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Romans 5:20-21 “The Marvelous Grace of God”

Intro. In vv.12-21 of this chapter, Paul mentions the word “sin” 10 times. Perhaps the most picturesque is when he says in v.21, “sin reigned.” You and I are living in a world where sin reigns. Here we see sin personified as an evil, despotic ruler over men. It’s as if Paul draws back the curtain to expose the one who reigns over the children of Adam to their harm and destruction. Look at him with your imagination. He is evil, dark, without mercy, and with a deadly cold heart. This is the one who reigns over mankind in this present evil age.

This evil ruler has many ways to control his subjects. First, he controls from within using our own sin nature. We all have a strong bent toward sin and self-centered behavior. Sin also rules over humanity with peer pressure. God created men with a conscience, and people feel much better about themselves if they can pressure others to join them in doing wrong, or in embracing their beliefs. Of course, his chief ally is Satan. He works with Satan to expand their kingdom of darkness.

We were all born into the kingdom of sin, and we all come under its evil control. Not one person is exempt from the problem of sin, for Paul rightly says in v.12 that “all sinned.” Paul also said in that verse that “sin came into the world through one man.” There is no more conclusive proof of the tremendous power of Sin over us, than the way He deceives people into thinking that He is a benevolent ruler over them. Sin can offer various temporary pleasures. Men imagine that they are free even while Sin enslaves them. He is an enemy to his subjects, yet they love, obey, and serve him with delight.

Another proof of Sin’s reign is that fact that death is universal. Paul said in v.21 that “sin reigned in death.” Paul said in v.12 that “death spread to all men because all sinned.” After a lifetime of ruling men and women in a *living* death, Sin delights in completing his evil dominion. Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:56 that “the sting of death is sin.” Sin inserts its poisonous stinger to bring about the end of what little life people have. Death is universal, for sin is universal. Billions and billions have died since Sin entered the world. “Oh Sin, how many more must die?” Sin and Satan just laugh. After all, Prov. 30:16 says that the grave is never satisfied. All over the world tears of mourning are being shed over the death of a loved one. Even children are not spared at times. Last year about 100,000 died of drug overdoses in our country, mostly among young adults. Sin and Death continue to reign.

What a terrible problem we have! Who can set us free from the dominion of Sin? Who can deliver us from its cold grip of death? Well in this brief text of Scripture, Paul mentions two other rulers that are seeking to exercise rule over your life in place of Sin. One is the Law, and the other is the grace of God. Which one can set you free from sin and death? Let’s seek to discover the answer to that question this morning. First of all:

I. CAN THE LAW OF MOSES DELIVER US?

Many in the Jewish and even Christian traditions believe that the way to be set free from the dominion of Sin is to pursue obedience to the reign of Law. The Law demands obedience and warns of deadly consequences for disobedience. Even in secular society many also believe that

passing laws is the way to control people's sinful behavior. They pass gun control laws to reduce violence but such laws do *nothing* about the sinful depravity and hatred of the ones who commit such acts of violence. Though our country was founded to set us free from government tyranny, we are living today under more and more government control over our lives through laws and regulations. Though we may agree that secular laws, properly enforced, can control human behavior to some degree, what about the Law of Moses found in the Bible? Can those laws set you free from sin's control? Well let's see what Paul says here in our text. In v.20 we see that:

A. The Law Was Added Alongside Grace – Paul said in v.20, “the law came in to increase the trespass...”¹ Many believe that the giving of the Law of Moses was an early attempt by God to save us from the condemnation and power of sin. But that is not true. The word translated “came in” (*pareiserchomai*) literally means the law “came in alongside.” Alongside what? It came in alongside God's previous covenants of grace. The fact is, grace pre-existed the Law, and was already at work. Grace was God's plan from the very beginning. Don't think that Law was given as *the* means of salvation from sin. It was merely added for the purposes I will share in just a moment.

God dealt with Adam and Eve in grace; He dealt with the patriarchs in grace; and He dealt with the nation of Israel in grace. He had dealt with them according to the unconditional covenant of grace made with Abraham. He graciously delivered them from Egyptian bondage. The Law was not added for the purpose of displacing grace. Rather, the law was added to God's dealings with man for other purposes. Here in v.20 we see why the law could never be a way of salvation, for:

B. The Law Only Increases Our Sin and Shows Our Utter Sinfulness – If the law was introduced as the means of saving us, then we might have expected Paul to say that the Law was introduced or added that sin might be restrained and diminished. But instead, Paul says in v.20, “Now the law came in to² increase (*pleonazo*) the trespass...” Doesn't that sound strange? Not if you examine this verse carefully. That verse is true for two reasons.

First, the giving of the law created the condition for willful trespass. Adam's trespass was disobedience to expressly revealed commandment. For thousands of years there was no written law for the children of Adam to live by. So when the law came in through Moses, there was henceforth a multiplication of the same kind of transgression that Adam committed, here called a “trespass” (*paraptoma*), a willful falling away from the righteous standard of God's law. Until the law, sin was not manifested as transgression because there was no commandment of God to transgress against (cf. v.14). Remember what Paul said back in 4:15, “where there is no law there is no transgression.” Sin was present both before and after the law, but now sin is *shown* to be rebellion against God. When the law came, thousands and thousands of transgressions were committed. Much of the Old Testament is the story of Israel's failure to keep the law generation after generation.

Furthermore, the Law actually tends to stimulate sin due to man's sin nature. There is something in all of us that rebels against an order, making what is prohibited more attractive than ever before. It's just human nature to want to do the very thing we are told not to do! Someone said, “There are three ways to get something done: do it yourself, hire someone to do it, or forbid the

¹ Likewise, Paul wrote in Gal. 3:19, “Why then the law? It was added (*prostithemi*) because of transgressions, until the offspring should come to whom the promise had been made....”

² Normally *ἵνα* is translated “that”, it may mean either “in order that” (expressing purpose, thus translated in the ESV “to”) or “so that” (expressing result). Robertson, who interprets “that” as expressing result, understands Paul to mean that the giving of the law resulted in the increase of sin. This was the actual effect of the Mosaic law for the Jews.

kids to do it.”³ Whenever the law encounters the sin nature of man, it evokes its natural antagonism to God, and so stimulates disobedience. Later on, Paul will refer to the commandment, “You shall not covet.” Then he said in Romans 7:8, “But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness...” (See also all of 7:7-11).

You probably know that when the Constitutional law prohibiting the sale of alcoholic beverages was enacted in the United States in 1920, it did not stop the sale and consumption of alcohol. In fact, some people who had never before touched liquor immediately began to drink! The problem here is not with the Law. The problem is with human nature.

So why is it that God gave the Law if it actually *increases* sin? God knew that it would be very difficult to get man to abandon confidence in himself. And so the law was given, not as a means of producing righteousness, but as a means of showing us how sinful we really are. The law was given to lead man to the point of acknowledging his sin. And this leads to another important truth about God’s purpose in giving the Law:

C. The Law Was Added That We Might Trust in God’s Grace - Paul points out that the Law furthers God’s purpose in preparing us for the work of Christ. Paul had already written in Romans 3:20, “... through the law comes knowledge of sin.” As the awareness of our transgressions increases, even so there should be a greater sense of guilt and need of a Savior. Thus, the law was given, not to save, but to drive men to Christ as their only source of righteousness and salvation.

We can compare the law’s function to that of a mirror. You observe in a mirror that your face is dirty, but you do not rub the mirror upon your face. The mirror can show you that your face is dirty, but the mirror cannot wash your face. Anyone who bases salvation on keeping the Ten Commandments is as foolish as one who seeks to wash with a mirror.

One problem in our society today is that we are doing away with moral law. Many in our society no longer accept an objective standard of right and wrong. The ACLU wants to make everything legal, and nothing is declared wrong. Our schools are afraid to tell students that taking drugs or premarital sex is *morally* wrong. They are defining it only in terms of good and not so good “choices.” And so we have a generation of people who are growing up without a sense of right and wrong, and without a sense that they are lost and in need of Christ. The law serves a very useful and necessary purpose.

More than ever parents and churches should not shy away from teaching God’s moral law, and the laws of right and wrong. We need to teach the 10 Commandments, and the many other moral laws found in the Bible. You need to make sure your children come to Vacation Bible School. Enroll them and bring them to Sunday School. At the same time, we have to avoid giving the impression that we are teaching a moralistic salvation.

Of course, the law was *not* added to provide the way of salvation. Paul has already concluded in Romans 3:20 that “no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” All that the law can do is demand perfection. A holy and righteous God could never demand less. God has only one passing grade. The passing grade is perfection. The entrance of the law did not supply one iota of strength to keep the law, and it was soon manifest that the people of Israel were totally unable to keep it (8:3). Since man sinned, the law actually became a curse. Paul said in Gal. 3:10, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’” Since we will never achieve perfection in this life, the law cannot be the way of salvation.

³ Sparks, in Bulletin Inserts of *Pulpit Helps* [Illus.#C-978].

We have seen that the Law cannot save us. Yet it has an important role in leading us to the way of salvation, but it cannot set us free from the reign of sin and death. Now Paul pulls back the curtain to reveal the one ruler who is powerful enough to set us free from the grip of sin and death.

As we look to see the Ruler who can set us free, consider this: What is the opposite of Sin? Righteousness. Why, then, does he not say that “as sin reigned in death, even so righteousness might reign to eternal life”? Because it is not man, or anything in man, that can be the true victor over the reign of Sin. God Himself must come into the field of battle, and only He is the foe that Sin dreads. That is to say, the only hope for a sin-tyrannized world is in the out throb of love from the great heart of God. The thing that will conquer a world’s wickedness is not human righteousness but the manifested love and grace of God. And so that leads to the true Victor over Sin:

II. ONLY THE PREVAILING POWER OF GRACE CAN DELIVER US

Sin and Grace are both personified in this text. Both are said by Paul to “reign.” They stand face to face, and each recognizes the other as the enemy. The one has already established his dominion: “Sin reigned.” The other is fighting to establish hers: “even so Grace might reign.”

I suppose there are few of the keywords of the New Testament which have lost more of their radiance and meaning than that great word Grace. What does Paul mean by it? The word grace carries us into the heart of God. This Queen is the love and goodness of God radiating out to us forever, who deserve nothing because of our sinfulness. Yet, the unconditional love of God supplies the grace we need to be saved. God’s grace gives spiritual gifts such as righteousness and eternal life. The Greek word translated “grace” is based on the verb that means “to rejoice.” Such gifts of grace certainly cause people to rejoice. By no other way can a sinful creature come to the Creator; and by no other means can a sinner stand before a holy God.

Now let us consider some wonderful truths about the grace of God. First of all:

A. God’s Grace Is Greater Than Our Sin – There is hope for deliverance from the tyranny of Sin, for Paul goes on to point out in the last of v.20, “but where sin increased (*pleonazo*), grace abounded all the more.” The word translated “abounded all the more” is from a compound word. The main part of that verb gives the picture of an abundance of water overflowing the banks of a river (*purisseuo*). Then the word includes the prefix *hyper*, which is like the Latin word “super”. This word is a strong *superlative*⁴ and it is placed in an emphatic position on top of that! Sin spread like a wildfire, but the overflowing flood of grace overcame the fire of sin. So where sin measurably increased, grace immeasurable increased. Paul expresses the triumph of grace over sin in the clearest manner. Paul had already said in the last of v.15 “much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.” He also spoke of “the abundance of grace” in v.17. In Eph. 1:7 Paul wrote of “the riches of his grace.”⁵ God’s grace was more than adequate to deal with man’s sins, and more than reverse the evils of Adam’s fall. Where there was guilt, there was more grace. Where there was sin, forgiveness was multiplied. When sin is most powerful, then grace is most mighty in deliverance. No matter how many times you have sinned, no matter how many years you have sinned, and no matter how badly you have

⁴ It is found only one other time in the New Testament. 2 Cor. 7:4 says, “In all our affliction, I am overflowing with joy.”

⁵ In 1 Tim. 1:14 says “the grace of our Lord overflowed for me....”

sinned, God's grace can deliver you from sin, and bring forgiveness to your heart. God's grace working through the gospel is able to overcome the power of sin and the death that results from it.

How is it that grace is greater than our sin? God never withholds grace because of sin. No dam erected by sin can stop the flow of God's grace. The multiplying of trespass is no problem with God. It only magnifies and demonstrates the super abounding riches of divine grace.

Adam had not gone very far from the scene of his rebellion before the grace of God sought him, called him by name, and pursued him where he was hiding. God did not withhold His grace because of Adam's sin. Instead, He made great promises of grace, announcing that the seed of the woman, the Messiah, would come. Although man lost the garments of light, God intervened in grace and clothed the guilty pair with coats of skins.

Years later, in the time of the Lord Jesus Christ, the sin of humanity reached high tide when the Son of God was crucified, but out of sin's greatest evil the grace of God flowed which brings salvation.

Again, in the case of Saul of Tarsus, God did not withhold grace because of sin. Saul's sin abounded but the grace of God did much more abound. In 1 Timothy 1:14-15 he said, "And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant.... This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." Though Paul later realized that he was the chief of sinners, God's grace reached a sinner like Saul of Tarsus, and gloriously saved him.

In the history of the Christian Church, one of the most outstanding objects of God's abounding grace was John Newton (1725-1807). He wrote the beloved song: "Amazing grace! how sweet the sound, That saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." At a young age he became an apprentice seaman. Wild and dissolute, he deserted from the British Navy and ran away to Africa in order "that I might sin my fill." He had the reputation of being able to curse for two hours without repeating himself. In Africa he fell in with a Portuguese slave-trader. After being mistreated, he decided to attempt an escape. He reached a spot on the coast where, with a signal fire, he attracted the attention of a passing ship. They took him on. Since he was a skilled navigator, he became first mate; but while the captain was ashore one day, John broke out the ship's rum and got the whole crew drunk. Upon his return, the captain struck him so violently that he fell overboard and would have drowned in his drunken condition, had not a sailor speared him in the thigh with a boathook, making a wound so great that ever afterwards John Newton could put his fist into the scar.

Weeks later, while the ship was returning to Britain, a great storm arose. Newton, who had been manning the pumps for days, cried out to God and was wonderfully saved. John Newton became a pillar of the Church of England, chaplain to Parliament, and even preached before the King.

Oh, dear sinner. Don't you worry about how much, or how often, or how deeply you have sinned in the past. God's grace is more than sufficient to save your soul and change your life.

Paul tells us another important truth about grace:

B. God's Grace Reigns through Righteousness – Paul said in v.21, "grace also might reign through righteousness...." Grace has super abounded to the end that it might reign over our lives.

How does grace establish her reign over our lives, delivering us from sin and death? Notice that grace sought to establish her reign "through righteousness." I believe he is primarily speaking of the righteousness of justification. There must be righteousness if there is to be life. Even that great love of God, throbbing straight from His heart, cannot give eternal life as a mere matter of

arbitrary will. When we see Jesus dying on the cross, we not only see the love of God, but we also see the righteousness of God. We see that God hated sin with infinite hatred. The love of God freely provided the atoning sacrifice in the death of Jesus, that justice may be satisfied, and sinners might be justified in His sight. Rom. 3:24 says, “being justified freely by His grace....” Because of this marriage of love and justice, God can now offer full and free salvation to every member of Adam’s race who believes in Christ. Thus grace is the freedom of God to forgive any sin with absolute righteousness because it has been paid for in full. It is also God’s grace that leads us to repentance. Romans 2:4 says “knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?”

Friend, Grace is God’s *only* remedy. Don’t you see that? You can’t be saved by keeping the Law or doing good works. Since God is perfect, He recognizes no good in a sinful creature. When the bulldozer of divine justice pushes human merit aside, the highway is open for the riches of God’s grace to be conveyed to man.

So which one is ruling over your life, Sin or Grace? The fact that Paul says that that “grace [is to] *reign*⁶ through righteousness” [emphasis added] means that Paul has in mind more than justification. God’s grace accomplishes a transformation into lives of increasing holiness and righteousness. Paul said in 1 Cor. 15:10, “by the grace of God I am what I am....” Can you say that Grace is ruling over your life if there is very little righteousness? By God’s enabling and transforming grace He can give us victory over sin and establish lives of righteousness. Paul will speak of that aspect of grace in chapter 6 (and 12:3, 6; 15:15; see also 2 Cor. 1:12; 9:8; 12:9; 2 Tim. 2:1).

Finally:

C. God’s Grace Bestows Eternal Life – Again, Paul said in v.21, “grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life....” The superabundance of grace bestows righteousness, which in turn grants “eternal life.” Just as sin’s fruit is death, the fruit of righteousness is life. What is eternal life? This is, of course, in antitheses to death but it is life that cannot be forfeited; it is life eternal.

Notice that His gift of eternal life is “through Jesus Christ our Lord.” He cannot allow the thought of grace reigning through righteousness unto eternal life to be divorced for a moment from the mediation of “Jesus Christ our Lord.” In Him is all the grace of God gathered together. In Him is righteousness; therefore, if we desire to be liberated from sin, we must go to Jesus Christ. In Him is life eternal; therefore, if we desire to possess it, we must possess *Him*. You can have eternal life now. You don’t have to wait until you die.

Conclusion: It seems like sin, suffering, and death are increasing in our world. Does atheism or communism have an answer for these problems? Is there a political solution to these problems? Does Islam or Hinduism or any of the other religions of the world provide any real solutions to these problems? Only the grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord and overcome the problems of sin, suffering and death.

So you have a choice to make. Do you put out your hand to take the poisoned gift from the claw-like hand of that hideous Ruler called Sin? Or do you turn and take the gifts of righteousness and eternal life from the hand of queenly Grace? If you have not done so, turn to Christ, and then you shall be delivered from the tyranny of death, and have eternal life.

For those who you who have received God’s saving grace, always remember that since our salvation is all of grace and has nothing to do with our works, all of the glory for our salvation goes

⁶ The tense is aorist, so Paul does not define the kind of action here.

to God and His Son Jesus. Let us praise His name for His amazing grace. Secondly, remember that God's grace can enable you to live lives that are pleasing to God. Trust in Him. He is full of love and grace. He stands ready to help you live your daily life. Furthermore, since we are children of God, we should be like our heavenly Father and extend grace in our relationships, including the grace of forgiveness. Finally, go and tell others of the saving grace of God!

Sources: Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament* (accessed through *Online Bible*); Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Expositions of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), except pp.169-182; F.F. Bruce, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963); Bruce Corley & Curtis Vaughan, *Romans: A Study Guide Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976); Charles Hodge, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 reprint); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Leon McBeth, *Exegetical & Practical Commentary on Romans* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1937); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Douglas J. Moo, *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); John Murray, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1965); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [Ver. 5:30] (Ontario: onlinebible.net, 2017); A.T. Robertson, *New Testament Word Pictures*, Vol. IV (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931, accessed through *Online Bible*); Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Right: Romans* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1977); Kenneth S. Wuest's *Word Studies From the Greek New Testament*, Vol. 1, Romans (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1955). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Crossway, Good News Publishers, 2001).

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