

BEST GIFT
Romans 6:14-7:25

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We are not a month removed from Christmas; some of you received most memorable gifts, while others of you received forgettable failures. Now think back: What is your most exciting Christmas gift ever? That one special gift that made Christmas morning a lifetime memory.

Well, for me, you'd have to go back to the early 1970s to a toy called "Incredible Edibles." It seems silly now, but it was a toy that would let you mold and make your own gummy candy. In fact, the little oven that cooked the edible creatures was a cartoon-like character himself – with big blue eyes and a red, bold nose. Take your gobbledygook – a liquid gel – squeeze it into the mold, cook the concoction in the super-duper fun-faced cooker, count the minutes away, and voila! – you could eat your wildly creative, gruesomely created creatures. Like luscious lizards. Beetle brittle. Or even a tasty turtle. I was busy that Christmas cooking up snake-shaped snacks and a dozen other bite-sized bugs and insects. You could cook with licorice, cherry, mint, or butterscotch flavor.

And you moms thought you had nothing to be thankful for in 2020. Be thankful you didn't have a son with an "Incredible Edibles" super-duper cooker and gobbledygook candy liquids. I morphed into a mad scientist, cooking up the creatures nonstop. Moms, pray Mattel doesn't make that machine again.

Yes, it's hard to beat the "Incredible Edibles" gift when I was a kid.

How about your worst gift? Do you remember your worst gift ever? One gentleman reports that his mother-in-law bought him a tin of cookies, ate the cookies, and gave him the empty – except for a few crumbs – tin. Another daughter-in-law said, "My mother-in-law, for years, bought her other daughter-in-law expensive make up or perfume, and I always was handed the free gift that came with purchasing hers." The token trinket gift.

My worst Christmas ever was about two years ago when I received a pair of old man slippers (Exhibit A) and a rock-hard pillow (Exhibit B). I did my best to muster up a Merry Christmas face, but how do you rejoice over a rock-like pillow? After a week awakening with a crick in your neck? I re-gifted the pillow to Lisa and told her "call a chiropractor before you use this."

But there are even worse gifts. One writer reveals that while he was in high school he opened up a Christmas present to discover a book from Santa entitled "Coping With Being Adopted." He said, "It was news to me." That's an eye-opening gift. Christmas gifts are not always the best way to break big news.

Another gift recipient recalls, “My cousin had died in a drunk driving accident a few months before, so my mom got me a breathalyzer key chain. It wouldn’t have been so bad, but the card that came with it said it was from the deceased cousin.” Sensitive – I think not!

You never know when you open those gorgeous gifts whether it’s going to be a hap hap happy Christmas or a long-remembered let down.

In our previous sermon in this series we learned (Romans 6:1-14) that we both die with Christ and rise with Christ. When He died for our sin, we died to sin, and we’re not to continue to sin that God might give more grace. In fact, in Romans 6:6-7, Paul says, “knowing this, that our old self was crucified with Him, in order that our body of sin might be done away with, so that we would no longer be slaves to sin; for he who has died is freed from sin.” But we are, he reminds us (v. 11), “alive to God in Christ Jesus.”

In the remainder of chapter 6 and all of chapter 7, Paul continues to contrast two ways of life: living in sin or living in Christ. The central verse of this section of Romans is found in 6:23. “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

I want us to look at contrasts Paul places before us in this passage.

I. Wages or a gift (6:23).

Ultimately, our eternal destination is determined by the path that we pick: we arrive at eternal death or life based upon whether we choose our earned wages or God’s gracious gift. When Paul says “the wages of sin is death,” he is using military imagery. The word “wages” here was originally used for a soldier’s pay (Luke 3:14; 1 Corinthians 9:7). Like a soldier receiving his wages for his work, Paul is saying that death is our destiny when we decide to serve sin rather than God.

In Romans 1:32, he tells us that those who practice sin are worthy of death. In 5:12, he tells us that just as through one man sin entered into the world, and through sin, death, so death spread to all men because all sinned with Adam. He closes chapter 5 with much the same. “Death reigned through Adam” he says in 5:17, though we have “the gift of righteousness through the One, Jesus Christ.” Or 5:21, that “sin reigned in death, even so grace would reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Throughout Romans, there are two destinations – death or life – determined by whether you take your own earned wages or claim Christ’s gift of grace.

So, do you want the wages of sin or the gift of grace? Do you want death or eternal life?

Your best Christmas gift might be a cardigan sweater, but your best Christ gift is grace.

II. Law versus grace (6:14).

Secondly, Paul compares and contrasts law versus grace. Look at 6:14. “For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under the law but under grace.” Or 6:15. “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be!”

Modern psychological experts contend that one’s self concept determines behavioral choices that are congruent with the perception of one’s identity. In plain words, we behave like who we think we are – what we believe is true of our self in the past, in the present, or in the future shapes our moral choices. In Romans, Paul is giving us a new identity as the holy people of God, that we might act as if we are part of God’s family. Remember, in Romans 1:7, he says we are called as saints; we are called to be the “holy ones.” Paul doesn’t want us to be trapped in sin by the letter of the law. Rather, he wants us to live in the sphere of grace. Law versus grace.

At the first session of a confirmation class, the minister asked, “What must we do before we can expect forgiveness from sin?” After a long silence, one of the students raised his hand. “Sin?” (www.homileticsonline.com).

Look at 6:14-15 again. “For sin shall not be master over, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? May it never be.” Just because we’re under grace doesn’t mean that we should sin more.

Living under grace means that we sin less, because we act like who we are: God’s children who have received the gift of grace. Law versus grace. Now our conduct is based on more than just rules; now we choose obedience because we have a relationship with God through Christ.

There is another contrasting pair in this passage, and that is

III. Sin versus righteousness (6:16).

U.S. President Calvin Coolidge was known for the brevity of his answers and responses. One day, after attending church, Coolidge found himself in the presence of a newspaper reporter. What was the sermon about, the reporter wanted to know. “Sin,” replied the president. “And what did the preacher have to say about sin?” asked the reporter. “He was against it,” Coolidge replied. (Homiletics, July 2010)

Paul makes clear here that we are going to have a master. Either we will be enslaved to sin, or we will be ruled by righteousness.

Look at Romans 6:16.

“Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”

Romans 6:18

“And having been freed from sin, you become slaves of righteousness.”

Either you are a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. Put another way, Paul says you will have a master.

Whenever I share Jesus with children, one of the questions I ask in preparation for their baptism is, “What is sin?” Believe it or not, the word “sin” has escaped modern vocabularies. Even over half a century ago, Pope Pius XII stated that “the sin of the century is the loss of the sense of sin.” Thirty years later, psychiatrist Karl Menninger, wrote a book entitled *Whatever Became of Sin?* If those gentlemen thought that the notion of sin was slipping away in the 1900s, they would be shocked to discover there are now “no sinners” in the 21st century. We have children who make bad choices, or adults who are sick with disease. But all the real sinners, the rebels against God, are gone.

The problem with ignoring sin means that we are also ignoring God, against whom we sin. And we’re denying the one door that might be opened to bring us into His holy presence – repentance.

When I was sharing with one particular little girl named Amanda, I asked, “Amanda, what is sin?”

She replied, “When you do what you want to do.”

She understood, didn’t she? When Adam and Eve did what they wanted to do, not what God commanded them to do, they brought the fall to all creation. That’s what Paul tells us. In Adam, we all die. But in Christ, the second Adam, we’re all made alive.

In arrogance, we go our way, instead of God’s way, claiming that we are free from His restrictions and His word. We are free from God.

The greatest irony of all for humanity is that when we declare ourselves free, we become enslaved. Yes, Paul proclaims that you are either a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness.

Have you ever seen an enslaved sinner who is truly free? One who walks his way or her way, instead of God’s way. Are they really frolicking in freedom? The irony is that obedience to God is the only way that we find freedom.

Is a drug addict free? One whose only daily desire is driven by the need to be chemically charged by another dose of drugs, no matter how he hurts in the process of getting his fix. Is the drug addict enslaved to sin or king of his own kingdom? He’s a slave to sin.

And it really doesn’t matter what sin you substitute, does it? Drug addict. Alcoholic. Porn addict. Or the one for whom gluttony is god? It doesn’t really matter – all those desires enslave us. And greed – the one who buys more than he can afford, who gives nothing to others but serves himself, paying interest to his masters called mortgages and credit cards. Debt for him has become Lord. The collection letters, the calls from the creditors, the repossessions – all rewards of freedom...free to always desire more and never be satisfied.

Paul told us 2,000 years ago that we have a choice. We'll either be a slave to sin or a slave to righteousness. But you will have a master other than yourself.

Frederick Buechner says in his book entitled *A Room Called Remember*, **“What scared the daylight out of me was to see suddenly how drawn we all are, I think, to the very things that appall us – to see how beneath our civilizedness, our religiousness, our humanness, there is that in all of us which remains uncivilized, religionless, subhuman, and which hungers for precisely the fare that Forty-Second Street offers, which is basically the license to be subhuman...to use and exploit and devour each other like savages, to devour and destroy our own sweet selves. And if you and I are tempted to think we don't hunger for such things, we have only to remember some of the dreams we dream and some of the secrets we keep and the battle against darkness we all of us fight.”** Buechner says, **“I was scared stiff that I would somehow get lost in that awful place and never find my way out. I was scared that everybody I saw coming toward me down the crowded sidewalk – old and young, well dressed and ragged, innocent and corrupt – was in danger of getting lost. I was scared that the world itself was as lost as it was made. And of course in a thousand ways it is.”**

There are two slaveries here – slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness. They have totally different results. Those who become sin's slave soon discover that it is a harsh taskmaster that clasps them in irons, fastens a slave collar around their neck, tattoos his ownership on their forehead, and cracks a deadly whip to keep them bowing and scraping before their master. Sin seems to promise freedom, but it robs persons of it, de-humanizes them, and hurls their lives skidding and careening toward an inescapable destruction. (David Garland)

Being enslaved to sin is the bad news, but the good news is we can choose to be servants of righteousness. Look at Romans 6:16. “Do you not know that when you present yourselves to someone as slaves for obedience, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either sin resulting in death, or of obedience resulting in righteousness?”

Or look at 6:18. “and having been freed from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.”

Paul is celebrating (6:17-19) that they are no longer slaves to sin. They are a new person, set free in Christ. Freedom from slavery to sin means slavery to righteousness. Being owned by righteousness, having righteousness as your master, leads to holiness (6:22). Holiness – that is sanctification – is used in scripture to refer to God's action in setting His people apart for His possession and purposes.

In regard to God, holiness implies His transcendence, His uniqueness, and His purity. In regard to us, God's people, holiness means being set apart for a relationship with the Holy One, to display His character in every area of our life.

Holiness is not based on our own merit. Rather, we are called (Romans 1:7) to be the saints, the holy ones, granted to us by God. And once we accept our status, once we see ourselves as God's people, then we will live our lives accordingly.

There is a fourth contrast here in Romans.

IV. Fruit for death or fruit for God (7:5).

Look at Romans 7:5.

For while we were in the flesh, the sinful passions, which were aroused by the Law, were at work in the members of our body to bear fruit for death.

What Paul is saying about the law here in verse 5 (and the verses that follow), is that the law didn't solve the sin problem. It simply added fuel to the fire. To be sure, it's God's law. It's not that the law is bad; it is, rather, that the law cannot save us from sin. Rather, it locks us in sin's jail house that we might be released by the Christ.

It reminds me of the zoo keeper who said he had a problem with kids throwing coins in the alligator pond. So he put up a sign that said, "Please do not toss coins in the alligator pond." The result was many more coins went into the water.

It's not that the law is bad; it's that we are. The law brings out the worst of our fallen nature, Paul is saying. The full fruition of our sin leads to death.

The fruit of death isn't the only kind of fruit. Look back at 7:4, "fruit for God." "Therefore, my brethren, you also were made to die to the Law through the body of Christ, so that you might be joined to another, to Him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit for God."

In Galatians, Paul reminds us what fruit for God looks like: love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness – the fruit of God's Spirit. You want to produce fruit of the flesh, which is death, or fruit of being bound to Christ, which is fruit for God?

There is a final contrast.

V. The old letter of the new Spirit.

Look at Romans 7:6.

For now we have been released from the Law, having died to that by which we were bound, so that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter.

How about this term, "oldness of the letter." The law was visible only as letters etched on tablets or inscribed with ink on scrolls. The letters of the law have no power to transform hearts. Paul contrasts the letter with the Spirit, whose transforming power dwells in believers (8:9) to fulfill in them the just requirements of the law (8:4) and to conform them to the image of God's Son (8:9).

Yes, the law may be spiritual (7:12), but it is not the Spirit of God. It functions in the domain of flesh. This arouses a sinful hunger lurking within us, instead of bringing about obedience. The Spirit, however, operates internally to produce a spiritual, inner transformation that makes possible the new life, the new creation, the entire new orientation toward God so that it bears fruit for God with moral behavior.

So there you have your contrasts. You have wages or a gift. Law or grace. Serving sin as master or righteousness. Producing fruit for death or fruit for God. Living under the old letter of living in the newness of the Spirit.

I don't know what's the best Christmas gift you've ever been given – “Incredible Edibles,” a brand new bike, or a shiny sled that made you long for snow. But the best gift God has ever given you is the gift of His Son. “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

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

You've got to pick your own path. And the law won't help you, for the law will just lock you up under sin.

So the question is which path will you pick? Will you choose wages or a gift? Will you choose law or will you choose grace? Will you choose sin with the old Adam or righteousness with the new Adam in Christ? Will you produce fruit for death or fruit for God? Are you going to live under the old letter or are you going to celebrate in the new Spirit?

(David Garland, forthcoming commentary on Romans)