**The Interpreter’s House**

Text: Romans 5:20-21

Rev. David Waldron

**Scriptures:** Genesis 3:1-7; Romans 5:12-21

**Confession:** Heidelberg Catechism LD2

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 216, 51, 441, 69b, 200, 531

**Series:** The Pilgrim’s Progress (#3)

**Occasion:** Reaffirmation of faith and child baptism

**Theme:** God’s good law does not save; it shows our need of grace.

**Proposition:** God’s grace in Christ cleanses the heart of all sin so that He abides in us

**Introduction**

‘*The Pilgrim’s Progress from This World to that Which is to Come*’ is an allegory of the Christian Life, written in 1678 by John Bunyan. If you have not yet read The Pilgrim’s Progress, I would encourage you to do so. Or you could watch the online animated movie available from Revelation Media at www.revelationmedia.com/watchpilgrims.

In this imaginative story, the Pilgrim named Christian leaves his hometown which is called The City of Destruction and comes to the Wicket Gate – an allusion to the ‘narrow gate’ Jesus speaks about in Matthew 7:13.

Having gone through this gate, Christian is surprised that he was allowed in, despite his past failings. The character Good-will explains to him that “*We make no objections against any; notwithstanding all that they have done before they come hither*”. Saying “*they in no wise are cast out*” (John 6:37). Good-will makes clear reference to God’s grace, about which Christian will learn more when he visits the Interpreter’s House. It is to this place that Good-will directs Christian saying that the Interpreter would ‘*show him excellent things*’. Some have suggested that John Bunyan depicted Christ in the character of the Interpreter, others the Holy Spirit.

{There is a sense in which you, [Names], are the Interpreters in your own house for your [child/ren name/s]. You expressed this in your vow in which you promised ‘*in reliance on the Holy Spirit and with the help of the Christian community, to do all in your power to instruct your children in the truth of the Christian faith*’. May your home, [Names], continue to be “An Interpreter’s House” together with all of our homes as we explain the gospel to our children and to others}.

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Interpreter shows Christian six scenes:

* A dusty room
* Two little children called Passion and Patience
* A fire burning against a wall
* A beautiful palace to which a man gained entrance
* A despairing man in an iron cage
* A man who dreamed that he was not ready for the Day of Judgement

In this sermon we will concentrate mostly on the dusty room - which is a picture of the human heart – as we interpret our text from Romans 5:20-21: *“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”.* The three parts of this sermon relate to God’s Law, to His grace and to life in Christ.

1. **The** **Law – a sweeping broom that makes the dust fly**

The character Interpreter leads Christian into ‘*a very large a parlour that was full of dust, because never swept; the which, after he had reviewed it a little while, the Interpreter called for a man to sweep. Now, when he began to sweep, the dust began so abundantly to fly about that Christian had almost therewith been chocked’*. A ‘parlour’ is a sitting room in a private house.

What does this dusty inner room represent? Interpreter explains “*This parlour is the heart of a man that was never sanctified by the sweet grace of the gospel; the dust is his original sin and inward corruptions, that have defiled the whole man. He that began to sweep at first is the law*”. The dust reflects the natural human tendency to ‘hate God’ and to rebel against Him. The truth being represented here is that the Law of God cannot sweep the human heart clean. In fact, there is a sense in which the law makes the situation worse. In John Bunyan’s words through his character Interpreter, ‘*The law, instead of cleansing the heart (by its working) from sin, doth revive, put strength into, and increase it in the soul*’.

Where did Bunyan get this idea about the Law of God from? The Bible. Specifically our text in Romans 5:20: “*Now the law came in to* ***increase*** *the trespass*”. This is not one of the easier verses in Scripture to understand, so let’s look at these words carefully. The law here refers primarily to the Mosaic Law given at Mount Sinai. This law ‘came in’ (literally ‘came in beside’). In the previous section of Romans 5 the Apostle Paul writes about sin having come into the world through the first man Adam. We read about this earlier from Genesis 3. The Mosaic law ‘came in’ at a later time in history than Adam’s fall.

Trespass is also translated in some English versions as ‘transgression’ or ‘offense’. It describes a ‘false step’ leading to a deviation from the right path for life. You might see a sign on a property boundary reading ‘*trespasses will be prosecuted*’. To trespass is to go where you are not allowed to walk. It is to cross a legal boundary. Earlier in the journey of Christian, before he reached the Wicket Gate, he stepped off the good path that Evangelist had directed him to walk. Following the bad counsel of Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Christian turned out of the way that leads to life. Later, Evangelist explained Christian’s error to him “*Thy sin is very great, for by it thou hast committed two evils; thou hast forsaken the way that is good, to tread in forbidden paths*”}.

In what sense does the Law of God ‘increase the trespass?’ If you hear “*Don’t eat that last piece of cheesecake on the plate*” – what do you find yourself wanting to do? – that is if you like cheesecake? Some have suggested that ‘forbidden fruit’ is more attractive just because it is prohibited. There is a tendency at times for us to want just the things we are not allowed to have. If the law making sins more attractive was the meaning, then we would expect the verse to read ‘*Now the law came in to increase the* ***trespasses***’ (plural not singular).

It makes sense to understand the singular word ‘trespass’ in light of Adam’s first sin as described earlier in chapter 5 (v12). Then to see that the Mosaic Law expanded the number of boundaries that God set in place from the first: First the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "*You may surely 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 surely die*." (Gen 2:16). Then God gave the Ten Commandments to His covenant people Israel through Moses, adding detailed laws covering many different aspects of their lives. The more boundaries that are put in place, the more likely it is that they will be crossed.

It is **not** that the Law of God in any way creates trespasses in human beings like you and me (ref. James 1:13). The Word of God is good, true and righteous (e.g. Ps 119:160). However, the Law reveals the pervasive/endemic/widespread extent of sinfulness in the human heart. John Bunyan represented this by a room full of choking dust. The Apostle Paul expressed the reality of the personal, painful, awareness of sin that the Law reveals in these words: *‘if it had not been for the law, I would not have known sin. I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, produced in me all kinds of covetousness’.*

The Heidelberg Catechism uses the word ‘misery’ to describe the necessary state for a human heart to receive the gospel. To be miserable is to be ‘*wretchedly unhappy or uncomfortable*’. In Lord’s Day 2, the Catechism asks the question: “*How do you come to know your misery?*” Answer: “*The law of God tells me*”.

Can you see how many boundaries you have crossed? Can you identify where you have gone astray? In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Christian realised that He had trespassed. As he made His way back Bunyan writes “*He went like one that was all the while treading on forbidden ground and could by no means think himself safe till again, he was got into the way which he had left to follow Mr. Worldly Wiseman’s counsel*”. Christian was repentant and turned back to the Way. Have you? The Way leads to life. It is the way of grace, which brings us to our second point.

1. **The Gospel – a sweet cleansing grace for the heart**

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Interpreter says to a ‘damsel that stood by’ (a ‘damsel’ is an old English word for a young unmarried woman): “*Bring hither water, and sprinkle the room*”. When this was done, the room was swept and cleansed ‘with pleasure’. The Interpreter explains to Christian what this means. “*He that began to sweep at first is the law, but she that brought water, and did sprinkle it, is the Gospel*”. *“When the Gospel comes in the sweet and gracious influences thereof to the heart, then, I say, even as thou sawest the damsel lay the dust by sprinkling the floor with water, so is sin vanquished and subdued, and the soul made clean through the faith of it, and consequently, fit for the King of glory to inhabit”.*

Bunyan’s illustration reflects the truth of our text from Romans 5:20: *“Now the law came in to increase the trespass,* ***but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more****”.* The Greek word translated ‘sin’ here conveys the idea of ‘missing the mark’. The word grace can be described as “God’s unmerited favour and supernatural enabling and empowerment for salvation and daily sanctification”. Grace is ‘everything for nothing to those who don’t deserve anything’. Grace is what every person needs, what none can earn and what God alone can and does freely give.

It is likely that Paul is thinking firstly of the history of Israel, who having been given the Law of God, repeatedly rebelled in disobedience. Reading the Old Testament clearly reveals this painful reality. However, woven into that same Old Testament Law are God’s provisions of grace. We see this in the ‘ceremonial’ laws where elaborate washing rituals were required of the High Priest, blood sacrifices were offered for sins, which were also symbolically transferred to a ‘scapegoat’. When Israel went astray eventually being taken captive by their enemies and being exiled to a foreign land, it was not any renewed ability to keep the Law that restored them to Canaan, it was the grace of God. Here are two staggering truths about how grace abounds (that is grace overflows above and beyond sin in great excess):

**Firstly**, God’s grace is **not withheld** because of sin. This is different from the way in which people like you and me usually operate. When we are offended by someone else who crosses one of our personal boundaries of acceptable behaviour, we tend to withdraw from them and withhold any favour we might otherwise extend to them. Clearly, they don’t deserve anything good from us, so we don’t give it to them! In contrast to the way we tend to function, God gives His grace in abundance to people like us who deserve nothing. Why? because we have crossed the good boundaries of His law.

**Secondly**, God’s grace is **never reduced** because of the increase in sin. John Bunyan illustrates this with another image from the Interpreter’s house. He pictures another scene where instead of grace being represented by sprinkled water that enables the dust to be swept away, grace poured out to maintain a fire burning. Satan is trying to put out the fire by throwing water onto it, but ‘*Christ continually, with the oil of His grace, maintains the work already begun in the heart*’. The store of God’s grace is without limit and therefore is always more than sufficient; abounding more than the increase in sin that results from many trespasses of God’s Law.

There is no lack of sufficiency in God’s grace, however, there is a hardening of heart that may eventually prevent a person from turning to Christ in repentance. Bunyan provides a chilling image of this for Christian to see in the house of the Interpreter. There was a man in an iron cage. He had been once been aiming for the Heavenly City but had sinned against the light of the Word and the goodness of God. He had grieved the Spirit, tempted the Devil, provoked God to anger and he had so hardened his heart that he could no longer repent. The man was miserable and without hope, kept in an iron cage of despair. He had shut himself out of all the promises of God.

If we continue to wilfully sin and see God’s grace as a means by which we can gladly trespass the boundaries of His good Law then we reveal that our hearts have not been cleansed. The Apostle Paul asks the question at the start of Romans 6: “*Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? My no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?*”. The Word of God warns us all who will listen **“***Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour. Resist him, firm in your faith*” (1 Peter 5:8-9). Praise God for His bountiful grace, but do not idly presume upon His favour, thinking “*Well, I know that this is wrong, but God will always forgive me so I’ll just do it anyway*.” God’s grace is **not an excuse** to continue to trespass God’s good boundaries. Instead it is a **motivation** to keep walking on the narrow way that leads to life – which brings us to our third point.

1. **Christ – the King who reigns in the clean heart**

In The Pilgrim’s Progress, Interpreter explains why the dusty parlour, representing the heart, was made clean by grace. So that it was then ‘*fit for the King of glory*’. The King of glory is the divine Son of God, Jesus Christ. In Romans chapter 5, the Apostle Paul has been describing the effect of the sin of Adam spreading to his descendants; people like you and me. Sin reigned in death; both physical and spiritual. This is why the heart of natural mankind is darkened, foolish and lustful (Rom 1:21). The spiritually dead heart is unclean and does not honour God as Ruler or give thanks to Him (Rom 1:21), instead it rebels against Him.

But when grace cleans this heart, Christ the Holy One takes up residence within that person rules them gently and lovingly. The heart, the whole person, is then alive in Christ and possesses eternal life; being delivered from the domain of darkness and transferred into the Kingdom of God’s beloved Son (Col 1:13). The Apostle Paul puts it this way: *“Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,* ***so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord****” (Rom 5:20-21).*

{Today, [Names] have confirmed that the grace of God reigns in their hearts through the righteousness of Christ credited to them so that they have eternal life in Him. They trust in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, as their Lord and Saviour. [Name] was baptised, as [Name] has been previously. We heard these words earlier from the form for baptism of the children of believers: “*Baptism, whether by immersion or sprinkling, teaches that sin has made us so impure that we must undergo a cleansing which only God can accomplish*”. “*Baptism is a sign and seal that our sins are washed away through Jesus Christ*”. Baptism points to the ‘dusty room’ of the fallen heart that needs to be thoroughly cleansed.

With infant baptism, the message is **not** that the sins of the person being baptised have already been washed away through Jesus Christ, but that baptised children, like [Name], belong in the covenant community where the washing of sins away by Christ is taught and demonstrated in the life of the church. For [Name] and others, her baptism does not save her, but this sign points to the need for her to respond in faith to the gospel. We pray that our gracious Lord would enable her to do so}.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, God is pleased to use people like us as Interpreters in the lives of others that they too may come to understand and believe the gospel. Many people think that following rules brings life; these rules may be some of the moral principles of the Bible, or perhaps other religious writings. No rules, no matter whether they are God’s Law or human traditions can bring eternal life; **only** God’s grace is sufficient to cleanse the dusty human heart. God’s grace reigns in a clean heart enabling Christ Jesus to set that person free to gladly and joyfully live for Him.

How do people like you and me obtain this amazing grace? By believing that Jesus Christ died in your place for your trespasses against God’s good law. By believing that His perfect obedience to that law is credited to your account so that God sees you as being righteous in His sight. There is no other way to have a clean heart. There is no other way to truly live. There is no other way to have lasting joy, satisfaction and peace. So come to Christ, enter by the narrow gate and take the upward path to the New Heavens and New Earth.

AMEN.