

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(November 4, 2012)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

Adam’s Undoing, Undone!

(Romans 5:12-21)

Study #9

Introduction: A gift exchange to love...

When we were kids, my twin sister and I had a great time Trick-r-Treating through our neighborhood.

At the end of the evening we would pile all the candy we’d gotten on the living room floor. Being twins, but not identical (for which she is so grateful) our tastes were similar - but not identical - and we enjoyed exchanging our less favorite treats for more favored ones with each other.

Every year after Christmas, stores are inundated with people like you and me making “gift exchanges”. We take back the thing we didn’t really want for store credit. We exchange the sweater for one that actually fits, or that is a color we might actually wear.

In our passage this morning, we read about the ultimate “gift exchange.”

The Bible says that the first man, Adam, left a legacy, a gift, to the human race. It is the gift that keeps on taking. But that gift was exchanged for another, and the One who orchestrated the exchange, Jesus, gave us a gift beyond compare.

And speaking of the passage in front of us...

Today, our study in Romans brings us to a passage that challenges hearts and minds.

I read long ago that the society that scorns excellence in plumbing because plumbing is a humble activity and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy.

Neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.

We had better esteem plumbing, because if plumbers don’t devote themselves to their craft and do excellent work, our pipes will leak.

And we, here, had better devote ourselves to the challenging portions of Scripture or else our theology will leak like a sieve.

The passage before us this morning, the second half of Romans 5, is arguably among the most profound AND the most difficult collection of verses in the book of Romans, perhaps in the whole New Testament.¹

And today we’ll plow through it together and mine its treasures. God’s best cookies are often found on the top shelves, so prepare to reach high. The prize of understanding life-changing truth from God’s Word today is well worth the mental work!

We’re going to watch as Paul sets two separate processes before us. On the one hand we have the process of sin-to-condemnation--to-death; on the other hand is the movement from righteousness-to-justification-to-life.

Throughout, he helps us to visualize the two processes by picturing two individuals - Adam and Jesus - as the ones who set each system in motion. Both Adam and Jesus gave gifts to the human race. And we’ll see the contrast between Adam’s trick and Jesus’ treat.

Paul starts with Adam, the first man.

¹ I ran across this quote, “If you wish to know whether a man is a theologian, turn to his Greek Testament, and if it opens of its own accord to Romans 5, and you find the page worn and brown, you may safely set him down as a devotee of the sacred science.”

Adam Brought the Reign of Death (vv. 12-14)

Sin and Death Enter the World (v. 12)

Sin and death entered the world through one man (v. 12a)

[12a] Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin...

The historical setting

When Paul refers to **“one man”** it is clear that he is speaking about the man God created in the Garden of Eden, Adam. You can read about Adam’s special creation by God in Genesis 2. He was a real historical figure, just as surely as Abraham and Sarah, David and Moses, Mary and Jesus were real historical figures.

Adam really lived and by his actions he made a huge impact on his descendants.²

The point of the history

In Genesis 2, God told Adam that he could eat freely from any of the trees of the Garden of Eden EXCEPT one: the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was off limits. God’s words were actually a prohibition: *“Don’t eat!”*

But at the heart of every prohibition is a choice - to obey or to not obey. And God was providing Adam with a choice. He could rebel OR he could live in submission to his Creator.³

God also clearly spelled out the penalty if he did choose to disobey, **[Genesis 2:17] “In the day that you eat from it, you will surely die.”**

² In the Hebrew language (the language of the Old Testament) his name means “mankind.” He was a real person, the first person, and he represented the whole race at the critical moment of its early history.

³ Along with the privilege of being made in the image and likeness of God came the inevitable *“awesome responsibility of being human - choice.”* (C.S. Lewis)

We continue reading in Genesis and quickly come to the scene (Genesis 3) where Eve was tempted and then deceived by the serpent. Believing a lie, she ate the fruit of the forbidden tree.

Then, the focus shifts to Adam, the one to whom God had given the command. He had a very simple decision to make: obey God or not.

He was acting with his eyes wide open - open to the clarity of God’s command, open to the reality of consequences.

What will he do? Will he choose to follow the path God has set, or will he choose to disobey?

Moses records his decision with no hesitation and with no embellishments - **“AND HE ATE”** - and the story of humanity is forever changed.

In Genesis, there are no excuses offered. Adam sinned. But more than simply committing a sin, Adam has ruined everything. The Eden Era experiment has ended. Man has died. He immediately died spiritually and he began to die physically.

Both from Genesis and Romans, it is clear that Adam’s sin affected more than just himself. As Paul will go on to tell us, his one act plunged all of his descendants into physical and spiritual death.

Death spread to all men, because all sinned (v. 12b)

How did sin spread to all men?

[12b] and so death spread to all men, because all sinned - ⁴

⁴ One of my commentaries lists six separate interpretations for the phrase, **“because all sinned...”** The three major ways to understand the phrase are: (1). All people sin in their experience, just as Adam did; (2). We sinned when Adam did, on the basis of either being in the gene pool or on the basis of Adam serving as the representative head of the race; (3). We sinned on our own, but because of the corruption of humanity through Adam’s sin, we were pre-disposed to sin. Of these three, (2) and (3) have the most to commend them, but I believe that Paul’s thought is more consistently described by (2).

Hmmm... *“all sinned.”* In what way did *“all sin”*?

While there are a variety of ways to understand this thought, I think the best way is to see Adam as having acted as the representative “head” of humanity.⁵

It is similar to the situation that arises when the leadership of our nation declares war on an enemy. When the president makes a request of Congress and the Congress declares war, the whole nation is plunged into war - not just the president and not just the Congress!

When Adam sinned, he dragged all of us into the abyss of sin as well. There is racial solidarity in sin. We are all in this together.

And what are the consequences of our having been dragged into sin? In a word: death.

The consequence of the spread of sin

It is tough for us who are used to dealing with death to accept the idea that death is odd. But it really is. Death was not a part of God’s original design.

But, all men sinned when Adam sinned. Thus, we are all *“in Adam.”* We thus all die.⁶

⁵ This is known as the Federal Headship view. The other major way of looking at *“all sinned”* is by an idea called “Seminal Headship”, which views all of humanity as existing in Adam’s gene pool when he sinned. Thus, when he sinned, we - at least, seminally - were present. The idea is not at all far-fetched. In Genesis 14, when Abraham met Melchizedek, a true priest to God Most High, Abraham paid a tithe of all he had to him. The author of the book of Hebrews takes that incident, and says that Levi, who was in the gene pool of Abraham (*“in the loins of Abraham”*) was paying tithes to Melchizedek! The author of Hebrews tells us that ultimately he was paying them to Christ, a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

⁶ John Donne’s often quoted words express a permanent truth about human solidarity: “No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod is washed away, Europe is the less as well as if a promontory were or a manor of thy friends. Every man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.”

Now, one of the oddities of Romans 5 (and one of the things that has vexed readers of Romans 5!) is that Paul doesn’t complete the thought he begins here at the start of verse 12 until he gets to verse 18!⁷

He’s been accused of everything from bad grammar to bad logic to bad writing style. None of that is what is going on!

He’s simply writing with great precision and he writes exactly what he does the way he does because he doesn’t want to be seriously misunderstood.⁸

Before completing his thought he’s going to explain the “gift” Adam gave to the race and the “gift” Jesus gave. He sure doesn’t want anyone thinking that they are similar gifts, so he will show just how radically different they are by contrasting them.

But even before he does that he wants to make sure that we understand the relationship of sin to the principle of “law.”

Sin’s Relationship to the Law (vv. 13-14)

The presence and the imputation of sin, prior to the Law (v. 13)

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

The presence of sin, from Adam on

So, Paul has stated the obvious. Sin existed in the world prior to the giving of the Mosaic Law. That should be pretty apparent since Adam - the first one to sin - lived before Moses.

⁷ This is represented in our English texts by an actual incomplete sentence. Not so in the Greek text.

⁸ The incomplete sentence is due to his fear of being misunderstood as saying that Adam’s work and Christ’s work were to be thought of as equivalent in any way. He breaks off his train of thought to draw a number of great dissimilarities before recasting the statement in verses 18-19.

But go ahead and read the record of Genesis AFTER Adam's sin and you'll find lots of evidence of exactly the kinds of sin that is described in Romans, chapter 1. A refusal to worship God. A steady descent into lovelessness and rebellion. It's all there. Sin was alive and well from Adam forward!

But, what are we to make of this: ***“sin is not imputed when there is no law.”***

Imputation, without law?

If I am found guilty of a crime under the laws of the state of Texas, guilt is *imputed* to me. It means I have been charged and found guilty.

But, if what I am being charged for is not on the books as a law, then there is no basis for imputing guilt to me.

There is no imputation of crime/sin without law. To go around arresting and convicting citizens without a law wouldn't be *just*.

So, is Paul saying that no one was condemned before God prior to God giving Moses' Law? Certainly not!

Let's not forget what Paul has shown us in Romans up to this point. He's told us that all people everywhere are aware of and have violated the *principle* of law.

That violation may come in the form of not worshiping the God who is revealed in nature, violating cultural rules, or violating conscience. But, no one lives ABSOLUTELY without law.

The only humans who *absolutely* fit the situation Paul describes here of being ***“without Law”*** are those who are not yet mature enough to understand the difference between right and wrong, and those who have never been mentally competent to understand the difference between right and wrong.⁹

⁹ A scholar as well-respected as John Murray holds to this same position, as do others. See his Commentary. New International Commentary on the New Testament, Eerdmans. p. 190.

It is because of what I read here that I come to the conclusion that those who die in infancy and those who are mentally incapable are not condemned to Hell.

I'm not going to try and set up some arbitrary *“age of accountability.”* Only God knows at what point any given person actually sins.

But if I understand Romans 5 correctly, until someone understands the concept of rules and boundaries and chooses to violate a rule, sin is not imputed to them. They are still related to Adam, so, of course, they die.

But, there is no “sin” to impute to them, because sin is not imputed where there is no law.

But, again, from Adam forward, sin was in the world. And the effects of Adam's sin were seen in the experience of everyone in this: everyone died.

The practice and outcome of sin, prior to the Law (v. 14)

[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.

All people died. Those who lived to culpable adulthood and who actively sinned AND those who died in infancy and never personally sinned. We say, *“All people are ‘in Adam’.*” Therefore, all people die.

And, Paul says, Adam was a ***“type.”***

By *type* we mean that a person, a place, a thing, or an event foreshadows a future person or event. By the impact Adam made on history, he foreshadows ***“Him who was to come”*** - and that would be Jesus.

The point is that Adam gave to all of his descendants a gift (death). Jesus also gave us a gift. And it is at this point that Paul moves to contrast those two gifts for us.

Let's first consider what effect the sin of Adam had on mankind.

The Contrasting Gifts of Adam and Jesus (vv. 15-19)

Death vs. Grace (v. 15)

The death gift of Adam (v. 15a)

[15a] But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died...

The “*many*” of this verse equals the whole of mankind. All people died as a result of Adam’s sin. That’s what Adam’s gift brought about.

And what did the gift of Jesus accomplish?

The grace gift of Jesus (v. 15b)

[15b]...much more¹⁰ did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man¹¹, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.¹²

It is far easier to push someone down a hill than it is to pull them up a hill. And it was much “easier” for Adam’s sin to roll us down the hill of death than it was for God to undo the damage done by Adam’s sin and save us.

Adam’s one act was uncomplicated.

¹⁰ The “much more” statements that we find throughout this passage are to be understood - at the very least - as meaning that there was much more work to be done in bringing us back from condemnation, than there was involved in pushing us down the slippery slope of sin and judgment.

¹¹ It is interesting that Paul does not mention the deity of Jesus, but His perfect humanity. Evidently, we are to think of Jesus’ sinless human perfection when we are reflecting on His sacrifice for our sins.

¹² Verse 15 supports an atonement co-extensive with the fall (in theological terms, this is called *unlimited atonement*). See Robert Lightner’s book, [The Death Christ Died](#), pp. 135-143 for a clear explanation of Christ’s unlimited atonement that excludes universalism.

But the grace that was given through Jesus required the Incarnation and virgin birth, the suffering and death of the Son of God and His resurrection from the dead.

“***Much more***” indeed! It was much more difficult, much more painful, much more costly for Jesus’ grace gift to abound to the many than for Adam’s death gift to go to the many!

And there is more dissimilarity between the two gifts.

Condemnation vs. Justification (v. 16)

From Adam came judgment, resulting in condemnation (v. 16a)

[16a] 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...

The judgment that ended up with everyone dying and with sinners being condemned before God arose because of one transgression by one man. That is a very steep price to have paid for one deed. But then different choices have differing consequences.

There isn’t much of a consequence to choosing to drink a Coke over a Dr. Pepper. But there is a tremendous consequence in choosing to drink Dr. Pepper or ammonia.

Adam’s one decision to rebel against God brought about consequences for every descendant who followed him.

But, the gift Jesus came to the earth to give is wholly different.

The free gift arose from many transgressions, leading to justification (v. 16b)

[16b]...but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.

Notice what happened: The gift of Jesus was God’s answer to innumerable misdeeds and to all the accumulated sins of the centuries.

So, one single misdeed was answered by universal condemnation. And the problem created by the sum total of all the sins and guilt of all the ages is answered by one perfect sacrifice by the Son of God.

And there is a third dissimilarity between the two gifts.

Slavery to Death vs. Reigning in Life (v. 17)

By the transgression of Adam, death reigned. (v. 17a)

[17a] For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one...

At the sin of Adam, death began an ages-long reign over our race. Here is how the author of the book of Hebrews puts it:

[Hebrews 2:14] Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, [15] and might free those WHO THROUGH FEAR OF DEATH WERE SUBJECT TO SLAVERY ALL THEIR LIVES. (emphasis added)

You've heard that the only certain things in life are death and taxes? That is funny, but only in a morbid way.

You should know that I have preached the book of Romans before. It was twenty years ago. I was 37 then. I'm not quite sure what I thought at that time about Paul's words, "***fear of death.***"

But I can tell you that it is quite different to consider death as a 57 year old. Earlier, I could say - and mean it, "*Everyone is going to die.*" Today, there is more of a sense of realism when I say, "*I am going to die.*"

I wonder what it would be like to look forward to a Methuselah (969 years) lifespan. Over 900 years of golf in retirement. Receiving Social Security for 902 years. Sweet. But death is coming. It is coming to us all.

We are all all of us are looking over our shoulders. Death reigns. It is the one unavoidable and non-negotiable.

Scripture says that there is a universal tendency to live in fear, to live like slaves because of death.

And in this Jesus' gift offers another "***much more.***"

Much more will those who receive the gift of Jesus Christ will reign in life. (v. 17b)

[17b]...much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.¹³

Death is all pervasive and universal "*in Adam.*" But there is much more grace in Christ than there is death in Adam!

Those who have not yet tasted life in Jesus are padlocked in a cell deep in the prison of death. Fear makes perfect sense outside of faith in Christ.

But in Jesus we have eternal life. We don't receive eternal life when we die. We receive the free gift of eternal life when we believe.

For those who have believed, physical death is, literally, a threshold we will cross on the way to the presence of God.

Now anyone can understand a certain trepidation about crossing a threshold we've never crossed before. So if we still feel nervous about death. That would be understandable. But an enslaving terror of death? Not now. Jesus' gift washes that fear away.

So, *in Adam* we all die.

In addition, those who have sinned like Adam did (a violation of a known law, either God's Law or society's law or conscience) are condemned to Hell.

¹³ The possibility does exist that the Christian might continue to live as a slave, and not as a King. That tragic possibility is taken up in chapters 6-7.

And those who have sinned like Adam did = EVERYBODY
(Romans 3:23, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*)

But while God has not provided an escape from death, He has provided a way of escape from condemnation and Hell.

He sent His Son, Jesus, to die for us on the cross. But, it is up to us - NOT TO WORK FOR THE GIFT - but to take the gift.

God is holding out the offer of eternal life to you right now! But, if you don't TAKE IT, Christ's saving work will not benefit you.¹⁴

Take the gift Jesus offers you. Place your faith in Him NOW and taste God's love and forgiveness, know His grace and mercy, and kiss the paralyzing fear of death goodbye forever!

Now, do you remember the incomplete thought of verse 12?

After having made clear the differences in the gifts of Adam and Jesus, Paul finally gets around to finishing the thought he began at the beginning.

You, the Sinner vs. You, the Righteous! (vv. 18-19)¹⁵

[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.¹⁶

¹⁴ The fact that unless a person believes/receives they are not justified is clear from verse 17. In Adam's sin all men actually came under condemnation, but in Christ's righteous act all men provisionally are justified - but are only actually justified when by faith they receive God's gift.

¹⁵ Paul has no verbs in verse 18, but uses a highly charged and condensed style of writing. Literally, it is something like, *“Therefore, as through one transgression - condemnation for all men, so also through one act of righteousness - justification of life to all men.”*

¹⁶ Christ's gift (of righteousness) abounds even more to “the many” than Adam's gift of death abounded to the many. This does not mean, of course, that Paul is teaching universal salvation. Taking into consideration here the rest of Paul's theology - and verse 17 of this passage - we understand that not everyone in the world tastes of the saving benefits of the gift of Jesus.

[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.¹⁷

All people were made to BE SINNERS through Adam's sin.

Something in humanity's constitution changed when Adam sinned. In Adam, we are sinners, inheriting a sin nature from our first father. In essence, outside of Christ, our core identity is, *“sinner.”*

That is depressingly negative. But, in Jesus things get *much more* outrageously positive than the negative is depressingly negative. Christ's obedience to the Father did something even more weighty than that which Adam's sin accomplished.

Jesus makes *“the many”* to BE *“righteous”* - this *“many”* being those who “receive the gift of God,” (that is, those who trust Christ)!

In Jesus, who you are has fundamentally changed. Of course you still sin and will always wrestle with sin. In that sense, you are still a sinner.

But, your core identity has changed. You are, fundamentally, righteous. You are a righteous person in Jesus Christ who sometimes sins. When you believed in Jesus, the one who died and rose again, He changed your core identity from “sinner” to “righteous.”

The final words of this grand chapter (and the final words of this major section of Romans) bring us to the point of Jesus' great gift.

Jesus Brings the Reign of Grace (vv. 20-21)

The Point of the Coming of the Law..... (v. 20a)

[20a] The Law came in so that the transgression might increase

¹⁷ Notice that the “all” in both cases are not set in concrete. “All” those who are condemned will not remain condemned if they place their faith in Christ. Likewise, the righteousness of the second “all” is provisional, and is only made actual if they receive God's gift by faith.

The other day I was “instant messaging” on Facebook with our son, Zach, who is adventuring around New Zealand with his wife, Courtney these days.

While typing I casually asked him if they had thought about going on any ocean expeditions - sailing, kayaking, stuff like that. I mean, there is a lot of ocean out there - and it’s really not that far from Antarctica, and...

Well, Kathy was paying attention to what I was typing and thought that my mention of going out on the wide ocean was a horrible idea. Why suggest it? He just might do it! (So I went on to suggest bungee-jumping, sky-diving, deep-sea diving, and crocodile wrestling. Marriage 101)

Well, Kathy had a point. Zach is something of an adrenalin junkie. He is oriented toward risk-taking. Suggesting a new adventure to him was, well, it was like waving a law in front of a sinner.¹⁸ It might make him want to do it

Law does not remedy the problem of sinfulness. Law aggravates it.

And it has that effect because as law intersects with our hearts, the principle of sin we inherited from our forefather, Adam, kicks into gear and we move toward rebellion.

We might be tempted to think that it would have been better for God to have left off law altogether. But, that would not have done away with the sin problem.

It would have only made certain that sin would not come to the surface and that we would never know forgiveness.

But now that Jesus has come, death no longer reigns. Condemnation is not our future. Guilt is not the verdict.

In Jesus, the end of the matter that ushers in everything else is grace.

¹⁸ You may have heard about the woman who objected to reciting the Ten Commandments because they put so many ideas into people’s minds. ☺

The Point of the Coming of the Lord! (vv. 20b-21)

[20b] 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.¹⁹

No matter how fast the operation of law stimulates sin and causes it to increase, faster still does the grace of God increase. More completely does God remove the accumulated load of sin from us who have received God’s gift.

Conclusion:

By Adam’s Eden sin, a whole new humanity was created - a sinful one, a race destined for death, for judgment, and for condemnation.

By Jesus’ saving work, there came a radically new humanity - one that is justified, a race destined for mercy, for grace, and for eternal life.

You and I see the effects of Adam’s act everywhere. All around us there is physical death, fractured relationships, and alienation from God.

It is mind-boggling to realize that God only needed to speak a word to fling the worlds into existence. But, to undo the damage done in the Garden of Eden, God had to send His own Son to suffer and die. That was the only action that would finally pay the penalty for the sin of Adam.

Yes, the tragedy of Eden was complete - but the victory of the cross is **“MUCH MORE”** complete!

¹⁹ As he wrote these words, Paul may have had in mind the cross itself. There, in response to Israel’s rejection of God’s Messiah by handing Him over to pagans to be crucified, and when the Gentile world in the person of Pilate responded to Israel’s challenge by the deliberate prostitution of justice to expediency, God responded by superabundant grace. As it was in the cross, so it is in our lives.