

Sermon

February 26, 2023

Demystifying Paul
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God who is the source of life and from Jesus, who is the light and life of God in the world.

Amen.

Have you ever found the apostle Paul somewhat hard to understand? Consider the Second Lesson: “Sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.... But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.”

That is so clear, isn’t it? That must be easy for people to explain to friends and neighbors who wonder what we do on Sunday mornings. “Oh, we heard about the Apostle Paul who talked about justification and righteousness and one man’s trespass and another man’s victory over sin and death.”

What the h does that mean? If that is the question you ask, then you are in good company. 2 Peter, written probably near the end of the first century, acknowledges the problem. “So also,” the author writes, “our beloved brother Paul wrote to you according to the wisdom given him speaking of this, as he does in all his letters, there are some things in them hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction as they do the other scriptures.”

In other words, here you have an author of Scripture, saying that *another* author of what would become Scripture is difficult to make sense of. That should be consoling, if you’ve ever struggled through a reading like we had for today. You are not alone. The Bible agrees with you. This guy (Paul) is tough.

Now, here’s the good news. The second lesson summarizes Paul’s thinking perfectly. It’s like a doorway through which you enter to see the entire range of Paul’s thought. Unfortunately, to enter through this doorway, you must decipher what Paul says here. In other words, if you can understand what Paul is doing in today’s second reading, you can basically understand the entirety of Paul’s thought.

So today with that in mind, I’m going to unpack a few portions of Romans 5:12 -19 with two objectives. First, I want you to walk away with a better understanding of this hard-to-understand Paul, to demystify Paul—especially given the difficulty of his writings. Second, I want to show you from my personal experience, how Paul’s teachings can help lessen the burden of our suffering, especially when it comes to deep grief and loss. So I want to clarify what Paul says, and I want to show you how he can be a resource for you when you undergo suffering and loss.

Now, before I even unpack, Paul, I want to unpack the introduction to the reading itself. Listen again. “Through Adam’s disobedience humanity came under the bondage to sin and death from which we cannot free ourselves. In Christ’s obedient death, God

graciously showers on us the free gift of liberation and life." Even the introduction is unclear, so let's unpack it.

What is "Adam's disobedience"? We heard about it in the first lesson. Adam wanted to be like God, what did God possess that Adam and Eve did not? Immortality, and the knowledge of good and evil. Adam wanted that for himself. So he reached for it, he grasped for it, as evident in the story of the consumption of the forbidden fruit.

So, there's lots going on here that we take for granted. Adam's disobedience, as symbolized in his eating of the fruit, is that he wanted to be like God, he wanted to be in control. He wanted immortality, he wanted perfect knowledge. Humanity came under sin's dominion. How on earth does that happen? Isn't Adam's sin his alone? Why are we part of that?

Well, the story of Adam and Eve isn't simply a story that took place once upon a time in the not-so-distant past. It's a story that takes place every day, all the time. We grasp, when we pretend to be more than we are, when we seek to be like God instead of letting God be God. So we are in bondage to sin from which we cannot free ourselves. Does that sound familiar to any of you?

I want to share with you my insight regarding possibly the greatest collection of hymns ever assembled. It's called the Lutheran Book of Worship. The green hymnal. It fell from the heavens themselves. It's a perfect hymnal. It's the one I grew up on. And those of you who are familiar with this hymnal know that the corporate confession at the beginning of the service is that we confess that "we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." You're not really free. Then we hear about "Christ's obedient death." Why is that important? Well, if you go to the letter Paul writes to the Philippians, he says that "Christ, though in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped." In other words, Christ is the new Adam, who resisted, as we see in the Gospel reading for today, the temptation to which Adam succumbed and by resisting that temptation has freed us from the same tendency through his obedient death – therefore, God unleashes, you might say, or graciously showers on us, the free gift of liberation in life. This is the fierce, reckless love of God that enters the world through Christ's death and resurrection that not only embraces us, but sets us free from this power of sin we're going to talk about now.

I'm going to focus on a few verses that will help us untangle what Paul is after here. Paul mentions sin. What does this mean? Well, Mike Huckabee, the former governor of Arkansas will tell you that "sin" here is "missing the mark." "Sin" for Paul, on the other hand, is a power, a power that enters the world through Adam's transgression. Listen to Romans 3:9-11. Paul writes, "What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks," both people from Ballard and people from Green Lake, are under the power of sin. As it is written, "There is no one who is righteous, not even one. There is no one who has understanding. There is

no one who seeks God. Why? We place ourselves first, because we are in bondage to this power. Well, let's see if we can unpack that even more.

Sin, that is, this power, this force that subjects us to itself, came into the world Not simply human nature, but *the world*. Just as sin entered the world, so this isn't simply a defect or flaw in our nature as human beings. This is a power that enters *the world* through one man. Who is that one man? Adam, that's correct. (At the first service they said Jesus and this is one of those rare times where Jesus is not the answer.) It's Adam.

So let's back up. Sin is best understood here as *addiction*. An addiction is something you've experienced that has control over you. You know that line in Romans 7 where Paul says, "I do what I do not want to do, and the very thing I do, I hate." What he's talking about there is being under the power of sin, which is analogous to addiction. When we are addicted to something, like our phones, we look into them, assuming that after hours and hours we will have found the answer or whatever we're looking for, knowing in the process that we really don't want to be doing this. It's kind of like drinking Coke. You drink it but you're still thirsty afterward. It's a power that has control over us, that compels us to act in ways that undermine or nullify our own best self-interest. So instead of living for health and life, we seek those things as if we were under the power of an addiction that bring to us destruction and death.

So when Paul says sin leads to death, in analogous terms, he's simply saying, we are under the power of forces like addiction that compel us to do things that are ultimately harmful to us, and indeed harmful to others. And let me tell you, addictions do kill; sin leads to death. And so death then spreads, Paul says, to all, because all have sinned.

Well, this is actually really helpful. Remember that Paul lived in two worlds, the Jewish world, the Hebrew world, but also the Greek world. Think about this for a second, in the Greek world. Isn't there a story about how evil and misery enters the world? What's that story called? Pandora's box. So what Paul is talking about here? It's that Adam opened Pandora's box and unleashed disease. Indeed, something like a cancer infiltrated God's good creation, such that now as Paul says in Romans 8 "nature groans in bondage to decay and death." In other words, things are no longer as they should be. We are living in a world that is corrupted by the power of sin, or in more traditional language, that is fallen. Listen to Romans 8: 19-21. "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God, in hope that it will be set free from its bondage to decay, and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God."

So Paul looks around. He sees death everywhere, death is pervasive in antiquity. People die at a much younger age than they do now. Paul himself was subjected to a number of illnesses, and we see evidence for that and his letters. Some scholars believe that might have been malaria that he had at one point, or even epilepsy.

So Paul looks around at a world and he sees sickness and disease and death. And he asks himself the question that we ask as people of faith: why? Why is nature "red in

tooth and claw"? Why is nature "an eternally regurgitating monster?" Why is nature, as Richard Rubinstein, a famous Jewish writer of the mid-20th century, wrote, "something like a cannibal that both produces its young and then devours us?" Is this what God wanted? Why is it the case that, as evolutionary biologists point out, 99.9% of all species who have ever been on this planet are now extinct? Is that what God wanted? And for Paul, the answer is no! God created a world that was good, a world that was free of sin and death, but God endowed human beings with freewill who chose to disobey God and through that choice, unleashed these powers, hence, a world that is now in bondage to decay.

In short, modern culture has profoundly trivialized sin. It's not just "missing the mark." It's not eating chocolate during Lent. It's not having an extra cup of coffee, or five, or 10, maybe 15. It's not any of those trivial things. Sin for Paul is a power that has entered the world through Adam's transgression and subjected not only human beings, but the entirety of the cosmos to its rule.

So if we have a big problem here, we're going to need a big solution. And for Paul, that solution is now the right answer: Jesus. So sin, he says, was in the world before the law, so he gives us a little history of sin before he gets to Jesus. But "sin is not reckoned when there is no law." Now, what does that mean?

The law not only harnesses sin, it acts as a kind of disciplinarian, according to Paul, kind of an emergency measure that God introduced once this power had been unleashed to say, "Well, I really don't want them killing each other. So I'm gonna give them a set of guidelines in the hope that they may flourish."

So what does it mean to say "sin is not reckoned when there is no law?" Well, another word for *reckoned* here is "considered, known or acknowledged." So think about it. Coveting is a sin according to the ninth commandment. To covet means to crave or desire something that is not rightfully yours. How many of you have ever coveted before? Desired something that doesn't belong to you? What has the law done? It has exposed this desire as sin. Paul writes in Romans 3:20, "for no human being will be justified in His sight by deeds prescribed by the law." In other words, we can't earn God's love simply by doing the right thing. "For through the law comes the knowledge of sin. "So sin is like a mirror that shows us our lack. If I tell you, "You shall not covet," if you're introspective enough, you'll say, "Oh, actually, I do covet. I didn't know that that was a sin."

Now you do.

So the law reveals to us what is sinful, hopefully driving us to seek grace. Let's look at verse 15. Now we get to Jesus – this is the exciting part. "But the free gift," Paul writes, "is not like the trespass." So the trespass is Adam. The free gift is Jesus. "For if the many died through one man's trespass" – okay, who's the one man? Adam. We often hear this language of "being in Adam," the word *Adam* in Hebrew simply means

“humanity.” So as human beings we find ourselves, day in and day out, repeating the basic sin, the basic transgression, of not letting God be God.

And that’s a really a good question to ask: “How have I not let God be the God in my life?” What do I feel I need to control instead of giving it over to God? That’s what the power of sin does to us. It turns us in on ourselves, such that we are no longer other-seeking, but self-seeking and self-aggrandizing. God introduces a counter-power to the power of sin and death, and that counter-power is the power of love. The power of love has been introduced through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This power sets us free from sin and death. Through Christ’s death, and especially resurrection, the power of love conquers these things, and frees us to live as God intended.

Jesus, therefore, is the *new* Adam. He’s the Adam who didn’t succumb to the primary temptation. And his victory is what wins for us freedom from sin and death. Jesus is the new Adam who overcame the first, or original, sin, which is man’s desire to be like God; the failure to let God be God.

What next does Paul mean by justification? Well, the release of God’s reckless or fierce love that is God’s grace does something to us, and it’s kind of like what happens in Microsoft Word. When you take text that’s either left- or right-centered and you “justify” it, that means you align it. So in saying that we’re justified, we could say that we’re being, like the text in a word processing document, *aligned with God*. And being aligned with God means living for others instead of living for ourselves.

Next to justification in response to sin, we have new life in response to death. Paul says the power of love that has been manifested and released into the world through Christ is such that it can not only conquer our sins, but even death itself. I’m mostly agnostic about what happens after we die. But when it comes to the power of love here, I cling to it as hope that when this world and its doors on us, Jesus is waiting on the other side, opening them and welcoming us into to the life of the world to come. There’s something really powerful in Paul’s writing here.

And again, think of the context. He’s surrounded by death. When you have a toothache in the ancient world, you can’t go to a dentist. You get a hernia, you can’t order the surgeon. You live in pain. But for Paul, even in these circumstances, even amidst this hardship, there is a greater power that has entered the world, that frees us to live as God intended.

What, then, have we learned? We’ve learned, first, about sin as power. We’ve learned, second, that this power has entered the whole world. This is the reason for why things die; why there’s violence and suffering in life.

We’ve learned that this is not the last word. God intervenes by releasing a counter-power, which is to say, the cure to the disease that entered the world. This counter-power frees us to live as God intended for others and for God in a way that anticipates the new creation that will occur at the end, not only for us, but for the whole cosmos.

Why does this matter? In my experience, bad theology can make suffering worse. It can add to the burden. Let me share with you an example I offered several years ago, when I was a seminary student. I had to take on a hospital chaplaincy for three months. I remember once a young woman was admitted to ICU; she had suffered a brain aneurysm while swimming. She was 21. The mother of this young woman got there before I did, as did her pastor. I had a chance briefly to meet the mother, who then went back to be with her daughter. Because I was a student at the time, I asked the pastor, "What do you say to something horrible like this?" And she said, this pastor, she said, "Well, I just told her the truth. She's being punished for her sins." And I will never forget that. There's a clear example of how bad theology can make suffering worse.

Paul, on the other hand, doesn't say that death is the will of God. Death entered the world through a human being, Paul says, and whether or not you agree with that, at least it gets God off the hook. God doesn't want death. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that death is the enemy of God. So for Paul, you have a very different take on suffering in this world. It's not punishment from God. It's not what God intended. But God has done something about it in Jesus Christ, and God will do something about it on the last day of creation.

Taking time to unpack all this shows that death is not the will of God, but the *enemy* of God. Sin and death have infiltrated, corrupted and contaminated what God has made. I think the best analogy here is cancer. I watched it as it took over my mom's body in the last few days that she was living. It's a ravenous disease, and I think it really gets at the power of what Paul's talking about: something being really seriously wrong with creation. But again, there is a cure in Jesus Christ.

Shortly after my mom died last month, I sent a text to one of our parishioners here at the church. I said the only answer that somewhat makes sense to me is that when it comes to my mom's death, ours is a fallen creation, one that does not reflect God's original intention—hence the need for a new creation, of which Jesus is the first fruit. In short, I refuse to blame God for my mother's death. Paul tells me so.

Yes, Paul is hard to understand. I hope I've "demystified" him for you. I hope you've also seen how Paul can lessen the burden of our suffering, especially when it comes to grief and loss. God does not want death. God's word is life. And in Jesus Christ, God has spoken this word definitively.

Amen.