

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Undeserved: Wages”

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Romans 6:23; Matthew 28:1-10

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Today we read two passages, well really one passage and then one other verse. But as we do, we're starting a series from today through the end of May, encompassing among other things the celebration of 75 years of ministry in this congregation on May 22. And along the way we'll be touching on any number of topics, but a running thread throughout, whether it be today or on that 75th Anniversary Celebration is that this really isn't about things that we have done, or things that we are doing, or things that we will do, but ultimately about all that God has done here in Christ, and about just how little, if any, of it was something we earned.

We're reading first from the 28th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, followed by a single verse from Paul's letter to the Romans. Hear now the Word of God.

Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn toward the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to look at the tomb. And behold, a severe earthquake had occurred, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone, and sat upon it. And his appearance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. The guards shook from fear of him and became like dead men. And the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; for I know that you are looking for Jesus who has been crucified. He is not here, for He has risen, just as He said. Come, see the place where He was lying. And go quickly and tell His disciples that He has risen from the dead; and behold, He is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see Him; behold, I have told you."

*And they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to report to His disciples. And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Rejoice!" And they came up and took hold of His feet, and worshiped Him. Then Jesus *said to them, "Do not be afraid; go, bring word to My brothers to leave for Galilee, and there they will see Me."*

Matthew 28:1-10

And then Romans 6:23. For the wages of sin is death, but the gracious gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

Almost fifty years ago, a man named Chuck sat in his car in the driveway of his friend Tom's home, but he couldn't move. Couldn't bring himself to move. You see Chuck had found himself in a bit of professional and legal trouble, to say the least. And he had sought out his friend Tom to explore a new opportunity, a new professional venture. But that wasn't why he couldn't move out of his friend's driveway.

The reason he couldn't move was because of something his friend had said to him, not about the professional stuff, but about some religious stuff that Chuck initially thought was just some "Pollyanna" nonsense, stuff he had never really paid much mind to before. Earlier in his life, Chuck had been what he called a "nominal

Episcopalian,” saying at one point, “Oh I think religion is fine, provided one has as little of it as possible.” So he never really gave it a lot of credence.

But now, sitting in his car in his friend’s driveway, that religious stuff sounded different. His friend Tom had shared with him a few sections of C. S. Lewis’s book *Mere Christianity*, in particular a part speaking about the sin of pride, which in Lewis’s book is the subject of a chapter called “The Great Sin.”

And there was something about it, maybe just on this particular night, that rendered him stricken. He could not move. Stricken by these words about, of all things, sin.

The Apostle Paul in writing his letter to the church in Rome says a lot about sin. Brings it up in that one verse we read. Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” There’s a lot we could talk about on that front that we don’t have time to today, but in short, the way he talks about something like “sin” isn’t so much the way you might hear it used. I don’t know how much you talk about sin in everyday conversation, anyway. My guess is maybe not all that often. But in general, I suspect you don’t necessarily go to your office, your school, your workplace and make small talk like, “So, how have you sinned today?” Probably doesn’t happen.

But even then, the way it seems we often consider a word like “sin” is more toward things that we do, as in, “Don’t do that; that’s a sin.” Something like that.

But the way Paul talks about it doesn’t sound so much that way, not exclusively anyway. Yes, according to Paul sin can be an action, it can refer to something we do or don’t do, but it seems that more so than that way, Paul speaks about this “sin” as something like a force or a power at work, one that is both internal and external, one that is both evident through our actions but also causes them, one that influences us but is also at the same time within our very nature, one that is, on one hand, something that we have some agency in but on the other something that we are entirely captive to. And all of it has something to do with that which separates us from God, that which runs counter to his ways, to his will.

No matter the nature of sin, which would be a much longer conversation, Paul in this one verse makes no mistake as to what sin brings about. “For the wages of sin is death,” he writes. And what I think he means here isn’t so much, “You do one thing wrong in your life and you deserve to die.” It’s more than that.

We hear the word “wages,” and we usually think of things like “minimum wage” or “a living wage” or “hourly wage,” something you get paid for work that you’ve done, and that’s straightforward enough. But the word itself originally was referring to something like a ration or a stipend, in particular a soldier’s ration, as in while soldiers were in the field, they’d receive their daily rations to sustain them.

So what Paul’s saying here is actually less a matter of punishment, as in, you do something wrong and you deserve to die, but more about the heartbreaking nature of this force that we are captive to: the wages of sin, what we receive to sustain our life, are in fact nothing that will sustain our life at all, but will empty it.

Sin wasn’t something Chuck had been all that concerned about up to that point in his life when he sat in his friend’s driveway. But that didn’t stop him from considering the wages of all he done up to that point. His career had had some professional success. He had excelled in school, went to an Ivy League university, served in the Marines, law school after that.

Then as he started practicing law, he set up shop in Washington, D.C., dabbled in and out of politics, until one day he was called upon to serve the President of the United States. So he went to the White House. And it was there that he realized he had a talent for getting things done in the worst kinds of ways.

He became known as the president's hitman because he was willing "to be ruthless in getting things done," once even saying he'd walk over his own grandmother for the president.

He engaged in acts of political sabotage on the fringes of legal and illegal, but he was good at it. There was a transactional quality to it that seemed to invigorate him, namely that you toe the line when it comes to the president, or you would reap the consequences as one of his enemies. Do this, you get that. Do that, you get this. And he was always coming out ahead. In the black, as it were. Those were his wages.

Until things started collapsing. Later in that president's administration, some operatives had broken into a political office at the Watergate Hotel and were caught. In the ensuing investigation, Chuck Colson was implicated. He left the White House, while he was still under investigation and potentially facing arrest, seeing the fruit of all his labor beginning to crumble around him.

That's what brought him to his friend's driveway, a new opportunity, trying to get back into private practice. But what he found instead was a conviction that he could not shake: that the sum of his work, his wages, were crumbling around him, and White House tough guy that he was, he began to weep. He later remarked, "I didn't know what to say. I just knew I needed Jesus, and He came into my life."

The "wages" that the Apostle Paul speaks of, the wages of sin, is death. And in seeing his life crumble around him, Chuck Colson saw where a transactional life led him, a life of retribution and vendettas, a life that emptied itself of any vitality. He saw where that road led.

But in that driveway, he caught a glimpse of the second half of what Paul wrote: "But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." The free gift. That is, something we can't earn, something we can't work toward, something we ultimately don't deserve because it's not something our actions can somehow merit on their own.

"Eternal life." Often, it's thought to mean something that kicks into gear right after you die. As in you pass away, your earthly life ends, and then eternal life would begin when you go to heaven—or that's how it's often thought. But I'm not sure that's how Paul meant it. Jesus either, for that matter. Life everlasting, to be sure. Life to the fullest in a new heaven and a new earth, but not something that has to wait.

When Christ came out of the tomb that Easter morning, he ushered in a new order of things, one in which the transactional wages of sin, the retribution, the jealousy, the treachery, the cruelty, the very forces that had led to his death were overcome, and life, resurrected life, broke forth into the world.

And that life didn't operate by the same rules.

Chuck Colson's conversion to Christianity was the subject of a lot of discussion, even of skepticism. Some said it was just a ploy by an amoral man to curry a lighter sentence. But though maintaining his innocence regarding the break-in at the Watergate Hotel and the subsequent cover-up, he surprised everyone, against the advice of his attorneys, by pleading guilty to a different charge altogether in a different case, one that, it was rumored, was about to be dismissed.

When asked later why he did that, his response was simple. “I deserved it.” He was sentenced to 1-3 years in prison, served seven months, but upon release he didn’t go back into politics or law. He felt the calling of God to go into ministry specifically in outreach to prisoners and their families, and advocating for their well-being and dignified treatment.

Prison, an institution by its very nature defined by the “wages” of one’s actions. Do this, serve this time. Do that, serve that time, time from your life. And into that transactional world, he sought to bring an encounter with the grace of Christ, of the free gift of eternal life that could start now.

Friends, too often we are caught in prisons of our own making, seeking to come out ahead at the end of all those transactions, but in the end the obsession over it, the selfishness of it, brings about wages of its own, and similar to prison, its wages are in time. You do this and this and this, and the wages of it are time, time from your life, and you’re just hoping by the time you add up all the transactions, all the wages of your life that you’ll somehow end up ahead.

And then when you’re at the end of it, or even in the middle of it, you look upon it and wonder well what was that for? We convince ourselves that that’s just how the world works, but it doesn’t have to be.

If that is a place where you are today, imagine for a moment if life didn’t have to be about what you got out of it, about your wages, so to speak. Imagine if the first word into your life wasn’t what you would have to do to get ahead, but rather if the first word was of something that was given, something that you could not earn, deserve, or live up to: the grace and forgiveness of a God who loves you.

You might say, well that’s just Pollyanna stuff; that’s not how the world operates. Everybody’s out to get something. But if you look around, you just might see more of this life by grace.

Just right now, in fact, this whole past week, our Youth Director Kenton Gullion and his wife Madi aren’t here. Have they gone to the beach or to see family? No. They’re in Poland, serving refugees from the war in Ukraine. Are they getting paid for this? Are they receiving wages from it? No. They go because the grace of God that has encountered their life is leading them.

The good news of Easter isn’t, “Hey Jesus has risen from the dead, so go do something nice for someone else.” But the good news of Easter is that a life, a resurrected life has burst forth into the world, proclaiming that the way of grace, the way of forgiveness, shown by Christ himself on the cross is the way that leads to life. This life is a free gift, and it starts now, and is ongoing.

Chuck Colson, later in his life, reflecting on his ministry, offered something similar. “The truth that is uppermost in my mind today is that God isn’t finished. As long as we’re alive, He’s at work in our lives.... And that leads to the greatest joy I’ve found in life. As look back on my life, it’s not having been to Buckingham Palace...or getting honorary degrees, or writing books. The greatest joy is to see how God has used my life to touch the lives of others.”

Friends, may you be free of the wages that hold us captive, and may you see the fruit, the wholly undeserved fruit, of the free gift of God, eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, which starts today.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.