

Sermon 54: Romans 6:23: Hell is earned but Heaven is free!

OUTLINE

Death and life
Wages and gift

INTRODUCTION

In every Gospel presentation I have ever encountered Romans 6:23 is mentioned. It is one of those essential verses that summarises the Gospel in a nutshell. It gives us a stark contrast between sin and grace; death and life. It shouts at us that hell is earned but heaven is free. Paul crowns his discussion on the topic of sanctification with this wonderful précis of the Gospel. Romans 6 has been a very deep analysis of the effect of the Gospel upon us for holiness. Various themes have been opened up for us as Paul has been defending the Gospel of grace which ensures Christians cannot continue to live in sin.

We have heard Paul ringing the bell of God's grace with all his might showing us that God's grace abundantly provides the legal and transforming righteousness we need, imputing Christ's righteousness to us, and imparting Christ's righteousness to us. We have spoken of God's initiating grace chasing us down in our sins when we were running from God in the hell bent pursuit of sin; how God enabled our believing and ongoing desire for holiness. We have spoken about God's grace empowering us vile sinners to actions like His Son's producing fruit that is not natural to our own natures. And we have spoken about the grace of God that will not only draw us to Christ, unite us to Christ and conform us to Christ; but a grace that will finish what it has started and finally unite us to Christ in eternity.

We have had our eyes opened to new ways in which we find all our riches in Christ. We have seen in being united to Christ we are dressed in Christ's righteousness that qualifies us to stand in the presence of an infinitely holy God in an alien righteousness. We have seen that in being united to Christ's death and life we have died the reigning power of sin and are filled with His Spirit who causes the power of His resurrection to produce true transformation into His image. The pattern of Christ's holiness has been put before us over and over again as the true human life of holiness. And we have seen how Christ's life as the Son lived as a joyful slave to God's will is the atmosphere of our own service to God.

Our view of holiness has experienced a revolution as we have seen our holiness grounded in our union with Christ and not drawn from the poverty of our own resources. We have seen how holiness is the inevitable fruit in the life of anyone who is truly born again, and that those who do not produce fruit are not joined to the fertile, vital, fruit producing Vine. We have seen that holiness is not a futile goal but something possible without perfection this side of eternity because of the ontological change we have experienced in being united to Christ. How holiness includes our cooperation and is not a thing of 'let go and let God,' but rather God blessing the diligent use of means. We have seen how suffering and a disciplined life are necessary to holiness and that it does not come without much effort.

That holiness not sin is where our true identity, purpose and happiness are found. And how holiness is not only something that starts in heaven when we die or are raptured, but rather we are being changed from glory into glory even now having this glory in jars of clay. And that holiness is a life of joy done out of what God has done for us, and life that is shaped by love.

Sin too was put in a clearer light. We saw sin as the power that tyrannizes all who are born to Adam, a power that all are subject to unless they are freed by Christ. That this power no longer dictates to the Christian as the Christian has died to the power of sin. We saw the nature of living in sin as slavery, a willing slavery that we hand ourselves over to gladly making us responsible for all our actions. We studied that snowballing effects of sin and looked at idols and addiction. And finally we said a few things about the consequences and destiny of sin—death.

As Paul concludes this glorious chapter on how the Gospel of grace overcomes sin he is continuing with a line of thought he began in v19. Paul has been exhorting us to not present our members to sin and to present them to God. He has argued on the basis of our union with Christ and our new hearts why we should leave sin and now he argues on the basis of the results it brings—death. Paul draws his grand conclusion putting in stark contrast the consequences of sin and the consequences of the Gospel, 'For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.' We have the contrasts of the wages of sin and the gift of God, as well as death and life.

Death and life

When speaking about the consequences of our sins Paul uses a word that was used to describe a soldier getting paid—wages. You can think of a soldier's wages in two parts. Firstly, there is the regular wage that the soldier gets, and secondly, the portion of the spoils that he gets when a battle is won. The wages of sin is death. Death is an apt description to describe the sinners regular pay back from sin as well as the great booty at the end. Death describes the present effects of sin well. Death in the Bible is not merely the separation of soul and body, but also the state of being separated from the life and blessing of God's presence. This was the type of death that Adam and Eve tasted when they were ejected from the Garden. In this state we exist but we are not alive, we are separated from the righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit that typifies the fullness of the Christian's life.

Death is also an apt description of the pleasures of sin. Sin takes all the good gifts of God, things and institutions that God intended as gifts and sin turns them into addictions, idols, and graves. Sexual intimacy: an act of self-donation between two people who are covenanted together in marriage; which was intended to reflect the self-giving of Christ for the Church. This has been hijacked and turned into a consumer product where we withdraw ourselves as soon as the product no longer satisfies or a cheaper more satisfying one pops up. Work: a gift of responsibility that man has been given to imitate God's own industry whereby we take the unharnessed potential of nature and produce things that

glorify God and benefit our neighbour. Sin has taken work and has made it a machine that exploits the lower classes subjecting them to terrible working conditions and mundane tasks, dehumanizing them so that shareholders can have more money. Sin has infected us with a type of Midas' touch whereby everything we touch is transformed by our greed and lust which is killing those things that are most precious to us.

Death is also an apt description of the final results of sin. Like the Roman soldiers who got a small pay for their regular services, they lived for the booty and the ransacking of war that was the big payday; when we have to face God in judgement one day that too will be our big pay day. There are those who say that there is no hell, but that hell is here on earth. We may think of this life of suffering as a type of purgatory but it is far from what hell is really like. Just as the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared to the glories that will one day be revealed to Christians, so the terrible judgements of hell are not worthy of being compared to the light momentary afflictions of this life.

Here are a few of the things Jesus said about hell. Firstly, 13% of all the words Jesus spoke were about hell and judgement; 50% of all the parables included teaching judgement. Jesus teaching puts to bed much of the fanciful speculation that has arisen in Christian thought through works like Dante's *Inferno*. Dante spoke about hell being in the centre of the earth with a frozen lake at the bottom, and nine layers of sufferings varying in the ways in which people were being tortured. The only indication Jesus gives of place is 'outside,' Matthew 22:13, 'Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' The most common word used by Jesus was 'Gehenna' a word derived from the rubbish dump in the valley of Ben-Hinnom, there in the valley would be all the refuse of the city, there would be maggots, and there would be smouldering fires constantly burning to get rid of the refuse. Why would Jesus use the picture of a rubbish dump to speak of hell? We need to extinguish any ideas of recycling and hear the words of C. S. Lewis as closer to the truth, 'To enter heaven is to become more human than you ever succeeded in being on earth; to enter hell is to be banished from humanity. What is cast (or casts itself) is not a man; it remains.'¹ Another picture of hell is a prison. Jesus tells us in various parables of being handed over the officer, to being bound hand and foot, Jude speaks about 'everlasting chains' and Peter of God holding the unrighteous for judgement. Two other descriptions which seems contradictory are 'darkness' and 'fire.' Peter talks about 'blackest darkness' and yet there is also mention of a fire that is never quenched. Can there be darkness where there is fire? Some have tried to speak of a fire that burns with darkness instead of light creating a new phenomena to account for the details. What I think is more likely is the fact that all of these images of prison, fire, darkness, torment, etc. are all pictures of something beyond words and comprehension. The absence of light usually represents the absence of God who is light. That is not to say that God is not inhabiting some part of His creation and that He is not omnipresent, no but rather the face of God as an indication of blessing is turned away. Paul puts it like this in 2 Thess 1:9, 'They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might.' This second death is terrible and it is never ending. It consists in getting the same portion as the

¹ Quoted in John Blanchard's, *Whatever Happened to Hell?*, p131.

devil in punishment. We have followed the captain of our damnation and will share in his spoils. The devil is said to be the one for whom hell was prepared (Matt 25:41), and yet the bible also tells us that all those whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life will go there too, Revelation 20:10-15, '10 and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.

¹¹ Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. From his presence earth and sky fled away, and no place was found for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done. 13 And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each one of them, according to what they had done. 14 Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. 15 And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.'

Contrasted with death is life, life past, present and future. Contrasted with being stillborn in Adam we were born anew in Christ. Where we had a deadness to all things spiritual and inclined to all things sinful, we are now alive to God and dead to the power though not yet the lure of sin. More than that, we can say that we actually have our eternal life now and don't have to wait for heaven to begin it. At present we are beginning to taste the fullness of life that God intends for us to know in heaven. Paul speaks of our present experience as one of knowing God's love shed abroad in our hearts, of peace and assurance, 'For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.' (Romans 14:17). We are now able to rejoice in our sufferings because of the good intended and brought about in them, to rejoice in hope of the certainty of the life that is ours. We are alive in Christ and beginning to taste some of the fullness even now. And one day we will have eternal life in all of its fullness, the same life that Jesus is presently experiencing as a resurrected and perfected man is our destiny and inheritance. That life will be the full and irreversible reversal of our separation from God. It will be a life that is the reversal of the separation of soul and body; the reversal of the separation that has existed in our human relationships because of sin. A life free from satan, sin and death; in eternal joy and provision in the presence of God forever, this is eternal life.

This life that we have been speaking about, it is free and it is offered to all. If you want to go to hell, you pay for your own ticket by living a life rejecting God committed to your half-hearted joys and temporary pleasures. And when hell is finally handed out to you, it will be exactly what you deserve. However, heaven is free. Jesus has bought us our tickets at the cost of His own life. He has acquired the wedding garments that we need to sit at the feast, all we have to do is receive this gift by faith and turn our backs on our sins to follow Him.

Wages and gift

The next major contrast we need to open up is the contrast between wages and gift. This is a simple thing to understand but it is the difference between life and death, as well as a happy Christian life or a miserable one. A wage we know is something that you work for, a gift is something that you do not work for but is freely bestowed. Wages are deserved and a gift is freely given. Now there are gifts that are not purely gracious. For example when we give gifts to our children we give them gifts because they are our children and we love them and they love us. The gift that Paul is talking about is not the sort of gift that we give to our loved ones on their birthdays but rather a gift given to the murderer of your wife and children, the gift a Jew would give to a Nazi, the Taliban to an American soldier. This is how God has bestowed eternal life upon us.

This is crucial to understand, for there are those who think that we are saved by our sanctification. There is in every human heart a legalistic bent that leads us astray as to how we are made righteous before God for justification, but not only justification for sanctification as well. We have hammered hard and long on the fact that our works will never save us our confidence has to be in what Christ has done for us to make us holy in the eyes of a holy God. Because we cannot do it ourselves it has to come from outside of us. Because it comes to us from outside of us and we cannot earn the giving of it, it has to be a gift. And because it is a gift we receive it by faith not by adding any works to it. God clothes us in the righteousness of His Son when we look away from our own works to what He has done on our behalf putting our confidence in that to make us righteous, receiving the free offer of righteousness as a gift and not by works. This sets the heart free from all efforts to save ourselves and rest in what God has done to save us.

There are many Christians who have experienced this wonderful liberty, but only to have it stifled as they have failed to continue to see God's dealings with us according to grace but revert to works when it comes to righteousness. We believe the gospel for justification but then the old works oriented, earning from God, buying by our efforts approach comes and hijacks us stealing our joy and hiding the glory of God grace from us. This is the difference between religion and the Gospel. Religion sees itself as the source of all righteousness and holiness and the principle that it works by is merit and works, and the fruit it bears is guilt and fear. The Gospel sees God as the source of our righteousness and holiness, the principle is works by is grace and gift, the outcomes of this approach are joy and assurance. The one word gift is the difference between true and false religion, life and death, joy and bondage.

So as we look at this verse of Paul's I want you to appreciate that there are two different mindsets, religion and Gospel. Religion is the default setting of our self-oriented sinfulness, Gospel is what we have to learn in order to be saved and live a life of holiness in joy and not fear. Has the Gospel reprogrammed you or are you still falling back into religion. Timothy Keller in his book *Centre Church* gives the following list distinguishing religion from the true Gospel. Test yourself by these comparisons to see whether you are living all of your life by grace or if you are falling back into a works mentality.

Religion says: I obey therefore I am accepted; Gospel, I am accepted therefore I obey. For religion motivation is based on fear and insecurity; for Gospel motivation comes from grateful joy.

Religion says: I obey God in order to get things; Gospel says I obey God to delight in and resemble Him.

Religion says: when things go wrong in my life I get angry at God or myself because good people deserve a good life and I think I am good; Gospel says, when things go wrong I struggle but accept it because God allows it and loves me as a Father.

Religion says: when I am criticised I get angry or am devastated because I see myself as a good person; Gospel says, when criticised I struggle, but my self-worth is not determined by man's but God's opinion of me and love for me.

Religion says, prayer is mainly petition and heats up when I am in need, the main purpose being to control my circumstances; Gospel says, my prayer life has a lot of praise and adoration and the goal is fellowship.

Religion says, when I live up to my own standards I feel confident, proud and unsympathetic towards those who are suffering due to laziness or bad choices, and when I fail I feel like a failure; Gospel says, my self-view is not one of a moral achiever but a sinner saved by grace. I am both humble yet confident.

Religion says, my self-worth is based on my hard work leading me to look down on the lazy and immoral; Gospel says, my self-worth is in Christ, and I see that all the good I do is by grace.

Religion says, my accomplishments are the basis for my success and acceptance therefore I make idols out of my talents, accomplishments, social status, etc, and I need these things to make me happy. When my idols are taken away I get really angry or really sad. Gospel says, I have many good things in my life, but God is my highest good, I can lose all these other things and yet still be content because I am a child of God.

Let us conclude. Paul has been telling us why it is impossible for Christians to live in sin pointing us to the work of God in uniting us to Christ, and the work of God in making us into servants of righteousness. He has capped off his discussion appealing to the effects and consequences of the two opposite paths. In sin we die, produce shameful sin and will die, in Christ we live, produce fruit and will live. We have seen how much God has done for us in grace, how much power is ours in Christ, how much love is ours in Christ, how much transformation is ours in Christ, how much purpose and hope is ours in Christ, let us then stop presenting ourselves to sin as if we were still married to it and be the faithful bride of Christ pursuing holiness with a heart overflowing with joy and gratitude.