

The Chiasm of Romans 5: Imputed Sin

The term “chiasm (chiasmus)” is derived from the Greek term “chiázō,” which means “placing crossways” in a diagonal arrangement or shaped like the letter X. It is a literary device that presents ideas in a sequence until an apex is reached whereupon the ideas are presented in reverse order like a mirror image. Some call this presentation of ideas and its reversal in parallel “inverted parallelism.”

Often the idea and its mirror are contrasts to help one understand the meaning of the idea.

However, the apex of the chiasm is the point of emphasis of the whole chiastic passage.

A good example of this can be seen in Romans 5:12-21.

12) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all 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 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.

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.

16) The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned;

for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation,

but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.

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.

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.

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.

20) The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,

21) so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:12-21)

Sometimes large chiasms can be unwieldy to study, so manipulating the passage and its mirror parallel can facilitate easier study. The following is an example of how one might go about this.

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12) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned	21) so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.
13) for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.	20) The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,
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.	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.
15) But the free gift is not like the transgression.	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.
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.	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.
16) The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned;	but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.
for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation,	

Working with this further, one could make a chart and record one's thoughts of the successive ideas, their mirrored parallel, and the meaning of the author's idea.

Idea	Inverted Parallel	Meaning
12) Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned	21) so that, as sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.	Through one man, sin enters the world and through sin, death. Through one Man, grace reigns and through righteousness, eternal life.
13) for until the Law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law.	20) The Law came in so that the transgression would increase; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more,	Without the Law, personal sins are not imputed. With the Law, personal sins are imputed. The greater the sin, the greater grace is magnified.

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Idea	Inverted Parallel	Meaning of the Idea
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.	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.	Because of Adam's offense, death. Because of Jesus' obedience, righteousness.
15) But the free gift is not like the transgression.	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.	The free gift is different. In contrast to the transgression that led to condemnation to all, the gift, one act of righteousness, brought justification to all.
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.	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 result of Adam's transgression pales in comparison to the result of God's grace and the gift by grace by Jesus Christ. Despite death's reign, those who receive God's grace and gift of righteousness through Jesus Christ will reign in life.
16) The gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned;	but on the other hand the free gift arose from many transgressions resulting in justification.	The gift is nothing like the consequence of Adam's sin. But many sins caused the provision of a free gift that would result in justification.

In this letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes an emphasis at the inflection point of his chiasm:

for on the one hand the judgment arose from one transgression resulting in condemnation (latter part of Rom 5:16)

Of all his uses of the word "judgment" in this epistle, it is here that Paul uses it to magnify the consequence of Adam's sin; death was not a part of Creation and did not exist before in the Garden of Eden.

By the sweat of your face
You will eat bread,
Till you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return." (Gen 3:19)