

Sermon for Sunday, January 24, 2010
Dr. Dan Doriani

HOPE FOR RENEWAL
Romans 5:16-21

Romans 5 is full of contrasts between what was and what is, between what is and what can be. Sin, condemnation and death are on one side. Righteousness, peace and life are on the other. We have Adam on one side, Jesus on the other. There is bad news and good news. The human race was and is largely governed by sin and death. Yet God can and does overrule them both.

Romans 5 is a commentary on a story: Not long after he was created, Adam rebelled against God by taking the fruit of one forbidden tree. Sin entered the world and death followed. Adam lived a long time, but he died from illness or age. Contrary to God's original plan, everyone now dies.

Why? Because everyone sins. Some sin just the way Adam did – deliberate rebellion, breaking a known command. Lots of people don't. Paul observes that from the time Adam to Moses, there was no published law of God (5:13-14). Therefore, while some people have God's law and coldly reject it and rebel against God, others rebel and don't know exactly what they're doing.

Either way, people rebel against God; deep down we know this. There is something wrong with humanity. A political candidate is way ahead in the polls, but he plays dirty tricks and tries to humiliate his opponent so he'll win the election by twenty points rather than ten. The best paid athlete in the world is married to a supermodel, but that's not enough. He needs more. We're horrified and yet we get it, because we know that we too have irrational, insatiable appetites, such as wealth, influence, travel, knowledge or dominance. For some, whatever we have or gain or accomplish, we will want more. In the summer of 1995, a famous tennis player won thirty-two consecutive tennis matches. Then he lost one - on a big stage. Because of that one loss, he decided life is meaningless. The world is not enough.

Solomon understood. He said, "I built houses, I made gardens and I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself. I acquired... a harem as well. I denied myself nothing my eyes desired. My heart took delight in all my work, Yet when I surveyed all that... I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind (Ecclesiastes 2:4-11).

Paul repeatedly says that this duo – sin and rebellion – lead to death:

- 5:12 "Death spread to all men because all sinned."
- 5:14 "Death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses."
- 5:17, 21 "Death reigned through that [Adam]... Sin reigned in death."

One scholar concluded that a culture can have one of three attitudes toward death: We can be death-accepting, death-denying, or death-defying.

Death-accepting cultures believe death is inevitable, possibly even good. Socrates was condemned to death for denying the existence of the traditional Greek gods. Before he drank the court-mandated poison, he tells his students, including Plato, that they must not weep. The soul is immortal and the body must die for the soul to escape this cursed bodily life. But very few people can accept death so calmly when it is their death or the death of their loved one.

Death-denying cultures pretend and avoid the topic of death. A large part of America is death-denying. We emphasize youth and vitality. We say fifty is the new forty and forty the new thirty. We take anti-oxidants and go to the gym and say things like, "I don't intend to age gracefully, I intend to fight it at every turn."

Faith creates a death-defeating culture. We believe there is life after death. Job said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see him with my own eyes, I, and not another" (19:25-27). This defiance of death comes through Jesus Christ. But first, face death again...

The **death of infants** and small children is crucial to our view of God and the world. When we consider Haiti or other tragedies, it's the suffering of children that troubles us most. They are small, defenseless. They did nothing to deserve this. Perhaps adults bring suffering on themselves, but infants do not. Infants are not guilty of sin. How then can God let them die? Is he unjust? Is He uncaring?

Paul's answer – the Lord's answer - given in Romans is that they fell with Adam who represented them as head of the race. (5:12). "Sin entered the world through one man" could mean that Adam set a bad example and everyone followed that bad example (per Pelagius/Pelagianism). While it's certainly true that we follow bad examples, that doesn't explain the death of little ones, who cannot yet imitate anyone.

In (5:16) Paul says, "The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification." God determined that Adam should represent us. We were accounted holy or sinful based on his actions. His nature, whether loving or rebellious, became ours. That is, Adam's sin was reckoned or imputed to the human race.

We may say this is unfair. It's probably safe to say that, even in Eden, we would have done the same. In fact, we often do the same things. We may question why God made the world this way, but he certainly has. Parents act for their children, governors for their citizens. It's woven into the fabric of life. But there is powerful good news in this for "Adam [is] a pattern of the one to come." Now the one to come is Jesus. Adam is a pattern for Christ, he prefigures or foreshadows the life of Jesus in these ways

1. Both represent the human race. We fell in Adam, now we stand in Christ. (5:17) "By the trespass of the one man, death reigned," but now "righteousness reigns in life through the one man, Jesus Christ."

2. Both Adam and Jesus passed on their disobedience or righteousness to those who follow them" (5:19). Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

3. Both give their people their status (5:18). "Just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." The labels are the imputation of Adam's sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

So Adam is a type of Christ. The old humanity is united to Adam. It rebels against God, sins against each other, is separated from God and is headed for death and destruction. We see this propensity to rebel in toddlers. The first word will probably be "dada" and "mama". But "no" and "mine" will also be in the top twenty.

The new humanity is united to Jesus. We trust God and we aim to love each other. And even now we make substantial progress in that direction. We belong to God and we are headed for life, peace, and wholeness.

In a word, we were created "good," we fell with Adam. By faith, our restoration has begun, and we look to the day when everything is restored and renewed. Our sin made us God's enemies. Yet because sin never entirely consumed His handiwork, "He knew how to hate what we had done [to ourselves], and to love what he had done" [in creating us].¹

¹ Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* - Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, 7: 411.

That is why Jesus came. Paul's words: "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:20-21).

This doctrine will be familiar to some of you and alien to others. If it's alien, I ask you to consider again the death of little ones. Even if you don't yet believe it, even if you haven't yet committed yourself to follow Jesus, at least see that the faith provides a coherent picture. In the earthquake in Haiti, in the plagues and wars that have racked mankind, infants died before they could rebel and say "no" or show their selfishness with "mine." Thus they are united to a race of sinners.

Infants die. Therefore, skeptics say God is unloving and cares nothing for these people. Or He is weak and can do nothing to stop the tragedies. And He is unfair, for He lets the innocent suffer. But the Bible says we are all united to Adam. We rebelled and sinned and become subject to death with him. But there is good news here too. For Jesus has inaugurated a new humanity. Adults may choose to join it and people from every nation do so. But the sweep of Romans 5 seems to indicate that this renewal through union to Christ is now the norm.

This gives strong hope that all who die in infancy will live with Christ forever. The Bible never explicitly says this, for the idea could be abused. Still Paul says, "the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (5:18). I cannot say "certain" and that leads us to think that after the resurrection, union with Him is the norm.

Now I want to lay aside exposition and theology and consider how we can live out our new life. Three answers: 1) By following the disciplines of grace, 2) By living in genuine community and 3) By engaging our culture.

Living as the renewed community

First, the disciplines of grace. The disciplines of grace are familiar: Reading the Bible, prayer, worship, self-examination, self-denial and service.

I urge you to read the Bible every day. Broadly speaking, we read two ways: large portions, to become familiar with the sweep of Scripture, perhaps a chapter a day or three chapters to get almost through Bible in a year.

Meditative reading is going over a few verses, slowly, reading then several times, letting the meaning sink in. Use a study Bible for help with mysteries. Always try to open your heart to God's message for you. Something you should know and believe or feel or do. Always ask, "How is God revealing His character or work?"

You say, "I don't know what to read." Read Romans! Sign up for an e-mail service and get at least two suggested passages each week. Call the church for resources that guide you through Bible in a year.

Prayer. The Bible says that we should "pray without ceasing." That means two things: A spirit that is ready to pray at any time and a discipline of praying often. The classic Christian view is that we should pray each morning and each evening. Add at each meal, when we start our day's work, when we hear of a friend in need. That sounds like a program, but it's common sense. Let prayer enter the rhythm of the day.

i2

² William Law, *Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*.

The danger of hypocritical prayer is great. Jesus warned against praying to be seen by men. I know well two Christian leaders who fell into grievous sin. Both spoke often of their prayer life while in their darkest sin. One told me, "I can't wait to go to bed at night because I know I'm that much closer to my quiet time with God." That same week, he did things that were sins and crimes. Jesus said: "Pray in secret, between you and your Father in heaven." If you don't know where to start, call the church and we can send discipleship materials on prayer. But you don't need a booklet: praise, thanks, confession, petition for others. We will discuss self-denial and service another day. I'm eager to turn to our life together.

Community Evaluating culture

In community, we flesh out our life in Christ together. Everyone who is here today has chosen to join the large group ministry of Central. In corporate worship we praise, pray, confess the faith and study the word. The large group meeting is good – even imperative.

King David said, "I was glad when they said to me 'Let us go to the house of the Lord'" (Psalm 122:1). Jesus himself worshiped every Sabbath day. Luke 4:16 says that when he visited Nazareth, "he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day." The Lord wants us to gather to worship him. There is nothing like it. But we also need something more intimate.

The early church practiced this. "Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming... that Jesus is the Christ" (Acts 5:42). Paul says this was the pattern of his ministry "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house" (20:20). They "broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad... hearts" (2:46).

When the whole community gathers, we hear the great truths that are for everyone. Together we celebrate God's grace and sing. It's very powerful. But, as someone has said, a church needs to be large enough to celebrate and small enough to care for each other. A large church stays small enough to care for each other through smaller communities. In small groups we form relationships.

Close relationships are not magical. Some small groups plan sins and crimes together. Many people seek companions simply because they can't stand to be alone with themselves. If that's your motive, relationships may not be constructive. "Let him who cannot be alone beware of community." If you seek community "because you refuse to be alone," you will harm yourself and your community.

Still, God calls us into community. Some things can't happen in large groups. In smaller groups, we can ask our questions and get answers from people who know you. They know why you are asking. They won't give you a strange look. They will help you when you aren't even sure what you're saying or asking.

Tight communities care for each other. Without networks of relationships, the church will fail to care for people. Pastors, deacons, and women's ministry folk are good at crisis. We're good at caring for people who tell us about their problems. But what about people who are shy and private? If they – if you - don't have a community, we won't know.

Jesus started a small group by calling twelve men to join. He stuck with them, failures and all. He never quit on them, although one quit on him. In genuine community, we provide accountability. We wrestle through issues. We have a right to ask each other real questions.

Small groups come in different forms, with different focal points. At a recent pastors' meeting Eric Stiller suggested that we look at them through the perspective of the three offices – prophet, priest and king. A prophetic group focuses on teaching and learning God's truth.

- Priestly groups focus on knowing, caring, encouraging and praying for one another, and generally living in community.

- A kingly group tries to will focus on action in the world – to bring God's good rule to the world in some form of service such as Life team, or Haiti.

Every group will have all three. A discipleship group is prophetic, but the people pray for each other every week. Service groups are kingly; they act, but the team studies to be prepared and prays for each other and the work.

C-groups are more priestly. They focus on fellowship, caring and prayer. In my C-group, we go a bit overtime most weeks for two reasons. First (dose of honesty), we start a little late. Second, we share and pray over so many issues in our lives. The group changes a little every year, but we know each other pretty well. We know the big issues in each other's lives. In times of need we help each other, too. So C-groups are mostly priestly but they study the Bible and do service projects, too. In short, each has a focus and each has the other elements.

In small communities we can test gifts and grow in them. Suppose you have a group with seven people. You can test your interests and skills in the company of friends. No one is going to pummel you if you forget to say something or organize something. It's participatory and everyone wants you to do well.

In community, people urge us to forms of service that we might not see for ourselves. An old story: Like many others, Augustine, the great bishop of Hippo, was dragged into Christian leadership. After his conversion, Augustine came to Hippo with a few friends to start a monastery. One day the prior bishop of Hippo spoke warmly of the need for gifted young men to serve the church – good theme!

But somehow people of the church knew Augustine was a man of strong faith, great intellect and powerful oratorical skills and they would not let his gifts go to an isolated monastery. As the bishop spoke, the people pushed Augustine toward the front and clamored for him to be ordained at once. Within months Augustine was ordained a "priest" or pastor. A few years later he became the bishop of Hippo. The people knew.

Augustine was a once per century talent; we can't expect hundreds of people to rise up and push us forward. But a few good friends may nudge us forward and we should listen.

We have dozens of small communities at Central and hundreds of people are involved in them. Many of you are involved in excellent communities that have no organic connection to Central. Some groups are loose, but real. Some have a clear identity and requirement.

- To stay in prophetic/teaching group, you may have to attend homework in hand.
- A kingly, action-oriented group may meet strictly to plan action.
- Priestly, caring groups may meet weekly or whenever needed.

The point of this is the Bible is consistent: Before they had buildings, the first Christians met in the temple courts or in lecture halls or large houses as a large group and from house to house as a community where everyone knows everyone. We need the large gathering and the small.

I am asking you to do this - get in a group. I don't care if it's tight or loose, well-organized or informal, no one can grow to the full without partners who know and care. I will be glad if you sign up for a men's group, women's group, for a prophetic/teaching group, for a priestly care group, for a kingly action group. Or you may simply call two friends. I truly don't care as long as you are laying hold of the means God uses to solidify your life in Christ...

This is not a call to a program or a major initiative – although you will hear a few new things. It's a way to live out our membership in Jesus' new humanity.

In all this, the last thing I want to do is turn inward and withdraw from culture. On the contrary, the stronger we are, the more light we have to offer the world. So here's a first word on Christians and culture.

First, many communities aim to serve in the world. Kingly groups work in prisons, homeless shelters, food pantries. We go abroad and we help with housing, legal problems, personal problems.

People sometimes ask if Christians should be involved in shaping culture. Mark Noll offers sad evidence that we must. Leading up to the Civil War, many southerners resented the interference of abolitionists who called on Christians to stamp out the evil of slavery. Some southerners said it's not the church's task to change culture. The church should preach the gospel and save souls. But this very approach shaped the culture, too. By their silence, those churches supported the status quo – slavery.³

The question is not "Shall we engage and shape the culture?" Everyone does so every day. The question is: for good or for ill? I believe community is the way. More on culture next week. But dream with me for a moment: What would happen if the Christians in many professions found each other and brainstormed about justice, love and truth – as defined by our Lord Jesus – in their work? Schoolteachers find it easy. But manufacturing, construction, finance, law, medicine, architecture, insurance do not. Men and women in most professions have no such opportunity.

Dorothy Sayers (*Why Work*) asserts that most Christians have very limited ideas about how to serve God at work. They know we should be honest and moral, that we should stand for the truth and resist mere popular opinion when making decisions, that they should set an example of love and fairness and trust God in stressful situations. It's fine as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far.

It's hard to go farther alone. How then? United to Christ, new humanity. Make it real. Let it take flesh – by reading Scripture, by prayer, by living in real community together. Through Jesus, there is a new humanity marked by life, peace and justice. Let's live it.

³ Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*