

ROMANS—WEEK 5

LIBERATION



F. Michael Slay
A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The cover image is the Conversion of Saul by Michelangelo Buonarroti

Through one man, sin entered. Through one man. Sin was defeated. Now, we are liberated; we're no longer under law, but under grace. This was God's plan all along.

You're free. Act like it.

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Romans, Week 5 — Liberation
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1 Romans 5:12–14 (NASB)

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned—for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

What is Paul referring to when he says, “*through one man sin entered into the world*”? Satan is part of the world and he sinned before Adam. How could sin enter the world through “*one man*”? The answer is in the Greek.

Two words are important here: **κόσμος** (“KOS-mos,”) which is translated as world; and, **άνθρωπος** (“AN-thro-pos,”) which is translated as man.

“Anthropos,” from which we get anthropology, isn’t a specific reference to males. It can mean male, but it usually means person. (“Andros” is the Greek word for males.) So, this could be translated as, “*death spread to all mankind.*”

“Kosmos” is usually translated as world, though it can mean the whole of humanity. Which does it sound like in this context? Make the passage neutral on that question by changing, “*entered into the world*” to “*made its entry*” and it reads—*Through one man sin made its entry, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.*

Does that sound like sin entered the whole world or just mankind?

If we interpret the beginning of this passage as sin entering mankind, then the rest fits perfectly.

Sin is congenital; we’re born with it. You can see it in little children.

We’re all in rebellion against God and his laws. Children too young to know God’s laws, just push back against whatever’s available. Parents feel the sting of that rebellion and live in fear that it might lead to tragedy at any moment. If kids would just obey the rules we give them, they’d be a lot safer and we’d be a lot more relaxed.

But parents also know what it’s like to love the little rebels. Thus, we get some sense of how God feels about our sin. He doesn’t approve, but He doesn’t give up either.

In fact, God has hatched an amazing scheme to rid us of our sin. At great personal cost, He has provided a path out of the pit we have dug for ourselves. We’ll never fully understand it—this side of eternity anyway—but at least we can sense the Lord’s motivation.

This is all part of our being created in God’s image. We don’t understand that either, but it sure is wondrous.

The intricacies of God’s plan are most glorious.

2 Romans 5:15–17 (NASB)

But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many. The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification. For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

Skeptics raise many questions about the gospel. Two common ones are addressed by this passage.

- 1) If Adam's sin is the cause of our sinfulness, why does God hold us responsible? (There's a predestination variant of this—If God is the first cause of our sinfulness, why does He hold us responsible?)
- 2) How does it make sense for God to punish His son instead of us for our sin?

This passage connects these two questions so that they answer each other.

But first we need a clarification. Number 2 is better stated in terms of God punishing Himself. Referring to the cross as God punishing His son makes it sound like He offered one of His kids as a child sacrifice. While Jesus is God the son, the trinity isn't a family; it's a Godhead. The decision for Jesus to take our punishment was a trinity decision. God suffered.

To be sure, there are levels of complexity in all this that we'll never comprehend this side of eternity.

But this passage shows the similarity between how we acquired our sinfulness and how we got rid of it. The same God foreordained both things.

Through an amazing sequence of events, man started out with righteousness, lost it, and got it back.

This was God's glorious plan.

This yields a beautiful combination—redeemed people who have no grounds for being smug about being redeemed.

Unfortunately, we tend to be smug anyway. Through faith we are credited with righteousness, but the actual righteousness is slow to develop. This disrupts our witness.

Paul is the perfect model of the right attitude; he sees himself as chief among sinners. Though he couldn't be more certain that he's going to heaven, he sounds like he will have a twinge of incongruity when he gets there. He knows he deserves hell, and he just can't shake that feeling.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give you Paul's repentant humility.

We should forever wonder, "Why'd you pick me?"

3 Romans 5:18–6:1 (NASB)

So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men. For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous. The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?

Once again, Paul asks a question that the reader could be thinking. *What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase?* Yes, what Paul said just before is that shocking.

Paul is pounding home one of the most difficult and advanced concepts in all of Christianity. *Law came in so that the transgression would increase.*

Wait. God wants the transgression to increase? That's why He gave the law?

Yes, and verse 5:20 makes this absolutely clear. *Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness.*

Two words are key here – “so that.” They translate the Greek word *ἵνα* (“hinna”) which indicates a purpose construct. A more literal (but clumsy) translation would say, “...*where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, for the purpose that as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign ...*” This verse actually tells us the reason God did something. That's thrilling.

God's motives are generally so far above our pay grade that we shouldn't expect to know anything about them. But there are a few places in scripture where we're directly told what He's up to. It's the most valuable information ever written. If any words are worth memorizing, they're it.

There's no getting around it. You can't have transgression if there's no law to transgress. Paul is saying that more transgression led to more grace and the purpose of it all was so that grace would reign. If you feel like sarcastically offering to help out by sinning a lot, then you get what Paul is saying.

Of course, Paul rejects the offer for more sin, but that's another lesson.

This is difficult because it means that man's fall into sin wasn't a setback; it was all just part of the plan. That makes it sound like the plan was, in a sense, evil. That can't be true if God is good.

This is beyond complicated, and worthy of much study, meditation and prayer. But it's not the only example of an apparent evil that's actually providentially glorious.

“You meant evil against me; but God meant it for good.” — Genesis 50:20a (NKJV)

4 Romans 6:1–11 (NKJV)

What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This passage addresses a question that is raised by critics of the gospel of grace—mercy encourages misbehavior.

It does. Criminal justice psychologists can attest to the dangers of failing to punish the guilty. If the rules of psychology applied here, the critics would be right.

But the gospel isn't about behavior modification through conditioning; it's about transformation—new life in Christ. Rather than using reward and punishment to get people to change their behavior, Christ puts the old person to death and raises a new one to life. It's a completely different approach.

Thus, grace can't cause us to sin more. *How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ... For he who has died has been freed from sin.*

Behavior modification doesn't work against sin anyway; the condition is systemic. You can't cure a cold by suppressing a sneeze either. Attacking the symptoms of a cold may be useful, but it still has no impact on the real battle—the microscopic war going on inside your body.

So it is with sin. Sin manifests itself as specific sins (envy, greed, pride, etc.) but these things are just what bubbles to the surface. Suppressing those sins does not fix the internal condition of sin.

You might even say, "Christ didn't die to cure us of our sins; He died to cure us of sin." That sounds wrong at first, but it's precise. The cross is the cure—the only cure.

But the real cure isn't instantaneous, even though the justification part is. The sins remain—and drive us nuts. "Why can't I stop?"

Trying to stop sinning through effort and will power, misses the point. You must make an effort, but prayer is the key to success. The Holy Spirit has to do the heavy lifting.

5 Romans 6:12–19 (NKJV)

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.

Many apocryphal quips are attributed to Yogi Berra. One of my favorites is, “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.” Today’s passage is about the challenges of putting our liberation from slavery to sin into practice. Let’s start by asking, “What is slavery to sin?”

It means that we can’t break the chains. We can push back, but that push-back always fails. Sin owns us.

But now we’re free. *For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.*

Paul is telling us to practice our freedom from sin. We have to push back for the push-back to succeed. While sin no longer has dominion over us, we can still act like it does. Old habits die hard.

That would be like an emancipated slave who stays on the plantation and works for free.¹

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey?

Even though we’re free in theory (and fact), we can be slaves in practice.

This passage gets a “may genoitaw” to squash the idea that we don’t need to fight against the remnants of our old sinful nature. Paul was adamant about this throughout his epistles.

This is the flip side of the connection between faith and works. In addition to doing good works, Christians should stop doing bad works—the dumb stuff we did when we were stuck in that mode.

You’re free. Act like it.

¹ Hat tip to John Murray for his explanation of this in the 1968 NICNT.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What the funniest example of sin in children you've seen?
2. Are you puzzled that God chose you?
3. Ever seen an intended evil work out for good?
4. Does it ever feel like your sinful nature's getting worse?
5. How should freedom from sin "feel"?

Items for prayer: