



GRACE REIGNS, Part Two

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #35

Romans 5:12-21

David Sunday

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Today we'll be looking at a great passage, one of the most profound statements of Christian doctrine in all the Scriptures, Romans 5:12-21. Listen now to God speak to us in His Word:

¹² 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— ¹³ for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. ¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁷ 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.

¹⁸ 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. ²⁰ 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.

Thanks be to God for His living and holy Word to us. Amen.

Back in 1988, Nelson Mandela was in prison in South Africa, and there was a concert held in London's Wembley Stadium to raise awareness for his cause. About 70,000 concert goers screamed with excitement for 12 hours as different pop rock artists performed—people like Sting, George Michael, Guns and Roses, Natalie Cole, the Bee Gees. But what happened at the end was totally unexpected. The opera singer Jessye Norman took the stage. She didn't have a band. She didn't have any back-up vocals. She began singing *a capella*, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound."

A hush fell over the audience. By the second verse, everyone was on their feet singing with her. Philip Yancey reflects on that event in this way: "The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it." The world thirsts for grace? I don't know. I look around and see people thirsting for lots of things—power, revenge, self-justification, wealth, all things concerning me, me, me!

Does the world thirst for grace? It's not always apparent and a lot of times people aren't aware of their thirst. A lot of times they have drunk so much of the sand of this world that they have made themselves insatiable. But I think when we peel away all the calloused layers of self-righteousness, pride, unbelief and self-justification, and we get to the core of a human being created in God's image but now fallen, now corrupted and tainted by sin—if we come to see ourselves as we really are—we are thirsty! We're thirsty for grace. We ask, "Will anyone show me any good? Will anyone love me in spite of my faults and failures and weaknesses? Is there anyone who will treat me not as I deserve, but in kindness and mercy and unfailing love?" We thirst for that.

I know I thirst for grace. I thirst for a God Who will love me in spite of my failure, Who will not treat me as my sins deserve. I am a sinner desperately in need of a Savior Who is full of grace. I thirst for grace in my relationships in my family. I thirst for grace from you, the church. What are we if we're just a human organization coming together, expecting all kinds of performance from one another, but if we don't meet the standard we're done with each other? What's a church without grace? We're just a fragile human organization ready to fall apart, were it not for grace. How desperately we need grace. I want New Covenant Bible Church to be an oasis in the desert, where people who are thirsty for grace can drink freely and deeply here. Don't you want that for our church?

Why We Thirst for Grace (verses 12-14)

Last week we looked at Romans 5:12-14, and you might title those verses: "Why we should thirst for grace." They remind us that all of us are united to Adam. He is the federal head of all

humanity. He is our representative and his actions—for good or ill—affect all of us, because he's the representative God chose. He was put in perfect conditions to stand as humanity's original head. But what we saw in verse 12 was that there was a chain reaction in the Garden of Eden. First sin came into the world through Adam, then death through sin, and then death spread to all people because all sinned. That last phrase of verse 12, "*because all sinned,*" is speaking of original sin. We were united to Adam as our head, then when he sinned we sinned. We all sinned *in* Adam; we all sin *like* Adam. So sin is inherited and it's instinctive. No one needs to teach you how to sin. No one gives us a tutorial on that. Somehow we figure it out without anyone telling us how. Sin is also imitative: like father, like son. As a result of Adam's sin and our sin in Adam, death spreads to all humanity.

Theologian George Ladd says, "Everywhere one goes, we find a gaping grave swallowing up the dying. Tears of loss, of separation, of final departure stain every face. Every table, sooner or later, has an empty chair; every fireside, its vacant place. Death is the great leveler." It doesn't matter whether you're buried in a great mausoleum or the Taj Mahal or the pyramids of Egypt or in an unmarked grave in a grassy ground or at the bottom of the depths of the sea. The reality of this world in which we live is it is ruined and fallen, and death reigns here. Death reigns—all the result of one man's sin and our sin in him.

At the end of verse 14, Paul wants us to see that Adam was a type of One Who was to come. He was a pattern, a symbol, a representation of Christ, Who was yet to come. In verses 15 through 19, Paul hones in on the differences between these two men—Adam and Christ—and the results of their work. He shows us the grotesque wreckage resulting from one man's act of disobedience and the gracious revolution resulting from one Man's act of obedience and righteousness. Look carefully at the text, honing in with your eyes, to notice the contrast between Adam and Christ.

First, let's consider the grotesque wreckage all over this world because of Adam's sin. In verse 15, pull out these words: "*...through one man's trespass...*" What's the result? "*...many died.*" In verse 16, "*following one trespass,*" we get judgment and condemnation. You see these words in those verses? Verse 17, "*Because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man.*"

Can anyone argue with this analysis of humanity's condition? Paul is telling us why this world is in ruins, why death is everywhere. Verse 18: leading from one trespass, we get "*condemnation for all men.*" Then you can pull these words out of verse 19: "*by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners.*" What a devastating track record Adam has had

through his sin. The world we live in is fallen and broken. Everywhere we look, “Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold, threaten the soul with infinite loss.” That’s our experience.

But thank God there is a better Man, another Adam, a last Adam. And because of Him, the hymn goes on to say, “Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold points to the refuge, the mighty cross.” Look at the gracious revolution that comes through Jesus Christ. Let’s go back through those verses and pull out what it says about the results of Jesus’ work, especially His work on the cross.

- Verse 15: *“By the grace of that one man Jesus Christ,”* certain things abound—the grace of God and the free gift *“abounded for many.”*
- Then look at the last phrase in verse 16: *“Following many trespasses,”* following a whole mountain load of transgressions, the free gift of Jesus *“brought justification.”*
- Verse 17: Because of one Man, Jesus Christ, *“those who receive the abundance of grace”* that’s in Him, *“and the free gift of righteousness”* that comes from Him, *“reign in life.”*
- Verse 18: Leading from one act of righteousness, what follows? *“Justification and life for all men.”*
- Finally, verse 19: *“By one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous.”*

So you’ve got grotesque wreckage on one hand and a grace revolution on the other. The contrasts are total and unparalleled. This really can make a huge difference in your life.

I was talking to one of our faithful women last Sunday who told me that it was through the teaching of these very verses and looking at the contrast of who we are in Adam and who we can be in Christ that she really came to know that she was saved—because if Christ has done all of this, then being united to Him gives you that assurance of real salvation. It was also these verses that prompted her to follow the Lord in baptism, and they were part of her testimony that day.

What Adam and Jesus have in common is that both represent a body of people. What they’ve done for good or ill is credited to the account of everyone who’s united to them. We’re all united to Adam by virtue of our humanity, and we all can be united to Jesus through faith and by receiving the free gift of righteousness and the grace that comes in Him.

How Adam & Christ are Different

But how are Adam and Jesus different? One commentator describes it in three ways: motivation, results and power. They’re different in their motivation, different in their results and different in their power. Adam was motivated by rebellion, which is evident in the words Paul

chooses: trespass and transgression. He was motivated by self-aggrandizement. He chose according to his flesh. Jesus, on the other hand, was motivated by grace. We read words like free gift and an act of righteousness and obedience that was a self-sacrifice on His part. We see in Jesus love and compassion, as well as obedience to the Father and to the Father's law and His will.

So totally different motivations leading to totally different results. What are the words that stand out for Adam and the results of his sin? Two words, over and over again: death and condemnation. What are the words connected to Jesus? Justification and life! What a contrast. I want to hone in on verse 17, because there's a wonderful statement here: *"If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man..."* What would you expect Paul to say now? If death reigned through Adam, what would you expect him to say with Christ? "Death reigned...life reigned"?

But I want you to specifically notice that that's not what Paul says in verse 17. He says something even better than that. He says, *"If, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man,"* Adam, *"much more will those who receive,"* so there's an active component of faith, of receiving Jesus, *"much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign."* He doesn't say life reigns. He says we reign! We *"reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."*

That's good news, because, as Tim Keller puts it,

Before, death reigned over us and we were in bondage. Now we are free. The old kingdom within which we labored crushed us, but we have not traded in one slavery for another one just like it. Rather, in the new Kingdom of Christ we become kings ourselves! Christ's kingship makes us kings, but sin's kingship makes us slaves. The contrast is total.

We become princes and princesses in Christ's Kingdom. We reign in life through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, getting hold of that truth can really set you free. Let me tell you one way that happened in our lives. It was July 28, 2010, a Wednesday afternoon. Five days later Kate was scheduled to have that massive surgery to remove her right lung and take away the tumor that was around her heart vessels. We were afraid. We were aware of the specter of death.

I had gotten an email a couple days earlier from a former member of our church who had moved to North Carolina, saying he was going to be in Ft. Wayne. And because he was "close by"—five hours—he wanted to come see us, as he had a word from God for us. Honestly, I remember thinking, "I don't want him to come. We are not in a position where we want to see

people right now. We don't want to hear what someone's word from God might be." But he was persistent, so I thought we should welcome him into our home.

He came on the Wednesday afternoon before the Monday of Kate's surgery. He opened his Bible and the word from God that he gave was Romans 5:17. This word set me free from fear that afternoon. This word gave us peace. This word enabled us to go to sleep at night, even the night before the surgery—not knowing what the results of the surgery would be, but knowing this: we have received abundance of grace, and we have received the free gift of righteousness. Therefore death no longer reigns over our lives. We are no longer tyrannized by the fear of death. Instead, we reign in life through our Lord Jesus Christ!

So we are more than conquerors through Him Who loved us (Romans 8:37). No matter what happens to us physically, no matter what the results of a surgery might be, even if we end up being put in the grave—that grave will not hold us, just as it could not hold Christ. We reign in life. Grace reigns over us. This truth set Kate and me free.

So the motivation between Adam and Jesus is radically different. The results are a great contrast. And the power—the power and the scope of Christ's work—is far greater than the power and the scope of Adam's work. Adam's work has a great scope and it has a great power. Adam's work dragged humanity down into death. But Christ will rise to life more powerfully than Adam dragged to death. Christ's work is greater than Adam's and we see Paul going to great lengths to emphasize that in verse 15.

Verse 17: "how much more." Consider the words he uses to modify grace throughout this passage—abundance of grace, abounding grace, super-abounding grace. Paul wants us to understand that justice will mete out exactly what you deserve, but grace gives us infinitely more than we could ever imagine. What we have in Jesus is so much greater than what we lost in Adam. Or as John Calvin put it, "Christ is much more powerful to save than Adam was to destroy."

When we read verses like this, it should cause us to press forward in hope, to advance the gospel in hope, to believe in hope for family members who do not yet know Christ, to pray for revival and awakening in a world thirsty for grace, to not get deceived by appearances and think maybe the Kingdom of Christ is failing, but to believe with all our hearts that whatever Adam ruined, Christ is gloriously restoring. He is going to prevail and be the Victor over Adam. He already has.

We see this in verse 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.*" Jesus as our Representative obeyed for us. Scholars differ some about whether Paul is referring in verse 19 to

Christ's total obedience in His life and death, or supremely to His obedience to the point of death, even death on the cross for us. I think in the context the latter option is better. I think Paul is referring specifically to that one act of righteousness, where Christ obediently went to the cross.

But think about it. If He had not been the pure, unblemished, holy, obedient Son of God, fulfilling all God's law throughout His lifetime—if He had not perfectly obeyed—how could He be the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world? So we praise Him not only for His obedience in death on the cross, but for His active obedience throughout His lifetime. And we behold Him now as our perfect, spotless righteousness. We praise Him that because He perfectly obeyed, He merited for us eternal life. There is no probation period for us. We don't have to wonder if maybe the righteousness we have in Christ could be revoked. No, because Christ perfectly obeyed, His obedience is credited to our account.

J. Gresham Machen was a theologian who well understood the righteousness of Christ and faith and grace, having written eloquently about them. While he was traveling after Christmas in Bismarck, North Dakota, many decades back, he suffered a heart attack and was dying. He wasn't going to be able to make it back to Pennsylvania where he worked at Westminster Seminary. He sent a telegram to John Murray, his fellow theologian there. These were some of his last words: "I'm so thankful for the active obedience of Christ. No hope without it."

We don't stand in our own record, on our own merit. We stand as sinners in Adam, subject to death and condemnation, but by faith in Christ we reign in life, we are justified and there is no condemnation. What a great contrast! These are the two ways, and there are only two. Paul anticipates in verse 20 that someone might say, "Paul, what about the law? We get it that we sinned in Adam and that death and condemnation are ours in Adam and that Jesus is our life. But is there possibly a way that we contribute something, that maybe through obedience to the law, maybe through a little Mosaic representation—following Moses' way—that we will be better prepared to stand before God?"

The Law Came in to Increase the Trespass (verse 19)

Paul says, "Perish that thought." Why did the law come? Verse 20, "*The law came in to increase the trespass,*" not to make you holy. God didn't give you His commandment so you could become such a good moral person and think, "I am somehow contributing to my righteousness or my justification." No, the law came in to reveal sin. The law comes like a light into the dark dungeon in which you were living. You suspected that there were some ugly critters

roaming around in there and that it was filthy place, but you never really could see how filthy or loathsome it was until the light appeared. That's the law of God. It shows us the filthiness of our hearts.

The law of God stirs up the mud at the bottom of the pool and shows you how dirty the water really is. The law of God is like a mirror showing you the blemishes on your face, but it doesn't give you the water to cleanse those blemishes. The law cannot make you holy. There's only one way to stand before God righteous, and that's to be united to Christ. Praise God that in Jesus, *"where sin increased, grace abounded all the more"* (verse 20). God's law was given so people could see all the more clearly the guilt and the vileness of sin. The law strips us of any excuse—any ability to say, "But we didn't know God's will." We've seen His will clearly in God's law, which increases our awareness of sin and makes us all the more guilty.

But Where Sin Increased, Grace Abounded All the More (verses 20-21)

"There's more mercy in Christ than sin in us," said Richard Sibbes, a Puritan theologian. Praise God that in Jesus we gained more than we lost in Adam. Praise God that Paul ends with these words in verse 21: *"So that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."* I love these words out of the novel *Godric* by Frederick Buechner: "What's lost is nothing to what's found, and all the death that ever was, set next to life, would scarcely fill a cup." Death reigned, but now grace also reigns for those who are joined to Christ. Grace reigns!

How do we apply this truth? In one sense we don't. You don't take a profound teaching like this and immediately apply it to your life. To do that is to short-circuit the whole depth and marvel of what's being said here. The first thing you do is to worship. Ray Ortlund tries to paraphrase this passage and I think he does a good job: "This life we live is not life. This life is a living death. This whole world is ruins, brilliantly disguised as elegance."

Remember this when you turn on the TV and see all those enticing ads. Remember this as you look at all those big houses and think, "What can I do to take another step up in this world?" Remember, "This world is ruins, brilliantly disguised as elegance." Remember this always. Christ alone is life.

Christ has come, bringing his life into the wreckage called us. He has opened up, even in these ruins, the frontier of a new world where grace reigns. [Jesus] is not on a mission to help improve our lives here. He is on a mission to create a new universe, where grace reigns in life... We don't 'apply this to our lives.' It's too big for that. But we worship Him. And we boast in the hope of living forever with Him in His new death-free world of grace.

(Ray Ortlund, Jr.)

When you get that, you first get down on your face. Or you stand up and sing with all your might praise to Jesus for abounding over the wreckage of your sin and doing for you infinitely more, “Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!” You say, “Thank You, Jesus.” You don’t immediately try to apply it. You worship.

But I’m still going to try to apply it. Christians, this world thirsts for grace. Can they find it here? Is our church an oasis in the desert, where people aren’t shunned or excluded because of their performance or their appearance, but they are loved and accepted without question because of one act of righteousness for sinners like us? Can people who are thirsty for grace find an oasis in the desert here at New Covenant Bible Church?

When they come to our classes, may they constantly find grace reminders. When we talk with one another in our Care Groups, may we be reminding one another of grace. When we sin and fail and fall short of each other’s expectations, may we not hold ourselves aloof from one another or look down on one another. May grace reign here. May this be the frontier of the new world where grace reigns.

Let us not give the impression that Christianity is a tight box that you’ve got to fit within, and do it just right, and have just the right answers in order to really belong. Let us show that we’ve been brought into a whole new world, a whole new frontier, where death no longer reigns, where sin no longer is the dominant note, but grace reigns. And in this world, you’ve got room to breathe, and you can be human again, and you can rejoice in hope, and you can fail—because you know those failures are not going to forfeit God’s unconditional acceptance in Jesus. Let this be a grace-reigning church.

What about marriage? Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to some newlyweds, saying, “The one word I have for you is: live together in the forgiveness of your sins.” We need that in marriage. Don’t view each other through the lens of faults and failures and disappointed expectations, constantly holding over one another a standard you cannot possibly achieve. Let grace intervene. Forgive. See your spouse under the shadow of the cross. It’s the only way a marriage can really survive—when you’re forgiving each other daily.

And parents, would your kids say of your home, “Grace reigns here”? Or are you tempted to take the holy, righteous commandments of God and use them in a way they were not intended to be used? Are you trying to make your kids moral by teaching them how much to obey, but not realizing they need salvation in Christ just as much as you do? Are your kids more aware of

correction or the hope of Christ? Is your home a welcome place for sinners to find rescue? Let grace reign in your lives, Christians.

Finally, to those who are outside Christ and are not yet in a relationship with Him, you might not be thirsty for grace right now. You might think, "I've got it all together. I don't need Jesus." But let this passage describe to you the wreckage—the landscape of ruin—that is your life and my life if we don't have a Savior. Let it drive you to a sense of need. Without Jesus, death reigns. Condemnation reigns. That's what we have to look forward to.

But if you came here today thirsty for grace, thirsty to know if there's a God in heaven Who would possibly love you and accept you and favor you in spite of all you've done, and in spite of how much you know you are weak and you'll never be able to be a very good Christian—if you want to know if there's grace for you, Jesus says, "Are you thirsty? Come to Me and drink. I'll give you living water" (John 4:10). Jesus is for you. He died for you. He lives for you. He welcomes every sinner who comes to Him. There's no hope apart from Him.

Do all religions lead to God? Mark Dever says yes, they do. "All religions lead to God...straight to His judgment seat. But only one gives you a Savior." Only one shows you a Savior where grace reigns. That's in Jesus. Will you in this moment His grace receive?

If you need this kind of Savior and believe He can forgive you bow with me and confess, "Lord, I am a sinner. I don't deserve Your goodness. I don't deserve Your love. I deserve death and condemnation. But be merciful to me, Lord. Thank You for Jesus' death on the cross. I believe it was for me He died. Thank You for His life of perfect obedience. I believe He did that for me. I want Jesus to be my Representative. I want to be united to Him. So, holy God, please connect me—a sinner in Adam—to the Savior, Your Son, Jesus Christ. I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen."

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