All equals many, but many does not equal all  
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Most commentaries on the book of Romans state that Romans 5:12–19 is the most difficult section in the whole book. This is true only when you have a theological bias that will not fit into these verses. If the Apostle’s argument is followed closely, it is a very clear passage. However, a consistent and honest exegesis of these verses will force you to accept the truth of Particular Atonement. I suspect that is the primary reason why many people have such a problem with this section.

Let us read the verses carefully. As we do, we will immediately notice that Paul’s use and interchange of the words one, all and many does, at first reading, seem to be confusing. However, when we follow his argument carefully, we will not only understand exactly what Paul means by one, all and many, but we will see how specific and selective Paul is with each use of the different words. I suggest you read the text carefully. All of the emphasis is mine:

(12) Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (13) (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. (14) Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. (15) But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. (16) And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. (17) For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.) (18) Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. (19) For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous (Romans 5:12–19).

I. The Overall Context.

The argument in Romans 5:12–19 is an integral part of the major argument in Romans. In Romans chapters 1 through 3 Paul shows that all men without exception are guilty sinners in the sight of God. Guilt means not only that you are going to be punished, but also that you truly deserve to be punished. It is the guilt aspect of sin that the world hates. Everyone agrees that man does some very bad things, but it is never the individual's fault. All of man's wicked deeds are blamed on bad parenting, poor social conditions, lack of education and opportunity, plus many other excuses. The actual wicked acts of man cannot be denied, but he is always excused because "man is basically good and not really depraved." The poor sinner was literally 'forced,' by factors totally outside of his control, to feel and act as he did.

In Romans chapter 4 Paul shows how ungodly sinners are freely justified totally apart from works or their own efforts. God justifies "the ungodly," not the 'good.' He saves those who "worketh not" but instead "believe in Jesus Christ." This method of justification by grace through faith has always been God's method of saving sinners.
Romans 5:1–11 lays out the results that follow justification. The justified sinner has "peace with God" and "access" into the presence of God. A justified believer is no longer God's enemy but has been totally reconciled. In Romans 5:10 and 11 Paul emphasizes the assurance of the future of all those who belong to Christ.

II. The Immediate Context.

The word therefore in verse 12 points back to verses 1–11. The sure blessings outlined in these verses flow from justification, and the guarantee of our full reconciliation and total redemption is now shown by Paul to rest on the fact of our union with Christ as our representative. The glorious principle of imputation is laid out in 5:12–19.

Verse 12 begins with the word wherefore and shows this section is part of the argument being carried on in the preceding verses. Paul here introduces the conclusion of the truth just established in the preceding verses. He does not immediately spell out that conclusion, but (as he often does) goes into an explanatory parenthesis in verses 13–17. In verse 18, Paul will conclude the argument. The primary point summarized in verse 10 concerns our reconciliation to God. We were enemies but we are now reconciled. Paul will now show just how God's wrath and its effects have been taken away.

III. The Exposition of Romans 5:12–19.

Verse 12 gives us a historical explanation of sin. (1) "Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world..." Sin entered the world by one man's (Adam's) one act of sin. (2) "...and death by sin;" Death, as the just and sure penalty of sin, followed Adam's sin. (3) "...and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:" Death, because it is the just punishment of sin, proves guilt was present or there would have been no death. In other words, wherever you find death, you find guilt being punished. God does not punish innocent people. If one soul ever dies, regardless of whom, where, or when, that was not a guilty sinner, then God was unjust in inflicting death on that person. Only guilty sinners die, therefore when we find death we also find a guilty sinner being justly punished. Log this fact into your mind.

The point of Paul's argument is to prove that all men without exception, including infants, are guilty sinners because of their union with Adam. Let me repeat the argument. Paul states that death is the penalty for sin. If death only comes to guilty sinners, then all who die must indeed be guilty sinners who actually deserve to die. Only guilty sinners are punished. God does not punish innocent people. In other words, Paul is showing that wherever you find death inflicted then you also find guilt being punished. Only guilty people are punished by God therefore finding death is finding guilt being punishment.

We can stand at the grave of every child that died in infancy and say, "Consider now: Who, being innocent, has ever perished? Where were the upright ever cut off" (Job 4:7)? That child has just endured the penalty of sin—death. In no sense is Paul saying the child is lost. Paul's only point is to establish the guilt of every one of Adam's children. We must see in verse 12 that Paul does NOT say, "all men die because Adam sinned." He says that all men die only because all men actually sinned in Adam. We do not die, nor does the infant die, because Adam did something, which was totally unrelated to us. The entire human race was in the loins of Adam when he acted as our representative in the garden. We were part of him and we all acted in him.

NOTE: I know I am being tedious and repeating myself but it is essential that we understand Paul's basic foundation points. Paul does not say that all men die because Adam sinned, but only because all men
have sinned. When did all men sin? The only answer is, "They sinned in Eden in the person of Adam their representative." It is vital that we see that fact if we are to understand the 'guilt' aspect of Paul's argument.

Verse 13 raises an obvious problem. "… until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law." Paul insists that "before the law" was given at Sinai, we know sin was not only in the world, it was also punished with death. All will agree that it is unfair to punish sin if there is no guilt, and it would seem, at least on the surface, that since, according to verses 12 and 14, there was no law to define sin before Sinai there could not have been true guilt.

Verse 14 shows that the only logical answer to the problem is the truth of imputation. Two things must be true. (1) Adam's sin must have been unique, and (2) all men (even babies) must have somehow participated in that one sin.

We know death reigned over all men without exception, including babies, prior to Sinai (or the time when the law was given). Death, the just penalty of sin, was experienced by those incapable of breaking a law even if there had been a law. The guilt of Adam's sin is imputed to all of his posterity because they were all reckoned "in him" when he sinned. Adam was the representative of all men. When Adam sinned, all his posterity sinned in him.

NOTE: (1) Adam was the only person who could have brought sin into the world. Eve sinned first but it was not until Adam sinned that "sin entered into the world" and the race fell. (2) There was only one single commandment, "Do not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil," that Adam could have broken in order to bring sin into the world. (3) Adam is the only person that ever became a sinner by sinning. You and I are born sinners and sin because we are sinners.

Let's review and emphasize the points developed so far:

1. Sin entered this world through the one sin of one man, Adam.

2. Death followed that first sin as the just penalty for the guilt of sin.

3. Death was, and is, passed on through Adam to all of his posterity only because they are somehow held accountable for Adam's first sin.

IV. The many and the all.

We must distinguish between the many and the all in Paul's argument. This is the key to the passage. The one sin of the one man (Adam) brought sin, death, and condemnation to more people than just himself. The many who were effected by Adam's sin were really all men without exception simply because the whole human race was represented by Adam. This one and many fact is set forth in verses 15–19. I have added some italics and words for emphasis.

(15) But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. (16) And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. (17) For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance
of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) (18) Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. (19) For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous (Romans 5:15–19).

Notice carefully the comparisons:

Verse 15:

A. By one man's [Adam's] offense many [the whole human race] died [because they were in some way reckoned as guilty].

B. By one man [Christ] grace abounded [because of being righteous in some way] to many [the new redeemed race, or the elect].

The many in these two verses does not involve the same amount of people. The first many include every single person that was ever born. The many are all of Adam's posterity. The many, all of Adam's children, died because the guilt of Adam's one sin was imputed to them. This is the doctrine of imputation. It means that the guilt of Adam's sin was, by imputation, truly the sin of each one of his posterity. It means that you and I are just as guilty as if our fingers took the fruit. It is only in this way that God could justly hold all men to be guilty of the consequences of Adam's sin. This same doctrine of imputation is likewise the only way we can understand and believe that Christ actually paid our sin debt before we were even born. If we reject the truth that Adam's guilt was imputed to us by representation then we cannot accept the truth that Christ's righteousness was also imputed to us by representation. This is Paul's argument in this section of Scripture.

We can now see why Paul added verses 13 and 14 as a necessary explanation of verse 12.

(13) For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. (14) Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come.

These verses were added to prove Paul's assertion that "all (including infants) have sinned." Paul's argument in these verses can be understood several ways. He is definitely answering the objection that "sin cannot be imputed where there is no law." Paul's answer involves the guilt and death of infants as well as the period of time from Adam until Moses when there was 'no law.' How can people be judged guilty when there is no law to break, and how can children break a law before they are even old enough to know right and wrong? It is obvious that people die who have not sinned "after the similitude of Adam's transgression." The NIV says, "by breaking a commandment as Adam did." Paul is proving that infants and others incapable of making a volitional choice to break a known commandment are nonetheless guilty sinners. If you establish that there was known law then you must also prove the infant somehow broke that known law and Paul's whole argument is destroyed.

One group of commentators has Paul agreeing with the objector concerning transgression and known law. Paul then would be saying:
"But your argument proves too much. It proves there was law from Adam to Moses. There must have been law since men died under the curse of law. This law is the same ten commandments that was given to Adam and later given to Moses. True, this law was not written down prior to Moses but was written in the conscience. There is only one eternal moral law of God and it has always been known since the dawn of creation. The death of men prior to Sinai proves there must have been known law in operation."

Other commentators have Paul saying:

"You are correct that guilt cannot be imputed without a deliberate transgression of a known law. You are also correct that there was no such codified law from Adam to Moses. However, you must still explain the fact that death, which is the penalty for sin and guilt, reigned over all men from Adam to Christ. Death even destroyed some infants and others who were not capable of breaking a commandment. Whether there was, or was not, a law in force, you must still explain the death of the infant. The baby cannot die if he is not guilty, and according to your argument guilt can only come from deliberately breaking a law. The baby did not choose to break a known law. Why then did babies, and all others, die under the guilt of sin, before Sinai?

It seems to me that the first interpretation, though textually legitimate, is more concerned with protecting a theological system than it is in exegeting Paul's words. Those who want to push the Ten Commandments back into the Garden of Eden hold that view. Paul's concern at this point is not to prove whether there was, or was not, a law before Sinai. He is proving that all men sinned in Adam in the Garden of Eden. Paul is saying, "I agree with your view of law. However, since death, as the penalty of sin, reigned during the period without law from Adam to Moses, it proves that the cause of that death in each case was the imputation of the guilt of Adam to each person, including the infant."

Paul is not arguing that the reign of death from Adam to Moses proves there was law in force. That would, in one sense, weaken his whole argument. He is showing that death comes to all men only because all that die somehow participated in that ONE sin of the ONE man, Adam. Paul is not concerned with the Law/Grace discussion concerning the "one eternal unchanging law." He is concerned with the doctrine of imputation.

The phrase, "who is the figure of Him that was to come" at the end of verse 14 is meant to introduce the idea of the contrast he is going to make. Just as some men were "made sinners" and treated as actually guilty because of what Adam did, so other men are "made righteous" and actually treated as perfectly justified because of what Christ did. Robert Haldane said, "Those who are saved fulfill the law just as others break the law, namely, in their great head or representative."

I know I am being a bit repetitious but in this case it is probably necessary. Let me review and summarize Paul's argument in verses 12–14:

1. Death entered this world as a penalty for sin.

2. Where death is present, sin is being punished. There can be no death where there is no sin or guilt.

3. An innocent person will never be punished for any sin of which he is not personally guilty. God is not unfair and unjust. He only punishes those who deserve to be punished.
4. The only reason that any person is punished is because of their guilt, and since all men, including infants, die, it clearly proves that those who die are being punished only because they are truly guilty sinners.

PROBLEM: It is unjust to charge a man with guilt for breaking a law of which he knew nothing about. How could God declare men guilty before the law was given at Mt Sinai? How could a day old baby be declared guilty of breaking a law?

ANSWER: It is a clear fact that death was in the world before the Law of Sinai, and it is just as clear that death reigned over all men during the period of time from Adam until the Law was first written on the "Tables of the Covenant" at Sinai. Even infant children died during this period of time. Either they were truly guilty or God was punishing the innocent. If they were not guilty of breaking a known commandment, then they must somehow be guilty because of their relationship to Adam. They must share in his guilt. They must have "sinned in Adam." That is the truth of imputation.

Here is the argument of verses 15–19:

First: God has only ever dealt with two public or representative persons.

A. The first representative person was Adam. He was the head of the human race and he acted in its behalf. What he did, the whole human race also did "in him" since all men were in his loins and were represented by him. What happened to him must also happen to each one that he represents. Since Adam represented all men without exception, it must follow that when he sinned, all sinned. When Adam was condemned, every single person that Adam represented, or all men without exception, was condemned as guilty. This includes infants as well as old men.

When God created man He did not create him like a cornfield where each person was an independent stock. God created mankind like a tree where every limb, twig, piece of bark and leaf came out of the one root.

B. The second public Person was Christ. He also represented others and not just Himself. All that Christ did and all that He suffered was for the benefit of others. He lived and died FOR others. The same principle of 'representation' that establishes the just condemnation of all those who were "in Adam" also establishes the sure justification of all those who are "in Christ." Just as everything that Adam did was, by imputation, also done by all those he represented, so everything that Christ did was, by imputation, also done by all those whom He represented. Just as each one of Adam's posterity must receive the rewards of Adam's sin, so each one of Christ's seed must receive the reward of Christ's work of redemption.

Second: There are some things which are exactly the same and other things which are exactly opposite when Adam and Christ are compared as representative persons.

A. The actions, and consequences of those actions, of both representative men are passed on to all those who are represented. In verse 15, the 'offense' of Adam and the 'gift' of Christ are passed on to others. Adam sinned and many died. Christ earned grace and that grace is freely given to many. If the truth of this verse is missed, then the whole passage will be difficult. If Paul's clear meaning is grasped at this point, the rest falls neatly into place.
1. We must see the principle of representation. What happens to the 'head,' or representative person, must of a certainty happen to all that are represented.

2. "Many are dead" because of one man's (Adam's) action. "Many receive grace" because of another Man's (Christ's) action.

QUESTION: Are the many the same in both cases? Do the same many that receive death for Adam's action also receive life because of Christ's action? The answer to that is the key to the whole passage.

ANSWER: Now listen very carefully. All whom Adam represented are not 'potentially' or 'hypothetically' guilty because he sinned. They are all actually treated as guilty sinners because of that one sin of Adam. All, without exception, who were in Adam 'died' in Adam. The identical principle holds true of Christ and His seed. All men, without exception, are not 'potentially' or 'hypothetically' righteous because of the work of Christ. All, without a single exception, whom He represented, will, of a certainty, be treated as righteous. If Christ, in His atoning death, represented all men, then all men will be declared righteous just as surely as all those whom Adam represented were declared guilty.

QUESTION: But is not Christ the second Adam, or second Head of the human race?

ANSWER: No! He is indeed the 'Second Adam,' but He is the Head of a new race. He is the "Head of the Church" (Eph. 2:22, 23; 5:23). He is the "Shepherd of the sheep" and lays down His life for them.

Here is the root error of the universal view of the atonement of our Lord Jesus. It insists that the atonement only has a potential value to save men. It cannot and does not by itself guarantee that any particular sinner will be saved. The atonement, in such a view, merely makes it hypothetically possible for all men to be saved if they are willing to contribute faith as their part of the deal. It is impossible to read the idea of either a hypothetical condemnation (of Adam's race) or a hypothetical justification (of Christ's new race) into Romans 5:12–19. There is nothing hypothetical about either Adam's sin or the guilt and death that was credited to all whom he represented. And likewise, there is nothing hypothetical about either the atoning work of Christ or the crediting of righteousness and justification to all that He represented. If we try to make the work of Christ to be only hypothetically possible of securing its designed benefits, we corrupt the meaning of Paul's words and totally destroy his argument in these verses.

The word many means exactly what it says. It means many more than just one. It means a whole lot. Only one man actually took the fruit but many were effected by that one man and his one act of disobedience. The word many may also mean all without exception. However, in the verses being discussed, it cannot always mean every single person in the world without exception. It means every person without exception who is represented! The many represented by Adam are all of the human race without exception. The many represented by Christ are all of the new elect race, or the Church.

Let me paraphrase these verses and insert in brackets what I have just stated. You will see why Paul goes back and forth with the words many and all, and why he sometimes says "the many." We will begin with verse 10:

For if when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled [not hypothetically but actually] to him through the death of his Son [and not on the ground of our faith] ... through him we have now received [a real] reconciliation. Therefore [here is how that happened] death and righteousness both came into the world
the same way. They both came from the actions of one individual. In one case, the person was Adam, and in the other case, the person was Christ. Both sin and righteousness were passed on as a certainty to every single person who was represented by either Adam or Christ.

You see, death came to all men only because all men have actually sinned. I realize that presents a problem. Since it is obvious that all men, especially infants, could not be guilty of breaking a known commandment [as Adam did], and since [as some objectors correctly state] there was no written law from Adam to Christ, then how do we explain the fact that death reigned over all men, without exception, including babies. If they could not themselves have broken a known commandment, they must have somehow been involved in Adam's sin since it was at that time that death started its universal reign. That is the answer! All men sinned in Adam. He, like Christ, represented many others beside himself. Adam is a clear pattern of Christ.

As Adam plunged all whom he represented [and he represented all men without exception] into sin and death, so Christ will bring all those whom He represented [and He represented all those given to Him by the Father] into righteousness and life. As everything Adam earned is imputed to his seed [the many whom he represented], so everything Christ earned is imputed to His seed [the many whom he represents]. However, the reward of Christ far outshines what Adam lost. Judgement followed one sin, but justification is from many sins.

Perhaps it would be good to look again at verse 15, the beginning of the point being argued, and verses 18 and 19 where the Apostle concludes his point:

"… For if the many [all whom Adam represented, or the whole human race] died [actually—not merely hypothetically] by the trespass of the one man [simply because he represented them], how much more did God's grace and the gift [justification and life] that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow [actually not merely hypothetically] to the many [all whom Christ represented, or the Church]!"

"Consequently [to summarize the whole matter], just as the [sure] result of one trespass was condemnation of all men [that Adam represented, or the whole human race], so also the [sure] result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings [actually—not merely hypothetically] life for all men [that Christ represented, or the new race]. For just as through the disobedience of one man the many [all whom Adam represents, or the whole human race] were made [actually—not merely hypothetically] sinners [because they sinned in their "head"], so also through the obedience [unto the death of the cross] of the one man [Christ] the many [all whom Christ represents, or the Church] will be [must actually—not merely hypothetically] made righteous."

The main thing that must be seen in the whole passage is the truth of imputation. What happens to the representative must, of necessity, also happen to all those who are represented. That part is clear as crystal. What is just as clear, but not as easily accepted by many people, is the fact that either particular atonement is true or else all men are going to be justified. What happens to the one absolutely must happen to the many. If the many that Christ represents are exactly equal to the many that Adam represents, then all men without exception will be made righteous by the obedience of Christ just as surely as all men without exception were made sinners by the disobedience of Adam. You cannot eat your cake and have it too. Either Christ died for His people alone or else all men are going to be saved. Any honest interpretation of Paul's words can lead to no other conclusion.