THE GIFT OF GOD

Romans 6:1-23
Key Verse: 6:23

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

In the previous passage, God’s Great Grace, we studied how God provided for us a new foundation on which we might stand, his grace of forgiveness and love through Christ Jesus’ death on the cross for our sins. Those who know this grace have peace with God, joy in the face of trials and the hope of eternal life. In today’s passage, Paul teaches about the transformation that has taken place when we were baptized into Christ. Here, baptism does not refer to ceremonial cleansing, but to the union we have with Christ by faith. Through union with Christ in his death and resurrection, we are no longer under law and under wrath, but we are under grace. Through union with Christ Jesus, we have become slaves to righteousness, leading to holiness and resulting in eternal life. But it is not the fruit of our own effort, or the product of our own righteousness. It is the gift of God that fully pays off the wages of sin. May God help us to take hold of Christ Jesus, the gift of God, and be set free from sin.

I. Union with Christ

In order to convince us of the total victory that God’s grace has won over the power of sin and death, Paul presented a very objective picture of that grace in chapter 5. Just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. Just as Adam’s disobedience brought sin and death, so Christ’s obedience will bring forth obedience and life. We can have absolute confidence in God’s grace, because it came through one man’s obedience unto death on the cross. Verse 5:8 reads, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” Paul concludes his discussion in 5:20 and 21. “The law was added so that the trespass might increase. But where sin increased, grace increased all the more so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring
eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” God’s love and grace are identifiable; they are absolute and triumphant. Whatever barrier we might imagine could exist that would prevent us from receiving that grace, it has been overcome. The great grace of God is ours to have for eternity. This is the gift of God for sinful man.

But there is a danger that the objective facts of God’s grace might lead us to conclude that what we do no longer has any consequences. Since God has provided for everything, and there is nothing I or anyone else can do anything to change it, it might seem that grace is a free pass for sin. In fact, some corrupt people suggested that the only thing sinful human beings can do is to sin more, so that grace might increase all the more. Wow. The sinful human imagination is a genius in finding excuses for sin. Nevertheless, Paul addresses this concern. It is because there is no one who does not sin, and who wouldn’t love to find an excuse for sin. In short, it is not enough to know that grace has conquered sin and death. We must experience the power of God’s grace to defeat sin and death at work in our selves. God’s grace is very objective in that it came once and for all men through Christ Jesus. But that objective knowledge still leaves me powerless before my sinful desires. We need more than knowledge to be set free from sin. We need God’s power. God’s victorious power comes to sinners when we are united with Christ in his death and resurrection.

Look at verses 6:1-4. “What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don’t you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.” Christ Jesus’ death on the cross for man’s sin was universal, but our faith in his sacrifice makes it personal. His baptism into death becomes our baptism into death. His resurrection from the dead becomes our resurrection and hope of a new life. By faith, what Christ Jesus did for all men, he did for me. By faith, what Christ Jesus gained for himself, he gained for me. Verse 5 summarizes this spiritual reality. “If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection.”
God’s grace was given freely to all men through Christ Jesus. As individuals, we claim God's grace when we are united with Christ Jesus by faith through baptism into his death. When we are united with him like this, we are no longer free to live according to our sinful nature. When we are united with Christ, we are dead to sin, but alive to God.

In the past, our struggle to be righteous consisted of vain attempts at suppressing our sinful nature, or in doing some heroic act of faith or charity. These things were good, and yet, they were hopeless. The key problem was our powerlessness. The fact is that immediately after doing something good, we become proud, self-pitying or lazy, and so commit unforgivable sin. Sin and death have robbed us of any power to combat our sinful nature, and so we despair of ever pleasing God or growing in his righteousness. It is in the awareness of this reality that Christ’s victory on the cross takes on its real magnitude. When Jesus hung there on the cross, he had to give in to his feelings of self-pity, of shame, anger or hatred. Especially after the religious leaders and even the robber next to him on the cross mocked him, saying, “If you are the Christ, come down from the cross and save yourself,” Jesus had to answer, “I will save myself, and you’re on your own!” But what did Christ say? “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a). Jesus answered the hatred of the world with love and prayer, even from the cross. But his prayer was not just the noble sentiment of a dying and defeated man. Acts 2:23,24 says, “This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.” In this way, Jesus defeated the power of sin and death. In this way, Jesus practiced the righteousness of God to the end.

Christ Jesus uniquely won the victory over sin and death. But that one victory changed everything. Against the reality of persistent sin and of our powerlessness, we fantasized that we would somehow become supermen who can shrug off sin like the Hulk shrugs off bullets, rockets and missiles. One woman had a spiritual experience. Then she went to her pastor and declared, “I have received the Holy Spirit, so
now I am perfect.” The pastor congratulated her for her accomplishment, and then proceeded to step very forcefully on her toe. The woman began calling down curses on him for his rudeness. But the pastor answered quietly: “Maybe you still have some work to do.” In the past, we clung to an illusion of supremacy and infallibility, in spite of our mountain of sins. But because of Christ's victory, we don't have to live any longer in a fantasy world. Instead, our hope is in being united with Christ so that his death on the cross crucifies our old self, and his resurrection becomes our new life to God. Look at verses 6-7. “For we know that the old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin – because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.” The only way to be freed from the power of sin and to experience the power of the resurrection is to die with Christ Jesus. “Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him” (8).

This is not some vague or ill-defined hope, nor is it a false hope. It is a real hope, based on the promise of Scripture, the demonstration of God’s love through Christ's death for us, and the gift of the Holy Spirit, who is a seal or deposit of the life that is to come. However, it is still a hope. Unity with Christ has not been realized by any of us here, though it belongs to everyone here by faith. Unity with Christ is possible for sinners, because of God's unchanging and all-powerful grace. Unity with Christ will be accomplished when we receive in full the new life that is ours at present by faith. We can have total confidence in the righteousness that is ours by faith through the unity we have with Christ.

But we should not be dismayed when we discover that our sinful nature still influences our thoughts or actions, or when old sins return to haunt us, because God is not dismayed. God's confidence is in who Christ is, and in what Christ can do for us. Look at verses 9-10. “For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” Therefore, our confidence and trust should also be in Christ. In this way, our sins only serve as a reminder of our own helplessness, and of the absolute imperative of drawing closer to Christ through Bible study, prayer and
servantship. I want to be found in Christ Jesus. I believe you all want to be found in Christ. This is our one true hope. When this has become our only hope, then we have died to sin, and have come alive to God. Our struggle on earth, therefore, is to hold on to this hope to the end. Those who have any other hope will make excuses for their sin in vain. Those who have this hope will die to their sinful desires, and “come alive” to their holy mission in God.

Look at verses 11-14. “In the same way, count yourselves as dead to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are no longer under law, but under grace.” Verse 11 reads, “count yourselves as dead to sin, but alive to God.” So we can understand that unity with Christ is a matter of faith. It is our confidence that we will be united with Christ forever in his glory. So we count ourselves as united to him now, able to enjoy the freedom from sin that his death provides, and the new life as promised by his resurrection. But it is not a trivial matter to hold on to this hope by faith. As long as we remain in our mortal body, we will struggle against the reign of sin. Evil desires will beckon, and sometimes, we will stumble and fall. But invigorated by our everlasting hope in Christ and to be united with him in his resurrection, we take up the battle to offer our bodies to God as instruments of righteousness.

There is a beautiful story about one woman’s change from an instrument of wickedness to an instrument of righteousness. Jesus met this woman by a well in Samaria. She could not come to the well during the morning with the other women, because she was despised for her immoral life. So she came at noon, during the heat of the day. The Samaritan woman had offered up herself to so many men in order to satisfy her thirst for human love. She led so many men into despair; even so, she could not be satisfied. She was a sponge, who offered up her body as an instrument of wickedness in a hopeless quest to satisfy her soul. But when she met Jesus, she drank deeply of the living water
from Jesus, until her soul was satisfied. Then she could confess to Jesus, “You are the Christ. You are my everything.” As a result, she ran back into her town in order to bring her whole town out to meet Jesus. The townspeople were shocked to see the Samaritan woman so bright and joyful. Out of amazement, they came to see Jesus, and after spending two days with him, could testify, “This man really is the Savior of the world.” When she offered her worship and praise to Christ, accepting him as her true husband, the Samaritan woman could be used by God as a source of blessing and joy to all the townspeople. She became an instrument of righteousness. It was because she was no longer under condemnation as a despised Samaritan woman; she was under the grace of Jesus who forgave her sins and gave her living water to her soul. A sinner can be an instrument of righteousness only by grace. When we are united with Christ by faith, we can die to our lives of immorality and selfishness. When we are united with Christ by faith, we can have a spring of living water welling up in our souls, which sustains a life of blessing and grace.

Look again at verses 13-14, “Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.” These verses give us a clear and practical direction in our lives as Christians. We must pay attention to what we do. Sometimes, people want to engage in very deep theological arguments, or speculate on ethereal spiritual reality. But the real question is, “What is your nose doing? What are your fingers doing? Are they doing the work of God, or are they obeying the evil desires of sin?” We might be surprised at the answer. So we must examine ourselves and the parts of our body, and make a decision of faith to offer ourselves to God in union with Christ, so that we may participate with him in his righteous work of world salvation.

You may not feel that you are ready to do anything for God because of your sins. But that is just an excuse. In fact, we have been set free from our sins by the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross. It is God's precious gift to us. So we must make use of that gift by taking up our holy mission as Bible teachers and shepherds for the sake of God's world salvation purpose. You may feel that by doing so, you are rejecting the world and what it says is important. That's exactly right.
In this way, you can begin to participate in Christ’s sufferings and death for sin, and share in that death, so that you might also share in his eternal life.

Look at verse 15. “For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.” A life of participating in Christ’s death and resurrection is a life that is set free for eternity from the power of sin.

II. The path of righteousness, holiness and life

Look at verse 16. “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?” Sinful man equates freedom with freedom from control. But freedom from sin is not like that. In order to be set free from sin, we must come under the control of righteousness. Christ Jesus did not have to suffer. He did not have to come down to this world and experience the loneliness, sorrow and shame of the cross. But he did. It was because he made himself a slave to God’s will. Although he had freedom and choice, he humbled himself and gave his obedience and very life to God, freely. Thus, Paul states the transformation that must take place in a Christian’s life as moving from slavery to sin to slavery to righteousness. It was true slavery to sin. We had no choice. In regard to Christ, it is voluntary slavery, in that the obligation we feel and seek to live up to comes out of thankfulness and love, not fear and despair. So, Paul says that this is a human expression to help us understand what we must do and the kind of attitude we should have in doing it, not that we are in fact slaves. Look at verse 17. “But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.” In the past, our primary obligation was to live up to the demands of our sinful nature. But now, in Christ, our primary obligation is to live up to the righteous standard Christ has set for us. We don’t have to be sorry at all, though it cost us many hard trials to do so. Look at verses 20-22 “When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But 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.” A pathway has been laid out for us. It requires turning our backs on our sinful desires. It requires us to go through trials and hardships in our struggle against sin and for the sake of our holy mission. But it is a beautiful pathway, because it leads to holiness, and the fruit is eternal life.

We are under grace, not under law. Therefore, our struggle is not to meet the outward requirements of the law. Our struggle is to meet the inner requirements of unity with our Savior, Christ Jesus, the one who defeated the power of sin and death through his obedience to the Father’s plan. When we struggle with him against sin and for the sake of our holy mission, we will surely also share with him the fruits of his victory: death to sin and eternal life in God. Look at verse 23. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” May God bless you and be with you in your struggle to be united with Christ Jesus as instruments of righteousness and springs of living water in this wicked and thirsty generation.