

Romans 5:12-21

An Exposition
By Daniel Thompson

Romans 5:12-21, An Exposition

Of all the interesting parts (and off-times difficult!), Romans 5 as a whole is the most straightforward. That being said, part two, verses 12 through 21, is more than just difficult – it is tough to explain why Paul would take up Adam at this point; 1 Corinthians 15, I think I can understand...but Romans 5?!

Introduction

Paul has just finished Romans chapters 1-4, accomplishing an exposition and basis for his gospel. First, in verses 1-15, he has introduced himself and the gospel that he will come, Lord willing, and preach to them also. Second, he gives the essential truth of the gospel he preaches, which, through faith, grants to us an alien righteousness – the “righteousness of God” – and this is through the power of God in Christ Jesus as the Scriptures attest (Hab 2:4).

Thirdly, Paul shows why this righteousness is something needed by the Gentile people because of their unrighteousness, (1:18-32). Fourthly, Paul establishes the principles of God’s judgment which the righteous judge will impartially apply in his universal courtroom on the last day according to Paul’s gospel (2:1-16). Fifthly, Paul displays the unrighteousness of the people who had both law and privilege, the Jews (2:17-3:8), and thus have the same need of righteousness as the Gentiles.

Sixth, Paul shows/summarizes the universal need of the righteousness of God through grace (3:9-20); and Paul's penultimate point number seven, the gospel's essential definition which he sketched in 1:16-17 -- (3:21-31). Lastly, in chapter 4, Paul concludes by showing the Gospel is not only not contrary to law (cf. 3:31), but that the Old Testament – in particular the history and truths of Abraham's life and David's Psalm 32 – testifies to the truths of the gospel of grace *and not* to its first century perversion, the gospel of work's righteousness (4:1-25; comp. 10:2-3).

Thus, the Romans chapters 1-4 look like this:

- I. Romans Introduction – 1:1-15
- II. Theme of the Book, the righteousness of God thru faith – 1:16-17
 - A. Gentile need of righteousness – 1:18-32
 - B. Judgment in righteousness – 2:1-16
 - C. Jewish need of righteousness – 2:17-3:8
 - D. Conclusion, universal need of righteousness – 3:9-20
 - E. Exposition of God's righteousness in Christ – 3:21-31
 - F. Proof that OT and NT righteousness are the same – 4:1-25

Now we come to chapter 5, and from the wording of verse one it seems clear that Paul wants us to grasp the wondrous fruit of having the righteousness of God in Christ and not ourselves: “Therefore being justified by faith, **we have peace** with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also **we have access** by faith into this grace wherein we stand, **and (we) rejoice** in the hope of the glory of God.”

It is further clear in *part 1* of the two parts of Romans 5 (5:1-11; 5:12-21), that the emphasis is on the **sure, unfailing access** of former sinners – now justified saints - into Christ's love and grace; note: “Christ *died for the ungodly*” (v6); “God *commended His love...while we were yet sinners...how much more...shall we be saved*” (vv8-9); “if we were enemies...*much more shall we be saved*” (v10); “and not only so...**now** we have received the (this) reconciliation” (v11).

But now, what of verses 12 through 21? If Paul has something to prove, what is it, and how would Adam and his

sordid history augment both the doctrines of 3:9-5:11, and whatever encouragement that Paul wants the Roman Christians to understand and rejoice over in chapter 5?

Introduction – vv12-21

It is an interesting fact, that if you want to know Paul's points or themes, you need only look at questions asked, conclusions drawn, vocabulary used (or not used) and other such simple, normal writing methods to uncover the truths he is trying to make. For Paul and verses 12 thru 21, it is his conclusion that gives us direction: "That as sin has reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (v21)."

So then, Paul wants to show through his exposition of the last part of Romans 5 three issues: first, sin and death reigned in the human race thru Adam; second, grace came and reigns thru Christ Jesus; and third, all who are now in Christ have a reign of grace greater and more abundant than the sin/death that reigned when they were in Adam.

In other words, just as vv1-11 ***unfailing forgiveness and assurance*** is the theme of God's grace thru Christ's blood – as expounded in places like verse 10; "much more...we SHALL BE SAVED," in verses 12-21, we meet with the theme and truth of God's bringing ***triumphant*** grace (cf. v21) over the Adamic curse that has been the ruin of all men.

In short, in part 1 of chapter 5 (vv1-11) we get ***assured forgiveness*** - and that "now" (v11) in faith and continuing in the assurance of the sweet, divine, and glorious mercies through the Spirit (v5); so also in part 2 of chapter 5 (vv12-21), we receive through Paul's pen and argument the ***assured triumph of conquering grace*** over Adamic sin – that being proven by both Paul's conclusion (5:20f) and inferred by the following question in chapter six (6:1).

Verse 12

Here in verse 12, Paul is describing the bad news in all men – that all men are fallen (i.e. dead in sin) in Adam. Thus Paul says bluntly it is “by one man” sin enters the world. The issuance of this sin is that it; 1) through Adam sin spreads to all men in that Adam** is the father of all men, and 2) the wages of sin is death (Rom 6:23), so it is not just sin that spreads but “death by sin” that descends upon the world through Adam. Thus, by Adam’s transgression of God’s command in the garden, you and I have the pollution of sin, and therefore death pervades the whole human population such that Paul can state further in his argument “death (by sin) reigned” (vv12, 14, 17).

This leads to the conclusion that Paul draws after his discourse on the entry of sin and thus the entry/spread of sin/death – that conclusion being “all sinned” (v12d). This is the obvious confirmation of the claim that sin/death entered and “passed” to all men – the proof being that all men do actually sin.

Now men of old have taken “all sinned” as meaning either the truth(s) given above (e.g. thru Adam, the proof that sin/death spread is that all actually sinned), or the meaning of “all sinned” might mean that we all are *represented* by Adam just as we are *represented* by Christ, so just as Christ’s righteousness becomes ours via His representing us, so Adam’s guilt is ours as he represents us in a similar way. Now since verses 15-17 make it clear the two men’s works are parallel in Paul’s illustration, and then it must be Christ-→righteousness |parallel to| Adam-→guilt.

I will try to show that the parallelism expounded through the exposition of verses 13-14 (which verses are intended to elucidate verse 12d, “all sinned”) **does not** favor that particular historic parallelism.

Regardless, in concluding verse 12, it is clear that Adam’s sin lead to the transmission of sin, and via each man’s individual sin to death for all men – the undeniable proof of Paul’s v12 argument being that all men *do* both sin and die.

** Many expositors and everyday Christian’s have understandably asked why Eve is not the “author” of sin’s

occasion rather than Adam, for she certainly sinned first and thus sin entered via her in *some* way. But there are two of God's great works that show that the fall is passed on through Adam even though Eve is chronologically the original sinner. First is the virgin birth. There are two "seeds" that make up the birth of man (Genesis 3:15 [woman]; 38:9 [man]). It is clear from the Holy Spirit's replacement of Adam's seed by the Spirit's created seed (Luke 1:35), that the fallen/sinful nature comes through the man. Thus Seth is born in *Adam's* likeness (Gen 5:3; comp Gen 1:27) – as are all subsequent humans.

Secondly, our Lord underwent no bodily corruption in the grave, and thus since we know spiritually He did no sin (1 Pet 2:22; 2 Co 5:21; 1 Jn 3:4 etc.), the incorruption relates to the human nature of Christ born of the virgin which, because of the Spirit's work in conception – "that which is **conceived** of thee" (Mt 1:20) – was a pure human, post-Adamic nature (see Acts 2:25ff; 13:33ff for the resurrection/non-corruption issue of Christ's death). In other words, in God's separating the seeds by taking and making woman out of and separate from Adam, Christ was both truly from Adam, and yet truly *not* inheriting the Adamic/diseased nature. It is an historic fact **of Christ alone** and his birth that to a woman it was said... "**that HOLY thing/one born of thee...**" (Luke 1:35).

Verse 13

Before we go on to verse 13, we need to have clear in mind the flow of thought (e.g. outline) of Paul's writing in Romans 5:12-21. It is agreed by all that because Paul uses the phrase "as" (i.e. "just as") in verse 12, he means to finish his thought with *the contrast* which begins "even so." It is further agreed that this finishing is done in verse 18: "Therefore (just like v12) **as** by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, **even so** by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all unto justification of life." This means that vv13-17 is a break in thought to explain certain issues that have arisen. Paul will do the same in Romans 7. He ends verse 6 on the "newness of the

Spirit,” but feels that two issues must be clarified before continuing in the Spiritual life, and so he asks and answers two clarifying questions in 7:7-12 and 7:13-8:3 before going on to the Spirit’s work. The same clarifying is occurring here, but instead of the question/answer format, he uses the digression-parenthetical format. Thus, Romans 5:12-21 outline:

A1.1 Adamic sin/death leading to “all sin” – v12

A1.1a. (Prove that “all sin”) – vv13-14,[digression 1]

A1.1b. [Explain “type”v14b Adam/Christ is *unequal*] – vv15-17[digression 2]

A1.12 Return to “just as” with “so/even so”v12 ----> v18-19

A1.2 Conclusion – vv20-21

So as we move into verse 13, we must remember that v13 is a proof that the conclusion of v12 - “all sinned” because of the entrance of sin in Adam - is accurate. Now how does Paul do this? He has already shown that thru Adam and his garden sin that this sin entered and was passed to all his posterity. But added to this is that the wages of sin is death, and so both sin, and its partner death, passed to all men...so he concludes v12 with:

Romans 5:12d (last phrase)

Greek

“upon which all sinned” or “all sinned because (of) *this*”

“*This*,” of course, being Adam’s sin.

Now the Greek phrase “*ἐκ τῆς ἁμαρτίας*” is found three more times (per: D. Moo) in the New Testament, followed by eight other times in the Old Testament Greek LXX. Further, followed by “all sinned,” the most basic translation is all sinned “*because of this*” (e.g. Adam’s action). Moreover, verse 12 is followed by a further evidentiary explanation. That is (v13), before the law (Sinai), sin was in the world, even though this Bible tool that attests to sin - the law (see Rom 3:20; 5:20; 7:7; Gal 3:19) - was not in the world. Yet, although the tool of displaying/showing sin was not there, **the fruit (death), and thus the root *was* there (e.g. sin)**. Thus if death was there prior to law, then sin must have been there, and if sin was there, then verse 12d is true and all did sin - Adam’s sin causing the entrance and spread of sin to all men – and thus Paul has proven v12, and especially v12d, is theologically acknowledged and established.

As a side note, in verse 13, Paul says “sin is not imputed where there is no law,” and many who comment on verse 13 stumble in their exposition, failing to point out that the word translated “impute” is a word that **is not** the normal word translated “impute” in Romans. Indeed, this word, *λογίζω*, is used just one other time in the New Testament in an extremely interesting context. In the book of Philemon verse 18, Paul uses this word in the phrase: “if he (Onesimus) has wronged you, or owes you anything, put that on my account,” or literally, “to me, *log it*.” In other words, the Greek of Romans 5:13 means to ledger something so as to be seen, known and thus *accounted for* in regards to future action.

Thus Paul is trying to show that even without the law to make clear the act of sin, his statement in verse 12 that the doctrine of Adam’s sin bringing both sin and death to mankind is absolutely proven even without God’s ordained mechanism (law) that makes this truth evident. Before Moses and the law, such incidents as the flood and Sodom showed without doubt man sinned and brought death via its origin in Adam. This is why Paul will start verse 14 with “nevertheless (i.e. in spite of no law to display sin) death (and therefore sin) reigned even prior to Moses, and that Adamic sin was the source.

Verse 14

From what was said previous, verse 14 should almost be self-explanatory. Even though law, and thus the power of sin was unseen, what is clear is that death reigned – which means sin reigned – which means Paul’s statement regarding Adam, sin, and death is true (v12). But in case one does not yet see sin and death reigning thru Adam prior to the law, Paul uses an example of known law like the 10 commandments (the law given to Adam about the tree), and even though men did not sin against the law of Sinai, which had not been given, Adam did sin against the command akin to the 10 (the command ‘not to eat’), and thus mankind between Adam and Moses and the truth/law, still sinned, died, and both sin and death reigned just as Paul declared thru Adam.

Now Paul adds a point of contrast to sin and death thru the Last Adam, the second man – Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Co 15:45,47) - and it is this; that just as Adam is the author of the sin-death syndrome which came to all men, there is a similar man – a type/figure of Adam (v14) – not bringing sin/death, but the essence of the good news, grace and life. This is the One who has turned Adam’s disease unto good news through an obedient act – Calvary (see Jn 10:17-18). Note the words Paul will use of Christ in contrast to Adam: grace, gift, justification, righteousness, life. But the most important point in Paul’s mind for us to see, is that as he contrasts Adam and Christ in verse 14, he does not want his readers to think the two are equal. The grace, gift, justification, righteousness, and life brought by Christ super-abounds over the damage of Adam. As an example, note verse 16. By Adam’s **one** offense men were condemned, BUT, in Christ, even with many offenses, He still brings life and justification!!

So Paul must pause a second time lest people get the idea that because Christ is a type of Adam, that the figure is one-to-one – equal. Christ’s work far outstrips and has more than

abundantly repaired the sin of Adam. So Paul pauses to show this superiority in verses 15 thru 17.

Verses 15-17

Here is a three verse comparison of Adam to Christ - in particular how Christ and His work is superior to Adam and his work, so as we compare we shall conclude that we have all the blessings of Romans 5:1ff and more because Christ and His work is not just parallel but *superior* to Adam. In Adam, we have his work – the “ :” that is, “offense(s),” 5:16, 17, 18, 19, 20; “trespass,” Matt 6:14, 15; “sins,” Eph 1:7 etc. It is that disobedience encountered in verse 12 which led to death.

But in Christ, Paul states, there is “much more” (v15c), and this is why Paul begins the Adamic/Christ parallel in this vv15-17 section by “**But NOT** as the offense, so...the free gift,” v15a. Moreover, to give adequate force to the language of Christ work, Paul must call our Lord’s righteous act at Calvary “gift,” “free gift,” and “grace.” It “*abounds*” by this one man Christ Jesus. This is why although the impact of Adamic sin in verse 12 was tremendous, yet for Paul the only words that are adequate in the comparison of Adam’s fall to Christ’s sacrifice on that hill far away is “much more!” – v15b.

Further, in verse 16, through one man’s sin much tragedy descended upon the human race. Yet again, Paul points to the obvious whereby the Roman reader would see the *much more* again in Christ and grace vs. Adam and sin. In the case of verse 16, it is that although through one sin, sinful havoc reigned, Paul makes it clear that Christ’s gift of grace thru the merciful act of the cross Jesus dealt with both Adam’s entrance transgression but more, he states, the free gift extended to the *many subsequent offenses* born of our fallen nature in forgiveness! We are condemned in Adam, but the cross was unto many offenses unto our justification! Marvelous grace of our loving Lord; grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!

Verse 17 says something quite important when we speak of Christ, Adam, and the differences in their work and how it impacts sinners. With Adam, sin and death came thru him and

passed upon all men without any consent on their part. Thru Adam, sin entered the world, and the father of the human race passed his image and nature (see again Gen 5:3 vs. 1:26f) such that Psalm 51 could say with complete honesty: “I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.” In Christ though, verse 17 says that the “much more” of grace and the “abundance” of Christ’s gift belong to “**they which receive...**” We are accepted by faith into the wealth of God’s gift and grace of righteousness as opposed to the Adamic sin being passed to us through no “acceptance” but rather birth.

Adam’s work bestowed upon us sinfulness which led all men to sin--→condemnation--→death (v19), whereas like in Peter (Matt 16:16ff), the Father open our blind eyes and bestowed faith (Eph 2:8-9) such that we desired to receive the abundant grace which led to life – all in and thru Christ Jesus.

NOTE: I want to reemphasize the “received” by the sinner because many in the reform view (in most ways the most accurate view of Biblical truth) have made the mistake in verse 12d by stating that “because all sinned” means that all sinned in Adam who acted on our behalf and as our representative as Christ acted as our representative. That is, just as Christ act of mercy is for all he represents (the elect), so this is the parallel to Adam’s acts of sin are for all he represents (mankind) – thus, “all sinned (v12d)” means “all sinned *in Adam’s sin.*” But although we do inherit a weak, fallen nature (cf. Rom 8:3) from Adam, Paul’s parallel is not Adam’s actions are ours by representation as Christ’s are for all who “receive” (e.g. the elect). The latter IS true, but the parallel is Adam/brought/sin, as opposed to Christ/brought/righteousness. And although it is true that all who remain in Adam continue in sin and death if there is no repentance, Adam’s sin in the garden (v14) was not “imputed” to his posterity – making v12d read as though “all sinned” means all sinned in Adam. Verse 12d was to prove (as vv13-14 do), that Adam’s transgression really did spread to all men *seminally*, not representatively.

Men who receive the gift are justified in Christ (v17).

Verse 18

Having finished the digressions of explaining the “all sinned” of v12d (vv13-14), and the “type of Him” in v14c (vv15-17), Paul must link back up with v12 and finish his “just as Adam...” which lacks the comparative “even so in Christ...”. This is what v18 completes. If I might combine all of v12 with v18 (I will put v12 in parentheses), Paul states: “Therefore as through (one man and) one man’s sin (sin unto the world came and) to all men (entered) unto condemnation, thus (e.g. even so) also, through one man’s righteousness act, came to all men who received (cf.v17) - righteousness of life.”

Here now is the parallel Paul had in mind all along. Again to repeat, this is also where most errors of Romans 5:12-21 are made – the parallel. What is the contrast Paul has in mind in the Adam/Christ contrast? The Puritan answer was almost unanimous. It was just as Adam was the representative of mankind, Christ was the representative of those the Father gave to Him (Jn 6:37-39; 17:2). So, just as Adam’s sin was imputed to those whom he represented (mankind), thus Christ’s righteousness was imputed to those whom He represented (the elect).

But here the great Puritans were mistaken as proven both from the concluding remarks of Paul’s words here (v21), and the implications of his question in the next section (6:1). Further, the word “impute” and its cognate words are not part of Paul’s Romans 5 exposition. Thus, the Pauline objective is made unmistakable in the concluding remarks of Romans 5:12-21: “That as sin has reigned unto death, even so might grace reign unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord (v21).”

Moreover, Romans 6:1 establishes what Paul proved in Romans 5:21-21 by the truth implied in his question: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?” It is without controversy that to word the issue/objection of 6:1 in such a fashion assumes Paul had proven in 5:12-21 **that grace did indeed abound!**

Thus, in verse 18, Paul expounds that as through Adam sin entered and sin/death passed unto **all men** – and the result, condemnation – was true even prior to this fact being evidenced by the law. But in Christ, we have a reversal for all who have received His abundant grace (v17) by virtue of the gift of His righteous act on Calvary's hill – reigning grace unto justification.

NOTE: The “all men” in the context of vv12, 18 (note Paul everywhere else uses “many”) is “all” in the decadency of Adam,” and in verse 18 it is the “all” who in verse 17 “have *received*” in Christ. This is the reason “all” instead of “many” is found where it is. I believe the puritan exposition of the all/many issue in Romans five leads to needless confusion doctrinally – one of the very few occasions!

Verse 19

Verse 19 reiterates the parallelism and truths of Adam and Christ with some other words in the mix. In verse 18 we have Adam's “offense,” in verse 19 we have “disobedience.” On the other hand, expounding Christ's work we have “righteousness” or “righteous act” changed to “obedience.” In verse 18, the emphasis is on the actions of Adam/Christ, in verse 19 the emphasis is the result of the actions of Adam/Christ.

The problem we have in verse 19 is the Greek word *ποιέω*, translated in the KJV as “made” (e.g. thru Adam's disobedience we are made sinners, but through Christ's obedience we are made righteous**). This can give the idea that we are right with God, not because of the gift of Christ's righteousness, but rather because we are made righteous and thus accepted by God – all of which is contrary to Phil 3:5ff; Rom 3:24ff; Gal 3:15-29; etc.,etc!

But the above Greek word mainly carries the idea of “to appoint” as to an office or position, and in our situation it is more the idea of a declaration of rightness or justness or of a position of rectitude or standing **in Christ** and **His work**. Thus, the abundance of grace spoken of in Christ's righteous act (v18), and 2) By Christ obedience to God vs. Adam's disobedience, our

standing before God is not of a sinner but of a righteous man, Christ having negated both the initial power of the Adamic offence in the garden as expressed in our fallen nature (Rom 6:6; cf. Eph 4:24; Col 3:9 – “old man” vs. “new man”), *but also the sins committed subsequently* (5:16)!

****** One should be aware that the verb “made” is in the future tense – thus, through Christ we “shall be made (better “declared”) righteous” is the literal translation for a verb in the future/passive. This may then refer to the last day and the great Assize (cf. Rom 2:16), or the future transformation of identity from sinner to saint.

Verse 20

At this point, after expounding sin through Adam and grace through Christ, Paul reiterates the important historical side-note between the fall of Adam, the promise to Abraham, and the redemptive work of Christ – the giving of the law and its purpose. So, Paul states the truth he will expound in many other parts of the New Testament; the law entered so that sin of Adam might be seen clearly in its character to abound both unto the whole race (v12), and individually in every man (note same, v13). The Greek “*ὅτι*” (“**that** sin might abound”) clearly spells this truth out – that the purpose of the Mosaic Law was to make the character of sin and its working in the human race unambiguous.

But as v20 finishes, the comparison of what entered via Adam and what entered via Christ is again made abundantly clear: “but where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.” As in vv15-17, Paul spells out the superiority of Christ’s work as the antidote to the disease which entered and spread through Adam. The triumph of Christ’s work over Adam’s sin is the great foundation of grace.

Verse 21

Now Paul draws the conclusion which naturally flows from all that which is contained in the truths of vv12-20. Now we finally reach the essence of both why Paul's use of the Adam/Christ comparison, and the essential, practical result which Paul wanted to declare as the second major consequence of justification and the justified man of 5:1.

What is the summation that Paul wants Christians to understand as the fruit of the cross to believing sinners, as absolute as the "love of God shed abroad in our hearts through the Spirit (5:5)?" It is the just as sin's power in Adam decimated all those in him, much more did the grace of God produce a gift of righteousness which reigned and triumphed through Jesus Christ our Lord. And this triumphant grace abounded over not just the Adamic sin in the garden but all sins of the sinner saved by this gift of grace.

So in the concluding verse of part 2 of Romans 5 (5:12-21), Paul shows that the reigning in Adam has been swallowed up in the super-abundance of grace for all those in Christ, and this is what Paul would have every Christian know is one of the two grand tributaries flowing from the blood of the cross, the other expounded in 5:1-11 of assured, unfailing grace and forgiveness.