

## **“One Man’s Trespass and Another Man’s Righteousness”**

Matthew 4:1-11; Genesis 2:15-17; 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-19

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This is a painting by a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russian artist named Ivan Kramskoi. It depicts Jesus during his forty-day sojourn in the wilderness, when he prayed, fasted, and was tempted by the devil. Matthew and Luke tell us that there were three tests, three temptations, that Jesus experienced during that time. There were, I suspect, many others. Jesus found the strength to say “no” to every single one.

The temptation story is a fitting way to begin the season of Lent, this period of forty days that leads us to Easter. For many Christians, it is a time of penitence, prayer, fasting, and self-denial. While we are called to be faithful to Jesus every day of the year, the season of Lent gives us a focused opportunity to go deeper than we typically go. We are providing a variety of resources, for people of all ages, that you can use to develop a deeper spiritual life and a greater ability to say “no” to the tempter.

Let us turn our attention to a pivotal passage from Paul’s letter to the Romans. It is about the very *first* temptation, the one back in the Garden of Eden. It is a complicated passage; it is also *hugely* important. Much has been written about it, by some of the most famous Christians who have ever lived.

It begins like this: “Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned” – well, let’s stop right there, and take these clauses one at a time. “Just as sin came into the world through one man.” You remember the story; God creates Adam from the dust of the ground, and breathes into him the breath of life. God puts him in a garden, filled with every tree pleasant to the eye and good for food, and two special trees: the tree of life, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God says to Adam, “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Then God makes a companion for Adam, the woman called Eve.

But along comes the serpent. The serpent tells the woman that they will not die if they eat the forbidden fruit; “for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” “So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.” Eve is deceived, and she eats. But it is Adam that Paul finds fault with. “Sin came into

the world *through one man*,” he says, not “*through one woman*.” Adam’s sin is the one that mattered.

This is the first act of disobedience recorded in the Bible. All sorts of sins follow after this – murder, adultery, greed, lust, envy, and so on. But this was the first. This was the moment when humanity first rebelled against God. That rebellion had a consequence: “Death came through sin.” God had told Adam that he could eat of any tree of the garden except that one tree; he could even eat from the tree of life, and live forever. But once Adam eats from the forbidden tree, God changes his plan: “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and life forever.” So God banishes them from the garden. The ability to live forever has been taken away. Adam and Eve will both live out their years ... and then they will die. That hadn’t been God’s original plan. Death was a *consequence* that resulted from Adam’s sin.

“And so,” says Paul, “death spread to all because all have sinned.” What does he mean, *death spread to all*? What does he mean, *because all have sinned*? Does he mean that every single person who lived after Adam is stained by sin? Babies who die within their first few hours of life – did *they* sin?

This is one of the most important lines in the entire Bible. Important, because of its huge impact on Christianity for *centuries* to come. This was not a Jewish concept – Jews did not believe that Adam’s transgression fundamentally impacted *everybody* who came after that. This was new, with Paul.

What he says is that “death spread to all because all have sinned,” and “by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners.” What is he getting at? This has been the source of much discussion and debate, over a period of *centuries*. There have been many faithful Christians who have given this matter serious thought. Among those are Augustine of Hippo (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century), John Cassian (4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> century), Anselm of Canterbury (11<sup>th</sup> century), Thomas Aquinas (13<sup>th</sup> century), Martin Luther (16<sup>th</sup> century), and John Calvin (16<sup>th</sup> century) – some of the most important theologians the world has ever seen. Augustine developed the concept of “original sin;” he believed that Adam’s transgression fundamentally altered the very nature of humanity. In his view, we were all *in Adam* when he sinned; we all *inherit* Adam’s guilt since we are descended from his seed; we are therefore *born* sinners. It’s like we inherit a genetic disease. Sinful nature is passed down from parent to child, from generation to generation. This view heavily influenced the Roman Catholic Church and the various Protestant denominations that broke off from it, including our own. Martin Luther and John Calvin both believed that we all inherit Adam’s guilt and are in a state of sin from the moment of our conception. Calvin’s followers developed the concept of “total depravity,” our complete enslavement to sin and our inability to choose to follow God or refrain from evil without God’s grace. Christian traditions that hold strongly to the concept of “original sin” or “total depravity” emphasize our need for baptism as soon as possible after birth, for – as one Lutheran confession puts it – “this inborn sickness and hereditary sin is truly sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit.” The Roman Catholic Church teaches that baptism essentially *erases* original sin. But not all Christian traditions interpret the Genesis story and Paul’s comments the same way. The Orthodox Church, for example, teaches that we inherit the *consequence* of Adam’s transgression – namely, death – but we do not inherit Adam’s *guilt*. He made a choice, a choice that got him kicked out of the garden, but that choice on Adam’s part does not affect our very *nature*. It just means that someday we *die*.

So what, exactly, did Paul mean when he said that “all have sinned” and “the many were made sinners”? We could spend hours discussing the nuances of the different interpretations of these verses. But in very broad strokes, *something went fundamentally awry*, with the whole human race.

And it remained awry, for an incredibly long time ... until Jesus did something that set it *right* again, something that completely *un-did* what Adam had done, something that *repaired* what Adam had *broken*, something that *corrected* Adam’s big *mistake*. Listen to what Paul says: “The free gift [of Jesus] is not like the trespass [of Adam]. For if the many [that is, all of humanity] died through the one man’s trespass [that is, died as a result of Adam’s sin], much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.” That is to say, what Adam did was bad – really, really bad! – and it had an impact on absolutely *everybody*. But what Jesus did was *good* – really, really good! – and it, too, has an impact on absolutely *everybody*. Indeed, the *good* that Jesus did is *greater* than the *bad* that Adam did. “And the free gift [the gift that Jesus gives] is not like the effect of the one man’s sin [Adam’s sin]. For the judgment following one trespass [Adam’s trespass] brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses [every sin from Adam to Christ] brings justification.” Justification is the fancy term for what God does when he looks at our lives and declares us righteous – a declaration that we do not deserve. What Adam did essentially resulted in all of us being *wrong* in God’s eyes; what Jesus did essentially resulted in all of us being *right* in God’s eyes.

So what was it that Jesus did, that accomplished all this? If we go back a few verses, we read: “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Sinless Jesus died so that we sinners could become free from sin. He gave his life so that we could become righteous.

But wait, there’s more: “If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.” What Adam did brought us all *death*; what Jesus did brought us all *life*! “Therefore just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just 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.” Are you following this? What Paul is saying is that Adam’s sin impacted us in two ways: it meant that all of us have to die, and it (somehow) turned all of us into sinners. But Christ’s sacrifice has changed all that. We still die – but we now receive the gift of a life *beyond* this life. And we still sin – but we now get the clean slate of Christ’s righteousness. Do you see? Everything that came about as a result of Adam’s sin gets *cleaned up* by Jesus. We may still be subject to death – but we are also now *inheritors of life*. We may still have a propensity to sin – but God now looks at us and calls us righteous. Christ’s sacrificial death has brought us both *eternal life* and *righteousness in God’s eyes*.

Now, that really ought to be worth celebrating. I mean, seriously: the two *biggest problems* that have plagued the human race since the very beginning have been *fixed* by Jesus Christ. Fixed, *forever*!

The thing is, though, temptation still beckons. It hasn’t gone away. So we observe the season of Lent ... a time to develop a deeper spiritual life and a greater ability to say “no” when the tempter calls.

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