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SUPER-ABUNDANT GRACE THAT REIGNS

Romans 5:20-21

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Romans, Lesson 30

Super-Abundant Grace that Reigns
Romans 5:20-21

In 2005, Christian Smith and Melinda Denton wrote *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* [Oxford University Press]. Based on interviews with about 3,000 teens, they described what they considered to be the common religious beliefs among American teenagers as “moralistic therapeutic deism.”

The authors summed up these beliefs as having five elements: (1) A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth. (2) God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. (3) The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. (4) God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem. (5) Good people go to heaven when they die.

The authors believe that “a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition, but has rather substantially morphed into Christianity’s misbegotten stepcousin, Christian Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” (Source: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moralistic_therapeutic_deism)

Sadly, I think the authors are largely on target: much of what goes under the banner of Christianity is *moralistic* in that it believes that good people will go to heaven (although often the standards for “good” are not in line with the Bible). It is *therapeutic* in that feeling good about yourself is the main reason to go to church and believe in Jesus. He can help you succeed in your goals. And it is *deism* in that you don’t really need a Savior from sin because you’re a good person. God is there when you need Him, but the rest of the time, just believe in yourself and pursue your dreams. God, His glory, and the cross are not at the center of this belief system.

I hope that you can see how far moralistic therapeutic deism is from the gospel that Paul sets forth in Romans. After stating the

theme of Romans, that he is not ashamed of the gospel, which reveals the righteousness of God (1:16-17), Paul shows that every person has sinned and is under God's condemnation (1:18-3:20). He then shows that by His death on the cross, Jesus Christ satisfied God's righteous demand so that He can be both just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (3:21-4:25). Then Paul sets forth some of the blessings of being justified by faith in Christ (5:1-11). His main aim is to assure us that our right standing with God is secure because it is not based on anything meritorious in us, but rather on what God did for us while we were yet sinners.

Then (5:12-19) Paul re-emphasizes why we must be justified by faith: When Adam sinned, we all sinned in him. His sin was our sin; the fact of universal death proves it. But the last Adam, Jesus Christ, more than overcame the devastating effects of Adam's sin. Adam's sin resulted in death for all who are in him, but Jesus Christ's obedience in going to the cross resulted in justification of life for all who are in Him. Adam's sin was credited to all his descendants, but Christ's righteousness is credited to all who are His descendants through faith in Him.

But, Paul anticipates a question that anyone familiar with the Old Testament would have: Why, then, was the Law given? What was its purpose? Didn't God give the Law through Moses so that people could keep it and live? So in 5:20-21 Paul contrasts the Law and its result with God's grace in Christ and its result. He is saying,

Through the Law, sin reigned in death, but through Christ super-abundant grace reigns in righteousness to eternal life.

Paul's words in 5:20 would have been utterly shocking to his Jewish readers: "The Law came in so that the transgression would increase" The average Jew would have thought that the Law came in to restrain sin, not to cause its increase (Thomas Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment* [Baker], p. 73). We'll consider in a moment what Paul meant by this statement, but for now just note that most Jews would do a double-take and say, "Did I read that correctly?" Paul's assertion definitely would have gotten their attention! He is saying:

1. Outside of Christ, the Law causes sin to increase and to reign in death.

There are several things to consider here:

A. The Law does not restrain sin at the heart level.

There is a sense in which both civil law and God's Law restrain sin externally. The speed laws cause us to slow down, especially when we see a police car. Laws against theft, murder and other things may restrain people who would otherwise do those things. But the law cannot restrain the evil desires of the fallen human heart. I still *want* to speed. Greed makes me *want* to steal. The law cannot bring my sinful heart into willing submission.

Jesus hit the Pharisees with their hypocrisy in these things. Outwardly, they practiced obedience to the Law so that others would think that they were righteous. But in their hearts, Jesus said that they were full of self-indulgence, uncleanness, and lawlessness (Matt. 23:25-28).

B. The Law actually increases sin.

"The Law came in so that the transgression would increase" Paul isn't just describing what actually happened, but rather God's intent or purpose for giving the Law. This was not God's only purpose or ultimate purpose, in that the increase of sin under the Law magnified the splendor and power of God's grace (Thomas Schreiner, *Romans* [Baker], p. 295). But, in the sense that I am going to explain, the Law actually increases sin. It didn't make the human race as fallen in Adam better; it made it worse.

The verb translated *came in* (5:20) points to the Law's subordinate role in God's economy (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Eerdmans], p. 347). The idea is that the Law came alongside the existence of human sin, not to provide salvation, but to increase sin in several ways:

- (1) The Law increases sin by turning our imputed sin in Adam into actual sins of deliberate disobedience.

This is Paul's main point, as seen by the words, *the transgression*. He has just used this word to describe Adam's disobedience (5:15, 17, 18). Adam disobeyed an explicit commandment of God. By way of contrast, those living from Adam until Moses sinned, but not in the same way that Adam sinned, in that they did not have God's explicit commandments (5:14). They violated their con-

sciences (2:12, 15). But when God gave the Law, the transgression of Adam increased, in that now sinners violated God's explicit commandments. And so the Law of Moses turned those it addresses into "their own Adam" (Moo, p. 348). Each sinner, like Adam, now broke an explicit law. As Paul says (3:20), "for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (also, 7:7).

Maybe you've had the experience of doing something that didn't quite seem right, but you were not aware of any law against it. But then you learned that the law specifically forbids doing what you were doing. If you do it again, the law has caused your sin to increase, because you are now deliberately disobeying.

- (2) The Law increases sin by imputing our guilt to our account.

In Romans 4:15, Paul said, "Where there is no law, there is no violation." In 5:13 he added, "For until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law." Sin existed before the Law, in that sinners instinctively knew that what they were doing was wrong. But that sin was not specifically charged to them unless God had expressly forbidden it. So when the Law came, the transgression increased by imputing guilt to every sinner.

- (3) The Law increases sin by exposing the utter sinfulness of sin and removing all excuses for disobedience.

Paul says (7:13) "that through the commandment sin would become utterly sinful." It's one thing to do something wrong when you are not aware of any law against it. But when the law is posted on the wall or it is verbally explained to you, and then you go out and break that law, you have no excuse. Your deliberate disobedience reveals your sin to be utterly sinful.

- (4) The Law increases sin by stimulating our sinful flesh to disobey it.

This is not Paul's primary meaning in 5:20, but in light of what he goes on to say (7:7-11), it cannot be completely absent from his thought. The Law, which is holy, combines with our rebellious flesh to entice us to sin. Paul says that when the Law said, "You shall not covet," it produced in him coveting of every kind (7:7-8). It's like the little old lady who told the preacher that she wished he

would stop quoting the Ten Commandments every week, because he was putting wrong ideas into people's heads! We've all had the same experience. I wouldn't have thought about walking on the grass if that sign had not said, "Do not walk on the grass"!

So the Law does not restrain sin at the heart level. Rather, the Law actually increases sin. But this raises the question: By giving the Law, was God causing us to sin? I hope that the very question causes you to say, "God forbid!" God cannot tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13). Rather, sin comes from our own lusts (7:5, 11-14). But that leads to a third observation about how the Law operates:

- C. The Law is necessary to expose our self-righteousness and to convict us of our sin.

Outside of Christ, the tendency of the proud human heart is to trust in our own goodness and good works. We think that by our own efforts, we can commend ourselves to God. But the problem is, like the Pharisees, we focus on the outside of the cup, but conveniently ignore that the inside of the cup is filthy. And so God graciously sends the Law to tear down our self-righteousness and convict us of our sin so that we will be driven to the Savior.

Jesus did this with the Pharisees in the Sermon on the Mount. They took pride in never having murdered anyone, but Jesus said that if they had ever been angry, they were guilty of murder. They prided themselves on their morality, but Jesus said that if they had lusted after a woman, they were guilty of adultery in God's sight. Jesus did the same thing with the rich young ruler. He took pride in having kept all the commandments, or so he thought. But by telling him to sell his possessions and give the money to the poor, Jesus showed him that he had not kept the first commandment, to have no other gods before the living God. His money was his god.

Thus the Law comes in, not just to increase the transgression, but also to reveal to us how guilty we are of violating God's holy standards. This is actually gracious on God's part, because in our self-righteousness, we don't see our need for a Savior. But when the Law exposes our self-righteousness and convicts us of our sin, it drives us to the cross where we find grace. But not only does the Law cause sin to increase; also ...

- D. The increased sin reigns in death.

We saw this last week: sin led to death and “death reigned from Adam to Moses” (5:14); “death reigned through the one” (5:17); but, he repeats it again (5:21): “as sin reigned in death.” Two brief thoughts:

- (1) Sin reigns as an evil tyrant in those who are not under Christ’s lordship.

In other words, sin doesn’t just move in as a polite houseguest; it takes over. It’s like bringing home a pet tiger kitten. It’s so cute and playful at first. But pretty soon, it grows into a vicious predator that kills you. Sin does not come in to work with you to accomplish your cherished objectives. It does not cooperate with you to help you be happy. It comes in pleasantly enough at first. It seems like a nice little pet. But invariably, it grows into an evil tyrant that reigns in death. If you do not conquer it, it will conquer and kill you (Gen. 4:7).

- (2) Sin does not lead to a better, happier life, but to temporal and ultimately eternal death.

Sin reigns in the sphere of death, which refers both to physical and finally to spiritual death, which is eternal separation from God in the lake of fire (Rev. 20:14-15). At first, sin always puts on a positive look: “You will be like God.” The fruit is good for food and a delight to the eyes (Gen. 3:5-6). Why not give it a try? It will bring you what you’ve always wanted! But that’s how sin deceives us. It did not bring Eve what Satan promised. It led her and the entire human race into death. Her oldest son murdered his brother out of jealousy. Sin is always ugly and leads to death. Remember that the next time you are tempted!

It’s a bleak picture, isn’t it! Outside of Christ, God’s holy Law causes sin to increase, so that it reigns in death. But thankfully there is some very good news:

2. Through Jesus Christ our Lord super-abundant grace reigns through righteousness to eternal life.

Romans 5:21 stands in contrast to 5:12. In 5:12, there are Adam, sin and death; in 5:21, we see the new Adam, Jesus Christ our Lord, righteousness, and eternal life. The new factor that makes the difference is super-abounding grace (Alva McClain, *Romans, the Gospel of God’s Grace* [BMH Books], p. 139).

The backdrop of sin displays the glory of God's grace all the more (Schreiner, *The Law*, 242). F. Godet (*Commentary on Romans* [Kregel], p. 228) points out that Golgotha, "where human sin displayed itself as nowhere else, was at the same time the place of the most extraordinary manifestation of divine grace." I once read about a master gem salesman who watched a rookie salesman fail to make a sale. With the next customer, the master showed the rookie how to display the gem on a background of black velvet to bring out the beauty and luster of the diamond. Even so, the glory of God's manifold grace shines even brighter against the blackness of human sin. Note three things here:

A. God's response to increased sin is super-abundant grace.

The Greek verb translated "increase" and "increased" has the idea of numerical increase. But the root of the word translated "abounded" means "to overflow," or "to have more than enough." But then Paul adds the Greek word, *hyper*, so that it means, "abounded all the more." So we can translate, "where sin added up, grace super-abounded." Donald Grey Barnhouse paraphrased it, "Where sin reached a high-water mark, grace completely flooded the world" (cited by James Boice, *Romans* [Baker], 2:618).

James Boice develops two points regarding God's super-abundant grace. First: *Grace is not withheld because of sin*. Second: *God's grace is never reduced because of sin* (pp. 619, 621). He points out that we do not usually operate this way. If someone wrongs or offends us, we withdraw from that person and do not treat him graciously. But God is not like this. Sinners crucified His Son who came to save them. After the resurrection, Jesus easily could have instructed the disciples, "Get out of this evil city of Jerusalem. It does not deserve to hear the gospel." But instead, He told them (Luke 24:47) "that repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations," and then He added, "beginning from Jerusalem."

John Bunyan, who titled his autobiography, *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, also wrote a little book called, *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved* (both in *The Whole Works of John Bunyan* [Baker], vol. 1). His point was that Jesus Christ would have mercy offered, in the first place, to the biggest sinners.

B. God's grace reigns through righteousness to eternal life.

Paul does not just say that in contrast to sin reigning in death, now grace reigns in life. He adds that "grace would reign *through righteousness to eternal life.*" *Righteousness* here refers to "the gift of righteousness" (5:17), which is the justification that all sinners receive when God imputes the righteousness of Christ to them by faith. As sinners who have been declared righteous, we are not made perfectly righteous in actual conduct until we see Jesus and become like Him (1 John 1:8; 3:2-3). We grow in godly behavior, but when we do sin, we have "an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). So our sins do not cut us off from God because His super-abundant grace reigns through the righteous standing that we have before Him through Christ.

This grace reigns "to *eternal life.*" In 5:17, Paul says that grace causes us to reign in life, but here he says that God's super-abundant grace reigns to *eternal life.* This means that God's grace takes us beyond where Adam was before the fall. He did not possess *eternal life* before the fall. We do. He did not have permanent, perfect righteousness credited to his account. We do. This should give us solid assurance of salvation. What God began in us when He graciously credited Christ's righteousness to us as ungodly sinners (4:5), He will complete unto eternal life.

John Piper ("The Triumph of Grace Through Righteousness," on desiringgod.org) points out that Romans 5 begins and ends with two infinite realities: eternal life at the end, and the hope of the glory of God at the beginning (5:2). He explains that our future existence needs to be eternal so that we can experience more and more of the infinite glory of God (Eph. 1:6, 18; 2:7; Rom. 9:23). This also insures us that heaven will not be boring, because God's glory is infinitely beautiful and enjoyable. He puts it this way:

Any amount of time short of eternity would be inadequate for a finite creature to experience the glory of God. It will take forever for us to see all there is to see and admire all there is to admire and enjoy all there is to enjoy of the glory of God. Therefore God ordains that there be eternal life for us.

There is one last thought that I can only mention in passing:

C. God's grace is mediated to us through our Lord Jesus Christ.

All blessings come to us as believers through Jesus Christ our Lord, who graciously came to this earth and bore the penalty that we deserved on the cross. He mediates God's blessings to us. Since we deserve nothing from God except judgment, this is pure grace. Throughout this chapter, Paul has repeated this so we won't miss it: "We have peace with God *through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (5:1). "We shall be saved from the wrath of God *through Him [Christ]*" (5:9). "While we were enemies we were reconciled to God *through the death of His Son*" (5:10). "We also exult in God *through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom* we have now received the reconciliation" (5:11). "Much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life *through the One, Jesus Christ*" (5:17). And here (5:21), grace reigns "through righteousness to eternal life *through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

All spiritual blessings are to be found in Christ (Eph. 1:3). Do you have Him? If so, His super-abundant undeserved favor will keep flowing and flowing to you unto eternal life!

Conclusion

In the center of Bath, England, stands a stone marker in honor of the city's medicinal waters that have blessed so many people. It reads: "These healing waters have flowed on from time immemorial. Their virtue is unimpaired, their heat undiminished, their volume unabated. They explain the origin, account for the progress, and demand the gratitude of the City of Bath." (From "Our Daily Bread," Aug., 1982.)

That's like God's super-abundant grace for sinners who have trusted in Jesus Christ! The gospel of God's grace is decidedly *not* moralistic therapeutic deism! Rather, through the gospel God's enemies are reconciled to Him through "the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness" (5:17). His super-abundant grace reigns in us through Christ's righteousness unto eternal life! A godly pastor who was about to die said, "I'm gathering together all my prayers, all my sermons, all my good deeds, all my evil deeds; and I'm going to throw them all overboard and drift to glory on the plank of Free Grace" (*ibid.*). Amen!

Application Questions

1. Is it necessary to experience deep conviction of sin before coming to saving faith? If so, how should this affect our presentation of the gospel?
2. Someone may reason, "If the Law causes sin to increase, why not just throw out God's commandments?" Your response?
3. Discuss: Self-righteousness is one of the biggest hindrances to a person's reception of the gospel.
4. Someone objects: "You say that sin reigns in death, but I've been much happier since I started yielding to my lusts." How would you respond?

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