

Sin equals Death but the Gift...

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St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 13; Genesis 22:1-18, Matthew 10:40-42, Romans 6:12-23

One of the most definitive verses in the Scriptures and one we should all know by heart is Romans 6:23 – **“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”**. This single verse encapsulates the challenge before humanity; on one hand a relationship with the Lord that leads to redemption, forgiveness, and a whole new life that starts in the present. Or alternatively, a slow but steady decline into corruption that will ultimately lead to death, both physically and spiritually, and the absence of God's presence and all the goodness that entails.

The reality of sin, a concept hated by today's society because of its implications, comes from the Hebrew term *hata* or the Greek, *hamartano*. Both these terms picture of an archer or soldier missing mark or target. In Judges 20:16 the author provides us the image of seven hundred left-handed fighting men of God who could sling a stone at a hair and not miss. That's "hair" as in a strand of hair not an animal. That's incredible accuracy – no wonder Goliath got a headache if you can be that accurate with stones! To not hit the hair, to fall short or to miss the target was to sin. We sin when we fall short of what God requires of us. We miss the mark in behaviour or attitude. We fall short of what we could do or be. Romans 3:23 tells us **“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”**. We sin, deliberately or unintentionally when, like Adam and Eve, we follow our own desires and fail to do what God has instructed. Why does Scripture say that all have fallen short? All except Jesus? Because all of us have fallen short of God's standard of perfection.

In Greek mythology Sisyphus was condemned to eternally rolling a stone to the top of hill only for it to roll back down just before he managed to get it over the top. Then he would have to start all over again. They believed the greatest punishment, the cruellest torture, was the constant grind of futile and hopeless labour. Many people in poor working conditions, with mindless work or with incompetent leadership would agree all too easily. If we continue to live under the burden of sin then we too become like Sisyphus constantly regretting, burdened, frustrated, angry and worn down, without a hope or a future. None of us are called to this, the Christian path is one far different.

The apostle Paul, writing to the house churches of Rome, told them, **“Do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires”**. You have, Paul says, a choice, a life-style choice. We can rebel against God in the choices we make or by the lack of the exercise of our will. Unlike Sisyphus we are not without options. We do not have to keep pushing in an uphill battle all the time with no realistic hope of success. Paul exhorts, **“Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness ...”**. People tend to see this as a reference to sexual immorality and perversion, and certainly that, for Paul's Roman audience, coming as they did from a society where sexual immorality was rampant, was a reality. Sex is a wonderful gift of God but one that has, rightly, been reserved for a loving and nurturing context within marriage, not the perversion it has so often become today. But Paul's injunction is not limited to sex. How much damage can be caused by the tongue? Another small body part that can be used for great good, for worship, for praise, for edification and encouragement. On the other hand, the tongue can be an incredibly destructive force. Blaspheme, gossip, slander, put-down, profanities and the rest. What about our eyes? What do we allow our eyes to linger on, to pay attention to? The marketing media know exactly what attracts men and what attracts women. There are constant temptations put before us in all walks of life. Do we allow our eyes to become focussed on

what is not beneficial, on what tempts and distracts us from the more important? And no, I haven't said anything about shopping.

If we were to look at all the ways we could go off track we could easily begin to feel like Sisyphus, burdened and frustrated by failure but Paul goes on to encourage us. **“Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.”** The obvious response to Paul is exactly what he then goes on to discuss. Does this freedom from God's Law mean that we can just get on with life and if we sin it doesn't matter? In fact, this was one of the earliest heresies in the church that had to be addressed. It's also one that crops up in various cult groups today from time to time. Freedom does not equal licence or anarchy, it equals responsibility. Instead of being Sisyphus-like slaves to sin we have now become willing participants with Jesus in His mission. Willing slaves if you like for Jesus. Our willing obedience leads us to righteousness before God.

What does this mean in practical terms? It means that when I face the day to day challenges that beset me I make a choice or choices that are centred in who Jesus wants me to be. How I use my body, my tongue, my eyes is not entirely accidental or coincidental. I make choices. If I see something that will take my thoughts and mind in the wrong direction I chose consciously to look away, to focus on something else. For men sexually attuned imagery has a powerful and long lasting influence – that's why pornography is such a major problem for many men. For women the influences are over a much wider range of topics but particularly around self-image. Do I choose to buy into this media and marketing hype and what it does to me or do I make a Christ-like choice? Do I make comments that are encouraging and supportive? Does my speech lift or bring down? I am known for speaking honestly or just what people want to hear? You get the gist.

The secret to this life is helped by recognising one important fact: eternal life begins with our coming to Jesus Christ and accepting Him as our Saviour and Lord. What happens from there on is a journey. With our willing participation He does His work in our lives by His Holy Spirit so that we can overcome the things that have held us back. We are not expected to make complete and instant changes although that can happen. The instant change is that, in coming to the Lord, we are a new creation in Him. The experience of the Scriptures, Jesus' disciples in particular, is that changing lives, attitudes, automatic actions and reactions takes time. How often have you done something and wished you hadn't, were surprised at yourself, thinking you had got over that phase yet here you are again? We have to grow into new behaviours and attitudes and the closer we stay to Jesus, the more we listen and obey, the quicker that process happens.

In Romans 6:22 Paul states, **“Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life.”** Note the **“leads to holiness”**. This is now a journey that we are on that leads us, eventually, to being perfect in Jesus. Something we could not achieve of our own accord.

How does this eternal life look in the now? For some of us it may lead to a time of testing as it did for Abraham. Are we willing to give up the things we hold dearest in order to put the Lord first in our lives? The example of Abraham being asked and willing to sacrifice his son Isaac is extreme. It's meant to be. Remember Abraham was the first man God called out to establish his own community. There were no rules and regulations, no Law before this. In fact, in the area of Canaan Abraham came from, practiced child sacrifice as a norm. Children were sacrificed to the fires of the demon god Molech. What God asked of Abraham then focussed on what he was willing to give – even his most beloved son? That God did

not allow the sacrifice to take place, and in fact, stopped the practice of child sacrifice forever amongst those who followed from Abraham brought home the points with a single master-stroke. God asks us to give up everything and our lives, to God, are of infinite value. It is one thing to profess something – but faith is only demonstrated as real when it is acted upon. What is God challenging you with? What in your life risks becoming an idol that comes between you and God? Is anything or anyone more important than serving the Lord? If so, then you have at least one foot off the path. It is also worth pointing out here that God keeps all things in His perfect balance. When we put Him before our spouses, our children, our family, our friends, our desires and ambitions, He honours that. He gives us more back than we can possibly imagine. More love, more relationship, more sense of purpose and success because in Him all things in His plan of good for us are not only possible but achievable. Abraham's willingness to give up everything and follow, even when he didn't fully understand or really even know where he was headed resulted in the greatest prosperity, destiny and legacy imaginable. We're still talking about him now thousands of years later.

The wages of sin may be death but the gift of God is eternal life and that begins now. Not, as one of the early heresies of the New Testament church period expounded – that we have already been resurrected and are walking around in post-resurrection bodies. That's why there is so much language of sleeping in death in the earliest works of the New Testament. Death was a shock, not expected. But our new life begins with God's impartation of the Holy Spirit to us. In Him we are a new creation no longer under the condemnation of sin.

Matthew 10 reminds us that God loves to bless. He loves to pour out goodness to those who do rightly. This is the beginning, the first-fruits of eternal life. We receive His love and of His Spirit. Our lives are then re-characterised by our actions – learning how to truly worship with each other in community, learning how to worship God with our lives, our goals, our relationships, our speech, our integrity, our honesty, our speech. The righteous, says God, can expect a righteous person's reward. Not just in eternity but now.

This is the gift of God we can appreciate now. The closer we come to Him. The more time we spend in His will, contemplating and acting on what He wants, the more we will achieve and the more we will rejoice in life He gives. And yes, even in challenging and difficult times, Jesus will lift us up so that we will rise again to master and achieve more for Him until that time He wants to call us home – and then our joy will be truly fulfilled.

Amen.