

The Gift of Life

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on September 19, 2021.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—for sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law. Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those whose sinning was not like the transgression of Adam, who was a type of the one who was to come. But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the free gift is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification. For if, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 5:12–21).¹

In the third chapter of Romans, Paul makes this comprehensive statement about fallen humanity: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). As God’s glory is his transcendent perfection, and as every man, woman, and child sins, all fall short of God’s glory. If ever there were a statement of supreme distinction, this is it. Such is the chasm between our sinfulness and God’s holiness.

If “all have sinned,” then sin is both pervasive and universal. There is no corridor of human existence that it has not walked. There is no corner of creation it has not wandered. But what exactly is it? In the case of sin, it seems easier done than defined. The Shorter Catechism helpfully defines sin as “any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God” (WSC 14), rightly setting God’s law as the perfect standard of righteousness. Sins of commission and omission are both included in this lack of conformity to or transgression of God’s perfect law, whether written on tablets of stone or the human heart.

Still, there are some who, in the freedom of their flesh, argue that what Scripture calls sin is nothing more than a deviation from “a set of evolved intuitions,”² crimes of cultural captivity rather than transgressions of timeless truth. Yet, when the Apostle Paul preached to the curious Epicureans and Stoics in the Areopagus of Athens (Acts 17), he did not have to define sin, as if it were an unknown commodity. While they did not have God’s written law, Paul did not need to

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

² Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 5.

define what God has written on the heart (Rom. 2:15). No, Paul simply preached to the pagans, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). He called them to repent of their sin—no one questioned what he meant.

Sin is sin, whether acknowledged or not. Everyone does it and it affects everything we do, but have you ever considered its origin? When and where did human sin begin? Scripture is clear and rightly do we confess that God is not the “author or approver of sin” (WCF 5.4), but if not God then who? Paul answers the question here: “sin came into the world through one man”—Adam. And it was through his one trespass that “led to condemnation for all men,” and his disobedience that “many were made sinners.” The origin of human sin is the first human, our father of the Fall.

The Origin of Death

Adam was not an evolving species or a mythical character but was created as a man, in the image of God (Gen. 1:26), from the dust of the ground. Created from the earth, God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” and he became “a living creature” (Gen. 2:7) that very moment. He literally was *the man*, as the Hebrew word for man, or mankind, is *adam*, which served also as the one man’s proper name: Adam, the *adam*.

From Adam, God made a woman, Eve (Gen. 2:22), “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them” (Gen. 1:27). In their created and one flesh union, Adam and Eve were created to live forever in perfect union with God and one another, the first description of paradise. But paradise was lost.

Tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent, Eve and then Adam transgressed God’s law, and broke the covenant. Our Confession says, “By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all parts and faculties of soul and body.”³ It was a Fall into total depravity with eternal consequence. But the consequences of sin were not isolated to Adam and Eve alone, but as the “root of all mankind, the guilt of [their] sin was imputed”⁴ to everyone born of Adam’s seed afterward. Adam is human sin’s origin but also its progenitor, corrupting us all.

Neither you nor I, nor any other children of Adam, know one nanosecond of existence untainted by sin, as a result of Adam’s sin. The Fall was cosmically catastrophic, the greatest tragedy realized in all of human history. Paul describes the consequences of the Fall from three perspectives: First, through Adam’s sin “many died” (5:15). Second, through Adam’s sin “death reigned” (5:17). Third, through Adam’s sin “many were made sinners” (5:19). Let’s consider each of these separately but in reverse order, as each phrase tells us much about the fallen human condition.

³ The Westminster Confession of Faith 6.2 (Lawrenceville, GA: Christian Education & Publication of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2007), 22-23.

⁴ Ibid., 6.3.

The Gift of Life

First, what does Paul mean by “many were made sinners”? The word translated “many” does not mean “a lot”, like a number, but “the many,” as a whole, meaning all of mankind.⁵

All of the natural descendants of Adam (that’s all of us) are born sinners—“made” that way through Adam’s original sin. We are not born good or even neutral. No one has to teach us how to sin, because we are sinners by inheritance, transgressors by nature.

Second, what does Paul mean by “death reigned”? Death is like a disinterested despot, sovereign over this life’s conclusion. No one cheats it; no one escapes it: death wins. Like a conquering champion, death defeats mankind, life after life after life. We may be living longer and healthier lives today, but death will win tomorrow.

Third, what does Paul mean by “many died”? Again, the word translated “many” here means “mankind.” Adam’s sin led to the death of mankind, but the emphasis here is on *death* itself. Contrary to popular opinion, death is not the natural expiration of life but is contrary to creation and the consequence of sin. From the perspective of our creation, death is unnatural. Death was introduced to the world through sin’s invitation and once the invitation was accepted, the world was never the same.

While it may be hard to fathom, all misery, every tragedy, the gamut of pain and suffering go all the way back to Adam. Sin and its consequences have been known by mankind since that first sin. And while God’s Moral Law may define sin, no one before it needed it to know what sin is or to identify it. The law may define sin and eliminate it but cannot stop sin or deliver us from death. Sin is sin and death its consequence. People sin, people die, such is the fallen human condition.

But it’s not just physical death that presents a problem. As we were created by God for eternity so also is death of eternal consequence. We don’t simply die and no longer exist. We die physically and continue in our existence. There is life beyond this life, which makes death an immediate concern. So, Adam’s sin continues to give the gift of death—the gift that keeps on giving, unless another greater gift is given.

The Source of Life

At the beginning of John’s Gospel, he tells us something interesting about Christ, the Word incarnate, and life. He says, “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men” (John 1:3-4). This statement takes us back to the origin of life in the creation account of Genesis, and we learn that when God spoke creation into existence that Word was Christ. All of life came through Christ, including human life. He is the source of life.

When Adam and Eve sinned and death came to all, it was contrary to the life given. Adam’s sin successfully ushered in sin and death; he could not undo what he had done. The sinful creature could not give life like the Creator. Adam was constrained by the means of his fallen humanity,

⁵ F.F. Bruce, *Romans: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 135.

The Gift of Life

yielding nothing but futility. How can a man of death give life? He can't, but ironically, he who is life gives life through death.

Christ accomplished what Adam could not do through the very curse of our inheritance—death. Uncorrupted by the seed of Adam, Christ's life was one of sinless perfection. Unaffected by sin, he would have lived forever as Jesus of Nazareth. But by divine ordination, he died a sinner's death that the imputed sin of Adam might rest on him: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). And he who created life resurrected to life, for it was impossible for death to conquer life (Acts 2:24).

In his victorious resurrection, Christ not only came to life but carried life out of death's dungeon. No longer can death brag in victory over those who trust in Christ, because Christ "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (1 Tim. 1:10). We who are children of Adam, inheriting his sin and deserving death, have become children of God through faith in Christ, inheriting the kingdom and eternal life.

The Gift of Life

Sometimes I hear people refer to the birth of a baby as a "miracle," which is sweet, endearing, and with good intention, and theologically wrong. Human life is not a miracle by definition. It is actually natural, according to God's creative design. Perhaps it's because we've lost the wonder of creation or perpetually forget God's common grace, but it's important for the Christian to keep the miracle, well miraculous.

So, what is a miracle? Let me answer by example. When a child of Adam, dead in the trespasses and sins of his father, is made alive together with Christ and is raised up with him and seated in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:1-6), that is a miracle, a supernatural wonder of wonders. Do you know what a miracle is? When those who were condemned to death by Adam's sin and trespass of God's law are justified as righteous through faith in Christ, that is a miracle of cosmic proportion. And further, it's not a miracle you can work or claim. It is the miraculous gift of life: Those dead in sin brought to life in Christ.

God's gift in Christ is one of measureless magnitude: Adam is overcome by Christ, sin by righteousness, condemnation by justification, death by life, trespass by gift. And it is through the marvelous generosity of God's grace that we realize the inexpressible glory of God's purpose in us. Christian, every day in Christ is a gift of life. What the Christian must guard against is resurrecting Adam and calling him Christ, trying to live the Christian life in spite of rather than in light of the gospel. When tempted to sin, look not to the reign of death but the life of Christ, who enables us to live the victorious Christian life by his Spirit. When tempted to despair, look not to the poverty of sin but to the abundant grace of God, who encourages us in his hope by his Spirit.

The Christian life, then, is a life lived not by looking back to what we were in Adam but who (and whose) we are in Christ, not by dwelling on the origin of our sin and death but the source and Savior of our life. It is life where grace reigns "leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."