



Wretched Man I Am

Introducing the struggle of the nature of man and sin.
by Don Hooton

Lesson 5 | Sin, Adam and Christ

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The subject of sin is seamlessly connected to the subject of the Bible story of redemption. And we must understand sin if we will understand salvation. And this week, we turn to the passage in Romans where Paul illustrates our need for the gospel because of the presence of death that spread to all men because of Adam.

Paul began the letter by stating that God is righteous and has been righteous in His purpose to bring redemption to the world through Jesus the Christ. Then, he shows how God's wrath has poured out against humanity because of their sinfulness (1:18). Pagans outside the Mosaic law had no excuse because God was manifest in creation; and the pagan, instead of worshipping God, worshipped the creation (1:18–32). The Jew was given the Law through Moses; but Jews also sinned and broke covenant in the Law, so they are also condemned.

No one is able to be saved without God; Gentiles have no excuse because, even with law written on their hearts, a conscience, they too stand condemned (2:17–29, 3:23) and Jews, with the Law, are sinners. The law will not redeem anyone; it can only turn sin into willful transgression (3:19). No one is righteous, and everyone is under condemnation.

However, God provided a means of justification through faith in Jesus Christ (3:21). Through Jesus' sacrifice we can be saved. Through one's own works, no one is righteous and no one can boast (3:22–29). Then, Paul uses Abraham as the prime example of how God has always justified His people. It was before circumcision (4:10) and consequently, before the Mosaic Law (4:13). And so, a person was justified through faith, and not by works. Those justified by faith are reconciled with God and freed from his wrath (5:1–11) and ultimate condemnation (8:1).

There is some disagreement about how Romans 5:12–21 fits into Paul's thought in the letter. I take the view, along with many commentaries, that verses 12b–17 constitute a parenthetical proof. In other words, Paul interrupts his main argument by going back to Genesis – the beginnings of human sin – in order to clarify it through the relationship between Adam and Christ, and comes back to his original argument at verse 18.

Paul argues that **death spread to all men because all sinned**, and **death reigned from Adam until Moses**, even in the absence of the Law to transgress as Adam transgressed God's command in Eden. They did not sin as Adam did – but they did sin. Paul calls Adam a type of Christ, a type in the sense of a person or thing prefiguring a person or thing. After noting that Adam is a type of Christ, Paul contrasts them rather than showing their similarities. Paul is contrasting *the effects* of their respective actions; Adam's disobedience resulted in death for all who came after him, and Christ's obedience resulted in the free gift of life for all who have faith in Him.

Christ's action is greater than Adam's for two reasons: first, it only took one sin to bring death to all men... Second, Christ's action produced a greater result; Adam's sin brought death, whereas Christ's sacrifice results in life for all who believe. Further, the gift in Christ's sacrifice came after centuries of sins. It is also greater in the result. Until this passage in Romans, Paul has used the terms Jew and Gentile. He discards these labels in this passage, having shown that all are equally under condemnation.

And among our previous discussions regarding *Original Sin* and *Calvinism*, this section has been the springboard in theology because it is said to teach that all people *are counted as sinful* because Adam



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sinned. This is the doctrine of original sin. These verses say that Adam's sin affected all humanity but not that all humanity bears Adam's sin. Paul's main point is *the contrast* between Adam and Christ. But what those who teach this approach to depravity say is that in verse 12, Paul says that everyone sinned when Adam sinned, because his sin counted for all his descendants. Because of what he did, we all sin and die. And they will then continue to say that just as *we receive guilt* from Adam, so also our guilt is given to Jesus, and his death counts for ours. They will say that we were represented by Jesus on the cross, just as we were represented by Adam when he sinned.

So, let's reconsider and look at what the text says: "Therefore" (5:1) connects to the previous chapter where it is the faith of Abraham shows future generations God calls us to have faith like he had (4:23). Having such a faith where God justifies us brings the following, he says: 1) "*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*" Paul is not talking about a subjective peace ("peace of mind") but about the relational peace which is the absence of hostility between us and God. Before, I was an enemy of God (though He still loved me! cf. 5:8). But now, through the act of God in Christ, we can be a friend of God. We have access to God's grace; grace is the basis of our salvation, it is the source of all our blessings. That's why Paul says we "stand" in it. Without grace we would never have opportunity to exercise faith. *Grace is the basis of our hope, faith is the means of appropriating it for ourselves.* And 2) we "rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (2). A person who is truly at peace with God can endure any affliction. This hope does not disappoint because it is based in the love of God. Again, Paul says that we exult in God because we have received *the reconciliation* (v. 11). And, he adds, if He does that for His enemies, will He not do much more for His friends (v. 10)?! "Saved by His life" (v. 10) refers to Christ's *intercession or mediation* for His people (cf. Hebrews 7:16, 25).

But in the section we are considering above, Paul diverts the flow of thought with the contrasts he makes with two representatives, Adam and Christ. Adam represents sinful man because he ushered in the rule of death through sin and all have followed him. But Christ came and proved that grace is greater than our sin – "much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many" (v. 15). Paul's point is not to show *the origin* of sin; it is to show *the fact* of sin and the fact of its remedy (the gospel of grace) with the emphasis on the latter. The first man Adam sinned and is therefore a *fitting representative of all men who have sinned* (note Paul's use of Adam as a representative in I Cor. 15 also). Death came to all men "because all sinned."

What kind of death is Paul talking about? It is true that physical death came into the world upon Adam's sin (see Genesis 3:19) but that is the context of Romans 15. Here the context is the death that "reigned from Adam to Moses;" this resulted from violations of law. Even in 5:13, Paul says that law is a prerequisite to sin. Hence, law (or moral law as some define it) has always been in force. Moses' law was a codified system that came in *and increased sin* by providing more codes to be governed by (5:20). So, humanity was dead because they had sinned and were under condemnation, deserving the wrath of God.

What we inherited from our physical forefather, Adam, *was a world into which he introduced sin*, not his sin (5:14). Death came because all sinned, not because Adam sinned (c.f. 5:12). All who have followed Adam's lead, are committing "many transgressions" (5:16); and it is resulting in their death. Even before Adam's trespass hurled humanity into the orbit of sin, God had a remedy prepared (cf. Romans 8:28-30; Ephesians 1:4-11). To explain the remedy, Paul introduced these contrasts between Adam's act and Christ's act. Adam, as representative of every man, *introduced the rule of death into the human family*; Christ *introduced the rule of life* (2Timothy 1:10; 1John 5:11- 13).

The point Paul is making here is simply that grace and life, introduced through Christ, is much greater than the sin and death that was introduced by Adam. It is "much more."



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When we come to chapter seven, there are at least three possible interpretations:

- (1) Paul describes his own present experience;
- (2) Paul describes his life prior to conversion, when he lived under the law as a Jew;
- (3) Paul is using a rhetorical device “I” to make his argument and is describing a person who is attempting to, in good conscience, keep the law.

If the law is unable to save us and if it only serves to arouse our passions toward sin, then one might think that the law itself is sin. Again, however, Paul is emphatic: **Certainly not!** If law were a bad thing, then Paul wouldn’t have been convicted by the law as a sinner (5:7). Instead, Paul says that the law is good but then asks, “has what is good become death to me?”

When he reaches his conclusion at the end of the chapter, he says: *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with my mind I myself am serving the law of God, but with my flesh, the law of sin”* (7:24-25).

The following are notes on the struggle of interpreting Romans 7 by David Posey:

I’ll begin with some words from Leon Morris (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, page 276): “First, we should be clear that Paul is writing about the law, not trying to answer the questions that modern people ask. The passage is not primarily a piece of autobiography or a psychological study of the Christian experience. It is a sustained treatment of the place of the law.”

The context, which starts at least back in chapter 6, seems to support Morris’ statement. Chapter 7 is not about “sinning in spite of ourselves.” In chapter 6, in fact, Paul denied that we should sin for any reason, implying that sin is something totally within our control. We choose to present our bodies as slaves, either to sin, or to righteousness (6:16-17). The reality of being “under grace” should make our decision an easy one – we will present our members as “slaves to righteousness” (6:18).

In the first part of chapter 7, Paul uses an illustration from marriage to demonstrate that we are not bound (married) to the law anymore. Instead, we have died to the law (the “oldness of the letter”) and have been joined to another (Christ) so that we can bear fruit and serve in the “newness of the Spirit” (7:6). Thus far in Romans, most of the talk about the law has been negative because Paul is arguing that the only way to be saved through law is by keeping all of it, without even one miss. Because of this, some might conclude that the law itself is sin. Paul says “may it never be!” (7:7) and proceeds to develop an argument which demonstrates the value of the law. In doing so, he chooses to speak in the first person. In a study by Werner Kümmel, referenced by Douglas Moo in his Commentary on Romans, page 452, it was shown that ego (in Greek, the first person singular verb) could be used as a rhetorical device without any personal reference intended at all (cf. Rom. 3:7). So the use of the first person, in itself, is not decisive for determining the meaning of this passage.

In 7:7-13, Paul argues that the law (or “commandment”) is good (v. 12) because without it, he wouldn’t have known about sin. Coveting, for example, is a sin all have committed, but how would one know about coveting except there was a law which defined it as sin? Paul made this point earlier in Romans: “For through the law comes the knowledge of sin” (3:20). Law defines sin as sin (violation of God’s revealed will; “missing the mark”). But Paul affirms another function, or effect, of law: it gives sin its life — “apart from the law, sin is dead” (7:8). That does not make the law sin, but law gives sin the opportunity to do its evil work. Without law, sin cannot exist. Using the example of coveting, Paul says that the sin of coveting took the opportunity created by the law against coveting and produced coveting in him of every kind. Does that mean the law against coveting is bad and therefore should bear the blame when we die spiritually? Of course not! (7:13). It is sin



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that kills us, through the commandment (because without the commandment, there is no sin). Paul is simply establishing the difficulty of living under law, even though the law itself is holy and righteous and good (7:12).

So Paul, then, argues that the law functions as an identifier of sin (7:13). This holy, righteous and good law is the revealed will of God. So this law — whether the moral law of God or the Law of Moses — identifies any transgression of it as sin, as a missing of the mark of God. It is not just a civil or common law code, but transgression against God himself. Therefore sin is “utterly sinful” (7:13).

From verse 14 on, Paul begins what must be a description of the misery of a man living under a law system. He desires to do good, but is unable to do so, because the law keeps driving him further away from God. It's like a nail in wood, with the law as the hammer. Each blow from the hammer (the law as it is violated) drives the nail deeper into the wood. Even if the blows should stop (by living a sinless life from that point on) there is still no way out of the wood. Years of living perfectly could not make up for the sins of the past. All you can do is cry, “wretched man that I am, who will save me from the body of this death!” (v. 24).

I do not believe this refers to Paul, either in his life as a Christian or before he became a Christian. The language here does not cohere with his statement of Acts 23:1 that he had lived all his life in good conscience. The person described here has a miserable conscience! He knew the right thing to do, but didn't do it! (cf. James 4:17). This is important: he seems unable to do good, no matter how hard he tries, and he is all too aware of his failings. When Paul was living as a strict Pharisee, he did so in good conscience, not second-guessing himself. He thought he “must do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth” (Acts 26:9), but he had always endeavored “to have a conscience without offense toward God and men” (Acts 24:16). Paul was far from distraught during his life as a Jew while this text is describing a man who is tormented by his failure to keep the law. It has to refer to a different kind of person. However, I'm not convinced that this passage is talking about the average regenerate person either. There may be some comfort in thinking that Paul is describing the Christian life here, that, in reality, we are powerless to keep from sinning (and isn't that what these verses are saying?). This text describes the flesh as winning handily over the spirit. In fact, if this text refers to the Christian, Paul all but says that sin is not really his fault, but just “the way he is” (7:17). Read Romans 6:11-23 and 8:5-8 — does that sound like the same Paul? Or is something else going on here?

There is a battle between spirit and flesh (Galatians 5:17). But if the Christian life is a losing battle against the flesh, we're doomed — we might as well jump feet first back into the world! If Paul is not saying that, what is he saying? The use of the first person to make a dramatic point is a not an uncommon literary device. The subject is law. Paul is looking with the eyes of faith back to the time when he was “under law.” His perspective is not that of a self-righteous Jew, but of a person who wishes there were a better way. He knows that the law is good because when he does that which he wishes not to do, he confesses that it is good, and that his predicament! (7:16). If he was like the “good Jew,” who was keeping the law as defined by Judaism or, like pagans who were ignorant of the law, he would at least feel better. But in Romans 7, Paul is viewing himself as a man living under law and realizes the folly of trying to please God in that state. So, while he wishes to do good, sin indwells him (7:17) because he has found no way out from under the crushing burden of law. For this “Paul,” the law-sin principle defines his spiritual life and he's miserable. Eventually, as he continues to compare his deeds with the demands of law, he realizes that nothing good dwells in him, that is, in his flesh. He wishes to do good (that is, fulfill the law) but he cannot achieve it (v. 18-19) — the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.