

A Sermon by
Pastor Andrew B. Pigott

Chinese Christian Church
of New Jersey

Sunday, June 27, 2004

Sin and Grace: A Study in Contrast

ROMANS 5:12-21

This particular section of scripture that we will consider today has produced vast libraries of comment. Different denominations have come up with their own interpretations. And, since our church is made up of people from various denominational backgrounds, it will be difficult for some of us to consider the words recorded in today's scripture reading without having either our religious background or our theological bias influencing the way we look at the words.

But, there are also some people in this auditorium today who have never taken the time to seriously consider the issues concerning sin and grace that are raised in our scripture reading. It is mainly with you in mind that I have prepared this message. I desire that you will be able see these verses of scripture in their context and understand how the thoughts connect to each other.

The first thought concerns itself with the general principle of sin. And, more specifically, it deals with how sin entered into human experience. That's the starting point. The human mind has trouble going beyond that point. The Apostle Paul did not write Romans so he could deal with the question of who tempted Satan to sin. He wanted to deal with the very practical issue of sin as it relates to all humanity, and his starting point was not the fall of Satan. It was some time after the fall of Satan, but long before the Law was given to Moses. It was Adam. In his brief summary of the gospel, recorded in ROMANS 3:21-31, Paul stated clearly that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (ROMANS 3:23). Now, in ROMANS 5:12-14, he is using more words and more detail to say the same thing.

All have sinned, and sin first entered the universe with the first man, Adam. From that point on, sin has been a part of human experience. This is the first thought. The words recorded in ROMANS 5:12 are not hard to understand. Truth was revealed to Adam. "The Lord commanded the man (Adam), 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'" Adam violated the truth that was revealed to him and he experienced the promised consequence; namely, death. And, the consequence was passed on to all men. The Bible makes a clear connection between sin and death, and death is always the consequence of sin. So, the fact that all people (including babies) die is evidence enough that all people have a sin problem and need a Savior.

Some people try to argue that there are exceptions to the statement that all people have sinned. A woman once argued with me by telling me that her little daughter had never sinned. She said, "how can I say that all have sinned when I know that my daughter had never committed a sin?" I tried to explain to her that her daughter's sin problem resulted from her being related to Adam. Regardless of whether or not a certain person has ever

© 2004 Chinese Christian Church of
New Jersey & Andrew B. Pigott.
All Rights Reserved.

232 South Beverwyck Road
Parsippany, NJ 07652
(973) 335-0183

Volume 4 Number 040627

committed a sin, that person has “sinned in Adam.” The moment a person becomes a person he inherits sin and the consequence of sin, which is death.

What we have come to know as original sin is a reality, and death is its consequence. Death first comes to a person in the form of spiritual separation from God and eventually claims the physical life of the person as well. People will always make attempts to rationalize away sin, but it is impossible for them to rationalize away death. No person has ever been able to escape sin’s consequence. No person has ever been able to hold death at bay.

So, when it comes to understanding sin, our reference point must begin with Adam. Adam sinned, and all people (with the exception of the Son of God) have sinned in Adam. The fact that Paul needed to continue explaining himself in ROMANS 5:13-14 is simply because a certain portion of his readers had another reference point. In their minds, it was impossible to have sin without the Mosaic Law. When it came to understanding sin, the Mosaic Law, and not Adam, was their starting point. Paul understood his audience, and we must also attempt to understand the Jewish mind-set when Romans was first written.

Paul responded to the Jewish mind-set by stating that sin was the problem of man long before Moses and the Law. History faithfully records God’s universal judgment on men because of moral reasons. For example, GENESIS 6:5 tells us that the wickedness of man was the reason God sent the great flood. And, that flood happened long before the Mosaic Law. The Law of Moses neither invented sin nor did it provide a solution for sin. That seems to be the clear meaning of the first half of ROMANS 5:13.

But, what about the second half of ROMANS 5:13? “But sin is not taken into account when there is no law.” How does that statement fit into the logic of what the Apostle is trying to say? It seems so strange and out of place. Didn’t he just say that sin was in the world before the law? And, isn’t he now saying that sin cannot be counted as sin without the law? Either this is a direct contradiction or there must be two kinds of law being talked about in Romans: one, the Mosaic Law and the other a “law of conscience” that operated before the Mosaic Law (and still operates today in the lives of people who have never been exposed to the Bible).

People suppressed truth long before the Mosaic Law was given. Truth cannot be suppressed where there is no truth or where there is no ability on the part of people to understand truth. If there is no truth and if men have not been created with a conscience, then it is impossible for sin to be taken into account. But, the very fact that sin has always been taken into account—even before the Law of Moses it has been taken into account—this fact is proof that truth and the “law of conscience” has always existed.

ROMANS 5:14 emphasizes that death, which is the consequence of sin, has always been around. This is clear proof that truth and man’s ability to comprehend truth has always existed. Sin has always been taken into account.

Paul used his letter to the Romans to present a case against all men on the grounds of truth suppression. We are all truth suppressors because we have all inherited the tendency to suppress truth from our ancestor, Adam. We are all sons and daughters of Adam.

This “principle of sin” is extremely important for people to grasp. It is virtually impossible to comprehend grace without first comprehending this fundamental principle of sin. Only when we appreciate who we are in Adam can we appreciate who we can become in Christ. There is only one contrast that can convince people to seek salvation. It is a contrast between Adam and Christ, which is also a contrast between sin and grace.

If I could give any advise to those of you going to other cultures on short-term mission projects, it would be this: People must first see you on the same level as themselves before they will want your Christ. Your culture and your religion will never convince them. The fact that you have the Bible and can quote the Bible will not convince them. The fact that you are spending a lot of money to spread religion and do good works will

impress many of the locals. In places like Taiwan and China you will actually receive a lot of complements. But, you will never convince them of their need for Christ unless they can understand that they, just like you, are sons and daughters of Adam.

Since the time of Adam, many issues have divided the human race. Throughout the ages language and culture and religion have separated people. And, if we continue use these things as standards to measure who we are, there will always be divisions. But, our scripture reading takes us back to a point in history where there were no differences, and it tries to convince us to use that moment in history as our point of reference in determining who we are. We are all related to Adam, and the fact that we are all truth suppressors who are going to die is proof that we are all related to Adam.

With the thought of sin clearly established, it is now possible for us introduce the concept of grace and appreciate the contrast between sin and grace. The key to understanding ROMANS 5:15-19 is to first identify the major themes that are set in contrast to each other. There are a lot of minor things that will tempt our minds to get off track, but there are three major things. They come in pairs. First of all, there are two men—Adam and Christ. Then there are two actions—a trespass and the giving of a gift. And finally, there are two outcomes—a tragic consequence and a blessed result. Two men, two actions, and two outcomes—these are the major factors that are set in contrast to each other. Most of our discussion will focus on the outcomes.

Let's now look at the actual words. In all these verses we can see the contrasts of two men and their actions. However, the main issue discussed in Romans 5:15 deals with the scope of the outcomes, and the emphasis is on the word *many*. Many died because of one man's transgression. In this case the word *many* means all. It does not imply that some did not die. The outcome of Adam's sin is death to all. In contrast, the outcome of Adam's action is God's grace offered to all people. Again, the word "many" is used. And again, the word does not imply that the gift of grace flowing out from Calvary is limited. It is available to all. The main point of this contrast should not be that hard to understand. The scope of the tragedy is overcome by the overflow of the gift.

In ROMANS 5:16, reference is also made to two men and their actions, but the emphasis of the contrast is still on outcome. However, with this verse, instead of looking at the scope of the outcomes, we are looking at the depth of the outcomes. The words *judgment* and *condemnation* are set in contrast to the word *justification*. Sin brings on judgment and condemnation. Grace cancels the judgment and condemnation, making it possible for a person to stand just before God. The depth of the tragedy is overcome by the blessing of justification.

In ROMANS 5:17 the emphasis remains on outcome. The words death and life are set in contrast to each other. Both are seen as dynamic forces reigning in the lives of people. Death reigns in the life of everyone unless grace is given a chance to intervene. And, when grace does intervene—when a certain person receives the gift made available to all—then the dynamic of life takes over. The power of death is overcome by the power of life. Spiritual death is overcome by spiritual life. The tendency to violate truth is replaced by the tendency to obey truth. And, physical death is also eventually overcome when the body that is now subject to decay is replaced by a body that is free from physical corruption.

The grand conclusion is that the outcome of grace is far superior to the outcome of sin. Verses 18-19 of Romans 5 summarize of the whole matter. In these two verses the three things being contrasted are clearly seen: two men, two actions, and two outcomes. One man, Adam, disobeys resulting in condemnation to all. And one man, Christ, obeys resulting in justification for all who exercise faith. I know the word *faith* is not found in this summary, but we must never forget that faith is essential to salvation (ROMANS 1:16; 3:22).

The whole reason for all this detailed discussion about sin and grace found in today's scripture lesson is to give support to the main thing Paul is trying to say in Romans. All men need Jesus, because all men are affected by Adam's sin. Jesus Christ and what He did and the blessed outcome of what He did is available to all men. All that is required

on the part of man is faith. It is impossible to experience salvation without faith.

Some people like to debate the question of how much truth a certain person needs to comprehend before that person is capable of exercising saving faith. Some people say that it is impossible for babies to comprehend truth and exercise faith. While others say that no one is better able to understand God and have faith in God than a newborn baby. And, as the baby grows older in the context of a sinful environment, it becomes more difficult for him to comprehend God and exercise faith. And then, there is the question of predestination. The idea is that, even though God predestined His grace to be available to all people, He also predestined that only certain people would exercise faith and receive salvation. People debate these issues, and I don't think it is wrong for them to do so.

However, when Paul wrote this letter to Rome, I don't believe he was trying to debate the question of who is able to exercise faith and who is unable to exercise faith. He was dealing with the obvious facts. People all around him were in need of the gospel, because death and wrath were so evident in the lives of people. Only when it becomes painfully obvious that the tendency of the people around us to suppress truth is greater than their tendency to obey truth, will the issues being discussed today seem relevant. If you don't realize the mark of death either on your own life and on the lives of people around you, then today's scripture lesson will seem very boring and very irrelevant.

The Apostle Paul clearly saw that the people around him had inherited the sin of Adam, and it grieved him. But, it had also been revealed to him that, through the act of Jesus Christ, the grace of God was now available to these people. The only thing needed for them to experience the grace was an act of belief. And so, he worked to persuade people to believe. We should not try to judge whether or not the person we are trying to persuade is capable of believing. We leave that judgment to God. We assume that he is, and we work to persuade him to believe in truth, because the mark of death is on his life.

These are the truths that make the world mission of the church so relevant and so urgent. Through the obedience of one man, grace is made available to all men. The people in my community and in my world need this grace, because the mark of death is upon them. I must use every resource available to me to persuade them.

Our discussion ends with a reminder of the purpose of the Mosaic Law. We already know what the law does not do. It does not invent sin, nor does it provide a solution for sin. Those are the things that the law does not do. But, what does it do? What is its purpose?

In ROMANS 5:20, the law is seen as an historic addition that was an absolute necessity. Sin had become very prevalent in the world and people had become extremely numb to their depraved condition. The nation of Israel was born in the context of gross idolatry. And so, God introduced the law to this new nation so as to expose and intensify the problem of sin and death already at work in the world.

Only with an increased awareness of sin can there be an increased awareness and appreciation of grace. The words "where sin increased, grace increased all the more" do not mean that more sin produces more grace. Sin does not produce grace. It produces wrath.

The value of grace in the eyes of a certain person depends totally on his awareness of sin. When sin has been downgraded or painted over to look good, the result is complete disinterest in God's gift of salvation.

Today's modern society has done a professional job of camouflaging the sinfulness of sin by feeding us a steady diet of words and images that entice us to laugh at sin and to think it is exciting. Even the ugly part about sin is now described in medical terms and the psychiatrist is portrayed as being more essential than the crucified Christ.

We need the Ten Commandments today just as much and perhaps even more than the nation of Israel needed the law when it first came into existence. Our sin problem needs to be exposed and intensified. It is the only way for people to understand and appreciate

their need for grace.

It makes me sad when we have to make rules in the church that define how Christians should behave. The rules are a sad commentary on our lack of awareness of the problem of sin and death. But, the rules are needed to expose and intensify our problem so that we will want to receive the grace made available to us in Christ. That is the purpose of the law.

I have spent most of my professional career overseas trying to persuade Chinese people to believe in Christ. The results of my efforts have been limited. But, the difficulty has never been that the gospel message is too complex. The message of the gospel is simple. However, for the person who is unaware and cannot appreciate his sin problem, the message of the gospel seems elusive, and the words recorded in our scripture lesson seem so hard to understand. The reason why mission work is so difficult in places like Taiwan and Japan and the United States is that sin has been whitewashed.

God's outstretched arms can be clearly seen. The fact that so many people cannot see them is clear evidence of how numb we have become. When we grow comfortable with the ways of the world, then the words of 1 JOHN 4:4 seem so unexciting. 1 JOHN 4:4 says, "The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."

And, those words provide us with a good summary of today's scripture lesson. Grace is so much greater than sin. But, we will never know it unless we want to receive it, and we will never want to receive it unless we become aware of terrible problem we have inherited from our first father, Adam.