1. The Striking Contrast (5:12-21)

This section closes the argument of the first two sections; the condemnation of all men and the justification of the one who has faith.

Paul now paints a bird's eye picture of the history of salvation. All people stand in relationship to one of two men. Either they are related to Adam and are under the sentence of death or they are related to Christ and are assured of eternal life (Moo, 314).

a. Adam, Sin, Death (5:12-14)

5:12 Therefore (based on all that has been said about the condemnation of man and the righteousness that is found in Christ), just as through one man (i.e. Adam) sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned -

Verse 12 is an incomplete sentence. He says "just as" but gives no conclusion. Even so, the point is plain - the effects of Adam's sin are transmitted to his descendants.

Sin is personified now as death is personified later. Both are seen as hostile powers that entered the world and obtained dominion over men. Elsewhere, Paul says that sin "reigns" (5:20; cf. 6:13, 14), can be "obeyed" (6:16-17), "pays" wages (6:23), "seizes" opportunity (7:8, 11), "deceives" and "kills" (7:11, 13) (Moo, 319). It was the entrance of sin that brought the universality of death with it. Death includes the expiration of the body as well as the spiritual separation from God and the eternal consequences of punishment (Gen. 2:17; 3:19; Ezek. 18:4; Ro. 6:23 8:13; Ja. 1:15; Rev. 20:14, etc.).

Adam was the cause of all men becoming sinners, for it was through Adam that sin invaded the human race (the world; cf. Gen. 3). "Death (the punishment for sin) spread to all men because all have sinned" (5:12b). If Paul had stopped with that observation, we would be left with the impression that death is deserved because we sin just as Adam did. But Paul's comments in the following verses make it abundantly clear that our connection to Adam is much closer than imitating his sinful behavior (Harrison, 61). Verse 15
says, "by the one man's offense many died." Verse 16 states that "the judgment came from one man's offense." Furthermore, Paul says, death reigned through Adam (5:17), by Adam's sin "judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation" (5:18), and by his disobedience "many were made sinners" (5:19). Although strange to the western mind, the sin of Adam is viewed by God as a sin of all of mankind and death is a result of his transgression (see Murray, 183-186). In other words, for some reason Adam's sin was regarded as ours in the same way that an ambassador represents a country or the vote of a senator represents the will of his constituents. Although we did not literally or actually sin when he did, there is solidarity within the human race in Adam. The concept is parallel to that of II Corinthians 5:14 where Paul, in speaking of Christ, says "... if One died for all, then all died." Adam is the representative of humanity, just as Christ is of the redeemed. (NOTE: This is called the representative theory of imputation. Others see man as being organically joined to Adam and actually sinning with him. This is called the realistic theory of imputation. Both views have their merits. The bottom line is that we are condemned for Adam's sin.)

As Lorraine Boettner says, "Adam was made not only the father but also the representative of the whole human race. And if we fully understood the closeness of the relation between him and them we would fully realize the justice of the transmission of his sin to them. Adam's sin is imputed to his descendants in the same way that Christ's righteousness is imputed to those who believe in Him. Adam's descendants are, of course, no more personally guilty of his sin than Christ's redeemed are personally meritorious of His righteousness."

"This notion, rooted in the OT, held that actions of certain individuals could have a "representative" character, being regarded as, in some sense, the actions of many other individuals at the same time" (Moo, 327). An example of this is found in Joshua. In Joshua 7:1 and 11 we see that the sin committed by Achan, one man, is said to be "Israel's sin" and his sin is the reason for God's anger burning against Israel. Even though all the people didn't sin as Achan did, they are held responsible and will suffer the consequences for his action.

(See How Long, O Lord, by Carson pp 78 ff. for a good discussion of Rom 5)
5:13 for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.
5:14 Nevertheless death reigned from Adam until Moses, even over those who had not sinned in the likeness of the offense of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

Verses 13 and 14 prove how we know that Adam is representative of the race and that all men are subject to death for his offence.

“To impute” is an accounting term that means to credit or charge something to someone’s account. Sin is not charged to the sinner’s account if there is no law. Though men sinned before the law was given to Moses, they could not be judged worthy of punishment for breaking a law. That being so, men should not experience death prior to the existence of the law, for death is the penalty of sin. But men died. The fact that death existed even before the Law of Moses implies that men were sinners prior to the law. Although people “had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam (5:14),” that is, although they did not overtly violate the revealed will of God as Adam did, they still died as the punishment for sin. But how can men incur the penalty for transgressing the law when there is no law to violate (cf. Ro. 4:15)? The implication is that if they didn’t die from violating the Law, they must have died because they are tied to Adam. It is “for the offence of one that many die” (5:15). Adam’s offense and punishment was passed to us because God appointed him as the representative of all men.

The solidarity with Adam and the experience of judgment (death) introduce a parallel analogy to Christ in verse 14. Adam becomes a “type of Him who was to come (Christ).” The word “type” literally means a print or an impression made by a blow as in John 20:25, “the print of the nails”. In a wider sense it means a figure, form, or image, either literally (Acts 7:43) or figuratively (Ro. 6:17 – “a form of doctrine.”). More commonly in the Bible it refers to a model after which something is made (Heb. 8:5), or a pattern to follow (Phi. 3:17). It also means a type in the sense of a prefiguration or counterpart, as the OT animal sacrifices prefigured the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. A type is not simply an historical parallel or incidental resemblance but a resemblance that was designed, that is, it was predetermined and created purposefully by God. It is in this sense that
Adam is a type of Christ (comments on "type" taken from Hodge, 162). What is true of those who are in Adam is also true of those who are in Christ, only in an opposite sense. Solidarity with Adam results in death. Solidarity with Christ results in life. As the sin of one resulted in our condemnation, so the righteousness of One resulted in our justification (Hodge, 162). Paul's chief aim is to demonstrate how "men are justified who do not act rightly after the similitude of Christ's obedience" (Murray, 188). Adam's offense and punishment was passed to us because God appointed him as the representative of all men. In the same way, Christ's righteousness which was revealed in His perfect obedience was passed to us.

b. The Contrast between Adam and Christ (5:15-17)

In verses 15-17 Paul expands upon the Adam/Christ typology, but he does so primarily by giving the particulars about how the analogy does not hold.

Although Adam is a type of Christ (5:14), the analogy is limited and needs further explanation; "the free gift is not like the offense." Verses 15-17 explain how they differ. Three verses ("much more"- 15, 17, 20) all show that the work of Christ is greater than the transgression of Adam.

5:15 But the free gift is not like the transgression. For if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.

Adam's sin is described as a "trespass" (transgression) or a "false step". This step brought death to many. "Many" of course, means "all" as the parallel thought in verse 12 shows.

The contrast in verse 15 is a contrast in degree; the work of Christ as a display of grace is greater in every way than the effects of Adam's sin. "This verse gives the difference in intensity between the destructive and the recovering power... If man, a creature, can do so much against the race by his fall, what cannot God do for the race by His grace in Jesus Christ?" (Stifler, 97-99).
Adam's one sin brings death to all men, but the gift of God super-abounds and cancels the consequences of Adam's transgression. In other words, Christ's grace is far greater than the effects of Adam's sin - they are not alike in the degree of their effects.

Verse 16 gives a second contrast between Adam's sin and the grace found in Christ.

5:16 The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned; for on the one hand the judgment (i.e. the judicial sentence that pronounces us unrighteousness) arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation, but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.

The gift of justification by grace is not like the judgment [or, the offence] that came through Adam. The condemnation we receive from Adam is for his one offense. In contrast, the righteousness we receive from Christ is for our many offenses. Christ does much more than cancel the curse pronounced on us due to Adam's sin, He secures justification for our innumerous offences.

McClain gives an easy-to-understand analogy. Someone could go in the forest and light one match setting the whole forest ablaze. But lighting the match was just one small act. That is what Adam did. Christ came and put the whole fire out - His work is vastly greater. Condemnation came from one offense, but justification blots out millions and millions of offenses forever (McClain, 137).

How the gift and the offense differ is further elaborated upon in verse 17 as indicated by the word “for.”

5:17 For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one, much more those who receive the abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.
The comparison here is between the judgment that came on all men and the free gift which came to all men. If death reigns through Adam, surely life will continue to reign through Christ.

Jesus delivers us from death, but more than that He bestows eternal life upon us. If we are subject to death due to a sin in which we had no personal concern, how much more shall we who have been given an abundance of mercy be saved by a righteousness which we joyfully embrace (Hodge, 168-169).

c. The Comparison between Adam and Christ (5:18-21)

5:18 So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men, even so through one act of righteousness there resulted justification of life to all men.

There is a striking analogy between our fall in Adam and our restoration in Christ.

by reason of one man's offense → judgment came → resulting in condemnation

by reason of One Man's righteousness → the free gift came → resulting in justification

Some believe that "all" in both occurrences of verse 18 speak of all men without exception. In other words, if "all men" are condemned "all men" will also be saved. But Bible students are well aware that terms are limited by the nature of the subject and context. In many cases "all" simply means all in the context, not all without exception (see Jn. 3:26; Matt. 2:3-4; 3:5, etc.). Because the Bible clearly teaches that justification only comes by faith, the free gift is limited to all who believe (cf. I Cor. 15:22).

Verse 19 teaches the same thing as verse 18 only in a slightly different form.
5:19 For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.

One man’s disobedience refers to Adam’s first sin (Gen. 3). One man’s righteousness refers to the act of Christ fulfilling the law during His entire life.

Here, the word in Greek translated as “made” (katestathesan - κατεστάθησαν) is never used of changing the nature of someone into something different than it was before. It means to be declared to be something, or to be appointed to a position, or to be placed in a category. For example, in Acts 7:35 when it says, “Who made you a ruler and a judge?” it means “Who appointed you as ruler and judge?” (cf. Matt. 24:47; 25:21; Acts 6:3; 7:10; Titus 1:5; Heb. 5:1 etc., Hodge, 173). Therefore, when Paul says that men were “made” sinners he does not mean that they were made sinful, but rather that they were placed in the same category as Adam. The same is true of relationship to Christ. Through Christ’s obedience we are placed in the class of the righteous, i.e. we shall be regarded as righteous and treated as such. It is not our righteousness that makes us righteous, but the imputation of Christ’s righteousness that makes us so (Hodge, 174).

Although Jesus’ death paid the penalty for our sin, we are still morally guilty. We have still transgressed the law even though we do not suffer the consequences for our transgression. The question may then arise as to how God can honestly declare us righteous (justify us) when we are not. The bridge between Christ’s death and its application to us is our union with Him. Just as what Adam did was seen by God as our actions, so by means of our union with Christ, the righteousness of Christ and His death is seen as ours. We are not just sinners who have had the penalty of our sin taken away, we have the perfect works of Christ transferred to our account. In other words, the “free gift of righteousness” (v. 17) that we receive by grace is “the one man’s obedience” by which we are counted righteous. This is the ground and basis for our justification: Christ and his obedience.
5:20 The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.

The law does not make man a sinner but it provokes sin, for when the law encounters the flesh, it reveals its evils and stimulates antagonism toward God which then leads to further disobedience. As antagonism toward God multiplies, so the need for grace increases and the luster of grace shines even brighter. The word Paul uses to describe God's grace is a superlative of a superlative. ["If πλεονάζω is comparative (πλευρον) περισσεύω is superlative (Lightfoot) and then υπερπερισσεύω goes the superlative one better. See υπερπλεονάζω in 1Tim. 1:14. The flood of grace surpassed the flood of sin, great as that was (and is)." RWP]. In other words, Paul isn't just speaking of grace, nor is he speaking of abundant grace, he is speaking of a super abundance of grace. The superabundance of the grace of God proved to be more productive in overcoming evil than sin was in creating it.

d. Christ, Righteousness, Life (5:21)

"... where sin abounded, grace abounded much more so that as sin reigned in death, even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (5:20b-21).

Sin is the absolute monarch of the sphere of death (death was the place where sin's triumph is most dramatically seen). But God allowed sin in order to display His glorious grace and dispense the blessings of redemption ("so that" is hina [ίνα] in Greek, meaning "in order that" and expresses God's purpose in permitting sin and the superabundance of grace). "The design of God in permitting sin, and in allowing it to abound, was to bring good out of evil; to make it the occasion of the most wonderful display of His glory and grace, so that the benefits of redemption should infinitely transcend the evils of apostasy." (Hodge, 178).

The source from which this reign of grace issues is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ.
SUMMARY: The doctrine of imputation is clearly taught in these verses, namely, that both sin and righteousness are credited to us. Sometimes that which is credited is foreign to us, sometimes it is personally ours. By virtue of our union with Adam (both as our physical ancestor and as the representative of all humanity), his sin is the ground for our condemnation. Our own sins also condemn us. At the same time, because we are united with Christ, His righteousness becomes the ground for our justification. Imputation does not imply a transfer of moral character (we still sin daily), but describes the relation of men to God and the law.

[The way that Adam’s sin is imputed is debated (Hodge 178 ff. has a lengthy discussion on the representative or federal headship theory; Ryrie, Basic Theology, 223 ff. briefly discusses the major views and holds to the realistic theory of imputation)]