

What Is Wrong with Me?

Romans 5:12-21

Series: We Believe

May 8, 2022

We're now in our third week of a nine-part sermon series that we're calling *We Believe: Exploring our Statement of Faith*.¹ I hope you're planning to join us for the next two Sundays as we continue this series with two more guests. Next week we'll have Mark Revell with us, he's the Director of Training and Development for Reach Global². Mark will be helping us to think through the doctrine of the Church and what it means for us to be *gospel people*. Then in two weeks, we'll have with us Kevin Kompelien, the President of the EFCA. Kevin's topic will be Article 4 of our Statement of Faith, the Person of Jesus Christ.

So for most of May, we're blessed to have some heavy-hitters coming to preach. But today, it's my turn. On this Mother's Day Sunday, we're going to look at a passage from the book of Romans as we consider together Article 3: The Human Condition.

Article 3 reads as follows,

We believe that God created Adam and Eve in His image, but they sinned when tempted by Satan. In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice, alienated from God, and under His wrath. Only through God's saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.

I recently came across a special issue of a magazine featuring *100 People who Changed the World*. There were names I figured would be there: philosophers and scientists like Aristotle and Isaac Newton, great men and women of history like Emperor Constantine and Queen Elizabeth I, as well as more modern world-changers like McDonald's Ray Kroc, and Apple's Steve Jobs. But that list had two glaring omissions, two people who radically changed the world for everyone who ever lived. I'm, of course, speaking about Adam and Eve.

Turn with me to Romans 5 as we consider together the human condition, and in particular what the Bible has to say about sin. If you've spent any time reading the book of Romans, you know that this is one of the more weighty portions of Scripture. To look at what the Bible says about sin, we could turn to Genesis 3. In fact, we'll consider that passage in a moment. But Romans 5 is one of the most significant passages in all of the Bible on this topic, especially as it speaks to why it is that sin has become a universal problem.

¹ We started this series two weeks ago with our guest speaker, Pastor Micah Carpenter as we began with the doctrine of God, considering together God's nature and his character. Then last Sunday, Pastor Rick Weinert brought us a message from Psalm 119 to help us think through the doctrine of Scripture and what it means for us to be grounded on God's Word.

² The missions arm of the Evangelical Free Church of America.

In Romans 1 through the first half of chapter 3, Paul makes the case that all people, whether Jew or Gentile, have sinned against God and thus are deserving of God's wrath. That section can be summed up by Paul's quotation from Psalm 14,

“What shall we conclude then? Do we have any advantage? Not at all! For we have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the power of sin. As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one”” (Rom. 3:9-12, NIV).

Paul knew it was necessary to first address the gravity of the bad news in order to fully appreciate the glory of the good news. So in the second half of chapter 3 through the first half of chapter 5, Paul explains how God has made a way of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Paul closes this section in the first part of chapter 5 by saying,

“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom. 5:8-11, NIV).

That brings us to our passage. And here, Paul anticipates a serious question. If sin has made such a universal impact on the human race so that billions of people are now under God's wrath, how then can the work of just *one* person, namely Jesus Christ affect so many people for the good? Let's look at verse 12:

“Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned—” (Rom. 5:12, NIV).

I'm going to spend the bulk of our time unpacking this one verse. We'll briefly consider the rest of the chapter, but verse 12 is so foundational to our understanding of our human condition that it's worth camping out here.

First, let's talk about sin itself. Three times in this verse Paul mentions the word *sin*. But what is sin? That's a different question from asking “What are *sins*?” or even “What is *sinful*?” Paul isn't differentiating here between things that are good and things that are bad. If we go back for a second to chapter 3, we see that Paul saw sin as a power and he believed that all people are subject to that power.

“Jews and Gentiles alike are all under the *power* of sin” (Rom. 3:9b, NIV).

This means that sin is not just the evil things that humans do, sin is the power that enslaves all people. Later in this passage, Paul will say that sin *reigns* (5:21). In future chapters, he says that sin is a power that demands obedience (6:16), that it deceives sinners (7:11), and it even produces in the sinner death (7:13). This doesn't mean that sin is a *who*; sin is not the devil or some evil figure. But in personifying sin, Paul shows us that in our fallen state, all people are subject to sin's power.

I appreciate how one author defines sin. He says, “[sin is] the *power* in human beings that has the effect...of corrupting human thought, word, and deed so that they displease God and make their authors guilty.”³

Once we understand that sin is not only a power that is at work in every human being but also that it's a power that holds all people in its grip, then can we see that there is no earthly solution within us or available to us that can break those chains. Paul will say in Romans 7,

“For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it” (Rom. 7:18-20, NIV).

So how is it that sin became a universal plight? Look again at Romans 5:12 where Paul says that “sin entered the world through one man.” The fact that Paul says that sin *entered* the world means that there was a time when sin was not in the world.

Two Sundays ago, we saw in Genesis 1 that with each successive day of creation, God looked at what he had made and saw that it was *good*. Even when God made the first man and woman in his image and then placed them in the Garden of Eden, God saw that his creation was *very good*. But things did not stay very good for very long. When Paul says in verse 12 that “sin entered the world through one man,” Paul was speaking of the very first man, the one that God named Adam.

The account of the creation of Adam and his wife Eve is found in Genesis 1-2, but the story of the fall of Adam and Eve and the entrance of sin into the world is found in Genesis 3. We don't have time to turn to those passages today, but in order to understand Paul's argument in Romans 5, it's important that we keep these stories in mind. But by referring to Genesis 1-3 as stories, I don't mean to suggest that Adam and Eve are mythological characters in some biblical fairytale.

³ *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., p. 13, fn. 10.

Many people discount the notion that Adam and Eve were real people. Some suggest that in the Genesis account, Adam is a generic stand-in for humanity, that his name, which in Hebrew simply means *man*, points to the fact that he is a fictional representation of mankind.

But the Apostle Paul, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, believed that Adam was just as real as the Old Testament hero, Moses, and just as real as the Lord Jesus Christ. And though he didn't refer to the first couple by name, even Jesus spoke of Adam and Eve as real people:

““Haven't you read,” [Jesus] replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh?’” (Matt. 19:4-5, NIV).

But when Adam and Eve first disobeyed God and sin entered the world, something else came with it. Look back at Romans 5:12 again where Paul says that “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin” (Rom. 5:12, NIV).

Sin's entrance into the world opened the door for death. Again, if we bounce back to the opening chapters of Genesis, this news that with sin came death is no surprise. And it should have been no surprise to Adam since God had warned him about the consequences of rebelling against his creator.

“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “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 from it you will certainly die”” (Gen. 2:15-17, NIV).

So when Eve willfully disobeyed God's command and ate from the forbidden tree and then shared its fruit with her husband, at that moment Adam and Eve died. Now physically, they didn't drop dead then and there. But spiritually their rebellion resulted in their alienation from their creator. Genesis 3 ends with God driving out Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden and restricting their access to the tree of life.

When sin entered the world through Adam, and death through sin, Paul goes on to say in Romans 5:12 that, “in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Rom. 5: 12, NIV).

Beginning with Adam and Eve and with every successive generation, the power of death reigned. Death came to all people (NIV). Death spread to all men [and women]

(ESV). It gets a bit tricky here because Paul doesn't tell us exactly *how* Adam's sin resulted in death for all people. But there is a link between Adam's sin and our death.

Christians throughout history have tried to explain this relationship in various ways. Some have suggested that Adam was merely a bad apple (pun intended) and that people die because they follow Adam's sinful example. They argue that people are born morally good, but because they choose to sin as Adam did, they die. But this is not at all what Scripture teaches. David says in Psalm 51:5 (NIV),

“Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.”

And Paul, writing to the church in Ephesus, said of our shared human condition,

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature deserving of wrath” (Eph. 2:1-3).

Others have understood that what we inherited from Adam and Eve is a corrupted nature, that we're born with a bent toward sin and rebellion against God. There's no doubt that this is true. But though this fact may be implied in Romans 5 and is supported elsewhere in Scripture, Paul seems to be saying something more here.

When Paul says in verse 12 that “death came to all people, *because* all sinned,” he is saying that in some sense when Adam sinned, we sinned. Now how that works out, that before we were even born we somehow sinned *in and with* Adam is a bit of a mystery. Paul doesn't explain how this is the case, he merely states it to be true. We see the same idea a bit more clearly in verses 18-19 where Paul says,

“one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people,” (v. 18),

and

“through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners” (v. 19).

Our EFCA Statement of Faith captures this tension well in Article 3 in the phrase,

“In union with Adam, human beings are sinners by nature and by choice.”

This means that in our union with Adam, we are counted guilty before God. Yet it also means that we are declared guilty before God because of our own sin and our own acts of rebellion against him. At first glance, it may seem totally unfair for God to hold us

accountable for something that Adam did on our behalf. But having established the bad news that we are, as our Statement of Faith says, “sinners by nature and by choice,” now we can more fully appreciate the good news of the gospel.

In Article 3, we confess that we believe that,

“Only through God’s saving work in Jesus Christ can we be rescued, reconciled and renewed.”

Picking the passage up in verse 13 Paul says,

“To be sure, sin was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not charged against anyone’s account where there is no law. Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who is a pattern of the one to come.”

At the end of verse 14, Paul says that Adam “is a *pattern* of the one to come,” or as the ESV translates it, Adam “was a *type* of the one to come.” Paul is about to make a comparison between the first Adam, through whom sin and death came into the world, and the true and better Adam who was to come and who would bring forgiveness and eternal life into the world ruled by sin and death.

I mentioned at the beginning of this message that Paul anticipated a serious question. If the sin of just one man has left such a universal impact on the human race, then how can the work of just one person, namely Jesus Christ affect so many people for the good? Here’s Paul’s answer.

First, the grace given through Jesus Christ is so much greater than the devastation done through Adam’s sin. Follow along as I read verses 15-17.

“But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! Nor can the gift of God be compared with the result of one man’s sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ!” (Rom. 5:15-17, NIV).

Where Adam’s *selfish* act brought death to all people, Christ’s *selfless* act is an offer of grace for many. Where Adam’s one sin brought judgment and condemnation to all, Christ’s justifying work covers the sins of the many who come in faith. Where Adam’s

trespass introduced the reign of death to the world, those who receive God's gracious gift will reign in life because of Jesus Christ.

In all of human history, no one brought more devastation to the entire human race than the one who God called Adam. But only one man can overturn the devastation done in Adam by one gift of grace, the one who God calls *Son*.

Second, although one man's act of disobedience brought all people a sentence of death, through his own act of obedience Christ offers all who believe the promise of eternal life.

Read with me starting in verse 18 to the end of the chapter.

“Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom. 5:18-21, NIV).

In our exploration of our Statement of Faith, we're going to dig deeper into the doctrines of the Person and Work of Jesus Christ when we come to Articles 4 and 5. But for now, consider this:

In disobedience to God, the man, Adam, and his wife came to the tree, and in one act of selfish rebellion, he took for himself what was not his, and thus he brought sin and death into the world for all people.

But in obedience to his Father, the Son of man, Jesus Christ came to the cross with his bride in mind, and in one act of selfless sacrifice, he took upon himself what was not his—our sin, and thus he brought justification and life to all who would trust in him.

Folks, the doctrine of our human condition and the problem of sin is an ugly thing. But when we look at it in contrast to the good news of the gospel, hopefully, we will see the beauty of what has been done for us and the glory of God that is shown through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let's pray.