

Very often, the actions of one person can affect the lives of many, many others. When the president issues an executive order, an entire nation is effected by his new policy. When a general plans a military campaign, a whole army can be moved into a dangerous battle. When a football coach calls a play, it sets all of his players in motion in a way that could win or lose the game, which in turn can result in the thrill of victory or the heartbreak of defeat for millions of fans.

In our Epistle lesson this morning from Romans 5, Paul sets up for us the two most influential people in all of human history: Adam and Jesus. And he shows how both of them carried out actions that affected the lives of not just thousands or even millions, but of every human being who has ever been born or ever will be born.

He writes, *“Sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.”* Paul is, of course, turning back to Genesis chapter 3, where we see the fall into sin. Where Adam and Eve rebel against the clear command of God: *“Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.”* And what did they do? They ate. And everything changed.

Through that one man, sin entered the world. And with sin came death. Death wasn't part of God's original design. It wasn't woven into creation as a natural feature. It was a punishment. A consequence of rebellion. The moment Adam sinned, he became subject to death. *“You are dust, and to dust you shall return,”* just as we heard this past Wednesday. The reign of death had begun.

Adam sinned, and he died. And like Adam, we all have sinned. Earlier in Romans Paul already said it plainly: *“All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”* There are no exceptions. Adam's corruption is not merely an example we imitate. It is a condition we inherit. Therefore, death reigns over all people.

“The wages of sin is death.” You and I are going to die, just like Adam did. Drive a little ways down 11th St and you'll see the proof of it: Walnut Grove Cemetery, where most of our members are buried. Proof that death reigns.

Then Paul addresses a question that might arise. He says, *“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.”* Adam sinned against an explicit command. God had drawn a clear line in the sand. Adam stepped over it. That is the very definition of the word “transgression”: crossing a revealed boundary.

But what about the long stretch of history between Adam and Moses? God didn't give the Ten Commandments to the world until He spoke them through Moses at Sinai. For those many centuries there was no codified, revealed Law. So were those people off the hook? Was sin not counted against them?

Paul's answer is an emphatic “no”. Death reigned from Adam to Moses. And death isn't arbitrary. Death is the consequence of sin. Even if they didn't sin in the exact way that Adam sinned, even if they didn't step over a clearly revealed line in the same way that he did, they still sinned.

They sinned against the knowledge of God written on their hearts. They violated their consciences. They committed idolatry, violence, lust, deceit. The proof of their guilt is simple and unavoidable: they died.

Consider those early chapters of Genesis. Consider the wickedness that filled the earth, so that God sent the flood in the days of Noah. They knew violence was wrong. They knew murder was wrong. And God's judgment demonstrates that their sin was counted. Nearly the entire world perished under God's wrath. Death reigned.

What Paul says about that interim period is significant for us today. Because there are still people in the world today who have never heard the Ten Commandments. They don't have the revealed Word of God in their hands. But they still have a conscience. They still know something of right and wrong. And they sin against it. Therefore they die too.

That's the bleak reality of things. We live in a dying world. A world where the earth itself is cursed because of our sin and ignorance of the law is no excuse. Death reigns over us all, it seems.

But then comes Paul's welcome turning point. *"But the free gift is not like the trespass."* Now Christ enters into the comparison. And Paul isn't merely contrasting bad with good.

He's doing something that was common among Jewish rabbis of his day. He's arguing from lesser to greater. Adam's trespass brought death to many. But Jesus isn't equivalent to Adam. He's so much greater than Adam. So how much more will the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abound for many.

One man. One trespass. One act of disobedience. And condemnation spread across the whole human race. But the free gift is not like the trespass. It's not equal and opposite. It's not yin and yang. It's divine grace of the greatest sort. And so it overflows. It surpasses. It abounds.

"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." One trespass was enough to condemn the world. One sin brought the reign of death. But the gift of God in Christ doesn't just cover one trespass. It covers many trespasses. It covers every trespass.

Adam's sin. Eve's sin. Paul's sin. Your sins. My sins. Not just one. Not just the first. But the accumulated mountain of human rebellion across all centuries. And what does God do with that mountain of sin? He declares the ungodly to be righteous. That is justification.

The Greek word Paul uses carries the courtroom sense of a verdict. The Judge pronounces the accused righteous. Innocent. Not guilty. Not because the sins were imaginary. Not because they didn't matter. But because they've been answered. They've been covered. They've been atoned 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." Death reigned. It sat on the throne. It ruled over Adam and all his descendants. But now there is another reign. Those who receive the abundance of grace reign in life.

And this is all through one man: Jesus Christ. Where Adam failed to keep God's command, Christ kept it perfectly. We see that obedience vividly portrayed in his temptation in the wilderness, from our Gospel reading. But it doesn't stop there. Throughout Jesus' life He fulfilled the Law actively. He loved the Lord His God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength. He loved His neighbor as Himself. Every thought, every word, every deed was in flawless conformity to the Father's will.

And that active obedience was absolutely necessary. A sinner couldn't save sinners. A lawbreaker couldn't justify lawbreakers. The One who would go to the cross had to first keep the Law completely. And then, at the end of His earthly ministry, He offered His passive obedience. He submitted Himself to arrest, to trial, to scourging, to crucifixion. He bore the curse that Adam's race deserved. He paid the wages of sin.

"As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men." Adam's act brought condemnation for us all. Christ's act brings justification and life for us all. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world.

Paul wraps up this passage with this summary: *"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."* There are two men whose actions affected the lives of every human being on earth. One disobeyed. Through him, all were made sinners. The other obeyed. Through Him, not only are those sins covered, but we are made righteous in God's eyes.

Death reigned. But it reigns no longer. Now grace reigns because Christ reigns. He reigns with righteousness. And he reigns by giving us his righteousness. That's the great exchange that defines human history. And because of him, we live. Amen.