

THE LETTER OF PAUL TO THE ROMANS
Commentary by Rev. Msgr. Gregory Mikesch
Lesson 8 - Romans 5:6-21

Romans 5:6-11

Verse 6 begins an important paragraph. Paul is speaking of the depths of the love of God for us. Paul wants to show us that what Jesus did in His death/resurrection was not something that changed God from being an angry God into being a loving God. God has always loved us, even in the midst of our sin. It is because of this love that He gave us His Son who was willing to die for us. It is because we are sinners that we are in need of redemption. And it is while we are sinners that Jesus is willing to give His life for us. This is all God's doing.

To help us understand verse 7, we need to read it in connection with verse 6. In verse 6, Paul has just said that Christ died for us while we were weak, or while we were ungodly. He is describing our condition as people who are subject to sin. But even while we were subject to sin, Christ was still willing to die for us.

Now, in verse 7, Paul wants to draw a contrast to show the abundance of love in Christ's act of sacrifice. He says that it is extremely rare that one person would be willing to die for another person. But then Paul seems to catch himself, because he realizes that there are occasions when someone is willing to make this sacrifice. Paul is not contrasting "righteous person" with "good person." These descriptions are synonymous for him. The contrast Paul is making pertains to the perceived state of the one for whom the sacrifice is made. If one person is willing to die for another, it is because the one for whom the sacrifice is made is seen as good, loving, and deserving. But when Christ died for us, we were not good, loving, or deserving. We were estranged from God because of our sins. This is why Paul is so abundantly confident of God's love for us.

Verse 8 is one of the most powerful verses in all of scripture. Paul is aware of the unconditional covenants God made with Noah and Abraham. He knows of the Sinai covenant with Moses and the people. He has prayed the psalms, and he is familiar with the words of the prophets—all signs of God's love. But the way in which God proves His love is by sending to us the gift of His Son, Jesus, who was willing to die for us. And He died for us while we were still sinners.

This verse also dispels any notion of God as an angry God who needs to be placated in order to give His love. It dispels any notion of conflict between Jesus and the Father, as if Jesus had to talk the Father into loving humanity. There can never be conflict among the members of the Trinity. The essence of God is love, and this very essence is the source, the root of the whole plan of salvation. God loves us into existence, and He loves us into redemptive life through the gift of His Son. God initiates all true love.

In verses 9 through 11, Paul uses what is called an “a fortiori” form of argumentation. His basic premise is that if “A” is true, then we can be even more certain that “B” is true. The opening words of verse 9, “Much more surely...,” express this form of logic. Paul says that if we have been justified by the blood of Jesus Christ, then how “Much more surely” we can be certain that we are saved from God’s wrath. This is the first of three steps in the progression of Paul’s thoughts.

Paul first says that we are saved from God’s wrath. Paul knows that wrath is what we deserve because of our sins. But God chooses to love, rather than condemn. He chooses life for us, rather than death. We can be certain of this because Jesus died for us. The second step is found in verse 10. Paul repeats his first premise that we are saved while still sinners and then he says how much more certain we can be that we are saved by His life. The first statement of being saved from wrath pertains to the future, when the final judgment comes. The second statement pertains to the present, for we share the resurrected life of Jesus here and now. In the third statement in verse 11, Paul says that we can even boast in God. To boast in God means to have a sure hope—a firm and constant hope—which is rooted in what God has accomplished, not in what humanity has accomplished.

With this final verse, Paul has brought his theme of boasting to the conclusion he desires. He had told the Jews that they could not boast in the law, for no one could fulfill the law. They could not boast in their merit, for it could never achieve salvation for them. Paul shows them where boasting makes sense, only in the love and mercy of God. Our boast is our hope—our firm conviction—that God can be trusted to fulfill His promise of eternal life. And this promise is rooted in the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Romans 5:12-21

With these verses, we begin a segment which contrasts Adam and Christ. To understand this segment as Paul intended, we must be aware of the foundational truth upon which he builds his argument. Paul is convinced of the solidarity of all humanity. This does not mean harmony of peaceful coexistence. It means that all human beings are intimately related in the very fact of our human nature. What happens to one, affects all. This is a concept which is somewhat foreign to our twentieth century, western mentality. We pride ourselves on our individuality and independence. But Paul is speaking from a culture in which family and tribe literally meant the difference between life and death.

In the early nomadic days of the Hebrew people, an individual could not survive without the support of the clan. This mentality lingered in the Jewish culture even after they became urban dwellers.

The summary of Paul's thought in this segment is that through Adam, sin and death came into the world, but through Jesus Christ, sin and death were destroyed. The one sin of Adam is shared by all humanity because of this solidarity. But more powerfully do all people share in the victory won by Jesus. This is the message we now explore.

In verse 12, Paul begins by saying that sin has entered the world through the one man, and this one man is Adam. The account of the fall of Adam and Eve is recorded in Genesis 3. And following this account, Paul will conclude that death is the result of sin. Paul believes that it was not part of God's original plan that human beings should die. God's original plan was for harmony, peace, and immortality. Sin disrupted this plan. And now death has spread to all people because all have sinned in Adam. The personal sins which have been committed since Adam confirm the sinful state which is already present because of Adam's sin.

The sentence structure of verse 12 is not complete. As Paul was dictating this letter, he seems to have had another thought which he pursued. He leaves the original sentence and begins to speak about the law.

In verse 13, Paul acknowledges that sin was present in the world before the law was given to Moses. This is verifiable because people died. People sinned but they did not recognize it as sin because the law had not yet pointed it out as sin. This verse is important to Paul for he wants to show that sin did not enter the world through the law. He will pursue this point in 7:7.

It might be helpful at this point to explain Paul's view of the world. He thought of the world as having three time periods. The first period was from Adam to Moses. During this time the power of sin was dominant, but it was not yet recognized. The second period was from Moses to the Messiah. This was the time of the law. The law helped to point out sin and make it known, but the law could not help a person overcome sin. The final stage is the period of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Jesus has conquered sin by His death/resurrection. Those who live in Christ are able to share His divine life here and now, and will share it fully in eternal life.

In verse 14, Paul speaks of the first period when he says that death had dominion over "Adam to Moses." The people who lived at this time were also subject to death, even though they did not knowingly break a command of God as Adam did. Paul implies that since they did not have the law, they did not yet know all that was sinful. But there is reason for hope, for Adam is a "type" of the one who is to come who will conquer sin and death.

It will come as no surprise that there is a great deal of repetition in the next seven verses, 15 through 21. Paul repeats the same theme six times. But, like a musical composer, he varies the theme with each new entry. The theme is that sin entered the world through Adam, while grace entered the world through Jesus Christ. And grace far exceeds the power of evil. This is another example Paul's use of the "a fortiori" argumentation.

In verse 15, Paul begins by saying that the "free gift is not like the trespass." The "free gift" means the gift of Jesus, the gift of His death/resurrection, the gift of justification, redemption, and salvation. All these come together as the ultimate expression of God's love and mercy. Paul does not want to give the impression that the trespass and the gift are almost equal in power. He wants to show that the gift of love in Jesus far surpasses the result of sin.

At the end of verse 15, Paul uses the phrase "for the many." This is another way of saying "for all people." He does not intend to exclude anyone from the gift of grace given through the one man, Jesus Christ.

Paul opens verse 16 with the same idea he uses at the beginning of verse 15. But then, in another variation on his theme, he wants to show the superiority of the gift. He says that after one offense the result was condemnation. Time has passed and many trespasses have been committed. But even with the multitude of offenses, the one gift of Jesus atones for all the evils that have been committed in the world. This is very important for us to remember if we encounter people who say "Will God truly forgive me for what I have done?" or if we ever are tempted to think that way ourselves. If a person has sincere contrition for sin, then there is no doubt whatsoever that the forgiveness is complete. This is God's promise.

In verse 17, Paul presents his theme by contrasting death and life. He says that death came as a result of the one man's sin, but life is the result of the free gift of Jesus Christ. The dominion of life pertains to both this present world and the world to come. We share divine life now because of our incorporation into the person of Jesus. We will share divine life fully in the world to come when we look upon the face of God.

Verses 18 and 19 are mirror images of each other. Paul is using this technique of contrasts to encourage the Roman Christians to stand firm in their faith. Life will still have its difficulties but there is solid reason for hope. And this hope is a certainty, for the promise of salvation is based on what Jesus has done for us.

In verse 20, Paul returns to the issue of the law. He says that the law actually increased sin, for it made people aware of how they offended God. But even this multiplication of evil does not offset the victory won by Jesus. Whenever sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. This is not meant as an encouragement to sin, it is a statement of the total superiority of God's powerful love.

Paul concludes verse 21 by saying that the justification we have received leads to “eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Remember that for Paul “eternal life” is a term which implies quality, rather than duration. Eternal life means the complete unification of a person with God. When we are granted eternal life, we are so united with God that nothing separates us from each other. This is what God desires for us. This is His plan for us, and it has been His plan from the beginning of creation.

Paul also calls Jesus “our Lord.” The title “Lord” is powerful for Paul. It is the title which sums up all that Jesus is. When we read the Christological hymn in Philippians 2:1-11, we see that Paul reaches the high point of his praise when he proclaims Jesus as “Lord.” All creation will acknowledge Him, and then Jesus will hand over the kingdom to God the Father.

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