

Sermons through

Romans

The Law Entered

Romans 5:20-21

With Study Questions

*Pastor Paul Viggiano
Branch of Hope Church
2370 W. Carson Street, #100
Torrance, CA 90501
(310) 212-6999
pastorpaul@integrity.com
www.branchofhope.org
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Introduction

We live in rapidly shifting times. Here in 2013 people make jokes about how a certain song or fashion might be so 2012. When I was a senior in high school in 1973 a movie called *American Graffiti* was produced. It was a period piece – a days-gone-by movie about high schoolers and the decisions they were faced with in life. It was very nostalgic and I recall thinking how cool it would have been to live in those days. But the days-gone-by period was 1962; I was alive in 1962. A mere 11 years had transpired.

But 1962 in America looked very little like 1973. Music was different, fashions very different, the relationship between the things of God and the functions of society were being severely redefined. The constraints of biblical morality, which has since been renamed traditional values, were loosened, if not tossed away altogether. **“Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us” (Psalm 2:3)** could have been the mission statement of that decade in American history.

In the throes of this national moral downturn came the response in the late 70s of an organization known as the Moral Majority founded by Jerry Falwell. Its membership of millions began to play a significant role in American politics with the formation of the New Christian Right, perhaps reaching its apex during the Reagan administration. Then, in the late 1980s, Falwell declared “Our goal has been achieved” and the organization dissolved.

People – even Christian people – have mixed thoughts about the notion of a Christian Right or some type of religious presence in politics. That has become very apparent to me during the past six or seven years having written about 70 socio-political columns in a secular newspaper.

Some of you are here today as a result and of these columns while others are still running in the opposite direction. There are brands of theology which seek of either vilify or stress the insignificance of promoting a religious ethic in the public venue. The arguments sound plausible when given a fleeting glance: One cannot legislate a changed heart; a nation's hope is not built upon legal codes and prescriptions; you shouldn't force religion upon an unwilling people, etc.

Of course, these types of arguments ignore the necessary fact that for a nation, any nation, to function there must be legal codes and those codes must have some moral foundation. Because a person is unwilling or incapable of identifying the source of their political ethics doesn't eliminate the reality that every time they vote they are seeking to force their beliefs upon those with whom they disagree.

I have addressed these types of issues elsewhere and won't labor it further here except to say that I can't speak with authority regarding the motives of the Christian Right or the Moral Majority in their political pursuits, but the brief passage before us this morning speaks loudly regarding the importance of a widespread proclamation of what is right, what is wrong and how and why we make those types of distinctions.

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The Law Entered

In an epistle where Paul is seeking to sort out problems related to the Jew/gentile distinctions, significant ink has been dedicated to Adam. Of course Adam was not a Jew. In chapter 4 Paul had referenced Abraham and David, Paul's Jewish readers might have been wondering why Paul is going so far back in history to make his point. What about the Israelite? What about the law?

That "**the law entered**" here is a clear reference to Moses and the Ten Commandments. There were many reasons for the entrance of Mosaic law/administration into the course of human events. It more clearly defines the standards for the restraint of evil (1 Timothy 1:8-11); it reveals the behavior commensurate with true love (Matthew 22:36-40; 1 John 5:3); it reveals to us the character and nature of God and much more.

But here Paul writes that the law entered **“that the offense might abound.”** What could he mean by that? Why would God want the offense to about? A variety of answers are given: Some (Augustine for one) think that it is the nature of man to rebel against given laws. How many fingerprints might you find on a button that says does ‘Do Not Touch’? Though this might be true of human nature, I don’t think it is Paul’s point here.

Others have suggested that the offenses are due to the thorough and numerous laws given. The Torah (the Law) is thick with precepts, standards, exhortations, codes, law – there are more offense because there are more laws. This certainly is true as well. Righteousness, according to the will of God is much deeper and broader than any of us could possibly imagine. I don’t doubt that, at perhaps some level, Paul has both of the above in mind when he writes **“that the offense might abound.”** But I think Paul’s point is clearly and briefly given in the chapters to come:

What then shall we say? That the law is sin? By no means! Yet if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. For I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet” (Romans 7:7).

Did that which is good (i.e. the law), then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown (lit. to shine) to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure (Romans 7:13 – parenthesis mine).

The law of God shines, as it were, a bright light upon our sin. As Paul taught in Galatians:

Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions... (Galatians 3:19).

Calvin taught:

He indeed teaches us, that it was needful that men’s ruin should be more fully discovered to them, in order that a

passage might be opened for the favor of God. They were indeed shipwrecked before the law was given; as however they seemed to themselves to swim, while in their destruction, they were thrust down into the deep, that their deliverance might appear more evident, when they thence emerge beyond all human expectation. Nor was it unreasonable, that the law should be partly introduced for this end – that it might again condemn men already condemned; for nothing is more reasonable than that men should, through all means be brought, nay, forced, by being proved guilty, to know their own evils.¹

It might be a healthy introspection – to ask ourselves if we are indeed shipwrecked however we may seem to ourselves to be swimming. Can we say with Paul that the law shined its bright light on our sin as to produce death in us that we might acknowledge our wretched estate and seek deliverance **“through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 7:24, 25)?**

If the entrance of the law served to highlight the sin of man that we might seek deliverance in Christ, would the law not serve that purpose perennially and universally? Would there come a time, this side of glory, when the law of God would fail to reveal sin? If the publication of the law of God was useful to the entire nation of Israel to expose their corruption and need for grace, should it not continued to be published that all men and women might recognize their spiritual incapacitation and seek to find rest in the grace of God?

Those who would criticize the heralding of the law of God in the name of the gospel have, perhaps unwittingly become enemies of the gospel, especially when it so obviously falls within the character of all men, not only to sin but to redefine that nature of it. Something we’re beginning to see with regularity and of which the Scriptures prominently speak:

He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the Lord (Proverbs 17:15).

¹ Calvin, J. (1998). Romans (electronic ed.). Calvin’s Commentaries (Ro 5:20). Albany, OR: Ages Software.

You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice” (Malachi 2:17)?

Therefore be careful lest the light in you be darkness (Luke 11:35).

Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter (Isaiah 5:20)!

Abounding Grace

It is through the law of God that God graciously reveals that we are bound by sin. It is like an x-ray which reveals that our hearts are of stone. But when Paul writes that where **“sin abounded, grace abounded much more”**, he is once again highlighting the superior nature of the last Adam over the first. Years ago there was a television show entitled *The Six Million Dollar Man*. It was about a man who had been in a terrible accident, but because of the technology of bionics they were able to fix him – and not only fix him but make him superior to what he had been. He would be “stronger, faster.”

The destruction and devastation of sin in our lives and in this world pales in comparison to the power, glory and grace accomplished by the person and work of Christ:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound (Isaiah 61:1).

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

Sin or Grace?

This final verse of the chapter is interesting in that it forms a somewhat unnatural comparison. One might think Paul would contrast the reign of sin with the reign of righteousness or even obedience. He appears to be so focused on the righteousness that comes by grace through faith that he contrasts the reign of sin with the reign of grace.

In chapter 6 Paul will begin to address human behavior, or more specifically the behavior of Christians. But the culmination of chapter 5 is the **“righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”** God had made a promise, a covenant which He fulfilled in sending His own Son to die for sinners.

For your name’s sake, O Lord, pardon my guilt, for it is great (Psalm 25:11).

Who is a God like you, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. ¹⁹ He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. ²⁰ You will show faithfulness to Jacob and steadfast love to Abraham, as you have sworn to our fathers from the days of old (Micah 7:18-20).

Any study of the history of humanity will readily expose the works of Adam. Destruction and misery are the universal fruit of his rebellion. But since the cross of Christ we also see sparks of redemption. We see the fruit of grace flowing from those who have called upon His name – those who have been obedient servants. But we must never lose sight of the seed, of the root, of that which is central – that which we see through **“a door standing open in heaven” (Revelation 4:1)** – perhaps moreso what we hear when the elders fell down before the Lamb:

And they sang a new song, saying, “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation (Revelation 5:9).

Paul wrote many “**hard to understand**” things (2 Peter 2:16). But some were quite simple:

The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost (1 Timothy 1:15).

There certainly is a danger that Christianity be reduced to a political force or a mere lifestyle method – where Jesus is reduced to a super life-coach. As we prepare for the Lord’s Table this morning, let us remember that front in center in our minds and hearts is the saying that is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance – that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.

Questions for Study

1. What are your thoughts about the Moral Majority or Christian Right – Strengths and weaknesses (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does it mean that “the law entered” (pages 3, 4)?
3. In what respect did the “offense...abound” (pages 4, 5)?
4. What is the value of heralding the law of God as it pertains to this passage (page 5)?
5. What are some examples in our culture where good is called evil and vice-versa (pages 5, 6)?
6. What does it mean that “grace abounded much more” (page 6)?
7. Why does Paul compare sin to grace rather than to righteousness (page 7)?
8. What is the primary message of the good news (pages 7, 8)?