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DEATH IN ADAM OR LIFE IN CHRIST?

Romans 5:12-19

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Romans Lesson 29

Death in Adam or Life in Christ? Romans 5:12-19

When most commentators say, as Thomas Schreiner does (*Romans* [Baker], p. 267), that our text “is one of the most difficult and controversial passages to interpret in all of Pauline literature,” I know I’m in trouble when I have to preach on these verses! Another commentator (Alva McClain, *Romans* [BMH Books], p. 131) suggests that perhaps it was this passage that Peter had in mind when he said that some of Paul’s writings are hard to understand (2 Pet. 3:16). After reading hundreds of pages of commentaries and sermons on these verses, I began to wonder if I should look for another line of work!

The difficulty with the text is not with the main idea, which is fairly clear, but with the many details. Just about every word or phrase generates pages of discussion and debate among the scholars. But rather than wading into several weeks of messages on that level of detail, I decided to give a single broad overview of verses 12-19. I won’t be able to explain every detail, but hopefully you will get the big picture.

Part of the debate is whether these verses summarize what came before or point ahead to what follows. It seems that they serve as a transition to do both. “Therefore” (5:12) looks back, especially to 5:1-11, to show more benefits of being justified by faith in Christ. Paul shows that the only way to escape the effects of the fall of the human race into sin is through the free gift of God’s grace that offers justification to all who will receive it. Practically, this gives even greater assurance and hope to believers. If we are in Christ, we are saved not because of our good deeds, but because of what Christ did for us on the cross. So these verses reinforce and cement what came before.

But they also point to what follows. In chapter 6, Paul moves from salvation to sanctification. Crucial to living a life of holiness and freedom from sin is understanding our new identity in Jesus Christ. So when Paul contrasts our old identity in Adam with our new identity in Christ, he looks ahead by laying a foundation for

our sanctification. Also, the themes of grace, sin, and death as reigning powers will appear frequently in chapters 6-8 (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], pp. 315-316).

Identification, either with Adam or with Christ, is the key to understanding 5:12-21. Paul is saying that either you're under condemnation because you are in Adam or you're justified because you are in Jesus Christ. Also, he is showing that God's gracious gift of righteousness in Christ is far greater than the devastation of sin that resulted from Adam's disobedience. Twice (5:15, 17) he says, "much more." He wants to encourage believers in Christ with the certainty of their glorious future in Him. To sum up:

If you are in Adam, you are under the reign of death, but if you are in Christ, you will reign in life, because Christ's gift is greater than Adam's sin.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones (*Romans: Assurance* [Zondervan], p. 178) put it, "The whole story of the human race can be summed up in terms of what has happened because of Adam, and what has happened and will yet happen because of Jesus Christ." First, Paul explains what happened to the human race through Adam:

1. If you are in Adam, you are under the reign of death (5:12-14).

Romans 5:12-14: "Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. 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."

- A. Sin and death entered the world through Adam and "in Adam," we all sinned (5:12).

In passing, note that Paul believed in the historicity of Adam and the story of the fall in the first three chapters of Genesis. Adam was not a mythical figure invented by the author of Genesis to explain how sin entered the human race. Rather, God created Adam and Eve as the first humans, placed them in the Garden of Eden, and gave them a strict commandment not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They disobeyed God, resulting

in God banishing them from the garden and imposing the curse on the human race as a result of their sin.

Also, note in passing that although Eve was the first to sin, God held Adam accountable for plunging the human race into sin. Why? Because God appointed the man as the head of his wife in the garden before the fall. The main idea of headship is responsibility or accountability. Satan approached the woman to tempt and deceive her. Adam passively followed her lead into sin. But God charges Adam with introducing sin into the world, because as Eve's head, Adam was responsible. This responsibility and accountability for husbands to lead their families spiritually is still in place (Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 11:3). And men are responsible to provide godly leadership in the local church (1 Tim. 2:11-15; 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9).

Paul says (5:12a), "through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin." The one man is Adam (5:14). Paul is referring to the original sin when Adam disobeyed God's explicit command and ate the forbidden fruit. God had warned Adam that in the day he ate of that fruit, he would die (Gen. 2:17). This referred both to physical death and to spiritual death, or separation from God. At the moment Adam and Eve ate the fruit, the effects of physical aging and death were set into motion. While the patriarchs lived extraordinarily long lives, the repeated refrain of Genesis 5 is, "and he died, ... and he died." Not only did people begin to die physically after the original sin, but also the entire creation began to experience death (Rom. 8:20-22).

But Paul has in mind not only physical death, but also the spiritual death that came through Adam's fall. In Romans 5:21, Paul contrasts the death that came in through sin with eternal life. When Adam sinned, he experienced spiritual separation from God that, apart from the gift of eternal life, would have resulted in eternal separation from God, which the Bible describes as "the second death" (Rev. 20:6, 14). So both physical and spiritual death entered into this world through Adam's original sin.

But the crucial (and most controversial) phrase in Romans 5:12 is, what does Paul mean when he says, "and so death spread to all men, *because all sinned*"? There have been four main views (plus a fifth, more recent view of Thomas Schreiner). Without explaining those views, I think the best view in light of the context is that Paul

is saying, "When Adam sinned, we all sinned." In other words, God appointed Adam as the representative head of the human race. His sin involved the entire human race in sin. His sin was imputed or charged to everyone born after him. Because of Adam's sin, each of us was born guilty of sin before we ever committed our first willful sin. We are not sinners because we sin; we sin because we are sinners by virtue of our union with Adam.

The common reaction to this is, "That's not fair!" But it's always very dangerous to accuse the Almighty Sovereign of the universe of unfairness (Rom. 9:20-21)! If God determined to treat Adam as the representative head of the human race, it is certainly God's prerogative to do so. Also, we live with this sort of representation every day. If our political leaders declare war against another country, *we* go to war and some of our soldiers will die because of the action of our leaders. Their decision was our decision because they represent us. A further response to the unfairness charge is, do you think that you would have done better than Adam? Do you think that you would have resisted temptation and lived a sinless life if you had been born without the effects and guilt of Adam's sin? That's not likely! And, finally, if it's not fair that Adam represented you when he sinned, neither is it fair that Christ represented you when He died on the cross.

But since there are other views, how do we know that Paul is really saying, "When Adam sinned, we all sinned"?

- B. The proof that Adam's sin affected the entire human race is that death is universal (5:13-14).

Paul begins verse 12 with a comparison ("just as"), but then breaks off in mid-sentence to explain or prove ("for") his comment, "because all sinned." While the flow of thought is not easy to follow, Paul seems to be arguing that the fact of universal death from the time of Adam until Moses was not due to their individual sins, which were not imputed to them because they were not breaking the specific commands of the law, but rather due to their identification with Adam in his original sin.

But, what does Paul mean when he adds (5:14), "even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam"? Again, there is much debate, but it seems that Paul means that after

the Law was given, sinners violated the specific commands of God, even as Adam did. But those who lived between Adam and Moses still sinned, even though their guilt was not imputed because they didn't violate specific commands. So, if their guilt wasn't imputed, why did they all die? Answer: they died because Adam's sin was imputed to them. They sinned when he sinned. The proof of their sinning in Adam is that they all died.

But, why does Paul add at this point that Adam is "a type of Him who was to come," namely, of Christ? Answer: Paul wants us to see the parallel. Adam's descendants were all implicated in his sin and died, even though they didn't violate specific commands as he did, because they are "in Adam." When he sinned, they sinned. In like manner, all of Christ's descendants, born spiritually through the new birth, are identified with Him and are counted as righteous not because of their individual deeds of righteousness, but because of Christ's righteousness.

John Piper ("Adam, Christ, and Justification," Part 2, on desiringgod.org.) explains and applies this:

That is the all-important parallel. The deepest reason why death reigns over all is not because of our individual sins, but because of Adam's sin imputed to us. So the deepest reason eternal life reigns is not because of our individual deeds of righteousness, but because of Christ's righteousness imputed to us by grace through faith.

O how much light this sheds on why Paul embarked on this paragraph at all! He did it for the sake of our faith and our assurance and our joy. He did it to underline the fact that our right standing with God and our freedom from condemnation is *not* based on our righteous acts but on Christ's righteous acts.

One other thought before we look at the rest of our text: Outside of Christ, the human race is still under the reign of death. As George Bernard Shaw wryly observed, "The statistics on death are quite impressive: one out of one people die!" We try to put it out of our minds, but then it hits someone close to us and we realize, "I'm going to die someday, too." We try to preserve our bodies through exercise and health food, and AARP magazine perpetuates

the myth by showing us old geezers who compete in triathlons, as if they will live forever. But the fact is, those old geezers are going to die. Plastic surgery may allow us to leave a young looking corpse, but it's still a corpse! And, contrary to popular mythology, death is not a natural part of the life cycle. Death is God's penalty for Adam's sin, imposed on all his posterity. Death reigns if you are still in Adam. How do we escape the curse?

2. If you are in Christ, you will reign in life because Christ's gift is greater than Adam's sin (5:15-17).

These are also very difficult verses, and I can only skim them. Paul is making a comparison between Adam and Christ, but even more, a contrast. He's showing why Christ is far superior to Adam, as seen by his twice-repeated phrase, "much more" (5:15, 17). Adam's sin resulted in condemnation and death to the human race, but Christ's obedience unto death resulted in justification and life to those who receive it. Let's look briefly at each verse:

- A. The work of Christ is greater than Adam's sin because it displays and dispenses the abundance of God's grace (5:15).

Romans 5:15: "But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many."

Paul contrasts the devastating effects of Adam's transgression—the many died—with the glorious effects of God's free gift and grace, which abounds to the many. "Many" is not viewing the affected groups numerically, but qualitatively. It has two different ranges here. In the first instance, it refers to the devastating effects of one man's sin on many, which means, the entire human race. It's like one little campfire left untended which starts a forest fire that destroys the entire forest. One man sinned, but many died. In the second instance, it cannot refer to the whole human race, but only to those who "receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness" (5:17). It would be wrong to interpret the second "many" to mean that salvation is offered to all, because in 5:16, the second group is actually justified. Rather, it refers to the many who actually receive the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

The “much more” refers to the superlative nature of salvation over judgment. Paul piles up words like “grace,” “gift,” and “abound” to emphasize how wonderful God’s gift of salvation is, provided freely to us at Christ’s expense. It is an undeserved gift and it abounds to us through the grace of God and through the grace of Christ, who are linked in this verse. How much sin have you piled up? God’s grace in Christ is more abundant! How great is your guilt and debt? God’s free gift and abounding grace is greater!

- B. The work of Christ is greater than Adam’s sin because it overcame many sins to freely bestow justification (5:16).

Romans 5:16: “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, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.”

The main contrast here is that one sin resulted in condemnation of the entire human race, but the many sins of that fallen race resulted in justification for all who believe. The word *believe* is not here, but it’s implicit because from 3:24-5:1 Paul hammered home that justification is received by faith alone. Condemnation and justification are judicial terms. Christ’s work is greater than Adam’s sin because it overcame the great devastation that resulted from Adam’s sin. Adam lit the forest fire that devastated the human race, but Christ not only put it out, but planted a new forest, an eternal one, for all who will receive His gracious gift.

- C. The work of Christ is greater than Adam’s sin because rather than bringing the reign of death, it causes those who receive it to reign in life (5:17).

Romans 5:17: “For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.”

How do we escape the awful reign of death? By receiving “the abundance of grace” and “the gift of righteousness” through Jesus Christ! Again Paul refers to the abundance of grace to let us know that there isn’t any chance that God’s supply will run dry on the sinner who is in line before you. The gift is righteousness, Christ’s

righteousness credited to your account, which is the meaning of justification. God does not just forgive your sins; He also bestows the positive righteousness of Christ to you, so that you stand before God not in your own righteous deeds, but in the righteousness of your representative, Jesus Christ.

And, not only do you escape the reign of death. Also, you will reign in life through Jesus Christ. This begins now as you live in victory over sin (Romans 6). It also means that the sting and fear of death are removed, so that we are more than conquerors in Christ (Rom. 8:36-37; 1 Cor. 15:56-57; Heb. 2:14-15). But it also means that throughout eternity we will reign with Christ (Rev. 1:6; 3:21; 1 Cor. 6:2, 3). He is the King of kings. Who are the kings that He is King over? We are (Lloyd-Jones, p. 265)!

Then Paul sums up verses 12-17:

3. To sum up: Through Adam's sin all were condemned as sinners, but through Christ's righteousness all in Him are justified (5:18-19).

Romans 5:18-19: "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. 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."

Verse 18 completes the idea that Paul began, but broke off, in verse 12: One man's sin brought death and condemnation to all, but One Man's righteousness brought justification of life to all. Paul is not teaching universalism, that all people will be saved. That would contradict what he teaches elsewhere, that sinners will face judgment and eternal condemnation (2:5, 8, 9). Also, in 5:17 he has just stated that it is those who receive the gift of righteousness who will reign with Christ. Rather, the two "alls" relate to their representative heads. All who are in Adam are condemned. All who are in Christ are justified. The same limits apply to the "many" in verse 19: Through one man's disobedience, the many (the entire race) were made sinners. Through One Man's obedience at the cross, the many (believers) will be made righteous.

The word *made* means *to appoint*, but it must be interpreted here in light of the forensic context. Douglas Moo (p. 345) explains, "To be 'righteous' does not mean to be morally upright, but to be judged acquitted, cleared of all charges, in the heavenly judgment."

So Paul is summing up 5:12-17 in verse 18 and repeating it in slightly different language in verse 19. The main point is: If you are in Adam, you're under the reign of sin and death, headed for eternal condemnation. But if you are in Christ by faith in His sacrifice on the cross, you are free from sin and death and will reign in life through Him, because Christ's gift is greater than Adam's sin.

Conclusion

These difficult verses have required a lot of explanation, but let me wrap it up by restating some of the practical applications:

(1) *Fathers, your behavior and choices greatly affect your children, so live prayerfully and carefully.* Thankfully, our sins won't affect the entire human race, as Adam's sin did. But we never sin in isolation. Think about how your conduct will affect your children.

(2) *Since the universal problem of the human race is sin, the universal solution is the gospel.* From primitive tribes to educated professors, the need and the solution are the same. Don't be intimidated by someone with a Ph.D. He is a sinner and he needs the Savior. You can point him to Christ.

(3) *If the universal problem is guilt by identification with Adam's sin, then salvation cannot be through adding our good works.* This text is all about how sinners can be put right with God. We must be identified with Christ's righteousness by faith. We must receive God's gift through Christ.

(4) *If we are in Christ, our salvation is secure not because of anything in us, but because we're in Him.* You won't be saved by your performance, but rather by Christ's obedience on the cross and the fact that you're trusting in Him alone. Are you in Adam, under the reign of death? Or, by faith are you in Christ, reigning in life?

Application Questions

1. Is the doctrine of our identification with Adam in his original sin unfair? Why/why not? Why is this doctrine important?
2. Discuss the implications of the twice-repeated “death reigned” (5:14, 17). What does it mean with regard to unbelievers (Eph. 2:1-3)?
3. Discuss what it means for believers to “reign in life” through Jesus Christ. How does this apply to daily life now?
4. Discuss the four practical applications given in the conclusion. What other applications can you think of in this text?

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