

“The Free Gift of God”

June 26, 2011

"The wages of sin is death." Pulled out of the context of the majestic letter to the church in Rome, this short statement sounds ominous; we have *all* sinned, according to this letter. If we read this, standing by itself, we might conclude that there is no hope for us.

Or, we begin to justify ourselves. We try to imagine what we've done that could possibly deserve the death penalty, and we can't come up with anything – and so we believe we are obligated to ignore this statement, assuming it's for someone else.

Part of the truth is that Paul *is* writing to someone else. This letter was written to a specific church, in the first century, by someone who probably never imagined that Christians in a far-distant place and time would be reading his words and looking for good news in them.

Another part of the truth is that we owe the author the respect of reading his words with attention to the *context* in which they were written. Paul did *not* write “the wages of sin is death,” and never says anything else. The words we hear appear in the context of a whole piece of writing, a piece in which Paul writes a thorough examination of his theology of grace, to a church he has never visited.

And part of the truth is that Christians have, for centuries, affirmed the work of the Holy Spirit in this letter, and therefore, we believe that it has good news in it for us.

If we treat this letter with care, looking at its original context and reading the whole case Paul is making, we don't need to avoid the parts that make us uncomfortable and skim the “good parts” off the top for keeping and living.

For Paul, the concept of “sin” is tied closely to his sense of the general state of human life for two categories of people: those who have tried to live under the Law of Moses – that is, his own people – and those who have worshipped other gods.

Paul believes both these groups have the opportunity to make a choice – to remain where they are or affirm the hope of new life, embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

This letter is written to people who have had experience with worshipping other gods, or worshipping no god at all, before having heard the good news of Jesus. To them, Paul writes that those who choose to follow their appetites wherever they may lead are engaged in sin; those who choose to die to their old ways and be born anew are accepting the free gift of God, the grace that changes everything.

Now, to those who have spent years sitting in the pews of the church, this might sound like old news. God's gift of Jesus and the life-changing power of grace that comes to us through him is basic stuff.

It is basic; but more than that, it's fundamental: meaning it's a concept on which we build the life of faith, the practices that feed us, and the self-examination that challenges us. We are never free

from the need to look closely at the lives we are living right now, to see if we are choosing behaviors that lead to death or life.

Most of us feel fairly well-insulated from the kind of sins that we imagine require punishment. The pews of our churches are full of nice people, even good people, with good intentions and wonderful programs to help us love and serve our neighbors. The consequences of many of our actions are actually *life-giving*, flowing from our sense of God's grace and its availability to everyone.

But maybe we are operating with too narrow a definition of "sin" and "death." If you kill someone, you have sinned, and the consequences of your actions may well be literal, physical death for you, depending on where you live.

But there is death, too, when a life is lived without regard for God's deep love for oneself, for others, and for creation itself. "Death" isn't just punishment for sin; it's also a way of being in the world that contributes to the diminishment of life for others.

We are called to careful examination of the entire range of our behaviors. There is more than one way to do harm. In our time, one of the simplest ways to do harm is simply to fail to pay attention.

Where do your clothes come from? How far did your food travel before it reached you? Are you aware of where your water comes from? Whose labor is involved? How is the planet affected by your choices? Do you cut people off when you're driving? How do you treat your money? These are all choices with real consequences for the earth and for other people.

If we behave as though our entire stay on earth is an opportunity to purchase and consume and make money, we have missed the point entirely. If we assume that our desires take precedence over the needs of other people, other countries, or other species, we have failed completely to understand God's love and grace.

But perhaps far more important in this entire discussion is the second half of Paul's sentence: "the free gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord." We are not just talking about living a moral life in order to avoid punishment. We are talking about two completely contrasting ways of living: There's a life that has only negative consequences, because there are only selfish and negative behaviors, with no purpose or moral compass; and there's a life shining with possibility, a life of growth and movement, a life that touches other lives with joy – because of the presence in that life of God's grace. This is the life God wants for each one of us. God's grace is available in everyone's life; our choices invite grace in, or keep grace on the outside.

Paul is working up to his comprehensive statements about God's grace and love, coming up in Chapter 8. He wants to be clear at this point that his readers understand the basic need we all have for grace; it's part of the fundamental design.

Paul says, "Do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are

not under law but under grace.” This is far more glorious than merely avoiding the commission of sins in order to avoid the negative consequences!

Paul says that we can be much more than sin-avoiders, people afraid to make any choice lest it prove to be the wrong one. We can be righteousness-enactors, agents for God’s agenda of grace and love. We can do the things that Jesus did, because we have access to God’s Spirit.

We can feed people. We can offer a cold cup of water. We can bring healing to people whose lives have been turned upside down because of personal tragedy or natural disasters. We can teach. We can make the earth greener, our neighborhoods safer. We can welcome the stranger and nurture our children. We can do these things by presenting ourselves to God, trusting that God’s grace is sufficient to begin and continue the work of resurrection in us.

We always have a choice about where we will put our energy and allegiance. If we make no choice except to sit and wonder what to do, that’s still a choice.

The glory of God’s grace and love is that whatever choices we make, we are given an opportunity every day to imagine God’s kingdom, enact God’s love, and do everything in our power to bring God’s grace into every day; into every choice we make, for the good of the world God loves beyond imagining. Amen.

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June 26, 2011