

3. Parenthetical on the Role of the Law (5:20-21)

Throughout this passage (5:12-21) Paul has sought to demonstrate that the believer's righteousness and justification stand upon God's reckoning of Christ's righteousness to him and nothing whatsoever in himself. In order to prove that claim he established and explained the crucial typological relationship between Adam and Christ. As men stand condemned by virtue of the imputation of Adam's sin and guilt, so also they stand blameless and justified by virtue of the gracious reckoning of Jesus' "one act of righteousness" entirely apart from their own intention or activity. This gospel truth is the marrow of Paul's previous proclamation that "*we exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation*" (5:11).

But in building his case for imputed righteousness through the "second Adam," Paul noted how condemnation and death held universal dominion during the period from Adam to Moses - a period in which the Law was not in the world (5:13). This contextual introduction of the Law of Moses is most likely the reason for Paul's return to the subject at the close of this passage. For if it is indeed true that prior to the ratification of the Old Covenant at Sinai God did not govern the world of men through the vehicle of law, and even more, that righteousness is by faith apart from works of law, the question immediately surfaces as to the purpose for the Law of Moses.

- In this passage Paul has treated salvation history as consisting in two discrete ages defined by two opposing principles and overseen by two separate "Adams." Given this structural scheme, what is the place and significance of the Old Covenant law in God's redemptive purpose? The Law dominates the pages of the Old Testament scriptures, which in itself indicates that it played an important role in the upward movement of salvation history.
- As well, the Jewish Christians among Paul's readers would have held the Law of Moses in high regard. The nation of Israel had been founded upon it, and it provided to the Jews the theological and practical definition of their relationship with God. Even more, at the time in which Paul was living it was common in Jewish thought to associate one's righteousness and final salvation with possession of and adherence to the Law (ref. 2:17-29). How, then, could Paul apparently minimize it in a discussion of God's saving work?
- Finally, the Jew-Gentile tension that characterized the first-century Church found its focal point in the Christian's relationship to the Law of Moses. Were not Jewish converts to Christ still required to keep the Law? And if that was indeed God's righteous demand for the Jew, then it equally implicated the Gentile Christians (cf. Acts 11:1-18, 15:1-33 and Galatians 1:1-5:6, 6:12-16).

These redemptive-historical, practical, cultural, and contextual issues make evident the appropriateness, and even the importance, of Paul's closing consideration of the Law in relation to the gospel of reckoned righteousness through faith in Christ.

Together verses 5:20-21 comprise one extended thought in which Paul articulated both the immediate and the ultimate purpose for the Law.

- a. With respect to the former, he stated that the Law of Moses “*came in that the transgression might increase*” (5:20a). It is interesting that, in referring to the inauguration of the Law, Paul chose to use an uncommon New Testament verb that, in its one other use, has a definitively negative connotation. In Galatians 2:4 it speaks of a sneaky or deceitful entrance - a “slipping in unawares” - and that for the purpose of doing harm. But clearly Paul did not view the Old Covenant in that way (cf. 2:17-23, 7:12-14, 8:1-4; also 2 Corinthians 3:7-11; Galatians 3:19-24; etc.). Nevertheless, the present context does indicate that he intended his language to properly *marginalize* the Law as that which, being “added,” was to be understood as secondary and transitory, and so also incapable of overcoming condemnation and death and bringing in righteousness.

That Paul intended to marginalize the Law is readily evident from the immediate purpose it served in salvation history, which was to cause “the transgression to increase.” There are commentators who view Paul’s grammar in verse 5:20a as indicating *result* rather than *purpose*, and this conclusion is certainly within the bounds of Greek usage. It is also undeniable that the entrance of law *did* result in the increase of sin (cf. 7:7-11). However, the context better supports an emphasis upon the purpose for the law within the movement of redemptive history, especially when that history is viewed in terms of two Adams and two ages.

This being taken as Paul’s intended meaning, his point is that God’s purpose in establishing the Old Covenant was not to *rectify* the circumstance of men’s fractured relationship with Him, but to *exacerbate* it. This insistence would have been shocking to the Jews of Jesus’ day, even as it is to many people today. For men naturally look to law as the means of attaining their righteousness before God; even when they acknowledge falling short of its demands, their confidence always lies in the hope of future “improvement” and the self-vindication it brings. Yet Paul was declaring that such a view of law is foolish and misguided. Though his specific concern was with the Law of Moses, the principle is universally true that the purpose of law in any form is not commendation but condemnation; “*through the law comes the knowledge of sin*” (3:19-20, also 7:7-11).

- 1) Specifically, Paul ascribed the purpose of the Law of Moses to the increase of *the transgression*. Since the presence of the Law implicates the transgression of Adam’s descendents rather than Adam himself, some scholars have understood him to have been using the singular noun in the *collective* sense. That is to say, they argue that Paul was considering the transgressions of men under the Law from the perspective of constituting a generic whole. But the contextual emphasis upon the one transgression of Adam, its imputation to all men, and Paul’s use of the definite article with the singular noun - *the transgression* - together suggest that he was still speaking in terms of Adam’s transgression.

But if this is so, in what sense did the entrance of the Law cause Adam's transgression to increase?

- One obvious answer is that the reckoning of Adam's transgression incurred the penalty that is the depraving of human nature. The result is that all men are perpetual sinners, yet "*sin is not imputed when there is no law.*" The Law converted sin into transgression, and in this way personal transgression abounded. But in that personal offense is grounded in Adam's transgression, the abounding of the former is also the abounding of the latter.
- A second, similar option also begins with the understanding that it was Adam's transgression that Paul had in mind. But it has him considering that transgression from the vantage point of its determinative and destructive power. Adam's trespass introduced sin as the determining principle of human existence, and the Law served to add a new dimension to sin's power and influence. One commentator has summarized this perspective as follows:

"The law has therefore no epoch-making significance, but has only the function of actualizing and radicalizing the crisis of Adamic human existence."

In other words, the Law of Moses did not inaugurate a new age; it simply acted to radicalize and therefore intensify the already existing Adamic age defined by condemnation and death. And precisely because Adam's act of disobedience was the ground and mechanism for the age associated with him, Paul could properly insist that the Law caused Adam's transgression to increase.

- 2) This understanding is further supported by Paul's verb rendered *increase*. Although it can be used to indicate quantitative or numerical increase, in Paul's writing it commonly has a *qualitative* sense. It often indicates a superabundance with respect to power, intensity, strength, scope, efficacy, etc., and that arena of meaning fits well with this context (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:15; Philippians 4:17; 1 Thessalonians 3:12; 2 Thessalonians 1:3).

Assuming this qualitative sense, Paul's point was indeed that the Law was introduced by God to actualize, radicalize, strengthen, and openly display and declare Adam's transgression. What Adam introduced in his quest for independent self-actualization was revealed and brought to fruition in the fullness of its destructive, tyrannical and invincible power through the inauguration of the Law. Douglas Moo observes: "*Against Jewish tendencies to attribute virtually salvific meaning to the law, Paul dethrones the law by ranging it on the side of Adam and sin.*"

- b. Yet the radicalizing, super-abounding empowerment of Adam's transgression through the Law was not God's ultimate end. Were it so, man's plight would be one of horrific, agonizing despair. But God's intention was to bring Adam's trespass to its full fury and strength in the world in order to demonstrate openly that "*where sin increased, grace abounded all the more*" (5:20b).
- 1) Again, Paul's perspective is redemptive-historical: his concern was not with the effects of sin and grace in the lives of specific individuals under the Law of Moses, but with the Law's role in God's redemptive purpose which began with Adam and culminated with Christ. His point is simply that the *negative* role that the Law served in transposing human sin into transgression of commandment - thus radicalizing Adam's trespass in its effect upon his descendents - itself ultimately served a *positive* goal, namely the triumph of grace.
 - 2) This triumph of divine grace is expressed by the verbs Paul employed in this clause: though sin was intensified and strengthened through the Law, it was overshadowed by the abounding, superlative efficacy of God's grace. It is notable that the same verbal root is used in the larger context, though only with respect to God's grace in Christ and the gift of righteousness it brings (5:15, 17). But here Paul appended an intensifying prefix that only heightens the contrast between the power of sin grounded in Adam's transgression and the grace of Christ that overcomes it.

As much as the Law was negative, it was ultimately positive. It was negative in that it pressed upon the human psyche the intractable universality of man's estrangement and lost condition and thereby provoked despair. Moreover, by making righteousness objective through direct commandments it served to incite further rebellion in the human heart. Thus the Law acted to make sin "*utterly sinful*" (7:13). But for these very reasons the Law was also profoundly positive. For it served to reinforce God's previous promise of divine remedy solely through divine power and goodness; *the Law's ultimate purpose was to advance and make more glorious the promise of triumphal grace* (ref. Galatians 3:19-24).

- c. It is this ultimate purpose to which Paul addressed himself in verse 5:21. The Law came in that "*as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

Like everything else in the upward advance of salvation history, the Law of Moses was prophetic and Christocentric. God's declared purpose for all things is their summation in Christ, and He is working and directing all things toward this singular goal (Ephesians 1:9-10). This means that everything that has transpired in history leading up to the coming of Christ points to and finds its fulfillment in Him. The Law is no exception: as Israel had its identity in the Law, so the Law anticipated the true Israel; the true covenant Son. It had its trajectory and found its true significance in the One who was its fulfillment (Matthew 5:17-20; 11:11-15).

And so this final verse of the larger context provides a marvelous summary to it. The language of comparison and contrast that dominates 5:12-21 is here drawn together in a profound and succinct articulation of the great truths of the gospel:

- 1) Paul's first point of comparison here is the *reign of sin* in contrast to the *reign of grace*. Previously he spoke of death's reign (5:17a), and the two ideas are reconciled by the understanding that sin reigns by establishing death and then ruling within the sphere or realm of death's dominion: *sin reigns in death* (cf. 6:16, 23, 7:13, 8:1-2; also 1 Corinthians 15:56).

But sin's reign in death also serves a positive purpose in salvation history: according to God's promise, it eagerly anticipated Christ's conquest and the triumphal reign of His grace unto eternal life. For, with respect to human device and remedy, sin has a universally invincible power; in this way it pointed to the *divine* remedy that is the promise of life in Christ Jesus. This sure triumph of grace is the reason for Paul's previous assertion that "*those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ*" (5:17b).

- 2) The second contrast is between *death* and *life* as the defining principles of the respective ages associated with the two Adams. But here Paul did not simply refer to life, but *eternal* life. By referring to life in this way Paul was affirming that its emergence through grace's victory is ultimate and everlasting; death - *itself everlasting if left to human devices* - has forever been swallowed up by life (cf. 2 Timothy 1:8-10; Revelation 20:14).
- 3) Paul's third comparison involves the contrast between *sin* and *righteousness* as the two "gifts" of the two Adams. Specifically, he concluded this passage by taking note that grace reigns *through* the righteousness that is *through* Jesus Christ. This is nothing more than a restatement of his constant insistence that Christ's righteousness is reckoned to men for their justification as a gift of His grace (5:15-19).
- 4) Finally, he ended with an exultant reference to "*Jesus Christ our Lord.*" As the first Adam was man, so also is Jesus of Nazareth, the last Adam. But whereas the first Adam plunged men into the comprehensive ruination of estrangement and condemnation, the last Adam has redeemed and delivered humanity from their ruination, for He is the *Christ*, God's Messiah. And because of who He is and what He has done, this final Adam is preeminently the *Lord*. But not simply a generic master, He is the Lord of His own: He is Jesus Christ *our* Lord (cf. 1:4, 4:23-24, 5:1, 11). The same Christological crescendo that marked the transitions of the preceding two contexts punctuates the close of this one also. Faith in the God who gives life to the dead; peace with God through justifying grace; hope of future glory that does not disappoint; these great indicatives all stand upon the preeminent gospel indicative that is Jesus Christ our Lord.