

Let's Play Dead
Romans 5:12-21
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It is no wonder the Protestant Reformer John Calvin was a lawyer. Sometimes it seems only a lawyer could make sense of the Apostle Paul's method of making a point. There are some passages of Paul's letters that can be understood fully upon first reading – few of them, but some. Most of the rest must be parsed, broken down into their constituent parts, studied, and then reassembled in our struggling minds. Tonight's passage is one from that second and larger category, although you can read it once and get the overall idea, which is, of course, that God's love and grace are infinitely more powerful than sin and death.

There is of course a lot more to it than simply that wonderful reassurance. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps your life is already challenging enough that you don't want to do any Biblical gymnastics tonight (or any night!) But perhaps the rest really is worth getting after, and as comforting as knowing the ultimate victory over death is well within God's capable hands, as you prepare for Lent, you need just a little bit of the Apostle Paul's wisdom. Either way is OK, but I'm going to opt for the value of the deeper digging, and offer absolution in advance for those who have just decided to take a nap. Peace be upon you, my dreamers; no hard feelings.

To begin with tonight, maybe you've wondered why the Bible uses funny old words like transgressions and trespasses when it is just talking about plain old sin. Well, part of it is for poetic and literary reasons, but tonight's passage is one of those occasions where those words are quite useful to differentiate something very important, in this case, to present the case Paul is making for the absolute necessity of Christ for all the world, Jew, Gentile, and indeed all creation. In this passage there are actually three different Greek words used to describe "sin": there is the pretty generic *hamartia*, which I mentioned a few weeks ago that has as a primary meaning to miss the mark, as an archer might with a bow and arrow. That is the one translated here as "sin." Then there is *paraptoma*, translated here as "trespass," also the same word used in the Lord's Prayer in Matthew. This has the sense of falling down, or stumbling, or lapsing in your good judgment. Then there is the one that is really crucial for Paul's case, and that word is *parabasis*, to violate a duly constituted law. That is the one used in verse fourteen to describe what Adam did back in the Garden of Eden; he transgressed the commandment of the Lord not to eat of the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and by doing so caused sin and death to come into the world, a catastrophe the consequences of which we are still suffering from today. It was a big thing, that first transgression.

With the distinction of those words in mind, I'd like to direct your attention to the video monitors where I've taken this long and windy passage and tried to put it into some order that I hope will make Paul's point clearer. This is how he sees it all went down.

- A. God gave Adam a commandment to not eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, Genesis 2-3
- B. Adam broke this commandment (he *transgressed*) and was judged and condemned, Genesis 2-3
- C. As a result, sin entered the world, and infected the whole world (*all of it*), verse 12
- D. We know that all sinned (although unlike Adam), because all died (like Adam), verse 14
- E. Between Adam and Moses, people sinned (but they did not transgress)
- F. This was not a problem, since without the law, there is no lawbreaking (transgressing), verse 13
- G. Certain people during that time (namely Abraham, but also Noah) were reckoned as righteous by faith even though they sinned (but they did not transgress), Genesis 15:6
- H. God gave the Commandments (Law/Torah) with the result that now people were aware of their sins, and began to transgress, Exodus 20
- I. Sin "increased" by virtue of the people's awareness of it (with the assistance of the Law), verse 20a
- J. Grace, as it has the power of God behind it to keep up with sin, also increased, verse 20b
- K. God's grace flowers in Jesus Christ, who saves the world (all of it), in the model of Adam, verse 18

Any questions? Seriously.

So is this elaborately made case really necessary just to tell us that God's power and grace are greater than sin and death? Not at all, but it is necessary to help us to avoid living a lie, and perpetuating our alienation from God, one another, and the rest of creation. This is not just Paul showing

off his awesome Greek vocabulary. It is Paul concerned that certain members of the church in Rome to whom he was writing, and indeed many people in the world still today, might believe that it is possible to be justified by faith in God, without recognizing that the salvation of the world, the resolution of sin by any of its names, Greek, English, or otherwise, took place through Christ's death and resurrection, and what that means for their lives. It is Paul not wanting them to miss out on any of the benefits of the knowledge of Christ in their lives, by thinking they can take the easy way out, trying simply to be good.

So that's it. Paul wants to make the case for everyone's need for Christ. But to do that, he must take care of some historical problems. Earlier in Romans he makes the case for salvation for the Gentiles by pointing out that Abraham found God's favor through faith, and he was not a Jew; he came some 400 years before the law, before circumcision, before temple practices and sacrifices, before Yom Kippur, and all that. So that means that the possibility of justification, of being right with God, doesn't just flow through the Jews, but also the descendents of Abraham to whom great blessings were promised. That's a good argument, airtight almost. But only almost. You see, Justification may be available to Jews and Gentiles alike, but not because they are Jew or Gentile. Neither Jew nor Gentile had figured

out how to stop death; only God had done that. Paul is teaching here that death has only stopped its long march through history at the foot of the cross of one man, the righteous, the obedient, Jesus Christ.

And so with his whole belabored explanation, Paul is trying to use death as his proof, the proof that none has escaped sin without Christ. If he does not make the case that death, and therefore sin, are universal, people can argue that, hey, if Christ was not necessary for those people before the law came, why should he be required for those for whom the law never even applied, or for me if I live a sinless life, or if I follow all the commandments? As one commentator put it, “Paul is interested in consigning us all to death in order that the life brought by Christ might be available to all. Unless he can do that, we might make the case that we are ‘Abraham-like’ and can be justified by faith, like Abraham, without knowledge of or commitment to Christ.” But, Paul is saying, Christ *is* required. Only Christ, the free gift, in his “all in all,” is the solution to the can of worms that Adam, in his disobedience, opened up.

And so, this Lent, if death is so important to Paul, let’s play dead! Obviously, it will take a certain amount of pretending, or at least suspending disbelief. But like the humble possum, playing dead to avoid a predator and thereby live, let us give it a try this year, that we may find a deeper and

richer life come Easter, and then on through the year in light of that celebration of the grace Paul so thoroughly praises. Now, there are very many things for which pretending works very well, like hiding your eyes so that no one can see you, or like saying there is peace in Libya while your troops are gunning down civilians in the streets, but pretending to be dead isn't as easy as it sounds. By playing dead, of course, I don't mean checking out of your life and into a spa for six weeks, disappearing from sight like a celebrity in rehab. What I do mean is taking a good hard look at Paul's proof that where there is death, there is sin. It means taking a look at the places in your life that exhibit death, or that lead to death, for yourself, for others, or for the world, and seeking the sin behind those practices. Death isn't really hard to see around us, is it? But that is mostly because we are looking at death on TV, or in the newspaper, or on the Internet and not within the walls of our home, or the confines of our souls and spirits. But there are areas in each of our lives that if they are not dead, are on life support, and if not on life support then getting unhealthier and unhealthier. Do you have habits that contribute to your bad physical health, or to your family's ongoing challenges, or to a nation's economic woes, or a planet's pollution? Are you keeping secrets that are eating you up inside, and preventing a closeness

with God and others? Are your spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, and generosity alive and well, or foundering from a lack of attention?

Friends, as uncomfortable as it may be, Lent is the season to explore the death within you, and to find the sin that is at its root. The sin may not be yours specifically to repent of, but you, like all of us since Adam, have been shaped and wounded by sin since the day you were born, and that's a good portion of what Paul is trying to tell us tonight. But he also tells us the good news of the gospel, that "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 through the one man, Jesus Christ." We who have that abundance of grace and righteousness have received the power, the dominion, to turn away from the sin we have done, and to put the sin others have done to us in its proper place. That's what playing dead can do for you. Amen.