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The National Presbyterian Church

Grace Can Run Faster

Romans 5

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Today we're considering Chapter 5 in St. Paul's greatest letter, the letter to the Romans. The very beginning of this letter seemed as if we were in a great courtroom and St. Paul was the prosecuting attorney. We watched him stride back and forth for three chapters, the opening chapters in this book. Paul plays the role of a prosecutor pointing up to us the human crisis; that crisis is a breakdown of relationships. Paul describes each of us in terms of four fundamental relationships that make us human: our relationship with God who created us; the relationship with myself to understand who I am; my relationship with the Earth so that I steward it, do not worship it; and my relationship with my neighbor. When those relationships are broken or distorted that then becomes the human crisis, the breakdown of relationships.

But the crisis is more than that. It also is cumulative. There's a cumulative force, a build up when we make the choices that go against the immortal God and choose idols to worship and choose to worship ourselves and our desires. A distortion occurs and this distortion has a cumulative effect and we saw that happening in the opening chapters. This may be seen as a grim and harsh way to begin a book, and it makes it hard for some people who begin to read the book of Romans. This harsh beginning causes an uneasiness that people feel.

Let me tell you a story. When I began my ministry after I graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1956 I started my ministry at University Presbyterian Church as the student pastor. I was a pastor to college students who attended the University of Washington. There were other student groups around the campus. There was for instance the Episcopal group called Canterbury and then the Congregationalists had the Pilgrim Club and then the Methodists had the Wesley Club and we were Calvin

Club because we were the Presbyterians. On one occasion the Canterbury Club Rector invited me to come as he invited the other student pastors to come, and give a talk on what were the distinctions of our denomination. They were having a series on the different church denominations. Therefore I was invited to speak on what Presbyterians believe and what makes a Presbyterian. You know I had been an Episcopalian as a boy so I felt I'm certainly able to go and I'll straighten out these Episcopalians and tell them about how I became a Presbyterian. And so I went, I was very happy to take on that assignment. The Rector though scared me a little bit at the very beginning when he said "Now Reverend Palmer, you're going to give your talk on what Presbyterians believe just as the pastor from Wesley Foundation told us about the Methodists last week and I want to alert you to the fact that there's one person in our group who is sort of a trouble maker. He loves during the Q & A time to ask trick questions and tries to put the speaker off, and I just want to alert you to that right at the beginning." That was an interesting way to start my talk knowing there's somebody out there who is possibly an enemy about to pounce on me.

So I gave my talk on what Presbyterians believe and I thought it was a very positive, friendly talk. And just as I finished it, then sure enough one hand was raised immediately. And I said yes. And this is what he said. He said, "You're a Presbyterian, aren't you? And that means that you're a Calvinist?" And I said, "Yes." He then said, "If Calvin is your leader, what do you think of his doctrine of the total depravity of man? How do you feel about that doctrine? Do you believe that doctrine?"

And you know that is not exactly the way I wanted to start my Q & A with them, but that's what he said. So I bought a little time. I'll tell you what speakers do when you get a hard question. If speakers are skillful they will say, "I'm awfully glad you asked that question." Now, that may be actually a lie from the speaker but it buys a little time, you know. So I used that technique. I said, "I'm awfully glad you asked that question." And that cheerful sentence gave me a few seconds and some thinking time, in order to think about what should be my response.

I remember from my football days that there are two competing strategies in football. For instance, in football you can be mainly a defensive team that plays good defense and stops the offense, in their tracks hopefully. Or you can be an offensive team and rush the other team off the ground with bold offensive plays and very good passes. So a football team has to make a decision – "Are we going to be mainly defensive in our play strategy or are we going to be offensive?" So I decided I'm going to be offensive in my strategy. And I made that decision in those seconds when I said, "I'm awfully glad you asked that question." So I decided to rush him off his feet with an offense. And then a funny thing happened. I started my offense and as I began to answer I realized that I really believed the argument I was making

and I began to gather momentum. And if he hadn't asked that question I probably wouldn't have made this breakthrough. And it turned out to be a great moment and I was very grateful to the Episcopalians ever since for that student.

I said to him this. "I'm awfully glad you asked that question. That's one of my favorite doctrines." Now that was not really quite true, in the moment I said it. But it became a favorite doctrine as I started to explain it. I said, "That's one of my favorite doctrines." John Calvin didn't originate that doctrine; he got it from St. Paul. And St. Paul says it at the opening of Romans. That is a good doctrine, that's not a bad doctrine. That's the doctrine that says we're all in this together. That's a good doctrine. It's as if an airplane crashed into the water - you know, something that's inappropriate is to say while you are adjusting your life jacket, "I want you all to know that I'm Star Alliance. I got to enter the airplane first; I should get to exit first." (Because in United Airlines they always say Star Alliance members and First Class passengers enter first. And then finally you're numbered one to five and then you get to enter.) "I'm First Class. I just want you to know that." But when you're in the water ... who cares? It's totally irrelevant.

The crisis is too big for that superiority that you thought was your right when you bought your ticket. It makes no sense now. You're in the water together. Who is First Class or Economy makes no difference. That is Paul's point in the opening of Romans. In the opening of Romans, Paul spends three chapters making the case that we're all in this together, and there's no advantage to the person who has an idol. In fact, remember my whimsical parable and the three men that fell in the water a couple of weeks ago, and one of them had his statue of Diana because he never went anywhere without his statue of Diana. And when he lands in the water he says, "I'm awfully glad I had the presence of mind to bring Diana with me for the photo op, and we didn't realize the railing had been removed and here I'm in the water, I'm awfully glad I've got Diana. Of course, she weighs 38 pounds and she's a fertility god, but a fertility god is totally irrelevant in the water when you're in a deep ocean water disaster." So very soon he drops that idol. He doesn't need her now.

And then there was the man that felt superior who was a better swimmer than anybody else and said, "I've been swimming a lot longer like the Stoics that Paul has to grapple with in the Greek world. We're better, we are definitely superior. We've been working out. I can swim long distances and you fellows have just been sitting around and have got flabby, you can't do it. I'm heading out; I'm not waiting for you guys. By the way, which direction is San Francisco?" But we know that the crisis is too immense for even a strong swimmer. And then the third fellow was the

man that had been in the map room; that would be the Jews who know the Law, they're proud of the Law and teach others about the Law. And he says, "I was in the map room, and while you fellows have been out partying I've been in the map room reading the charts. And just before this ill-fated photo was taken, I was in the map room. And I just want to announce to you guys that as we land in the water, San Francisco is 1,733 miles from here. And Hawaii is even further. I checked it."

Now notice that's the map guy. He doesn't comfort us but he does give us accurate information. But what's the point? He doesn't feel better about it and we don't feel better about it. So I pointed that out. Paul makes the same point at the opening of Romans. He says to the person who feels superior to others, you're no better because you're doing the same thing they're doing. And the person who feels that he has an idol, the idols deteriorate on you. You start by worshipping man and you end up worshipping a snake. They don't help you. And then the Jewish person that has the Law, it doesn't help you. Romans 3:23-24 puts it plainly. "Since we are all sinners equally, we all have to be saved by God's grace alone." And then in the fourth chapter Paul honors Abraham the father and says, "Even Abraham who was the father of the Jews was saved by faith, not by anything else" (Romans 4:1-3). So, that's what Paul has taught us in these opening chapters. He's pointed out that we're in the crisis together. It's a total crisis for which we need total help.

Now we come to the fifth chapter and Paul will draw all of those themes together and as he does this he will create a model for us. It is a model that has to do with two Adams. The name Adam first appears in Genesis 1. The text in Genesis says, "God created Adam, male and female he created them" (Genesis 1:27). So Adam becomes the generic name for man/woman; in Romans 5 Paul will talk about the first Adam, and then he'll talk about the second Adam. The second man, Jesus Christ. So he's going to create a teaching model for us. Listen to the way he does it in Romans 5. This is a tremendous text.

*For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. [Notice, this is a doctrine of total depravity.] Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though perhaps for a good person ["good" is the word kind], a kind person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died in our behalf. Much more surely than now that we have been justified. [Notice that all the language is coming together now that you heard last week in verse 21.] Since we are justified by his blood, [he means his life, given for us on the cross; since we are justified by his life given for us on the cross, as Jesus takes our place we will be saved through him from the judgment of God.] For if while we were enemies, [now he really makes it very clear,] we were reconciled, [he now introduces a new word. The word reconcile comes from *katalidzo* in Greek. Most of modern science gets it's vocabulary*

mainly from the Greeks, and the word is used to describe a catalyst agent. A catalyst agent in chemistry is an agent that comes into a set of other chemicals and it changes everything that it's mixed with, but it doesn't itself change. It changes other things but it itself stays what it is. And that's Jesus Christ. He comes into the world, he changes us and he stays the same. And that changing of us is now what Paul's going to focus on.] *For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God, changed through the death of his son, much more surely now having been reconciled, we will be saved by his life. But more than that we even boast in God through the Lord Jesus Christ through whom we receive this reconciliation* (Romans 5:6-11).

Paul has now brought everything together that was in that great sentence that Rev. McGarrahan was able to preach on last week for the total help for total need sentence. And what Paul has done has given to us now the whole theology of the cross. What happened when Christ died on the cross? First God imputed righteousness to us, it's a great mystery but he did. He gave righteousness to us because he alone is the totally righteous one who took our place and disarmed sin himself. He disarmed the power of evil. He took it and therefore his righteousness is granted to us and our redemption is won for us. He covered our sins. We saw the word "atonement" used last week in Romans 3:25. He covered our sins, fulfilled all the Old Testament sacrifice tradition. He redeemed us and the word "redeemed" is used and means, "to set free." He sets us free at the cross from the power of sin, the power of the devil, and the power of death. He makes us safe, the word "salvation" is now used. He makes us safe at the cross. He also reconciled us at the cross, which means he changed us so that now we're no longer the old man or woman but we're made into a new man, a new woman. He changes us. And now the final key word in Chapter 5, and why did he do all of this? Because he loved us. Because he *loved* us.

He loved sinners. He loved us First Class, Economy class, both equally. He loved us. And that's the reason he did it. And now Paul will create a model to explain how this all works with the two great Adam's of history. The first one is Adam the sinner. "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, one man/woman Adam, and death then came through that one man, this is the doctrine of original sin now, sin then came into the world and death came in with it, and it spread to all men because we all sin" (Romans 5:12).

So now we discover the doctrine of original sin in its most basic form. It tells that we have a legacy of sin and then the result is that judgment and then death spread to us, therefore we're all in this together, because we all sin. Our freedom is still protected in that great model. Karl Barth has a great line in his commentary in Romans, "No harm must be done to the critical choice."¹ We had a critical choice to make. It's not just automatic. Therefore in the one man a legacy of death spreads

and with sin, judgment. And therefore death exercised dominion from Adam to Moses even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam who was a type of the one who was to come. Paul goes on to point out that sin was in the world before the Law came. The Law comes with Moses. The Law measures the sin, but still sin had its impact and its dominion and does its harm even without the Law.

I tried to explain that a couple of weeks ago. I said that you know if you were to step off the 80th floor of the Empire State Building not knowing the law of gravity, saying, "I've never heard about that law so I should be protected." And I walked off the building on the 80th floor and as I went by the 60th floor I was heard to say, "So far so good." But you're laughing because even that man who is ignorant of the law of gravity nevertheless suffers the law of gravity as it takes effect. Pascal used this same argument when he said of extreme heat; "You can't measure it, but you suffer it."² A laser is able to burn right through your hand even though you wouldn't feel it, but you would still suffer it. And the same thing with our sins. We commit a sin like one of the Ten Commandments - "You shall not bear false witness" (Exodus 20:16). Someone might say, "Well I never heard that law. I never heard about that." But still I don't have any friends, because I bear false witness all the time and nobody trusts me. I didn't even need to know the law to still lose all my friends because when I broke that ancient standard it had its effect even though I couldn't measure it with a quotation from the Law. That's Paul's point. The Law wasn't there but still that legacy of brokenness went forward. And now he goes to the second Adam.

But the free gift is not like the trespass, for if many died through one man's trespass, [that's the legacy we have] then much more will the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of one man, Jesus Christ, [that's the second Adam] abound for many. The free gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin for judgment following one trespass brought condemnation and judgment. But the free gift following many trespasses brings justification [just as we saw. God justifies us because of Christ]. If because of one man's trespass, death exercised dominion over that one, much more surely those who receive the abundance of grace, [notice he now protects our freedom on this side of the equation. Love comes now from Christ, the grace, but we need to receive it]. Behold I stand at the door and knock, if anyone hears my voice and opens the door (Revelation 3:20) [We get the right to open the door. We have the right to receive God's grace right now and the importance of our own freedom is preserved.] Those who receive the grace of the free gift of righteousness have because of the one man, Jesus Christ. Therefore, [and now he completes his argument,] just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, [total crisis] so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and

life now offered for all. [Remember, God so loved the world, not God so loved the First Class passengers. God didn't just love the Jews. God didn't just love the Stoics. God loved all. So his righteous act is an act of righteousness for all.] *For just as by one man's disobedience many are made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous.* (Romans 5:15-19)

And then he has one more line about the Law. He says, "The Law came in to increase the trespass" (Romans 5:20). What he means is that the Law came in to make you feel worse because now you can measure your trespasses. You couldn't measure them before. And that was my map man in my shipboard parable. When they got in the water and the map reader was able to say, we're 1,760 miles from San Francisco, that was an accurate piece of information and it didn't help them any, but in fact, it did increase their crisis. Especially if they thought that maybe they were only a few hours out of San Francisco. No, it's much worse. And it was the Law that showed them how severe their crisis was.

So the Law came in to make you feel worse about the crisis. That's what Paul is saying. Now comes one of the greatest sentences in all of St. Paul's writings. "But where sin increased," and we know sin does increase, we know that there is an accelerating power in evil. Just read J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. There is an accelerating power in evil. "But where sin increased, or where evil accumulated, the grace of God ran faster, accumulated more (Romans 5:20). Karl Barth points out that this model that Paul creates is not an example of ancient dualism; this is not an equal model. It's stronger on the side of grace than it is on the side of sin. Thank God for that.

Now as a result of Chapter 5 I know two things about everybody I meet. I know first of all about everybody that I meet that they're a sinner; this certainly clears the air. I know that about everybody in my family. They're all sinners. I'm a sinner too. We're all in this together. That's why I told the Canterbury Club students, I love this doctrine of the total crises. It's a wonderful doctrine. There is no need now to figure whether you're better than somebody else. We're all in this together. I know that about everybody. And secondly, I know a second thing. I know that every single person in the room is beloved. Whether they know it or not is beside the point. They are loved, "For God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son" (John 3:16). And I know that about every person. You and I are loved before we even know it. And that is also in the fifth chapter. A legacy came from the second Adam and it's for everyone. So I know that.

And then I now understand one more thing, I know that where sin increased and it is powerful, the grace of God is more powerful. I know that now. And that is a marvelous thing to know. Some of you know that I wrote a book on humor, *The*

*Humor of Jesus.*³ I realized in writing on humor that the humor of Jesus is really a reflection on the fourth word of the great words: Faith, Hope, Love, Joy. Joy is the fourth great word. And so really *The Humor of Jesus* became a book about the Joy of Jesus Christ. And I got the idea from G.K. Chesterton. He said, "I often wondered if the great secret of Christ wasn't his mirth."⁴ *Chara* is the Greek word for joy and it is the root of the word "grace." *Charis*. *Charis* is built from joy.

When I came to the final chapter of the book I wrote these words, "We humans need mirth, and not because we need to be humored, but because the humor of joy draws us near to Jesus so that we'll want to trust him more. We owe this humor to our children too, because however serious and heavy life is and can become, the greatest truth of all is this: that Jesus Christ who gave his life for our salvation is alive and therefore the word that pleases us more than all other words is the word "joy." St. Paul said it well, in one of his most humorous lines. "Where sin increased, the grace of God increased more." The heart of humor is a sudden perception of incongruity. This is truly incongruous. We thought evil was so powerful. But it's not. Grace is more powerful. It's a marvelous breakthrough. "Where sin increased, the grace of God increased more." How can this be possible? It's because the Son of Man has won that victory in our behalf. And that's joy. And we discover that at the end of the fifth chapter.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this great chapter. Thank you for joy, thank you that where sin increased, grace increased faster. Thank you that this is true for us, for every one of us in this room, it's for all the people that we know. We know two things about everyone. We know that we're in need, but we know that there is the Lord who loves us and knows us and saves us. May we experience that in Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Barth, Karl. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Oxford University Press, 1968.

2 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensees*, 1688.

3 Palmer, Earl F. *The Humor of Jesus: Sources of Laughter in the Bible*. Regent College Publishing, 2001.

4 Chesterton, G.K. *Orthodoxy*. Doubleday, 1908.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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