

Adam v. Jesus

Romans 5:12-21

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Most of us understand that we inherit traits from our parents. We understand this fact theoretically, but I think sometimes we don't really believe it until we get quite a bit older and start seeing evidence of it. Most adults have times when they suddenly realize they have become their parents. Often it is about the way you respond to something, a phrase you say that your parents always said, or something else in that vein.

Working alongside my dad in a rather public setting, I have the privilege of people pointing this out to me regularly. Usually, it is not meant to be insulting but encouraging. But as I've gotten older, I've discovered that I have inherited my father's hairline (maybe even less hair), similarities in my voice and cadence, and I've been told we both walk the same (whatever that means!) I just hope I didn't inherit his hips!

While we understand this with some of our physical and behavioral traits, the Bible teaches us that we also inherit spiritual traits from our spiritual fathers. In our passage this morning, the Apostle Paul is going to show us how our spiritual condition is a result of Adam's sin, and contrast that with the difference being part of Jesus' family makes to every one of us. We are going to wade in some deep waters this morning, but I hope we'll also unpack some important truths in the process.

Adam's Sin

We start with Paul's thesis statement for these verses,

¹² When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. (Romans 5:12, NLT)

While on the surface, this seems like a simple statement, there is a great deal contained in this single sentence. Paul starts by saying that when Adam sinned, sin entered the world.

Most of us understand this. Prior to Adam's fall, the world was a perfect place and free of sin. It wasn't until the rebellion of Adam and Eve that sin entered the world. We know that as a result of sin entering the world, the world was cursed as well. There were several effects of this curse.

The biggest, most noticeable effect for human beings was the fact that because of sin, we would now become mortal. Human beings would now face death. This was exactly what God had told Adam would happen if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

¹⁶ But the Lord God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden—¹⁷ except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die." (Genesis 3:16-17, NLT)

So, because of Adam's sin, death entered the world. In addition, God said that the earth would be cursed, making farming difficult; childbearing would become painful; there would be a constant competition between husbands and wives; and Satan would continue to attack humanity. These were all effects of Adam's sin.

If you look at the genealogies in Genesis 5, you see a common theme. A person is introduced, we are told his parents, his children, the length of his life, and then the words, "and then he died." The writer was emphasizing that every person now faced death as a result of Adam's sin. That continues to happen today. Everyone faces death because of the sin of Adam.

But Paul doesn't end with talking about death. He takes it a step further, explaining that death came to everyone, *because everyone sinned*. This is a significant statement, and is the source of a doctrine called original sin. The concept is this: when Adam sinned, in a very real sense, each one of us also sinned. We were complicit in his failure. Because we are sinful, we proceed to break God's law and incur additional sin on our account. It would be appropriate to say that we sin (break God's law) because we are sinners, and not the other way around.

This raises some difficult questions, doesn't it? One would be how can God hold us accountable for Adam's sin? We didn't commit the sin ourselves, Adam did, so how is it fair for God to punish us for what Adam did?

This is where things get a bit complicated, but I will do my best to explain what I think Paul is saying. Paul is not merely saying that because of Adam we become predisposed to sin (though that is true), he is saying that we actually become sinful. We actually participated in the sin of Adam. How can that be? Paul tells us that Adam served as a representative of mankind in a similar way to how Jesus serves as a representative of mankind.

The best analogy I can think of is like this. Suppose the president of the United States declared war with another country. That country would now view every American as an enemy in this war. While we can understand them viewing soldiers with guns and bombs that way, the truth is that every American, combatant or not, simply by virtue of being an American, is seen as complicit in the actions of our president. He is the representative of all Americans, not only himself.

In a similar sense, Paul declares that Adam is the representative of the human race, and we are therefore complicit in his rebellion against God. This fact can even be seen in Adam's name. The Hebrew word for Adam is translated as a name in the first few chapters of Genesis, but much of the time, the Hebrew word for Adam is translated as "mankind." Adam was a representative for all human beings.

As such, the doctrine of original sin says that each one of us is sinful from the time we are conceived. We do not merely have a bent toward sin, we are all sinners! If we were simply bent toward sin we might expect that one of us might finally throw off that

tendency and reject sin entirely, kind of like how it is possible (albeit very difficult) for a person to overcome some of the generational curses of their family (like addiction or poverty) to break the cycle. If we were merely *influenced* by Adam's sin, you would expect that someone would break the cycle. But that isn't the case. Every single person on the planet sins. The cycle continues for everyone. This is because we are born sinful. Sin is not something we learn; it is who we are. It is not something we can overcome or avoid because it is endemic to being part of Adam's sinful race.

This is why the virgin birth of Jesus is so important. Had Jesus been conceived by human means, He would have been born sinful as a descendant of Adam. But because Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit, He was born without original sin. He then lived a sinless life, enabling Him to uniquely serve as our substitute.

While original sin is a difficult concept for us to grasp, it is not a new one. As a matter of fact, there was a time in our country when children learned to read and write using *The New England Primer*. They taught children the alphabet with simple statements that communicated important truths. When children learned the first letter of the alphabet, they also learned this phrase, "In Adam's fall, we sinned all."

Why Does This Matter?

The question, of course, is why does Paul emphasize this point? He is making a case for the greatness of what Jesus has accomplished by contrasting it with what Adam accomplished. He continues in verses 13-14,

¹³ Yes, people sinned even before the law was given. But it was not counted as sin because there was not yet any law to break. ¹⁴ Still, everyone died—from the time of Adam to the time of Moses—even those who did not disobey an explicit commandment of God, as Adam did. Now Adam is a symbol, a representation of Christ, who was yet to come. (Romans 5:13-14, NLT)

Paul explains that even before the law was given, people died. If people died, it was because they were sinners. But how can you be a sinner if you don't have the law? As we've already established, we are sinners by virtue of being part of Adam's race. But because of that, we break God's laws over and over, whether we realize it or not. It isn't until we get to Exodus 20 (halfway through the second book of the Bible) that God gives the written law to people. But everyone before that point was still sinful. They were cursed by Adam. Paul begins to explain that Adam is like Jesus, only completely opposite. That's the point he is driving toward.

Listen to what Paul says as he continues his argument,

¹⁵ But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. ¹⁶ And the result of God's gracious gift is very different from the result of that one man's sin. For Adam's sin led to condemnation, but God's free gift leads to our being made right with God, even though we are guilty of many sins. ¹⁷ For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But

even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ.

¹⁸ Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone.

¹⁹ Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:15-19, NLT)

Here Paul makes what is called an argument from the lesser to the greater. He points us to how Jesus and Adam are similar in many ways, chief of all that they both serve as representatives of the human race. But while their similarities are important, the more striking thing to note is their differences. Adam's actions brought death to the world; Jesus' actions brought life.

Now we must be careful here, because some people have distorted Paul's argument to mean something different than what he is saying. They have said that if Adam's death brought sin to everyone in the world, then Jesus' death brings life to everyone in the world. Their conclusion, then, is that everyone will ultimately be saved, they will be forgiven because Christ's sacrifice covers everyone.

There are elements of truth in this line of reasoning, but it misses important truths. First, notice what Paul said in v. 17. Paul said that all who receive God's grace and his gift of righteousness will live in triumph over sin and death through Jesus. Paul does not say that *all* will live in this triumph, but rather that *all who receive the gift* will do so. This is consistent with the teaching of the rest of scripture. Nowhere do the scriptures give any indication that everyone will be saved. Jesus was quite clear that some would face judgment and condemnation for their sin. He said that apart from Him, they would stand condemned. Only those who trust Jesus will be forgiven.

But this is the point Paul is trying to help us see—even though every one of us deserves condemnation, God has provided a way, through Jesus, for us to be forgiven! Adam's rebellion became our rebellion because we are "in Adam". We are born in Adam, but we must choose to be in Christ. But the good news is that if we are in Christ, then we are delivered from Adam's sin, and instead we are participants in Christ's righteousness! We move from sharing in Adam's sin, and instead share in Jesus' righteousness. We move from being children of Adam, to children of God. And this changes everything.

Paul's Point

Paul finally reaches the climax of his argument in the concluding verses of chapter 5,

²⁰ God's law was given so that all people could see how sinful they were. But as people sinned more and more, God's wonderful grace became more abundant.

²¹ So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's wonderful grace rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Romans 5:20-21, NLT)

Paul belabors the point that we are sinful because it is only against the backdrop of our sin that we can appreciate the magnitude of God's grace. He says that the point of God giving us the law was not to show us how to save ourselves by being good enough (because we can't, because we are sinful from the time we are conceived), but to show us just how sinful we truly are. It is kind of like an x-ray; it shows you what is wrong but doesn't fix the problem. It is easy to labor under the delusion that we are pretty good people until we are given an absolute standard against which to measure ourselves.

I have spent a lot of time at track meets lately. It is interesting to go to large meets and observe people running the same race in different heats. When you have a bunch of slow people running together, the one in the lead appears to be pretty fast. It is sometimes difficult to know who ran the fastest among 4 or 5 heats of racers. This is why they time the races. Times provide an absolute point of comparison. Sometimes it is amazing to go back and look at how the winner of a slower heat, who appeared to be running so fast, was actually many seconds slower than even the slowest person in the faster heats, and the winner was faster yet. When slow runners run against other slow runners, they look pretty fast. It is when we start looking at a standard like time that we can truly measure them.

In a similar way, we can convince ourselves that we are basically pretty good people until we look at God's law. We can try to compare ourselves to other "slow runners" and decide that we're much better than we are. But when we have the law, we begin to understand just how messed up we truly are. As we understand this, God's grace becomes that much more amazing to us. When people are not amazed by God's grace it is because they do not understand the depths of their own sin.

But when we see the depths of our depravity, the fact that God extends grace to us is truly astounding. We begin to get a sense for the magnitude of God's love for us in sending Jesus to provide the righteousness we lack, and to take on the punishment we earned. When we understand this, we understand how truly amazing God's grace really is.

I came across something I found helpful as I did my research this week. At the end of verse 20, Paul says that as our sin increased God's grace become more abundant. But the Greek word we translate as "abundant" is quite difficult to translate into English. The root of the word means abundant, or overflowing. It means there is more than enough, more than is needed. But Paul took that word that means overflowing or abundant grace and then put the word (or we would call it a prefix in English) "hyper" on the front of it, making a new word. The idea here is that God's grace is hyper-abundant, overflowing, more than sufficient to cover our sin and still have plenty left over.

If we can grasp this, it should change the way we live. It prevents us from looking at ourselves as worthy of God's love and grace, but rather, astounded by it. It should cause us to live with joy, with gratitude, and with wonder at a God who could love us. It should keep us from questioning whether God can still love us when we sin, because we see that His grace is "super-abundant"! It should cause us to love and worship the

“second Adam”, Jesus, who did the complete opposite of what Adam did for us. And we should follow Him, receiving the blessing He makes available.

Conclusion

We have talked about some deep theological concepts today. Some people bemoan spending time on theology, because “it doesn’t really matter.” I would argue to the contrary. What we believe has a profound impact on how we live and how we perceive the Lord and the world around us. So, what do we learn practically from the truths we’ve unpacked today?

First, we learn that humanity is sinful to its core. Many people in our world (some even in the church) believe that human beings can be perfected. They argue that we are simply sick and there is some sort of remedy to our illness. They believe that education, love, affirmation, or something else can make us better. But these verses remind us that our problem is not external, but internal. We don’t mess up because we need more education, love, or something else; we sin because we are sinners. This is true of every human being. We cannot fix this problem on our own.

Second, we are reminded that Jesus is our only hope. As we have seen repeatedly in Romans, all the solutions people come up with to the problem of sin fall short. There is only one solution. Just as our first father, Adam made us sinful, our second Father, Jesus, will make us righteous if we will embrace Him and follow Him. When we understand the contrast between these two representatives of the human race, we can understand how desperately we need Jesus.

Third, we should see the “super-abundant” grace of God. As Paul describes God’s grace in these verses we are reminded of an important truth—God’s grace is far greater than our sin. We sometimes imagine that God may get tired of our constant failures. We reason that, if the roles were reversed, we would be tired of someone as inconsistent and messed up as we are. The good news for us is that the roles are not reversed. In fact, Paul shows us that God’s grace is inexhaustible. This should not lead us to conclude that we can indulge our sinful desires because we are covered by God’s grace. What it should do, however, is offer us comfort in the inevitable times of failure. Satan will tell you that God cannot possibly still love you, that He must have turned His back on you, that He has surely had enough of your fickle faithfulness. Paul tells us otherwise. God’s grace is so much greater than we need, it is greater than we can imagine. So we can have confidence to run to Him over and over, even when we have failed, knowing that He extends grace once more. Understanding this should lead to a place of worship of God’s amazing grace.

I hope you understand these truths, not so you can impress people at your next dinner party, but because they are foundational to a proper understanding of the gospel message. If we can grasp these truths, we understand the greatness of our Savior, and the wonder of His grace.

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