

Gifts and Wages (*Rom 6:23*)

Introduction – On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This was the 16th Century version of the church website or announcement board. But the symbolism is significant. The Theses were attacking the Church's teaching on indulgences; sin was not something that could be bought off, Luther was arguing. Indulgences, part of the whole system of ritual paybacks, turned the Christian life into a mechanical routine instead of a personal faith in the grace of God. Luther understood the difference between gifts and wages.

This is what Paul was teaching in Romans 6. In Chapter 5, Paul declared our justification from sin through the righteousness of Christ. In Chapter 6, he goes on to speak of our sanctification in Christ; that as by the righteousness of Christ we have been delivered from the guilt and penalty of sin, so by the power and life of Christ in us we are delivered from the dominion of sin, so as not to live any longer in it.

The Reformation took the Church, wandering in the desert of works, and threw us into the ocean of God's grace and mercy. This little verse reminds us that being reformed means we are dripping with grace, through which now our lives are characterized – by grace through faith.

Wages, Not Gifts – When God damns a man, He is paying him a wage. Condemnation is God being fair. Damnation is God showing no partiality. This is because *"all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God"* (Rom 3:23). When God pours out his favor on a sinner, it is not like a parent choosing one of his children. It is more like a governor pardoning one on death-row. The real problem with God saving is with God *saving anyone!* The answer given to this problem is the Cross. In the Cross, God is just and the One who justifies (Rom 3:26).

Death – Death is the natural result of sin (Gen 2:17). Death is not a ceasing to exist; it is not annihilation. Death is something one can abide in (1 John 3:14). It is also death to God and to Truth (1 Cor 2:14). Even when Christians sin, there is a sense of death, a separation, from the power and communion with God. Outside of Christ, however, this wage is eternal torment.

Gifts, not Wages – Every man has a sense of this death, this separation, this condemnation in himself. He knows he is disoriented from truth, from God, from spiritual things. Some try to not care. Some try to find truth. Some try to earn it, as in Luther's day (and ours). But it is not *wage and wage* for life and death. Neither is it *gift and gift* for life and death. It is not symmetrical. We have all earned death. The elect are given something they have not earned in any way; that is what makes it a gift. The book which brought Luther to life in Christ was Romans, and while this verse was a favorite, Rom 1:17 was the fulcrum that God used to overthrow the shackles of condemnation in which Luther lay bound. This gift was apprehended and received by faith alone. There was nothing to earn at all. Ultimately, Protestants protest that salvation can be earned in any way, shape, or form.

Life – We cannot be *"born again"* of our own making any more than we can control our first birth. John 3:7-8 teaches us that this is done to us by the Spirit; it is not something that we do. And like the wind, we cannot control, schedule, or summon the Spirit. We cannot do this and our dead man does not want to anyway. The Word is clear that this work of regeneration is the work of God, not of man (John 1:12-13, James 1:18). It is mercy. It is grace. It is a gift.

Truth that Changes a Life and a Lifestyle (Rom 6:15-23, Matt 5:7) – The context of Rom 6:23 is that this fundamental truth not only changes our nature and our future, but it changes our present lives as well. To return to an earlier point, we find ourselves dripping with grace and mercy – and everything we touch gets wet. And this is why Protestants, and the Reformed particularly, should be the most gracious and merciful people on the face of the earth.

What Makes Me Merciful? – The kind of blessing that God is describing in Matt 5:7 is developed in passages like Rom 6. When we are born again, we take on Christ's character, whose tender mercies are over all His works (Psalm 145:9, 18:25).

Saved to Be Merciful – Scripture teaches a correspondence between faith and works (Eph 2:8-10). It is not faith by good works, but faith to good works. "Blessed are the fruit trees, for they shall obtain a crop," the beatitude might say. We are taught that we reap what we sow, and faith without works (James 4:17) is like mercy without mercy. It is like grace without grace. Saying that you are merciful without acting merciful, saying that you are full of grace without acting gracious, is dead mercy and dead grace. It is as though you are returning to the practice of buying and selling indulgences.

Unsymmetrical Love, Grace, Mercy – There should not be symmetry between what people have done to us and how we are to treat them in Christ, because this is the gospel: we do not get what we have earned. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones once said, *"What makes me merciful is the grace of God. But the grace of God does make me merciful. If I am not merciful, there is only one explanation; I have never understood the mercy of God, I am outside of Christ. I am in my sins, unforgiven."* Another way of looking at this is if we are not gracious, we have either forgotten the ocean of grace that is ours, or we have somehow perverted that ocean, thinking we in some way deserved it.

"The wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Jesus said, *"Freely you have received. Freely give"* (Matt 10:8).