

“THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE”

Romans 5:12-19 February 22, 2026

If I said the names **Puffing Billy, Salamanca, Blucher or Rocket** you might think I was speaking some kind of foreign language or sharing odd pet names. But if I added the fifth name of **Locomotion** you might guess what all of these names have in common is they are connected with the railroad and you will be correct. Each of these are the names of early railroad steam engines, going back over 200 years.

Out of the bunch, **Puffing Billy** is the world’s oldest surviving steam locomotive, constructed in 1813-1814 by William Hedley, Johathan Foster and Timothy Hackworth. The train was sold to Christopher Blackett, the owner of the Wylam Colliery (the English word for coalmine) located near Newcastle upon Tyne, in the United Kingdom. It was employed to haul coal wagons from the mine at Wylam to the docks at Lemington in Northumberland. **Puffing Billy** is preserved and on display in the **National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh**.

In order for these, and all future trains, to be used commercially there had to be train tracks that would hold up to the weight and pressure demands. Without a trustworthy track all one had was a large stationary steam engine. While such engines were used on farms and in factories, without the track they weren’t going anywhere. It was the track that allowed the engines to move goods and people from one location to another at great distances. Of course, different tracks are going to take you

to different places, and unlike a car it's not as easy to get off and go in a different direction.

The season of Lent provides us with a great opportunity to pause and ask some questions. For instance, **“What track are you on? Where is your life train heading? What baggage have you been hauling around for far too long? And do you need to jump on another track, but finding it difficult to do so?”** Perhaps I take the train metaphor too far, but Lent calls us to the spiritual exercise of pausing to reflect on the condition of our spirit in the light of God's grace. It asks us to take time to understand, unload, and draw closer to God. Perhaps we will even hear a whistle call to a different station. The good news is we don't have to take this journey all by ourselves.

I. WE ARE ONE TOGETHER

I enjoy listening to our choir. I'm amazed how each of their voices are so different. Each member sings in a different voice range. Usually, they are split into different parts, some are singing the melody and others the harmony. Even with all these differences and skill levels, by using the same sheet music and guided by the same director, they sound incredible and harmonious. However, if every choir member suddenly wanted to sing whatever song they wanted simultaneously, well we would have a big problem. It's going to sound really bad. A choir must sing as one together, each doing their part.

If you can hold on to that choir image, then you can begin to understand the Jewish mindset and argument that Apostle Paul is using in

his letter to the church in Rome. Its difficult for us Americans who so pride ourselves on rugged individualism, independence, and I did it my way narcissism. When push comes to shove, we look out for number one, more than for the good of our society. We pay the cost for such thinking.

But people in the first century and even in many Asian cultures today never thought as individuals, but always as part of a family, a clan, and a nation. They did not see themselves as a person but as a member of a society, apart from which there is no real existence. That's why exile was one of the worst punishments.

These people found meaning, purpose and identity within a group. Here's the important part. Because of this collective identity, what happened to one member happened to them all. If one person was honored all were honored. If one person sinned, its as if all had sinned. We are one together, for better or for worse.

So when Paul writes, **“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned...”** The people had no problem accepting that one person's sin infected them all, kind of like a virus. Even Saints like **Augustine of Hippo** who lived in the 4th century, explained that sin came into the world because of **Adam**, a notion he called **Original Sin**, and he passed it down to his children who passed it on to their children and so forth, like a flaw in their DNA.

Even though sometimes it seems like this idea is true I don't really buy into the original sin theory. I see Adam as a metaphor for the common

human experience. I can't blame Adam for my sin. That is too easy, too cowardly, and lacks any personal responsibility. I freely admit, like everyone else, I am responsible for my own poor choices, inordinate attachments, self-centered orientations, and character flaws. No one caused them in me. However, that doesn't mean my sins, our sins don't affect others.

Each lie, each theft, each covet, each injustice, each disrespect, each selfish act impacts the life of another, let alone the damage it does to our own life. And as Paul reminds us, the end result of sin is death.

II. REAL POWER

Have you ever watched any of those strong man contests of TV? Some of the challenges these guys face are unbelievable. For instance, one challenge is to pick up heavy stones and place them on various platform levels. Another challenge is picking up a log and pressing it overhead. They may throw beer kegs over a high bar, pull a tractor trailer with a rope, or do squats with a heavy barbell on their shoulders.

Skinny me watches what these strongmen are doing, and I think WOW now that is real power. And yet for all their strength, many animals are far stronger and faster. And let's not forget about the power of the ocean, a hurricane, or an exploding volcano. Now that's real power.

Paul talks about real power also. In his mind sin and death are real powers with real consequences. They are not mere bad choices. He believed that sin has power over us and makes us a slave and inevitably leads us death. And the tragedy is we can't break free on our own.

Even if we set our mind to do what is right, how often do we follow through? How many times have we made the wrong choice knowing it was the wrong choice? How many times have we tried to break a bad habit, be a different kind of person, or not think ugly or destructive kinds of thoughts and actually succeeded? How hard is it to practice forgiveness when there is another voice in our head that is urging us to light another person up and take revenge? Yeah, I think sin is very much a real power at work in the world.

But here is the good news. Paul wrote, **“But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for many. If, because of the one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.”**

Paul does love to go on, but his message is profound. He agrees that sin is a real power in the world, but there is an even greater power at work that frees us from slavery to sin and death, and gives us eternal life. He points to Jesus Christ and says now that is REAL Power because it is the greater power. If one guy brought sin into the world, the next guy took it out. Or to put it in card playing terms, God’s grace trumps sin. God has the power to put us on the right track. Great News!

III. THE STRUGGLE

The problem is, if God has moved us to the right track why do we still struggle with sin? To that I would reply, “**The train has got to move.**”

In talking with missionaries from Sudan I learned a little about the country’s plight. They had told the Southern Sudanese that when you split away from the North you need to set up and have in place a new kind of government, one not based on tribalism but national unity. So when they won their independence what did they do? They went right back to tribal mentality. Instead of working for the good of all, they worked for the good of their tribe, which every other tribe was doing. Thus, conflict. Technically they were free and independent, but these people had lived so long under the old regime they didn’t know how to live differently. I think that was the problem of the Israelites with Moses in the desert too.

We have been given freedom in Christ. Our sins are forgiven, a new life is set before us, the Spirit of God is upon us, but we have lived so long under the old regime that we don’t know how to move in the new one. The life of sin has become normal, ingrained, often unrecognized for what it is. So what do we do? Move the train and embrace the grace. What do I mean by that?

III. EMBRACE THE GRACE

If we were in an AA program, which is based on Ignatian Spirituality, I would tell you to come to meetings and work on your 12-step program. **The Twelve Traditions**

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Make a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The reason so many Christians struggle is they aren't doing any kind of program, and then they wonder why they have such fight with sin and don't seem to make any kind of progress. They aren't moving on the track

to embrace the grace. It takes time to learn how to live into this new life. And just like anything we learn by practice.

Some of our faith practices are: fasting, prayer, studying and reflecting on scripture, serving others, simplifying our lives, forgiveness, making confession, enjoying creation, journaling, doing mission, worshipping God every day, get a spiritual director, practicing generosity, cutting out distractions, and a dozen other possible spiritual practices. If you want to move down the track you need to work your program.

Warning, please don't attempt to do all these at once. Make sure you have a balance between internal and external, solitary and community activities. If you need help with this come see me. If you don't have room or time for any of these practices then maybe some other activities need removed from your life. For instance, during Lent I am not watching any TV or Social Media. It's amazing how much time that frees up, to practice one's faith.

Cascading effect

The French playwright **Victorien Sardou** (1831-1908) went to a literary dinner party. What happened next has become a legend in literary circles. **Sardou knocked over his wine glass.**

The woman next to him sprinkled salt on the stained tablecloth.

Sardou tossed some of the salt over his shoulder to ward off bad luck.

The salt hit the butler in the eyes.

The butler rubbed his eyes and dropped a platter of chicken on the floor.

The family dog began devouring the chicken and choked on a chicken bone.

The son of the house tried to loosen the chicken bone from the dog's throat.

The dog bit the boy's finger.

The boy's finger had to be amputated.

The story shows how one thing can lead to another, whether that thing is good or bad. When our faith practices become our habits and our habits become a lifestyle and our lifestyle reshapes our spirits we change. And you will notice sins power over you fades because you are embracing God's grace as God's grace embraces you. Why not use Lent to get on the right track with the Real Power of the Universe? **Amen.**

Romans 5:12-19

12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—

13 for sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law.

14 Yet death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who did not sin in the likeness of Adam, who is a pattern of the one who was to come.

15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many.

16 And the gift is not like the effect of the one man's sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the gift following many trespasses brings justification.

17 If, because of the one man's trespass, death reigned through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

18 Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.

19 For just as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so through the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be To God.