

June 28

THANKS A LOT, ADAM!  
FIRST IN SERIES ON "THE WAY OUT" OF THE HUMAN DILEMMA  
ROMANS 5:12-21

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What is wrong with the world and why aren't things getting better? Look at the phenomenal advances we have made in technology. The newspapers have been covering the conference in Berkeley about the fascinating invention and possibilities of superconductors. But technological advance is not all good news. Hunter P. Mabry, of the United Methodist Church's General Board of Church and Society, wrote in the June issue of Engage magazine:

We live in an age in which we are both fascinated and horrified by technology. We are fascinated by the use of modern technology to mend our bodies, handle our bank accounts, map earth's resources, and explore outer space. But we are horrified by the use of modern technology to torture prisoners, silence civilian dissent, manufacture lethal gases and place in our hands a nuclear arsenal sufficient to obliterate all human and other life upon our planet earth.

The June issue of Engage in which this quote appears is dedicated to exposing the rise of hatred in our time. The theme of the issue is "New Era of Hate." Across rural America hatred is spreading like an epidemic. Every five minutes a farm family leaves. Every hour two rural businesses close. In the midst of this desperation, a cancer-like epidemic is spreading. Extremist groups are spreading hate, anti-Semitism and racism. White farmers are being attracted to a theology which preaches that the Lost Tribes of Israel and therefore the true Israelites are the white Anglo-Saxons who have descended from peoples of northern Europe. Jews are described as the children of Satan. Black people are considered "pre-Adamic," a lower form of species than white people. Equally alarming is the theological view of the end times. Armageddon is a military battle between the "chosen" white Anglo-Saxons and the "satanic forces"--meaning Jews, Blacks and other people of color. Throughout rural America, this theology is used to justify the stockpiling of weapons and paramilitary training.

What is wrong with the world and why aren't things getting any better? How did we get in such a dilemma, and what is the way out? In the book, Forever Beginning, Donald Shelby tells of a young adult who pleaded:

What do I really want? I want backing, from God and from myself. I want to be at home. I don't want to be afraid. I want to relax. I want to lose my loneliness. I don't want to feel sick inside. I want relationships that aren't poverty-stricken. I want to feel certain about something. I don't want to hold a faith. I want a faith that holds me.

To such a plea, to the cry--"what is wrong and where is the way out?"--the Bible and our Christian faith have answers. We don't necessarily like the answers. We wish the answers were simpler and easier to practice, but our faith does have answers. This summer I am preaching a series of eight sermons on "THE WAY OUT" of the human dilemma, according to the Book of Romans. I am using the lectionary readings. The lectionary is a suggested list of scripture readings used now by many denominations, including the Roman Catholic Church. Some Sundays we use the lectionary readings, and some

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Sundays we choose our own. As I began preparing sermons for the summer, I was struck by the lectionary readings from Paul's letter to the Romans. I challenge you to read Romans this summer, especially the passages upon which these sermons are based. I warn you: this is not your typical summer fare; this is heavy stuff. Romans contains some of Paul's richest and most profound theology. As Paul had not yet visited Rome, the letter was not written in response to church problems and fights, but to send a summary of his teachings to Rome.

Our passage this morning begins with a description of the human situation, the condition under which we all live. It is very important for us as Christians, and for us as Americans who are accustomed to living a relatively easy life, to have a clear picture of the human situation. Based on my "vast years of experience" as a minister, many of you have unrealistic expectations, and are, therefore, sometimes disappointed and discouraged. For example, if you were invited to dinner and were led to believe the menu was steak and apple pie, you would be disappointed (and probably complain a lot when you got home) if you were served hamburgers and apples! If you had expected a hamburger and apples, you would have been perfectly content. Or, if you had no expectations at all, you would be pleased to eat hamburger and apples!

Or, if you become a member of the First United Methodist Church of Palo Alto with the expectation that you will always have an uplifting, spiritual experience here; if you expect a church where the clergy and staff are super humans who never make mistakes, the choir never sings wrong notes, the floors are always clean, the windows always shining, and all your fellow church members are perfect examples of Christian charity, virtue and patience, I'm sorry, but you will be disappointed! It's a matter of expectation.

Likewise, what are your expectations of life, the human situation? I have met many people who live with the expectation that if they worship God and live a good life, disease will pass them by, tragedy will never strike them or their loved ones, and death will pass over their house. I have met Christians who actually expect life to be fair and just! People who expect to be exempt from tragedy are going to be very disappointed. We received a letter this week from friends in Minnesota who are trying to help friends of theirs deal with the tragic death of their daughter. The daughter was only in her 30s when she got cancer and died a horrible, premature death. Her father is having a difficult time dealing with his grief. He bitterly asks, "Why Suzie?" "Why?" That question is unanswerable except to say, "This is the kind of world in which we live." It is not fair or just, and the good are not necessarily rewarded!

Thomas Hardy in Tess of the d'Urbervilles, writes:

"Did you say the stars were worlds, Tess?"

"Yes."

"All like ours?"

"I don't know; but I think so. They sometimes seem to be like the apples on our tree. Most of them splendid and sound--a few blighted."

"Which do we live on--a splendid one or a blighted one?"

"A blighted one."



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This world is not as God intended; it is blighted; it has a curable disease, called sin. Paul's understanding of the human condition is not quite what American Christians like to hear. Paul says this is a world of sin and death. Thanks to Adam, the human condition, the human dilemma under which we all live, is sin and death.

Thanks a lot, Adam! Romans 5:12 "Sin came into the world through one man." In Adam's defense, however, the word "adam" in Hebrew means "man." Adam, the unfortunate soul who ate the forbidden fruit, is seen by Paul as a representative of all humankind. Adam was one of humankind, and his sin was the sin of everyone. In biblical thinking, which looks at the corporate whole rather than individual people as does our culture, all of us literally and actually sinned in Adam. Ernest Best in his commentary on Romans wrote, (pg. 62) "Without believing in an actual Adam we can accept Paul's thesis that all people are caught together in sin because they have been born into a world in which there is sin; in that sense Adam represents them."

In verse 12, Paul wrote that everyone has sinned. Also, in Romans 3:23, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The word "all" means all of us, including you. The word "all" includes all people who have ever lived. The word "all" means that the human condition is sin. Paul states it even stronger in 3:9--everyone is under the power of sin. Then Paul quotes from two Psalms to illustrate what he means by living under the power of sin. (3:10-18)

None is righteous, no not one; no one understands, no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; no one does good, not even one.

Their throat is an open grave, they use their tongues to deceive.

The venom of asps is under their lips.

Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.

Their feet are swift to shed blood, in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they do not know.

There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Furthermore, Paul said, sin results in death. Romans 5:12 "Death spread to everyone because everyone sinned." Death is a part of our world because of sin. William Barclay in his commentary on Romans wrote, (pg. 80) "Death is the direct consequence of sin. It was the Jewish belief that if Adam had not sinned man would have been immortal...In Jewish thought sin and death are integrally connected." We are talking here not only about physical death, but also spiritual death. Ernest Best wrote (pg. 61)

When Paul speaks of death he means much more than the end of physical life; throughout this passage death is contrasted with that life by which Paul means spiritual or eternal life, a new kind of life which he gradually explains through chapters 5-8. Death, however, brings a person to judgement and, since everyone has sinned, therefore to condemnation and punishment by God.

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We are living in a world under the power of sin, disease, death, and judgement, where no one is righteous, no, not one.

You may not be thrilled with that description of the human condition, but it is far more realistic than the simplistic, idealistic, pollyanna, positive-possibility-thinking view like "God's in his heaven, all's right with the world." With Paul's view of a world under the power of sin and death, you can understand why there is cancer, why tragedy strikes regardless of how well people live, why there are epidemics that cut people down regardless of who and what they are, why there is hatred, injustice, and war. This is the kind of world in which we live. Is there a WAY OUT?

YES! God has provided a way out of the human dilemma, and it is a free gift. Thanks to Adam, sin reigns. Thanks to Jesus, there is a way out. God has acted and is acting in grace. Grace is the unrestricted, limitless, boundless love of God. Romans 5:15, "But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many." And, in verse 17, "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." The Concise Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible summarizes, (pg. 136)

Christians are pioneers of a new humanity in Christ...Adam is the representative figure of the old humanity, unable to attain righteousness because limited by sin and doomed to die. Christ is the dominant figure of the new humanity...life of a quality which is not affected by death.

God has acted in Christ to overcome the world and bring us out of the human condition, but when? Does living in Christ mean we no longer live in the human condition of sin and death? When and how are we freed from sin, sorrow, disease, injustice, and death? And, in the meantime, how do we deal with sin and death? Continued next week.

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JUNE 28, 1987