

**Romans:  
The Law, the Covenant of Works,  
and Grace**

**Romans 5:20-21**

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If you have your Bibles, I'd invite you turn to Romans, chapter 5, we'll begin in this passage that we've been looking at for a few weeks. Romans 5:12 until the end of the chapter, there's a passage in which Paul goes a long way to explaining why salvation has to be by grace alone. You know throughout this passage, Paul has emphasized that we sustain one of two relations, and those two relationships determine our everlasting future. We are either in relationship to our representative Adam, or we are in relationship to our representative Jesus Christ. We are either in this sphere of Adam's influence, and part of his family, or by grace we are in the sphere and influence of Jesus Christ and part of His family. And the apostle wants to make it clear that everybody in the world is in one of those two camps. You are either in Adam or you are in Christ.

Paul is wanting to make that analogy between Adam and Christ to show the similarities and differences that exist between Adam and Christ precisely so that we will understand that the only place that you can flee for salvation is to Jesus Christ. There's no third way. There's no fourth way. There's one way. You're either in Adam, or you're in Christ. It's that simple.

Now having said that, the apostle has provoked the thoughts of the thinking members of the group that opposes His teaching. And they are wondering to themselves. Well, wait a minute, where does the law fit in? Sounds to me, Paul, that you don't have a place for the law. Where does the law fit in? They are thinking of this. Now they don't ask a question, at least Paul doesn't record the question that they are asking to themselves, or maybe even objecting out loud here in verses 20 and 21. But he certainly records their objections in chapter 6 and 7. And I want to suggest to you that the fact that Paul brings up the law here again at the end of a passage which has not, by and large, talked about the law, but which has compared Adam and Christ, and their particular headships or representative rolls or mediatory roles, how ever you want to describe them, the fact that he introduces the law here then, is an indication that he knows what his opponents are thinking. He knows the question that they want to press. He knows the objection that they have to his teaching, and he is pre-empting that

objection before they even get it out of their mouths. So with that with a word of introduction, let's hear the word of God in Romans, chapter 5, beginning in verse 20.

"And the law came in that the transgression might increase, but where sin increased grace abounded all the more; that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ, our Lord."

Amen, and thus ends this reading of God's holy and inspired and inerrant word. May He write His eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

Our Heavenly Father, show us Yourself in the Word, show us our sin in the Word, and then show us the Savior in Your Word, for Your glory and our good, in Jesus' name, Amen.

Now Paul's skeptical opponents are thinking, "Well, what about the law. All this Adam and Christ stuff, no mention of the law." They are thinking to themselves, "Look, Paul, the distinctive thing about us as believers in the one true God is that God has granted us the law. When God through Moses gave us the law, moral, civil and ceremonial, it set us apart from the nations. And yet as you describe the way into saving fellowship with God, there is not one mention here of the law. All this Adam headship stuff, Christ headship stuff, and no law. What about the law, Paul?" And I want you to see that the answer that Paul gives to that unspoken as yet objection is as bold and as audacious as it could possibly be.

Let's remember that Paul, though he is indeed speaking to a mixed congregation, that is, there are some Gentile Christians there, as well as Jewish Christians, he is speaking in the context where Judaism and the religion of the Hebrews and the Scriptures of the Hebrews is very much dominant in the thought world. Even the Gentile Christians that are a part of this fellowship know the Old Testament well. And they know the teachings of the Old Testament; and they know the importance of the revelation of God's law to Moses, and how that distinguished Israel from all the nations. And there are some of them who are just a bit suspicious of what Paul is saying, and they hear him speaking against the law, and they hear him speaking against Moses; not unlike His Master was heard by some who objected to His teaching, and they are suspicious of Paul here. And the apostle wants to take opportunity again to shock them into a realization about why salvation is by grace. Because of that, what Paul is saying to this original audience, is just as relevant to you and to me today as it was when He first spoke it. This is not just an interesting text that's two thousand years old that dealt with the specific cultural theological problem with a particular group of people that has no further reference or relevance to us. It has every reference and relevance to us. As Paul himself could say about the Old Testament. These things happened and were written for our benefit. That's true of what Paul is saying today.

Now there's a lot in this great passage. But all I want to look with you at is two things this morning. We're really going to skirt over verse 21 because next week, Lord willing, we're going to come right back to verse 21; and look at what it means for grace to reign in righteousness. Today I just want to concentrate on verse 20 with you. And I'd like you to see two things there.

First of all, in the first phrase of verse 20, the apostle teaches that God gave the law to convict and to convince us of sin. And second of all, I want you to see in the second part of verse 20 that Paul teaches that despite the increase of sin by the law, grace has been even more expansive. Grace has super abounded, despite the increase of sin. Those are the two things that I'd like to look at with you this morning in verse 20, the first part of the verse and the second part of the verse. And I think as we look at it, you will see the importance of grace and the reason why grace is the only way that you can be reconciled with God.

### **I. The law is not our Savior, indeed its presence exacerbates our predicament.**

Let's begin in the first part of the verse. The law came in so that the transgression would increase. Paul is telling you here that one reason, and he's only giving one reason, and he's not saying more right now, but Paul is telling you that one reason that God gave the law, was to convict and to convince us of sin. Paul is saying this because it is vital that the Romans understand, and it's vital that you and I understand that the law is not our Savior. Indeed, the very presence of the law exacerbates our predicament. You remember last time we were together, we looked at the predicament that Paul talked about that we were in? Well Paul says, "The law doesn't help that predicament." The law, coming along in the time of Moses, does not solve that problem that Adam plunged you into. The coming of the law with Moses was not God's great solution to the Adamatic problem of sin, God's great solution to the Adamatic problem of sin was Christ and grace. And so Paul wants you to understand that the law was never given to be your Savior.

The purpose of the law, not exclusively, but as Paul explains it here was to; listen to it, increase sin. Look, if you're paying attention at all, you've got to be asking what in the world are you talking about, Paul? Are you saying that God gave the law so that sin would increase? Are you saying that God caused the increase of sin? Are you saying that God wanted sin to increase, and so He gave the law to Moses? Are you saying that He gave the law to Moses because He desired for us to send more? Well, the answer of course is no. But if the answer is no, you've still got to ask, what in the world are you saying, that the law came in that transgression might increase?

Let me answer that question in four parts. And I'll give you four words beginning

with "p" to sort of help outline this thing. Paul's answer is polemic, it is partial, it is pedagogical, and it is provocative. So there are four parts to the answers. Paul's answer is polemic. In other words, it is argumentative. The first thing I want you to see is that this phrase, the law came in that sin would increase, this phrase is deliberately designed by the apostle Paul to promote the maximal offense in his hearers. He wants everyone listening to be offended. Look, Paul is talking to people who are the descendants of people who were sent into exile in Babylon because they disobeyed the law. These people are serious about the law. They know, especially as people who are no longer part of a Jewish theocracy, that they're under Roman domination, and that the one thing that sets them apart from everything else in the world is the giving of the law. And the apostle says here, "Now why did God give the law?" To make you special amongst all the nations? No. So that sin would increase. You couldn't have said something more offensive to these people if you had thought for a million years. Paul deliberately says this to shake them out of their tree. Paul wants them to be shocked. Paul wants them recalibrate. He wants them to, as one of my dear colleagues likes to say, he wants them to reframe. He wants them to look in a different way than they are looking. The law is not their instrument of salvation. No. In fact, he says, "The law came in that transgression might increase." That's the first thing that I want you to see and understand in this phrase. He's trying to shock them. He's trying to shock us. He's succeeded. We're all ears. Tell us more, Paul.

Secondly then, notice that what Paul says about the law here is partial. This is so very important. In the worship guide, if you want to sneak a peak real quick, under the section on the sermon, I mentioned that there are three phrases in this passage that are very, very difficult to understand and have promoted a lot of misunderstanding. This is one of those phrases because a lot of people have taken Paul here to be given the sum total of what he believes about the law of God. In other words, they've said, "Aha!" You see this is what Paul says, and therefore, the law has nothing to do with the believer. That's Old Testament; it doesn't have anything to do with the New Testament believer. But it's very important for you to see that what Paul is saying about the law here is partial, it is selected. This is not all that Paul has to say about the law. If we would look at Galatians, chapter 3, verses 17-25, if we were to look at II Corinthians, chapter 3, verses 6 through 11, and if we would look at I Timothy, chapter 1, verses 8 through 11, in all those places Paul has more to say about the law than he has here. In fact, Paul is going to take up this very subject again in Romans, chapter 7; and he's going to have more to say about it than he says about it now. So it's important for you to understand that this is not all that Paul has to say about the law, about its function, about its purpose, about how it relates to Christians. But what Paul is saying here is very, very important about the law. It's essential to understanding the role of the law. So what he's saying is it's polemic and it's partial.

It's also pedagogical. He's telling us that the law is given to teach us something. It's a pedagogue. What is the law given to teach us? Paul is telling us here that

the law served to teach us what sin is. It serves to expose sin. We might even put it this way. It serves to expose sin in us. Paul is telling us that the law serves a function of teaching us our need for grace. This is what the old Reformed theologians referred to as the second use of the law. It drives us to Christ by showing us our sin. As James speaks of the law, do you remember what he calls the law? He says, "The law is a mirror." You look at the law and what do you see? You see yourself. And it's not a pretty picture. It's early in the morning; the makeup is not on yet, it's not a pretty picture. The law shows you yourself, it shows you your need for grace. It shows you your sin, and thus by showing your sin and your need for grace, it leads you to the Savior. The Greek word *pedagogue*, for which we often use teacher, that's how we translate it today, actually referred to the slave that was a member of the household that took the children to school. So the pedagogue took you to the schoolteacher. He's the one who led you to the one who was going to give you what you need. And who was that one? Jesus Christ. So the law leads you to the one that you need. Paul is saying that the revelation of the law that God granted to us especially in the days of Moses was designed to show us our sin, not to be the instrument of salvation. It is not our Savior; but if properly understood, it leads us to our Savior. The law apart from the Savior simply exacerbates our predicament. But the law rightly and spiritually understood leads us to our Savior.

Do you remember that scene in "The Hunchback of Notre Dame?" I'm not talking about the Disney version. I mean the book. Read the book. You remember the scene where Quasimodo is with this beautiful thing that he has captured, and she's crying. And he says to her, "Why are you crying?" And she says to him, "Well, you're crying." And he says, "Well, yes, I am crying." And she says, "Well why are you crying?" And he says to her, "Because I never knew how ugly I was until I saw how beautiful you are." And my friends, that's the law. You never knew how ugly you were, until you saw how beautiful your God was. The law shows you the beauty and the glory and the honor and the uprightness and the holiness of God, and it humbles you. You never knew you were such a mess before the law. Furthermore, Paul is saying that the law had a distinctive role in God's purposes and mankind. He said, "Look, before the law, we knew the difference between right and wrong. This wasn't a relativistic moral universe until God spoke to Moses from Mt. Sinai. From the time of Adam, and his fall, we knew the difference between right and wrong. If you had been around when Cain slew Abel, you would have known that what Cain did was wrong. If you had been around when Abram went down to Egypt, and told the leaders of Egypt that his wife was his sister, and sure, you can have her, you would have known that the seventh Commandment had been violated. You didn't need a copy of the Ten Commandments up on your school room board to know that. If you'd been around when Lot went into the land of Canaan and chose the choice land before Abram, his superior, and the representative of the Covenant had the opportunity to choose his land; you would have known that Lot was greedy without having the Ten Commandments spelled out for you, or the Tenth Commandment spelled out for you as it is in Exodus, chapter 20. But, when Genesis is succeeded by

Exodus and Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you better believe you know about sin now. If you knew about sin then, after you've read through Leviticus, whew, boy do you know about sin. After you've read through Exodus 20 and not only the summarization of God's ten moral commands, but the exposition of it from the Exodus 20 to 24, and the discussion of worship that runs from 25 to 40; then when you pick up Deuteronomy, and you see this gigantic farewell sermon by Moses that's about what the righteousness of God revealed in His law, you better believe you know about sin.

Paul is saying, "Look, God didn't send the law into the world to be the solution. God sent the law into the world so you would know that you need grace. You need to understand what sin is. But furthermore, in the very giving of the law, there is an expression of grace because in the sacrificial system, we are pointed to the answer. The sacrificial system points beyond itself. We know, as the Old Testament folk knew as well, to a certain degree what the author of Hebrews said, when he says, "The blood of bulls and goats cannot forgive sin." So did the people of God think that by slaughtering calves, they were actually appeasing the righteous judgment of God? No. They knew that those sacrifices pointed to something greater, something beyond. And so the law itself reveals sin to us in ways that we have never known it before. But it also pointed to the Savior. "This is one thing," Paul says, "that the law was for." That's the third thing that Paul is saying when he says, "The law came in that transgression would increase."

Fourth, and finally, Paul is saying, "The law is provocative." Paul may be indicating that the law provokes sin. You know how this works. The minute the boundaries are set, somebody wants to cross them. But that's why you can say to your young children, "Don't you eat those peas." And eighty-seven percent of the time it provokes the immediate response of eating the peas. Why? Because in a fallen world, once the righteous boundaries of God are laid down, there is an inclination in the wicked, human heart to find those boundaries and transgress them.

I had the privilege, when I was in Colorado Springs last week with the PCRT, of taking out the entire University of Arizona RUF group for supper. Now don't have in your mind Ole Miss or Mississippi State. This was ten people. But we went to Chili's. And as we drove into the Chili's parking lot, there was a bumper sticker on the back of a car that said "Keep your laws off my body." I thought, well, that's fairly in your face, isn't it? But, you understand the resistance there. How dare you tell me how to use my body. Isn't it interesting that when you lay down the good and perfect law of God, it instinctively provokes a rebellion in the wicked, sinful human heart. We resent the law. We don't like the law. We want to find every place that it can be bent, find every place that it can be aggravated. You see, once you've seen your sin, and once you understand that the law is not an instrument of salvation, then you have to look somewhere else. That's why Paul is telling you this. The reason you can't be saved by the Mosaic Law is that's not what it was made for. It wasn't the instrument of salvation.

## **II. We need to look to grace, for grace superabounded and outdistances the increase of sin.**

Now that leads Paul to the second part of this sentence, which is the thing that he really wants to say. And that is simply this: We need to look to grace for salvation. We need to look to grace for grace super abounded, it outdistances the increase of sin. If you're wondering what in the world Paul means when he says, "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." He doesn't mean what some have said that he means, in saying that we ought to sin so that grace can abound. Paul's going to deal with that in just a couple of verses. In fact, if you want a good commentary on this Psalm, go back and look at that Psalm that we just sang, "Marvelous Grace of Our Loving Lord." That song is a commentary on that part of Romans 5:20. What Paul means is that God actually takes advantage of the negative functions of the law in order to exalt Himself in order to exalt His grace, and in order to foster His saving purposes. The more sin is multiplied, the more it is shown to us, the more aware we become of it, the more aggravated it is, the greater is the grace that conquers it, and the more that grace is known and appreciated. The reign of sin is trumped by the triumph of grace. Grace meets sin head on, and it defeats it.

What's our favorite Southern way of dealing with sin and shame? Number one of my list is denial. Obstruction. Make sure nobody knows about it. If anybody knew that about me, they wouldn't like me. So let's pretend like it's not there. The elephant is in the room, right behind me, but it's not there. If anybody sees it, it's not there. Denial. That's our atoning work, denial. God is saying, "Grace operates in a far more effective way than that." Because grace, knowing that you ought to be rejected, if someone knew that about you, in fact, you ought to be rejected by God, but grace comes and says, I trump the sin, I conquer the sin, I justify the sinner, I destroy the old man, I raise him to newness of life, I give him a new life here, I give him a new hope in eternity. And all those things that you are afraid of your friends knowing about you, grace deals with. Not because God somehow didn't know that you did them or didn't know that you were that way, but he knows you better than you know yourself. In fact, He knows some of those things that you don't know yet about yourself. And in grace He comes to you, and He says, "Child, I know exactly who you are. I know exactly what you're like, and My grace is sufficient to conquer that sin."

Now don't run to your obedience for salvation, because your obedience is the problem. Don't run to your heart for salvation; your heart is your problem. Don't run to your deeds for salvation; your deeds are the problem. Don't run to making a new start in new start in life by making some new resolutions. That's the problem, your will is the problem, your heart is the problem. You are the problem. Don't run to you, run to Me, run to Christ. Run to My grace, I am the solution. That's what Paul is saying. Grace is greater than all our sin.

My friends that is so comforting, not only because it teaches us why salvation is by grace alone, but it also teaches us that no sin is greater than God's grace. Now you hunt around some dedicated Christians from a little bit of time. You scratch around a little bit, and you talk a little bit. There's going to be one of them somewhere struggling with something they just can't let go of because they think that that sin is a little special, it's just a little beyond God's grace. Paul is saying, "No, you've got it the other way around. Grace is greater than all your sins." But Paul, you don't know what I've done. "Oh yes, I do. I'm the chief of sinners, and you've got a ways to go before you catch up with me." Paul says, "I am the chief of sinners, and I can assure you that grace is greater than all your sins. That's what Paul is saying here. That's why you don't run to yourself, you run to grace, you run to Christ, and you will find that grace will triumph over sin. May God grant you the faith to believe. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, we bow before you, and we ask the grace to believe. And then we ask, oh God, that grace would change us, transform us. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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