

From the slums to a sea side inheritance  
What's wrong with the world and how to make it right.  
November 1, 2009 - Romans 5:12-21

One of the world's sad realities today is billions of people live in poverty. Many end up in slums. A slum includes sub standard housing, overcrowding and some filthy living conditions.

Check out these pictures from the world's worst slums. The first comes from the Caribbean. Smartly dressed girls pass by a garbage pile and open sewage pit. The girls in their pretty dresses seem so out of place amidst the squalor in that alley.

The next picture shows a slum in Mumbai, Kenya. Garbage covers the railway tracks. People live under plastic tarps and tin roofs just meters away. You can even see laundry strung out above the garbage and closer to the tracks.

The next picture shows a densely populated region of Rio de Janeiro. Can you imagine trying to live and move and breathe in an environment like that?

Now wouldn't it be something if we could take people out of the slums and move them to a better place? Wouldn't it be marvelous

if we could take some of those kids we saw and relocate them in a home by the sea?

How about this one? Notice the stairway goes right down to the ocean. Wouldn't that be neat to take those girls in their pretty yellow dresses to this place and tell them "this is now yours?"

How about this one? It has a huge yard that backs onto the ocean. It would be so great to take some of those folks living beside the railway tracks in Africa to this spacious place. I wonder what their faces would look like if someone said, "This is now your house!"

This last one has an okay view of the ocean. It looks like it has an adequate yard for kids to play in. Wouldn't it be great to take some of those crowded folks from that Rio de Janeiro neighborhood and let them experience space here?

Well friends, we can't accomplish this physically for the millions living in physical slums. But God can accomplish this spiritually for the billions living in spiritual slums. That includes or included you and me.

We all were born into the slums. We all have a slum heritage. We all had slum attitudes and engaged in slum behaviors. We lived in these slums reigned by brutal task masters. As hard as we tried, there was nothing we could do to get ourselves out of those slums. But some of us have been set free from the slum master's reign. Oh, we still live among the slums. But we serve a new master and look forward to an inheritance of life by the sea.

The good news today is **God offers a free sea side inheritance to spiritual slum dwellers.**

Now most of you have never lived in a slum. Maybe you've seen slums or visited people in them, but you didn't come from the slums. So you might be tempted to tune me out right now because you're convinced this doesn't really apply to you. I'd ask you to give God and His Word a few minutes before you confirm this judgment. Some know what I'm talking about. Remember where you came from and what you're called to today. I'm not actually the one who claims we were born slum dwellers. God declares it in His Word. Oh, He doesn't use that exact terminology. But I think slums and sea side

inheritance grant us at least part of the picture that God paints for us in His Word.

Some of you might have come today because you're interested in answers to the questions we posed on our sign and in the paper. What's wrong with the world and how to make it right? We will answer those questions as we proceed through today's passage.

It all comes from the next section in the book of Romans. We've learned the apostle Paul wrote this letter to Christians in Rome in the first century. They seemed to be scattered throughout the city in different pockets. They had not yet come together as a church. Paul did not plant this church nor had he ever been to Rome at the time of writing this letter. But God compelled him, to speak and his scribe, to write this letter which contains some of the greatest statements about the Gospel in the whole Bible.

We've seen Paul declare this letter is all about the Gospel. Romans 1:16 – For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes; to the Jew first and also the Greek. The Gospel is God's good news of salvation. Then Paul explained why there needed to be a Gospel. In the rest of

Romans 1 through most of chapter 3, he reveals both immoral and moral people are under sin and under God's just wrath. Romans 3:9 – Jews and Gentiles alike are under sin. Romans 3:19 – Every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Then came the super good news of Romans 3:21-26. There we learned how our holy God could justly forgive lawbreakers like you and me. We heard there about justification and propitiation. We saw that this gift of justification or right standing with God could only be obtained by faith in Christ.

But we humans somehow struggle with free gifts. It offends our pride to admit that we're needy and have to trust someone else for something. So in chapter 4, Paul addresses those who might think justification was necessary for immoral people, but moral people could trust their good morals. Those holding this view would point to Abraham and his great works. Surely he was justified by faith and works. But Paul shows that it was only through Abraham's faith that God justified him.

Starting in chapter five, Paul begins to work out what justification means for our lives today. He shows that God provides

great assurance that we'll be okay when we die. We can trust God because now we have peace with Him. And He's using our sufferings to build into us the endurance, character and hope that He will keep His word on judgment day. This brings us to our passage for today.

It seems Paul felt the need to again address those who believed a person could earn right standing before God by trying really hard to keep God's law. These people believed they could work their way out of the slums by their own efforts. So Paul goes back to the beginning of human history to show that the slums existed way before God's law. The task masters ruling the slums could not be overthrown by people keeping the law. Paul exposes this. But he also reveals the sea side like inheritance God offers to those in the slums.

Three sets of questions will unpack this for us. Set #1 - What's wrong with the world? How did we all become slum dwellers? Set #2 - How do we make it right? What's this free sea side inheritance God offers? Set #3 – What do we do with this news? How do those recipients of the sea side inheritance continue to live among the slums? Then I want to give us time to respond to what God might be doing in our hearts.

### **Romans 5:12-21 - New International Version (NIV)**

<sup>12</sup>Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned— <sup>13</sup>for before the law was given, sin was in the world. But sin is not taken into account when there is no law. <sup>14</sup>Nevertheless, death reigned from the time of Adam to the time of Moses, even over those who did not sin by breaking a command, as did Adam, who was a pattern of the one to come.

<sup>15</sup>But the gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died by the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many! <sup>16</sup>Again, the gift of God is not like the result of the one man's sin: The judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation, but the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification. <sup>17</sup>For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

<sup>18</sup>Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. <sup>19</sup>For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also

through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.

<sup>20</sup>The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more, <sup>21</sup>so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.

### **What's wrong with the world?**

We're all born slum dwellers. We are all born sinners and live in the spiritual slums. Three brutal task masters rule these slums: Death, Sin and the Devil. Verse 12 mentions death and sin, "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned."

So sin entered into the world through one man, Adam, the first man. My son and I had quite a spirited debate this past week on how unfair that was. He argued correctly that sin actually entered first through the woman Eve. So why doesn't she get the primary blame. Part of the answer – God had created Eve as a gift. God meant for Adam to protect and care for her, but instead he blamed her. We're not totally sure. But God holds Adam responsible. He was either absent

when Eve got tempted by the serpent or he was standing there and didn't do anything. But redemptive history declares that *Adam* gets tagged as the entry point of sin into humanity.

I have just one other quick aside. There continues and probably always will be a debate within Christianity about the interpretation of Genesis 1-11. Does it describe literal events or is it a symbolic account to communicate simply that God created the world and then things got messed up. This view concludes Adam and Eve weren't historical people but symbols of the beginning of humanity. One of the major challenges this view faces comes from this text. Romans 5 doesn't really work if Adam is not a real person. The force of Paul's argument comes by comparing the life impact of two real people; Adam and Jesus. Death and sin came into humanity through one real flesh and blood man, Adam. Life and righteousness came into the world through another real flesh and blood man, Jesus.

Through Adam's sin or transgression, he was sent to the spiritual slums – separation from intimate fellowship with God. He didn't drop dead but immediately his and Eve's body began to decay and prepare for their eventual death. All Adam's descendents inherit

the same address and rebellious attitude towards God. Do you see that at the end of the verse? “So death came to all men, because all sinned.”

Every act of greed, lustful thought, explosion of temper and abuse of power goes back to this root of sin. Nobody is perfect including you and me. Most things get fouled up at one point or another. Every time we see a graveyard we're reminded something's not right with this world. You'd think that after all the centuries of mankind's existence, we'd be better people; things would be getting better. But we've just become more skilled and sophisticated at doing evil.

So what's wrong with this world? We're all born sinners. Paul Barnett writes “The outcome of Adam's rebellion is nothing less than humanity's alienation from God, the coming of dark forces into the human psyche, and the dislocation of the social order.”<sup>1</sup> We are all born rebels towards God and follow that rebellious nature. We're slum dwellers with a slum attitude and actions.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Barnett, *Romans*, (Christian Focus Publications, Focus on the Bible Commentary, Geanies-House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland, UK, 2003, 2007), 116.

But there are at least two strong objections to this claim. One centers on the goodness of man. The other wonders about fairness.

“Isn’t there a fundamental goodness in all humans?” the objection goes. Everyone’s born innocent and then corrupted by their environment. “We’ve got to look for the good in people and be positive. If we don’t we’ll always be negative and condemning.” On one hand I agree. We do have to affirm when people make choices that honor God. But is the essential nature of man really good?

I was corresponding with one of our church neighbors over this issue last year. He emails me about our sign messages. He lets me know when he doesn’t like them and when he’s interested. I really appreciate his perspective and the time he takes to write. We had an email discussion about humanity.

Basically, he believes we must focus on the good in people and the hope that we will work together for a better world. He emphasizes the great blessing we enjoy living in a nation like Canada, in a province like Alberta and in a community like St. Albert. Certainly, there are a great many blessings we enjoy in this community. People do good things! But ultimately where does that good come from? I

would argue it’s comes from the image of God that is stamped on every human whether or not they are Christian.

This passage does not claim everyone is the worst sinner who engages in the most despicable sins. It simply declares the reality that because we descended from Adam, we have inherited a sin nature that naturally rebels against God. It doesn’t mean that we can do no good nor should we give up trying to do good, but that we can never do good perfectly. We’re born into the spiritual slums, ruled by the taskmasters of death, sin and the devil.

But that leads to a natural second objection. “Why should we be condemned to die because of the wicked action of my distant ancestor Adam? Where’s the justice in that?” Paul does not answer that question. Oh he stops at the end of verse 12 to emphasize that sin and death were in the world before God’s law. But he doesn’t answer the fairness question because it likely never occurred to him. Paul looked at things through the Hebrew mind. That worldview puts more emphasis on the community relationship rather than the individual. So Paul likely regarded our connectedness with the “first man” as a given. It wasn’t even an issue to him.

We have inherited the individualistic Greek way of thinking. We think individual first, community second—we can take that to the extreme where we are islands completely independent of anyone. It’s all about here and now in my life. Yet we all are affected in some way by those who have gone before us. Paul Barnett writes “I’m an Australian because of a decision made to migrate there by an Irishman I never knew. I had no say in that, and there is nothing I can do to make me an Englishman or a Croatian by birth. I cannot release myself from the action taken by my Irish ancestor. I am what I am because of his choices, and the choices of others long ago, going back ultimately to the choices of the First Man. I may question the morality of my accountability for Adam’s action. But I cannot doubt the reality that Adam constituted me a law-breaker whose condemnation I and others will share.”<sup>2</sup> He’s not saying that we’re all victims. He’s not saying that our ancestors completely define our identity today. But he is pointing out that we can’t do anything to change the reality of our connection to our ancestors.

This he acknowledges may not be altogether satisfactory. But then he asks a different question. “Are we really so different from Adam? Do we seek to honor and thank God daily (hourly)? Do we willingly and gladly live under his rule as a good steward of his creation? Do we always love God and always care for others in love? The grim reality is we do not and day by day we endorse and confirm Adam’s sin. The fact is we may even admire Adam.” He concludes “the fact of universal sinfulness and death can scarcely be denied.”

That’s what’s wrong with the world. We’re all born sinners and live in the slums under the rule of sin.

### **How can we make it right?**

Through good works and keeping the law! We can get ourselves out of the slums by doing and being good. Really? Law keeping has never overcome death. That’s part of what he’s saying in verses 13 and 14. Death and sin began their rule the second Adam sinned. They reigned over mankind. Yes, Moses came along thousands of years later. God gave His law through Moses. But upon receiving that law, death and sin did not disappear. People still died after the 10 commandments were given. People still suffered under the rule of sin.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 117.

So we can't make this right by ourselves. We can't deal with our own or the world's sin problem by trying really hard to be good. The law was given to show our desperate need for God.

*Instead we must receive God's abundant provision of grace to deal with our sin problem.* It's only through Christ that it's made right. That's what spills out of Paul's pen onto the parchment through verses 15-17. Look at verse 17 again "For if, by the trespass of one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ."

This is where the sea side inheritance comes in. Now please do not go out and say "Tom said that if you come to Christ, you'll become materially prosperous and inherit a sea side villa." I was trying to think of a way to portray the immense contrast Paul presents to us between the fatal effects of sin and the immeasurable provision of God. I wasn't smart enough to think of anything. So I picked up on I think C.S. Lewis analogy that apart from Christ, we are like children living in the slums. He describes them and us as content to play in the mud in an abandoned lot. Then they are offered a vacation by the sea.

But they don't know anything about the sea. They aren't familiar with it so they conclude they'll just stay in the mud, and they turn down the offer for a vacation by the sea. People living in spiritual slums think they're living the good life. They're missing God's offer.

Well, God doesn't just offer vacations by the sea. He offers eternal life by the sea. It's a life ruled by the good and just Lord. Christians get to taste bits and pieces of this life now because we have Christ in us. One day we actually get to enjoy the complete inheritance. God has provided our release from the rule of the slum's task masters.

Notice Paul does not want us to think that God's provision of grace barely compensates for our suffering in the slums. This sea side inheritance offer of grace goes way beyond anything we can even imagine. Look at how Paul elevates God's provision through Jesus above the effects of Adam's transgression, again in verse 17. "*How much more* will those who receive God's *abundant* provision of grace . . . reign in life through Jesus." Paul cannot contain his excitement. God could have responded to our slum dwelling attitude and actions with judgment. Instead, He responds with an over abundance of grace.

How do we make it right – We can't. But we can receive God's abundant gift of grace by faith in Christ. He justifies us releasing us from the reign of those brutal task masters: Death, sin and the devil. .

So we've answered the first set of questions "What's wrong with the world and how did we all become slum dwellers?" We're all sinners and slum dwellers because of our connection to Adam. We've answered the second set of questions – How do we make it right? We make it right by receiving God's abundant gift of grace by trusting in Christ as our Savior. Through that faith, God pours His gospel and gives us that sea side inheritance of life eternal with Him.

But what do we do with this news?

If you've never met and received Christ, you now know that He's the ultimate answer to how to make the world right. Accept God's super-abundant provision for you in Christ by putting your faith in Him. You will gain that spiritual sea side inheritance. (Christians, will you pray for the non-Christians in this room right now that God would work in their hearts and enable them to respond?).

But what if we've already received the inheritance? What if we're already Christians? Well we must feel and ponder the tension that

comes with this inheritance. We still live in the spiritual slums of this world. We no longer are ruled by Death, sin and the devil. But we still live in the realm they rule. There are people all around us who are slum dwellers, and some are quite happy to stay there. Others know things are wrong.

So what are some tensions we might experience and how might we respond to them?

**In the slums, people think there are many ways to get out. We've got to both believe and reveal there's only one way.** You will hear that the way out is through love. That's partially true. The way out is through God's love who empowers us to live a life of love. But they're talking about engaging in loving acts to earn our way out of the slums. Christ alone blows away the fatal effects of Adam's transgression.

Buddha, Confucius, Madonna, Oprah and the Dalai Lama all talk about the need to love each other. But none of them actually deal with the devastating consequences of Adam's transgression. If all we need is love, then many "saviors" can claim legitimacy. But if what we need is someone to overwhelm Adam's transgression, Christ alone

accomplished that. We can boldly share this truth in a world where the uniqueness of Christ is denied. We are equipped to answer the perennial question “What’s wrong with this world.” Answer – We all sinned in Adam’s sin which has led to fatal, universal damage.

**In the slums, life sometimes looks pretty dark so we must go back to God’s super abundant provision.** Some of you are going through dark times right now as you live among the slums. When we go through these tough times we must remember how God dealt with the largest problem in history. Through Christ, He did not just remedy the fatal damage of Adam’s sin. He overwhelmed it and provided an abundance of grace and life instead of condemnation and death. If God can overwhelm the deepest problem in the history of humanity, He can see you through your troubles today.

**The familiarity of the slums draws us back to them so we must guard against slum thinking.**

Yes, we live amidst the slums. We must not think or live like spiritual slum dwellers. But it’s like there’s a whirlpool of slum thinking that continually threatens to pull us back in. It’s not that we fall back to lose the gift of grace. But we get sucked back in to living

like that’s our home. We live as if we’re still ruled by sin. So we think the old ways; we go back to some of the old behavior; we come to a crisis of the next step in our Christian journey and get scared. So we run back to what we know and find ourselves getting sucked back into that way of thinking.

I think this is one of the biggest challenges of the Christian life. Life on this planet involves living in a place where the slums still exist. We’re not totally removed. We can still smell, hear, touch and taste the slum. We’re drawn to it but we know the Sea is way better.

It’s a struggle. We might wish there was no struggle. Why can’t it be easier? But remember the first part of Romans 5 – God uses these trials and struggles; these sufferings to produce perseverance and perseverance character and character hope.

God will not give up His life long project in us to turn our hearts away from the familiarity of the slums and towards the fresh air of the Sea. He moves us through the Holy Spirit’s sanctifying work further and further away from the slum thinking. He grows us so that we find the smells, taste, look and the touch of the slum repulsive and the taste of Christ sweet. Our job is to say “Yes Lord, continue to do

it. Yes, continue to turn my senses and passions away from the slums and towards you. I'm a slow learner Lord but in you there really is the sweetness of life."

- Response
  - Other thoughts.
  - What questions do I have from this message/passage that I need further clarification on? What don't I understand?
  - What will I do to get those answers? (E-mail, call, talk to Pastor Tom; raise them with my small group/accountability partner; research this further; ask for resources)
  - What has God been speaking to me about through this message? (Attitude to change; sin to confess; new understanding about life; new revelation about God, Christ, Life, Me; Something else?)
  - What do I need to act on?
  - What do I need to share with my accountability partner/small group/family/pastor so they can encourage me to follow through?