

# WHAT'S THE POINT?

*the gospel according to Ecclesiastes*

*“Where’s Righteousness?”  
Ecclesiastes 7:15-29*

There was a pastor by the name of James Montgomery Boice who pastored the historic 10<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. He had been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer, and with only weeks to live, and on the last occasion to speak to his congregation, he said, “If God does something in your life would you change it?” Pastor Boice answered his question by saying that if we tried to change what God had done, things wouldn’t be as good and in the end, we would only make things worse (as recounted in Ryken, p. 170).

There is a story of missionaries, maybe you heard of them, who were doing work in Peru. They were in an aircraft because they were mistaken by the Peruvian air force as drug smugglers. Their plane was shot and they crash landed. The husband and one of his children survived, but his wife and infant died. You see, what happened was that a bullet from the air force shot through their plane, and then killed the wife and daughter sitting on her mother’s lap. Obviously, in the days to follow, the husband, Jim, struggled. He stated at the funeral that he didn’t believe God had a plan in that circumstance. But then recounted that God faithfully began to show him his faithfulness in this sovereign plan. At the funeral Jim Bowers went through a partial list that he can composed stating his assurance that God is sovereign and good. At one point in his sermon, he said, “Roni and Charity were instantly killed by the same bullet. (Would you say that’s a stray bullet?) And it didn’t reach Kevin, who was right in front of Charity; it stayed in Charity. That was a sovereign bullet” (as recounted here: <http://redemptionministry.org/a-sovereign-bullet-jim-bowers/>).

These are just two stories of people who have gone through tremendous hardship and yet they seem to be standing with sorrowful-yet-rejoicing confidence in the fact that God is in control of everything. Last week, towards the beginning of the sermon, I said that if you cannot rest in the sovereign control of God, you will never cease from anger, anxiety, and frustration. But you may still be wondering, “Why shouldn’t I be anxious when *this* or *that* thing is in my life? But as we’ve seen through the weeks of studying Ecclesiastes, Solomon displays to us that we ought not to ever take comfort in our circumstances. Instead, we must take comfort in God who alone is faithful and good – even if we don’t understand and even if we still feel pain and toil. In verse 14 of Ecclesiastes 7, Solomon wrote, **“<sup>14</sup> In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him.”<sup>1</sup>**

The encouragement from this verse is profound to me. When I’m anxious. When I want to know what’s going to happen next. When I want a guarantee that everything will be fine if I just do x, y or z; Solomon, under the inspiration of the Spirit, tells us that God doesn’t want us to know what’s going to happen. We have joys and pains alike in this world not so that we can fix everything and make sure that we have less pain. But instead, this happens in order to cause us to depend on the only One who never changes: God himself.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:14.

But still you could say, “How can I trust God when there’s so much difficulty and pain in this world?” This is where Solomon goes in the rest of chapter 7. He’s still not done in his quest for wisdom. What he does in the following verses is evaluate three different types of pains that this world brings and then tells us how we *ought* to respond in the midst of the clear depravity around us. So, if you haven’t turned in your Bible to Ecclesiastes 7 yet, please do so:

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*<sup>15</sup> In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing. <sup>16</sup> Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time? <sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them. <sup>19</sup> Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. <sup>20</sup> Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. <sup>21</sup> Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup> Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others. <sup>23</sup> All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, “I will be wise,” but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup> That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? <sup>25</sup> I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. <sup>26</sup> And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. <sup>27</sup> Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—  
<sup>28</sup> which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. <sup>29</sup> See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.<sup>2</sup>*

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As we see over and over again through experience and even in Ecclesiastes is that we humans want to find comfort, identity and life in the things around us. When we don’t, our “world” falls apart. But instead of realizing that this world doesn’t satisfy, what many of us tend to do is try harder to put the broken world back together again. And when we realize that we can’t do that, then we become angry. And many times, people become angry with God.

I think what Solomon does in these verses is quite helpful because what he does here is essentially confront those of us who seek to take refuge in what we see. In other words, Solomon says, “Look at this world around you. Do you *really* want to find your meaning, life and hope in *this*? *It’s a sickening cesspool of sin!*” Can sinfulness give you what you long for? **Why put your hope in this vain world?**

In case people don’t believe this world is *that* bad, Solomon gives us three examples to consider and take to heart. The first is the vanity of morality, the second is the sinfulness even of the wise, and the third is the depravity of all mankind.

So, let’s start with the first example Solomon gives.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:15–29.

## 1. The vanity of morality (vv. 15-18).

Look at verse 15 again with me: <sup>15</sup> In my vain life I have seen everything. There is a righteous man who perishes in his righteousness, and there is a wicked man who prolongs his life in his evildoing.<sup>3</sup>

Is Solomon saying that he has literally seen every single thing that has happened in his lifetime? No. However, I don't think this statement means nothing. Some might think he's simply saying, "Well, I've just seen it all!" Solomon has been on a greater quest for wisdom than anyone else. He's studied, evaluated, tested through a myriad of personal experiences. So, Solomon is probably saying that in his short lifetime (i.e. – his vain life), he's seen essentially all the basic, most important things to see.

And in this vain life, he hasn't come back with all pretty findings. Instead, he's seen things that trouble him. The first example is that a righteous man dies in his righteousness and a wicked man lives long. This may just be one of the greatest struggles we have as human beings. When I was a kid I used to think that nice people got nice things and mean people got bad things in return. I mean, I learned some of Aesop's fables. I watched the old Disney classic short cartoons that were moralistic. Even in church in Sunday School, I was more-so taught that if you obeyed, you'd experience blessings and if you disobeyed then you'd get punished. I don't know if I was ever really taught about Job or the pain of the apostles in their obedience.

Again, though, it's not only Christians who struggle with this. Mark Twain once wrote in "The Story of the Bad Little Boy Who Didn't Come to Grief" about a young man named Jim. He was always bad, and instead of getting in trouble, he seemed to succeed. Twain writes, "Once he climbed up in Farmer Acorn's apple-tree to steal apples, and the limb didn't break, and he didn't fall and break his arm, and get torn by the farmer's great dog, and then languish on a sick bed for weeks, and repent and become good!" Then there was "the time he went boating on Sunday, and didn't get drowned, and that time that he got caught out in the storm when he was fishing on Sunday, and didn't get struck by lightning." As the story continues, Jim grows up and Twain then states how he's doing by saying that Jim "got wealthy by all manner of cheating and rascality; and now he is the infernalist wickedest scoundrel in his native village, and is universally respected, and belongs to the Legislature" (as quot. in O'Donnell, p. 145).

Whether a Christian or a moralist or just a regular human being, we all struggle with "why seemingly good people" have "bad things" happen to them. Personally, I've struggled with that. I remember having thoughts like, "I don't want to do that thing because then it'll bring pain in my life." But then I looked at other people, and I thought, "They don't seem to have problems." Then I'd think, "But they probably do have problems that I just don't see." Then I'd look at the people who were nice and moral and I'd say, "But they have problems, too!" I'd wonder "What's the point?!"

Solomon reveals to us that this real issue has been around for millennia. So, are we going to trust circumstances? If the "good" can have problems, then goodness will not give me the security for which I long. But then, hold on, is Solomon saying we should just sin as much as we want and we'll be better off? Absolutely not. In Ecclesiastes 2:13, Solomon wrote, ". . . I saw that there is more gain in wisdom than in folly. . . ."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:15.

<sup>4</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 2:13.

All that Solomon is seeking to say is that our longings aren't fulfilled in our actions – whether good or evil. Look at verses 16-17 with me: “<sup>16</sup> Be not overly righteous, and do not make yourself too wise. Why should you destroy yourself? <sup>17</sup> Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool. Why should you die before your time?”<sup>5</sup>

What does this even mean? Be not overly righteous? Can you be *too* righteous? Didn't Jesus say that our righteousness needs to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees? Actually he said it stronger: “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>6</sup> Do Solomon and Jesus disagree?

I am confident that they don't. As one commentator notes, “Grammatically speaking, the form of the verb that the Preacher uses in verse 16 may refer to someone who is only *pretending* to be righteous and is playing the wise man” (Ryken, p. 166). Look at the verses again, “do not make yourself.” There's an emphasis on *yourself* and you *making yourself* wise. This fits the context well, too. The word “righteous” can refer to a righteousness that's based solely in your own actions, and so Solomon is saying here, “Why spin your wheels so much in trying to be nicer and nicer? You work hard and then problems come.” Did your niceness save you? Absolutely not. In your daily life, when trials come, you'll say to God, “Why did you do that? I'm nice. I'm good! I didn't deserve that.” And if you continue to live this way, this kind of self-righteousness will only condemn you in the judgment before God. Instead of worshipping God and thanking him for his care and his gifts; you made yourself to be the center of everything and wanted all of God's gifts to be your servants for your benefit. And so you spurned God and you trusted in your goodness. Why choose self-righteousness?

But on the other hand, Solomon says, “Don't choose foolishness either!” When he talks about being overly foolish, I believe he's talking not merely of a person who sins, but of a person who persists in living in sin. This is someone who makes their living out of the clear overt sinful lifestyles. These individuals many times do actually die young. And so Solomon says that while morality doesn't bring gain, he also says, neither does immorality.

Then he concludes his thoughts with an exhortation to us. If neither morality nor immorality is something we should trust in, what should we trust in? Look at verse 18: “<sup>18</sup> It is good that you should take hold of this, and from that withhold not your hand, for the one who fears God shall come out from both of them.”<sup>7</sup> Essentially he tells us to keep our hands on the truths regarding morality and immorality. Don't let go of these things or else you'll be tempted to either be self-righteous or licentious. But if we're not to choose either of those routes, what are we to choose? Solomon says we're to fear God. So often people tend to think God is simply satisfied with our actions, but over and over again the Bible tells us first that God wants our hearts.

Can you imagine a relationship with your children where they do everything you say, and when you thank them, they just say almost robotically, “Well, I want to be self-disciplined and I want to show you that I can do these things. I very much appreciate you, and I want you to see that.” Where's the heart?

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<sup>5</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:16–17.

<sup>6</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Mt 5:20.

<sup>7</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:18.

God doesn't merely want a moral person. Oh yes, God calls us to love and good works. But that love and those good works come from individuals who now have desires within them that want to follow the Lord (or even want to want to follow him).

Solomon says "fear God." That's the only way you're kept from the two extremes. That means you understand his power, his majesty; and you understand his glorious love. He's not your slave. He's the Lord over all who can do whatever he pleases. And for those of you who trusted him, he was pleased to save you and now you can love him and keep his commandments.

So, in the midst of a world where the righteous die young, and the wicked can flourish – God is our only hope and security in the life to come and he is the only trust to endure in this life right now. Morality and immorality don't give righteousness and justice. Why look there. Look to God! Can you trust the God who is sovereign? Oh, you must. You can't trust your morality!

Ok, we can't trust our own morality, but can we trust others? Maybe others can rescue us!

## **2. The sinfulness of the wise (vv. 19-22).**

Look at verses 19-22 again with me: <sup>19</sup>Wisdom gives strength to the wise man more than ten rulers who are in a city. <sup>20</sup>Surely there is not a righteous man on earth who does good and never sins. <sup>21</sup>Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup>Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others.<sup>8</sup>

In a city, you might just have one ruler and you hope he's wise. But here you have 10 wise people – a good number. And ten wise people are better than one ruler. Real quick, let me talk on politics and its lure. You know, even in our day, it's as if so many people think that a politician, a president, a representative is going to *save* us. While I encourage Christians to work in society and for the good of government; I think many Christians have treated politicians as though they're the ones who are going to bring peace on earth. But here's the news flash: even leaders in government are sinners.

I've seen this myself in studying our Founding Fathers. Benjamin Franklin was an inappropriate flirt? Alexander Hamilton was in a promiscuous relationship? Duels? John Adams instituted a law to punish papers that were lying about political issues – thus ignoring the freedom of speech. Then the stories go on through the decades. Even the best of rulers have fallen horribly.

But Solomon's point isn't to focus on rulers. He's talking about the wise. Many in this room may be disenchanted with politics or you at least say, "I can clearly see this society is falling apart!" But then you still want to find some people who are really wise who you can trust in. Maybe they're not politicians, maybe they're just *people around you*. You've been hurt. Or you're struggling and going through trials. You want someone who can stabilize your life. So you look around to find someone, anyone. Solomon says there's no one who's going to meet your standards.

I will never forget when my mom taught me that if you put someone on a pedestal, you better be ready for them to come crashing down. But we tend to want to blame the person for falling. Whereas, we should have been wise enough to remember that they weren't intended to be up there.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:19–22.

Is there *any* person around you in your life that you can give your full confidence to? Is there anyone that can provide the rest your soul needs in this vain world? In case you're tempted to say "yes," Solomon gives an example. Look at verses 21-22 again: <sup>21</sup>Do not take to heart all the things that people say, lest you hear your servant cursing you. <sup>22</sup>Your heart knows that many times you yourself have cursed others."<sup>9</sup>

If you're wise, you're going to know that people (even wise ones) aren't perfect. And if you're wise, you're not going to live for people's acclaim. Just because someone likes your Facebook pictures or status doesn't mean that you should always seek their approval. Just because someone smiles at you and listens to what you have to say doesn't mean that they will never hurt you. The wise know they'll be hurt by people, and you cannot protect yourself from ever being hurt.

Solomon's example here is that you hear someone talking about you that hurts you. They speak behind your back. What are you to do? Oh, I know what people are tempted to do. I've seen people, grown adults on social media say things like, "I'm unfriending you. You know who you are!" Or, "Today I'm really hurting because a friend has done something. But I'm bigger than that. I will not let them bring me down. I am unfriending the negative influence." Others will get hurt and they'll be mad back. They'll talk about how angry they are about what that person did. Others will clam up. There are many ways to respond, but we don't tend to think of what Solomon says: don't take it to heart. What?! Really? Yes, and you know why? You've done those same things. The only difference is that you didn't get caught.

Oh yes, you, the wise person who wants to be moral and good and kind. You have done those same things to others and you're not extending grace to others. What ever happened to "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?" Jesus tells us that we are to love our enemies and do good to those who hurt us. Ventura, how are you today? Have you elevated people up as your security and comfort? Have you made someone "pay" for their words? You need to confess your own sinfulness, and as we're told in the New Testament, we need to "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you."<sup>10</sup>

If you're making people pay. If you're shocked by the sin of the wise. You've probably forgotten that your security and rest doesn't come from them. So, stop looking there. As Solomon already said, "Fear God." This vain world will not give you what you're longing for.

Well, if the wise people won't give me security, maybe I'll go elsewhere! Alright, let's look at verses 23-29 and discover Solomon's teaching on the depravity of all mankind.

### **3. The depravity of mankind (vv. 23-29).**

<sup>23</sup>All this I have tested by wisdom. I said, "I will be wise," but it was far from me. <sup>24</sup>That which has been is far off, and deep, very deep; who can find it out? <sup>25</sup>I turned my heart to know and to search out and to seek wisdom and the scheme of things, and to know the wickedness of folly and the foolishness that is madness. <sup>26</sup>And I find something more bitter than death: the woman whose heart is snares and nets, and whose hands are fetters. He who pleases God escapes her, but the sinner is taken by her. <sup>27</sup>Behold, this is what I found, says the Preacher, while adding one thing to another to find the scheme of things—<sup>28</sup>which my soul has sought repeatedly, but I have not found. One man among a thousand I found, but a

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<sup>9</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:19–22.

<sup>10</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Eph 4:32.

woman among all these I have not found. <sup>29</sup>See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”<sup>11</sup>

Alright, so you’re going to still persist in trying to find meaning and life and hope “under the sun?” Just so you know, sin is *everywhere, and you cannot stop it*. Honestly, this is one of my favorite paragraphs in Ecclesiastes. In a world where we want all the answers and we want to understand everything, Solomon says that sin is something that you cannot figure out fully. And that should make sense to us. Sin is foolishness. Sin is madness. So, if you can make sense of sin, what does that say of you? That means you’re crazy.

But what many people do in trying to help people to stop sinning or to help them to stop unwise behavior, they try to figure out all the reasons why the person sins. Now, don’t get me wrong. There are many things in life that can open doors in our lives to various types of sins. And it may be worthwhile to address those. However, here’s something you’re going to have to come to grips with. In the end, you sin because you’re a sinner, and being a sinner is completely foolish. With all Solomon’s searchings, he couldn’t give all answers to satiate his understanding. And neither can you.

You can say, “I know why I pursue this sin or that sin,” but really, “Why do you do it if you know it’s wrong?” You’ve done something utterly foolish. It’s “deep.” Who can figure it out?

Then Solomon gives an illustration. He uses a word picture with a woman. Her heart is snares and nets. Her hands are fetters. The idea that is pictured here is a woman who is alluring to a man. Now, there’s nothing necessarily wrong with a man being drawn to a woman, but clearly this is an inappropriate relationship. Think Delilah with Samson. She draws him in. He does her bidding. And even as you read the story, you’re thinking, “How dumb is Samson?!” But infatuation can tempt people to do the utterly stupid things.

Please understand at least two things here. First, Solomon is not talking merely about a sensual relationship – although that could be what draws a person. I think Solomon is personifying foolishness. So, here’s foolishness drawing people into all kinds of idiocy. It’s like in the story of Pinnocchio. All the kids follow that pied piper to the foolish town. At first they get all they want, but in the end they’re trapped. This is what Lady Folly does to those who follow after her.

This leads me to another point. Who are the people who follow Lady Folly? Sinners. Phew. Only sinners follow Lady Folly. And at that moment, some people could say, “I’m exempt!” But wait a second, didn’t Solomon just get done saying that even the wisest person sins?

But you might be thinking, “I sin, but I’m not a sinner! I’m better than that.” But then we read on in verses 27-29. Solomon says that while he’s still evaluating sinners and why they do what they do, he then says that “One man among a thousand I found, but a woman among all these I have not found. <sup>29</sup>See, this alone I found, that God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes.”<sup>12</sup>

Hold on a second, is Solomon saying that women are worse sinners than men? I don’t think so. There could be different ways to take this verse, but I’m going to present one option. Solomon did have 1,000

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<sup>11</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:23–29.

<sup>12</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ec 7:28–29.

women in his life (concubines and wives put together). And the Bible tells us that the women in his life drew him away from the Lord. Were they wise? Clearly not.

But what about this one man in a thousand? Listen, those odds aren't good either. This could be a close friend or someone else that he really thought was very wise. But please keep in mind, this person still is not perfect. Because even the wisest aren't perfect. So, Solomon is saying that finding a truly godly person in this vain world is a rarity. Why? We're all sinners and we're all imperfect.

So, on the basis of this search to figure out sin and sinners, Solomon comes to a conclusion in verse 29. The one thing he could say was this, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." This takes us all the way back to the Garden of Eden. The word in Hebrew for man is "adam." And I believe Solomon wants us to think about Adam. In that garden we're told that God made man and woman and that creation was *very good*. They didn't have sin natures. But then they chose to believe the lie of Satan – to take comfort in foolishness instead of God. They chose sin and then they recognized the difference between good and evil. And thus began the struggle between morality and immorality. Thus began the confusion of our own hearts where we were never meant to have to deal with that. And now we have to face the grim reality that every human being sins because they're sinners. We may not know all the reasons why we do what we do, and that's sad because that means the blame doesn't go to others. The blame lands on me and you.

Is there any hope for us then? Can't we take comfort in *anything in this world*? Well, the book of Ecclesiastes calls us to springboard into the New Testament where there was one who came into this world to rescue us from our sin. The Bible even calls this one the second Adam. He came and lived righteously. Thought tempted, he was without sin. He healed people, brought forgiveness, and he told people of a superior righteousness – not a self-righteousness, but of God's righteousness – a righteousness that could be gifted to those who trust in him and follow him.

This righteous man was loved at first, but then hated and spurned, and while he did many miracles, the self-righteous chose to deny him and have him murdered: tried for blasphemy against God. At a young age, this righteous one's life was cut off. But in his death, he took sinner's punishment for treason against God. And three days later, he rose from the dead, conquering the power of sin and death. Now as the God-Man he reigns and calls people to trust him for salvation, comfort and rescue. He promises to bring to God all who turn from their sin and trust in him.

You see, we cannot trust this world and the vainness. The pastor and the missionary I spoke of in the beginning began to realize that God and his sovereignty were worth trusting in because God is security, but this world is shifting sand. Praise God if you see that. And we see God's faithful care most clearly in Jesus himself.

**Truly Jesus is the ONE righteous man who died young. And he is truly the ONLY man who is sinless, perfect. Where is righteousness? Righteousness is found, for us, in Christ! And as Paul writes in Romans 5:17: For 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.** <sup>13</sup>

**This is the gospel according to Ecclesiastes.**

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<sup>13</sup> *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2001), Ro 5:17.

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