

Romans 5:12-21
(Genesis 5:1-3; John 3:16-17)
“Two Families”

Introduction

We have all asked the question: Why pain and suffering? Why must children die? Why does peace never last? Why the absurdity of death that laughs at all our hopes and dreams? Paul has just finished telling us that through Jesus Christ we have been reconciled to God. He now explains how this relates to the whole question of life and death, and in the process he makes an argument that levels the kinds of illegitimate distinctions we are so fond of making. He tells us that it doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor, powerful or weak, educated or illiterate; it doesn't matter whether our ancestors came here on the Mayflower or as human cargo on a slave ship. Every one of us belongs to one of two families. We are all born into the human family, descended from the first human beings. Some of us are reborn into the family of God by grace through faith in God's Son, Jesus Christ. And at the end of the day, our eternal destiny depends upon which of those two families we belong to.

Some of you may be questioning whether Paul's argument is merely metaphorical, or whether it really matters whether or not there was a historical Adam. Clearly, nothing in science contradicts the idea that we are descended from common ancestors. “All human beings share the same anatomy, physiology and chemistry, and the same genes” (John Stott). John Stott has put it like this:

Adam ... was a special creation of God, whether God formed him literally “from the dust of the ground” and then “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” or whether this is the biblical way of saying that he was created out of an already existing hominid. *The vital truth we cannot surrender is that, though our bodies are related to the primates, we ourselves in our fundamental identity are related to God* (emphasis added).

In these verses, Paul both contrasts and compares the vast and far-reaching consequences of Adam's disobedience and of Christ's obedience. We should be careful not to miss the essential point that lies at the heart of the text: namely, that the brokenness of humanity lies, not in each individual's unique way of manifesting that brokenness, but rather in our organic solidarity as members of the human family; and likewise, that for the Christian, our peace with God and hope of eternal life are found, not in anything unique to us as individual believers, but rather in our union with Christ and our spiritual solidarity with one another in Christ.

This means that there is no one on earth whom we should despise as if they were by nature worse than we are, nor should we take pride in ourselves as if anything good we do is because of our own native goodness. It is all a matter of whether we are merely Adam's children by birth, or God's children by grace. Which family is yours?

Body

1. Consider, first, the organic solidarity of the human family.

This solidarity is presupposed by the entire text, summarized in verse 18: “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.” This flies in the face of our western views of individualism, the idea that what I do is my own affair, as long as I don’t hurt someone else. Of course, other cultures – Asian, African and Latin – understand better than we the inter-relatedness of family and community, and that whatever I do will eventually come round to affect you.

Consider the families who have sent children off to war, and especially those whose children are casualties of war. They did not decide to invade Iraq or Afghanistan. But they are citizens of a nation whose leaders decided to do so. Consider the children of prisoners or children born with AIDS or Hepatitis, or addicted to cocaine, simply because of things done by or to their parents. Villagers fleeing bombs likely had no part in the issues that brought war to their land. We are interconnected across family and tribe and tongue. We are one great family of Adam’s children and the sooner we understand the awful ramifications of that fact, the sooner we can understand the remedy.

2. Consider, secondly, the devastating consequences of human sin.

We tend to think of sins rather than of sin, and we categorize sins into those we consider minor and those we consider major. Then we accept or reject people depending on whether we think them minor or major sinners. This is not how Jesus saw or treated people. Sins (plural) are simply symptoms or manifestations of the disease the Bible calls sin (singular). Sin is, at the heart, choosing my will over God’s will. It manifests itself in unbelief and disobedience. But at the heart, it is choosing what I want over what God wants for me. Adam did this in choosing to take something God said was not for him to take and in eating what God said he was not to eat. And each one of us has done the same, not once, but over and over again.

But here is the difference between our sin and Adam’s sin. He represented us before God and what he did has affected every one of us. Back in the 1860s my father’s grandfathers chose to cast their lot with the South, and as a consequence, the family never recovered the wealth it lost in the war. My father had not yet been born. But his life, and that of his extended family, and even in some ways my life, were all affected by the decisions made by our forefathers.

In the case of Adam, the consequences were these: Sin – that is rebellion against God – entered human history through our first parent as surely as cocaine enters a addict's child *in utero* through her mother's awful choice. Through sin, both condemnation and death entered the world, alienation from God leading to both physical and spiritual death. And so we all are born bearing the awful consequences of Adam's rebellion: we sin, we are alienated from God who is the source of everything we long for – love, beauty, justice, intimacy, joy – and we die. And the law of God simply "increases the trespass," by showing us what it looks like to love God and love one another, and by showing us how often and how terribly we fail to do so.

But the heart of the text is not about Adam's disobedience, but about Jesus Christ's obedience, not about condemnation but about reconciliation, not about death but about life.

3. Consider, thirdly, the far greater consequences of God's grace.

Paul writes, "But the free gift was not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many" (5:15). And he will repeat over and over again the idea that Adam's disobedience cannot compare to Christ's obedience. If condemnation followed one act of disobedience, we would expect even greater condemnation to follow an entire history of disobedience. But because of Christ's obedience, the daily acts of disobedience by God's people down through the ages are all forgiven, and through that one obedient life, we who are in him by grace through faith are no longer under condemnation, but are justified, are no longer spiritually dead, but are alive, no longer face a prospect of judgment and death, but of fellowship and eternal life in Christ.

Note one of the most encouraging ways that Paul describes this: As members of the human family, we are said to be under the reign of death (5:17). But now, as members of God's family, we are said to "reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ" (5:17). We now reign over that which once reigned over us. Why should we go around depressed and cast down? Why should we ever live in fear?

And we also see the greater consequences of grace in this: in the scope of salvation. Both John Calvin and Charles Hodge, as well as many other commentators, have observed that Paul's use of "all" and "many" should assure us that the number saved will be far greater than the number lost, for the consequences of grace are so much greater than the consequences of sin. You may be thinking, "But didn't Jesus himself say that the way to destruction is broad and many find it, while the way to life is narrow and few find it?" "Yes, but when asked by his disciples who then will be saved, Jesus answered that with men it is not merely hard but impossible. The fact is that no one

finds the way to life, and no one enters on the path to life, except through the grace of the One who is “the way, and the truth, and the life.” But the grace of God is majestic and powerful, and we should pursue mission in the confidence that our God is mighty to save, and that through the obedience of the one man Jesus Christ, “many will be made righteous” (5:19).

4. Consider, finally, the spiritual solidarity of God’s family.

Our unity with each other is a consequence of our unity in Christ. We were born in organic solidarity with the human family, sharing its beauty and its brokenness, its rebellion, condemnation and death. We have been placed by grace into a new family, the family of God, and have been made heirs of all that is his: peace with God, abundant life now, and eternal life in the future. The family of man will tend to believe or not believe the story of God’s grace to the degree that we love one another well and lovingly serve them well, even as Jesus so graciously gave up glory to find us and lead us home to the Father’s house.

Conclusion

Which family do you belong to this morning? Have you been brought from death to life? If you are God’s child, do you realize that you are united to Christ and united to the family of God? Everything you and I do affects so many others. How can we who have been delivered from sin still live in it?

If because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ (5:17).

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