jesus in the upper right-hand corner, with another disciple (probably Peter) in the foreground. Christ is nearly concealed in darkness,

pointing his hand to Matthew, summoning the tax collector to come and follow him.

I have always loved how well the artist Caravaggio has captured Matthew's utter shock and surprise by being called to follow one so great as Jesus. If you look at the **detail of Matthew's Expression (IMAGE 2)**, you can see the tax collector pointing to himself as if saying, "*Who? Me? You can't be serious!*"

And there is undoubtedly good reason for Matthew to be surprised. Jesus could have picked *anyone*. But instead, Jesus chooses to share meals with tax collectors and sinners. And here, he even calls a tax collector to be one of his twelve disciples.

Tax collectors were seen as traitors to their own people. They were widely regarded as conmen that used their positions of authority to force people into paying them more tax than they needed so that the tax collector himself reaped the profit. And more than that: they were seen as fellow Jews who were colluding with and even funding the very Roman empire that was oppressing God's people. They were complicit with the tyranny of the powers that be.

Because of this, Matthew was a man who many Jewish people would have considered untouchable. Although he wasn't physically unclean like the unclean leper a few verses before, he would have been considered morally unclean. But Jesus breaks into this tax collector's dark world of isolation, and with a single word, summons Matthew to a new life.

Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew* illustrates how God calls the unworthy and the unlikely. And this is really good news. No matter where you are now, no matter your past, God can use you.

But there is also something that seems a bit off about this painting. It's **Jesus's hand (IMAGE 3)**. When you look at it closely, you might be a little taken back by the unexpected lifelessness of Jesus's wrist and hand. The way Jesus holds his hand makes him look detached, distant, uninterested, and somewhat weak. How could this be?

But this is not an accident. There might even be something about that hand you might find oddly familiar. As it turns out, Caravaggio was not the first painter to paint a hand in this exact way. In fact, there is a much more famous depiction of this hand that you might easily recognize.

This hand first appeared on Adam in "**The Creation of Man**" (IMAGE 4) on the Sistine Chapel ceiling, painted by the famous Michelangelo. Michelangelo's painting is almost one hundred years older than Caravaggio's *The Calling of St. Matthew*, and it would have already been very famous in Caravaggio's day.

By choosing to depict Christ with this same hand, the artist Caravaggio is intentionally communicating a theological truth. When you compare these two hands **side-by-side (IMAGE 5)**, the hand of Adam and the hand of Christ are almost identical in every way. But they contrast in one key way—*they are reversed*.

By this reference, Caravaggio is saying that the one calling Matthew is a reverse Adam, a new Adam, a second Adam, or as Paul would say in 1 Corinthians, *the last Adam* (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45). Christ is the true and better Adam, who welcomes sinners and tax-collectors into new life by the gift of grace.

But Matthew's gift of grace will come at a great cost to Christ himself. *That same hand that summons Matthew to life will soon be pierced with death.* And it is only because of Christ's death that the tax collector and sinner can know life. This is why Caravaggio subtly references the means of that costly redemption, with **the window frame (IMAGE 6)** above the hand of Christ, which forms nothing less than the image of the cross on which Jesus will die as an outcast.

Why can the outcast be accepted? Why can we be brought near to God, although we're unworthy? Why can we be justified despite our sin?

It's not through achievement. It's not by our good works. It's not intellectual brilliance or wealth or family pedigree. We are made righteous by faith alone. We are made righteous by trusting what Jesus has done on our behalf is enough. We are made righteous by the victory of the cross and the triumph of the resurrection.

We are Matthew. We were the tax collectors and sinners; we were beholden to and complicity with the tyranny of sin; we were bound by the death of Adam. But by grace, Christ became our new Adam. He has come into our darkness. He has set his eyes upon us that he might call us to rise and follow him into the light. Our sin is real. Our sin is serious. But Christ's righteousness is more powerful than our sin.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, with unveiled eyes, may we see the power of sin exposed for what it is. May we rejoice in the far greater power of Christ's redemption. May we behold and marvel before Christ our new Adam. May we behold the goodness of the kingdom that is at hand and the kingdom that is coming. And may we rest in the reign of grace. AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Community

1.) *Read Romans 5:12–21 out loud.*

2.) *Sin is not less than breaking God’s law, but it is more. Why is it significant that Paul portrays sin as a spiritual force in this passage (see also Gen 4:7)? Have there been times when you have felt like sin has been a powerful force in your life?*

3.) *Discuss the ways Paul compares and contrasts Adam and Christ in this passage (see also 1 Cor 15:21 –22; 45–49). How are Adam and Christ alike, and how are they different? What is important about this comparison?*

4.) *What does it mean for sin to “reign” through death and grace to “reign” through righteousness?*