

Lesson 55 at StudyRomans.org

Romans 5:18-19, Continued

Romans 5:18-19 — 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.

When we ended last week, we had just started looking at a potential difficulty in verses 18-19. Is Paul teaching universal salvation when he says that life is for **all** men and that **the many** will be made righteous? As we saw last week, at least one rather verbose commentator thinks so. Here is what he wrote:

“Common to all these passages is that all-powerful grace is unthinkable without eschatological universalism and that cosmology overshadows anthropology as its projection.”

After we decode that, we can see that commentator is saying two things about the grace of God, neither of which is correct.

The first thing he is saying is that, if God's grace is really all-powerful, then it must be true that everyone will ultimately be saved. And, yes, that is wrong, but it is also understandable given his starting point.

If, as Calvin teaches, the grace of God is irresistible, then it must be true that either everyone will be saved or that God's grace is limited in its scope. If we start with the false premise that God's grace is irresistible, then we must arrive at one of those two false conclusions.

Calvin chose one of those two false conclusions (limited atonement), while this commentator chose the other false conclusion (universal salvation). But both conclusions are false. And that should not be surprising given that they are each based on the same false premise — God’s grace is not irresistible!

People resist God’s grace all the time. In fact, I suspect we all know people who are resisting God’s grace right now. Most people resist God’s grace their entire lives, and even some who are saved resisted the gospel when they first heard it and only later believed and obeyed it.

What God said about Israel could be said today about almost everyone: “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people” (Isaiah 65:2; Romans 10:21). God is holding out his hands to people, but what are those people doing in response? They are resisting! They are disobedient and contrary!

Now Calvin, of course, would tell us that they are resisting the grace of God because they can do nothing else. Calvin would tell us that it is only those who have been supernaturally changed by the Holy Spirit who find the grace of God irresistible. Absent that transformation, all any of us can do is resist God’s grace. But after that transformation, all we can do is receive God’s grace. In neither case do we have any choice in the matter. That is what Calvinism teaches.

But, of course, that view makes no sense at all. If God’s plan is to change some of us into robots who are unable to resist the gospel, then why not just do that for everyone? We know that God’s will is that everyone be saved (2 Peter 3:9), so why not change us all into robots with no free will? Why stop with only the elect? If God over-

rides our free will by some sort of transformation, then why not transform everyone? Wouldn't that ensure that no one perishes?

The truth is that we have all been given free will by God, and that fact alone tells us that God's grace is not irresistible! And if it were irresistible, then the price would be our free will.

That is what irresistible means — we are unable to resist it. We are unable to choose anything else. We have lost our free will. And if God wanted to be worshiped by robots, he could have accomplished that without ever sending Jesus to die on a cross. Instead, just create a world filled with robots who have no ability to reject God.

We could say much more on that topic, but let's get back to our wordy commentator. The second thing he wrote was "that cosmology overshadows anthropology as its projection." What does that mean?

What he means is that the grace of God transforms the whole creation, and so, as a result, that grace must eventually transform every person in that whole creation. That is what he means when he says that cosmology (the big picture) overshadows anthropology (the individual picture).

And, again, he has reached a wrong conclusion, but perhaps he has done so in an understandable way. Why understandable? Because what he says about cosmology finds some support in Paul's epistles.

In Romans 8:21, Paul will say "that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God," and in Colossians 1:20, Paul says that God was pleased through Jesus "to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven." We will talk about Romans 8:21 later, but for now

let's just say that there may be some way in which God's grace transforms the entirety of creation. We will see.

But even if we were to accept that cosmological view of grace, that would not mean that everyone will be saved. Perhaps God transforms the cosmos by casting out the wicked. And if our cosmological argument did mean that everyone would be saved, then we would know for sure that our cosmological view is false. Why? Because Paul repeatedly tells us that not everyone will be saved. Universal salvation finds no support from Paul.

Romans 2:6-8 — He will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honor and immortality, he will give eternal life; **but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury.**

Romans 8:13 — **For if you live according to the flesh you will die**, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

1 Corinthians 6:9 — Or do you not know that **the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?**

Galatians 5:21 — ...those who do such things **will not inherit the kingdom of God.**

2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 — In flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. **They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.**

Philippians 3:18-19 — For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. **Their end is destruction,** their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

So, whatever verses 18-19 mean, we know they do not mean that everyone will be saved. They cannot mean that because of all of the other scriptures that teach the opposite.

So, having looked at what these verses do not mean, what do they mean? What does it mean that “one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men”? What does it mean “the many” were made sinners and “the many” will be made righteous?

I think the key to understanding verses 18-19 is found in verse 17, which should not be surprising. That is how context works. What Paul is telling us here in verses 18-19 is connected to what he told us in verse 17 — and there is no need for Paul to repeat what he said in verse 17 given that he just said it! Again, that is how context works.

So what did Paul say in verse 17 that is so important to these next two verses? Let’s read it again.

Romans 5:17 — 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.

“Those who receive.” That phrase is crucial for understanding the next two verses and for quickly seeing the error in the false view that Paul is somehow teaching universal salvation.

Verse 17 is telling us about those who receive God's grace and the free gift of righteousness. And that language, of course, leads to only one conclusion — there must also be those who do **not** receive God's grace and the free gift of righteousness. Some receive God's grace, but not everyone receives God's grace. And, of course, that is just the same thing that Paul tells us repeatedly elsewhere as we saw with Romans 2:6-8 and the other verses we just quoted. Some will be saved, but not everyone will be saved.

When Paul said these things in verses 18-19, he assumed that we would still remember what he said in verse 17. Again, that is how context works. And if anyone is studying verses 18-19 out of context, that is their problem, not Paul's problem.

So now let's look at verse 18 again:

“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men.”

How did Adam's sin lead to condemnation for all men? Paul does not tell us here, but he does tell us elsewhere. He told us back in verse 12. Adam's sin led to condemnation for all men when each person sinned and followed Adam's bad example.

That condemnation for all men did not happen automatically. Instead, it happened after they did something. It happened after they sinned.

So how then did one act of righteousness lead to justification and life for all men? Again, Paul does not tell us here, but he does tell us elsewhere. In fact, he told us in verse 1 (“we have been justified by faith”)

and he just told us in verse 17. And Paul will have more to say about that in the next chapter.

And, as with the condemnation for all men, the justification and life for all men did not happen automatically. Instead, it happened after they did something. It happened after they obeyed the gospel.

So what does Paul mean when he uses the word “all”? We know he does not mean that all will be saved because he repeatedly tells us the opposite. So what does he mean? I think when we view verse 18 in the context of verse 17 and the rest of the Bible, we can see that what Paul means is this:

“Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men [who sinned], so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men [who obey the gospel].”

But, some might say, that is not what Paul says here in verse 18. And I would respond, yes, but that is exactly what Paul says if we include the context of verse 18, along with many other verses we have already studied. And I think Paul was expecting us to keep up with him. And, again, that is how context works. That is why context is so important.

Let’s consider a modern example. Assume you are lined up outside a football stadium to get in to see the big game. An announcement comes over the loudspeaker:

“Please have your tickets ready. Once the gates are open, no one without a ticket will be allowed inside.”

Then, later, the gates open, and you hear another announcement:

“The gates have opened. Everyone please enter the stadium in an orderly fashion.”

But you don’t have a ticket. Should you expect to be allowed inside the stadium? Didn’t they just say “**everyone** please enter in an orderly fashion?” Aren’t you included in “everyone?” How do you think that argument will work with the security guard who is stationed at the gate? “Why do I need a ticket? They said everyone!”

I think we all know how that argument would work — it wouldn’t. When we speak, we do not constantly repeat everything we have just said, and so why do so many expect Paul to do that? Using the phrase “all men” in verse 18 to try to get into heaven is just like using the word “everyone” to try to get into the stadium.

And I think we will see that the same thing is true of verse 19, so let’s read that verse again:

Romans 5:19 — 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 first thing to note here is that, once again, we see the word “many.” We saw that same word back in verse 15: “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**.”

But there is a difference between verse 15 and verse 19, at least in the ESV. In verse 15, we see “many,” but here in verse 19, we see “the many.” That is what we see in the ESV, but as we said when we looked at verse 15, the Greek text of that verse has the definite article — Paul

said “the many.” Is that also true of verse 19, and if so, why does the ESV treat verse 19 differently than verse 15?

The answer is that both verses 15 and 19 refer to “the many” rather than just to “many.” And, yes, for some reason, the ESV makes that clear in verse 19 but does not make that clear in verse 15. As for why, I suspect the translators just thought it sounded better in verse 15 to drop the definite article. As for whether that is a good enough reason to drop a word from the Biblical text, I lean toward no!

The Greek text translated “the many” in verses 15 and 19 is *hoi polloi*. And if that phrase sounds familiar, there is a reason for that — it is also an English phrase. Today, we use the phrase *hoi polloi* to refer to the general public, but usually in a derogatory sense, as in the great unwashed. But in Greek that phrase just means “the many,” without any negative connotation at all.

And here is the question for us — are “the many” in verse 15 the same as “the many” in verse 19? As we recall, back in verse 15 we said that “the many” referred to everyone who is accountable to God. All such people died spiritually when they sinned, and the free gift of grace abounded for them all. Does that mean that all were saved? No, it just means that salvation was available to all. It means the same thing that we read in Titus.

Titus 2:11 — For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation **for all people**.

God has brought salvation for all people, but that does not mean that all people are saved. It just means that all people could be saved if they would obey the gospel. That is not what Calvin teaches, but that is certainly what the Bible teaches.

So are “the many” here in verse 19 the same as “the many” in verse 15? I see no reason to think otherwise. Paul has not changed the subject. I think that, as we saw in verse 15 and as we saw in verse 18, what we see here in verse 19 is again describing something that is available for all people but that is not necessarily received by all people. That understanding agrees with the context and does not have Paul proclaiming universal salvation in contradiction to what he has repeatedly told us elsewhere.

Here is what I think verse 19 (when read in context) is saying:

For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners [when they followed Adam’s example], so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous [when they follow Jesus’ example].

The point of contrast here is between Adam and Christ, which, as we have seen, is between law and faith. Under a system of law, one sin is all it takes to separate us from God for all eternity. Adam opened the door to all of that, and we walk through that door as soon as we decide to do what Adam did.

But where Adam was disobedient, Jesus was obedient. Paul tells us all about that elsewhere.

Philippians 2:6-8 — Who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

And let’s think about that Philippian passage for a moment. Do we remember what prompted the first sin? It was a desire to be like God.

Genesis 3:5 — For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.

And yet what did Paul just tell us about Jesus? He “did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.”

Where Adam disobeyed God because of his desire to be like God, Jesus, who was equal with God, did not grasp that but instead was born in our own likeness and was obedient to the point of death. Jesus undid the work of Adam by doing the opposite of what Adam did.

Now, before we leave verse 19, let’s look at one final word — the word “made.” Many were **made** sinners, and many were **made** righteous. Who did that? Who made them sinners? Who made them righteous?

I think the answer is God. God made them sinners, and God made them righteous. **But we should note that God making me a sinner is not the same as God making me sin. And God making me righteous is not the same as God making me obey.** I am the one who chooses to sin. And I am the one who chooses to obey. God is then the judge who declares me a sinner or who declares me righteous.

And that view fits nicely with the Greek word that is translated “made” in verse 19. That word means to set or to appoint. It is the same word that Paul uses in Titus 1:5 when he talks about **appointing** elders, it is the same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 25:23 — “You have been faithful over a little; I will **set** you over much,” and it is the same word used in Acts 7:10 to describe what Pharaoh did to Joseph: “Pharaoh, king of Egypt, who **made** him ruler over Egypt.”

In each case, the Greek word refers to a determination of a status that is based on something else that was done. The elders are appointed because of their qualifications. The one who is faithful over little is set over much. Joseph was made ruler because of his obedience to God and his usefulness to Pharaoh.

The same word is being used the same way here. The many who sin are made or appointed or set as sinners by God because of their disobedience and faithlessness, and the many who are faithful are made or appointed or set as righteous by God because of their obedience and faithfulness.

Romans 5:20

Romans 5:20 — Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

“The law came in.” What law is that? Our general rule is that any time we see “the law” we should think first of the law of Moses, but there is a problem with that rule here in verse 20 — the Greek text just says “law” rather than “the law.”

And, yes, that means that the ESV removed the definite article from “the many” in verse 15, kept the definite article in “the many” in verse 19, and then added the definite article to get “the law” here in verse 20. It is almost like the ESV translators were shaking definite articles out of a salt shaker! There is definitely a lack of consistency.

Once again, we find a more accurate translation in the Young’s Literal Translation:

And law came in, that the offence might abound, and where the sin did abound, the grace did overabound.

“And law came in.” The ESV translators apparently thought that “law” was the law of Moses. Were they right? I think they were, but even so, I would rather they leave that choice up to me rather than add in a word that is not present in the original Greek text.

But, yes, I think the law that came in was the law of Moses. As for why Paul called it “law” rather than “the law,” perhaps he figured we would know what law he meant given that he has been talking about the time between Adam and Moses. What marked the end of that time period was not just the appearance of Moses, but was the appearance of the law of Moses. That law was the real dividing line between the time prior to Moses and the time after Moses — and especially so for the Jews.

And if you had described the terrible time of sin prior to Moses, most Jews would have told you that the law of Moses was the solution to that terrible time of sin. But that is not at all what Paul tells us here. Rather than solving sin, Paul tells us that the law of Moses **increased** sin! What does he mean?

How did the law of Moses increase sin? I think it did so in at least two ways — by increasing the **quantity** of sin and by increasing the **severity** of sin.

And this statement that the law increases sin may give us another possible reason why the law of Moses is called “law” here rather than “the law.” It may be because what Paul says about the law of Moses is also

true about law in general — the more law you have, the more ways you have to sin.

As for increasing the quantity of sin, the law of Moses prohibited some things that were almost certainly not considered wrong prior to the law of Moses. Yes, murder, theft, and adultery were already known by all to be wrong, but what about these other Mosaic laws?

- “You shall not sow your vineyard with two kinds of seed” (Deuteronomy 22:9).
- “You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together” (Deuteronomy 22:10).
- “You shall not wear cloth of wool and linen mixed together” (Deuteronomy 22:11).
- “You shall not round off the hair on your temples or mar the edges of your beard” (Leviticus 19:27).
- “Everything in the waters that does not have fins and scales is detestable to you” (Leviticus 11:12).

I think at least some of those laws were new, and so one way that the law of Moses increased sin was that it created many new ways to sin.

But the law of Moses also increased the severity of sin. How? Because, unlike the work of the law written on the heart of man by God, these laws were written down for all to see. As Paul already told us in Romans 3:20, “through the law comes knowledge of sin.” And later, in Romans 7:7, Paul will say that “if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin.”

The law of Moses was a direct law from God. In that way, Moses was like Adam, who had also received a direct law from God. There was very little that was vague about the law of Moses, and so breaking that written code was, I think, a greater act of rebellion against God.

The principle here is that greater revelation brings greater accountability, and I think Paul has already told us that:

Romans 2:12 — For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law.

Am I saying that a greater revelation from God removes excuses we might otherwise have had for our sin? Yes, I am saying that because Jesus said that:

John 15:22 — If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin.

John 15:24 — If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father.

Luke 12:47-48 — And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more.

“Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required.”
That statement is very sobering in light of all that we have been given.

Ephesians 1:3 — Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.

And what do those verses say to us today who have the complete word of God? We have the complete revelation from God — so what excuse do we have for our rebellion?

Hebrews 2:3-4 — How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

These verses are telling us that responsibility increases as revelation increases. Prior to Moses, mankind had almost no revelation from God. After Moses, mankind had partial revelation from God. After Christ, mankind has the complete revelation from God. What must our responsibility be given that we have such a great revelation from God? How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?

Verse 20 ends with yet another wonderful description of God's grace — "but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more."

Yes, sin increased with the law of Moses, but God's grace abounded all the more! No matter how great the sin, God's grace is greater. And again, no one knew that better than Paul. He had persecuted the church of God, and yet he had been forgiven by the grace of God. Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more!

So maybe what we should do is just sin more and more. Wouldn't that mean that God's grace would abound more and more? And wouldn't

that be a good thing? Isn't it always better to have more grace than less grace? And don't we get more grace if we sin more? Paul, is that what you are saying?

Paul will answer that question in the next chapter, but first we need to look at the final verse in this chapter.

Romans 5:21

Romans 5:21 — so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

We saw death reigning in verse 14, and we saw Christians reigning in life through Christ in verse 17. Here in verse 21, we see sin reigning and we see grace reigning.

What Paul is doing here is contrasting sin and grace. He is explaining the difference between someone who obeys his own passions and someone who obeys the will of God. And Paul will still be discussing this topic in the next chapter.

Romans 6:12 — Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.

Romans 6:16 — Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?

And notice the focus on obedience in each of those verses. Whether we **obey** sin or whether we **obey** God, the decision is ours. We choose whom we obey.

If we are faithful and obedient to the reign of Christ, then we will live in rebellion to the reign of sin. “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body.”

But if we harden our hearts to Christ and are instead faithful and obedient to the reign of sin, then we will live in rebellion to Jesus.

Hebrews 3:15 — As it is said, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.”

The choice is ours. God has given us the freedom to choose. Calvinism is based on the notion that God takes back that gift, but that is not what the Bible teaches.