

## Wages and a Gift

*From the Epistle: Romans vi. 19 ff.*

*19 I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. 20 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. 21 What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life. 23 For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.*

*For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* These words seem to me among the most powerful ones within Paul's Epistles. It is this one short, succinct phrase that I'd like to address this morning. To those of you who are familiar with the language and techniques of evangelism, this sentence is a familiar part of standard presentations of the Gospel. It says something very clear about sin and its consequence, contrasting this immediately with the blessings inherent in the salvation God has generously provided through His Son. But let's look closely at this phrase, and at the terms that are used.

*The wages of sin is death...* The Greek word for *wages* implies a day's pay to a soldier for his work, which might even have been rendered in the form of food: bread, fish, corn, fruit, etc. But how could *sin* possibly offer a *wage*? Most sin is committed precisely for the sake of the sin, which brings with it its own payment, whether it be the mere pleasure of it, or the immediate gratification it yields of some physical or mental desire, or that strange and perverse thrill that accompanies the performing of something that conscience and even common sense loudly cry against. But this phrase looks beyond these apparent benefits of sin, to their ultimate consequence, which is a *wage* utterly unexpected by those never even realizing that they were in an employ that would yield such a payment.

That unlooked for remuneration is *death*. There is hardly a more serious word in the entire lexicon of human language. In its common usage, of course, one envisions the death of the body, the cessation of life, the end of conscious existence. It is, of course, not generally the subject of casual conversation, and when it is approached, it is with a liberal sprinkling of comfortable euphemisms, to make this worst of all possible topics into something we polite, rational, and in-control creatures will find palatable, and enabled to maintain a cozy distance from. But *death* here can hardly mean mere physical death, which, after all, is the inevitable end of any thing that lives, since no living thing can exist in its present state forever.

*Death* here is far, far more serious than that which is deduced from the evidence of dead things that is all around us, whether people, or animals, or plants, or even civilizations or cultures. *Death* here means the incremental separation of something from its purpose, its reason for

existence, its proper use, until it arrives at a state of complete and utter ruin, a condition which not only includes that physical death which is naturally inherent to the course of things in this world, but perseveres beyond the grave into a state of irrecoverable destruction that is beyond the power of words to properly convey. Since God is the Maker and Creator of all, implied in this *death* is a final, absolute, complete separation from Him... for Holy Scripture says

*Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created* (Rev. 4:11).

Every sin unrepented of yields for the sinner by gradations further progress toward a this state of *death* which is also described in terms of *loss* — the loss of one's soul. To use our Lord's own fateful words: *For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?* (Mark 8:36). Putting all of this together we find a great irony: a completely unexpected *wage* unknowingly received for acts committed for the sake of their immediate payoff in pleasure or selfish satisfaction, but a *wage* that is in fact no gain at all, but all loss!

Think of life today. I'll use the common, everyday image of the digital price counters on the gas pumps: the numerals, especially the cents, whiz onward with dizzying inevitability and a speed humanly impossible to keep up with. I am reminded of a verse from the book of Ezra: ... *our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens* (9:6b). Jesus' words in His discourse describing the end of history also apply: *...because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold* (Mt. 24:12). For a world turning with ever stronger purpose against God, and giving itself over instead to sin — whether it be greed, or immorality, or the idolizing of self, or the self-deluding effects of limitless means of entertainment —, there remains hidden from it the issuance of *wages*, a *death* of staggering proportions commensurate with the *sin* that is leading to it. This is sin that is both individual, insofar as it arises out of decisions knowingly made on that level, and collective, to the extent that the sins are shared, mutually encouraged, and facilitated among many. There is hardly a more dangerous situation for eternal souls when a mass context for the rejection of God is facilitated by a government at odds with God's law, or by industry bent on profiting from foolishness and empty distractions that people are duped into purchasing at high prices, or by educational systems that hold tradition in utter contempt. What will rescue the individual in such an hour?

*...but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.* Contrast the two words: *wages*, and *gift*. The *gift* too is utterly unexpected, as the best of gifts always are. It certainly wasn't earned, for then it would cease to be a *gift* at all. Furthermore, the gift itself provides something completely outside human ability to produce; we simply have no way whatsoever to provide ourselves with *eternal life*. We may dream of immortality in some sentimental sense, but it remains only a mental exercise that serves more to satisfy ourselves that in some sense we will live on, whether through our progeny, or through a mystical union with Nature, or

as a kind of disembodied essence. But in Jesus Christ the promise of *eternal life* becomes something that thrusts aside sentiment. It is vividly evidenced in the post-resurrection appearances of Christ Himself. He is there for us —through the apostolic witness— to touch, handle, and see.

Listen to the joyful testimony of St. John (from 1 John 1):

*1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; 2 (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) 3 That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. 4 And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.*

This is eternal life that is tangible. It has risen above the conceptual, because it is seen in a living Person. If it were anything less than this, there would always remain a lurking sense of uncertainty and doubt. There would be no end to that compulsion to have to convince ourselves of those things which remain unsure, regardless of how much we might wish it were otherwise. But when it comes to the salvation of our souls, it truly is a matter of life and death. There is no room here for anything other than that which rests supremely and triumphantly on the basis of its own objective and certain existence. In a world awash with relativism, where skepticism and unbelief are working unceasingly to destroy every foundation upon which men have dependably built, this matter of *eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord* stands as the last and best resort for all who are searching desperately for safety and security.

*The wages of sin is death.* How would contemporary man, in all his pride and self-sufficiency —convinced, as he is, that his actions carry with them no implications other than those he or society deem appropriate— imagine for a moment that his life freely lived will result in *the wages of death*? And how will those —those recognizing in their sin-filled lives the awful, destructive power of sin, its strangling grip, and its determination to destroy them— how will they perceive of and receive *the gift of God, eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord*?

The hope is that our prayers, and personal Christian witness, on behalf of family, friends, our communities, and society at large, will serve to open their eyes to these truths, as God has graciously opened ours. Let's look again at the opening words of today's Epistle:

*I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh: for as ye have yielded your members servants to uncleanness and to iniquity unto iniquity; even so now yield your members servants to righteousness unto holiness. For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death. But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life.*

Am I beheld by others as an individual whose very *members* are yielded to righteousness and holiness? Am I afraid to be *holy*? Do I think it's only possible for special saints who possess haloes to prove it? No, a thousand times, no! *Holiness* is not an option for the Church. It is a

characteristic of our faith that must be indelibly stamped upon our lives in such a manner as to be obvious to all.

Let's become holy together. It will come through trials, testings, adversities, persecutions, blessings, and successes. Its fruit will be the winning of souls, *and the end everlasting life.*

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*