

Sin's Wages and God's Gift

J. Gresham Machen (1881-1937)

For the wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23).

SOME time ago I heard a sermon on this text by a preacher who has now retired. The sermon was not one that I agreed with altogether, but the beginning of it, I thought, was interesting. The preacher said that during the preceding summer he had met in a chance sort of way, on one of the steamers of the Great Lakes, a gentleman who turned out to be a man of large affairs, but a man who had little to do with the church. Incidentally the conversation turned to religious matters, and the man of business gave to the preacher the benefit of a little criticism. The criticism was perhaps not unworthy of attention. "You preachers," the outsider said, "don't preach hell enough."

Usually the criticism which is leveled at the church by men who know nothing about it is as valueless as ignorant criticism is in other spheres. But in this case I am inclined to think that the critic was right. We preachers do not preach hell enough, and we do not say enough about sin. We talk about the gospel and wonder why people are not interested in what we say. Of course they are not interested. No man is interested in a piece of good news unless he has the consciousness of needing it; no man is interested in an offer of salvation unless he knows that there is something from which he needs to be saved. It is quite useless to ask a man to adopt the Christian view of the gospel unless he first has the Christian view of sin.

But a man will never adopt the Christian view of sin if he considers merely the sin of the world or the sins of other people. Consideration of the sins of other people is the deadliest of moral anodynes; it relieves the pain of conscience but it also destroys moral life. Many persons gloat over denunciations of that to which they are not tempted; or they even gloat over denunciations, in the case of other people, of sins which are also really theirs. King David was very severe when the prophet Nathan narrated to him his sordid tale of greed. "As the Lord liveth," said David, "the man that hath done this thing shall surely die." But Nathan was a disconcerting prophet. "And Nathan said to David, 'Thou art the man.'" (II Samuel 12:5, 7) That was for David the beginning of a real sense of his sin. So it will also be with us.

Of course it seems quite preposterous that we should be sinners. It was preposterous also for King David seated on his throne in the majesty of his royal robes. It was preposterous, but it was true. So also it is preposterous for us. It seems to be a strange notion to treat respectable people as sinners. In the case of college men, it seems particularly absurd. College men look so pleasant; it seems preposterous to connect them with the dreadful fact of sin. Some time ago I was reading, I

think in a journal published in London, a review of a book that dealt with religious conditions among university men or young people. The author of the book spoke of the moral ideals of the young men of the present day as being summed up in the notion of being a good sport. The young men of the present day, it was said in effect, may not use the old terminology of guilt and retribution, but they dislike the man who does not know how to play fairly a match of lawn tennis and does not know how to take defeat like a gentleman. The remark of the reviewer, I thought, was eminently just. Surely, he said, with regard to this very common lawn tennis view of sin — surely, he said, among university men "there are grimmer facts than these." He was right, and we know he was right. He was right about university men in England; he was right about college men in America; and he was right about the rest of us as well. There are grimmer facts than poor lawn tennis and poor sport, regrettable though that no doubt is. There is, in general, in a thousand ugly forms, the grim fact of sin.

So when I speak of sin I am not talking to you about the sin of other people, but I am talking to you about your sin, and I am talking to myself about my sin. I am talking about that particular battle ground where you come to grips with the power of evil and where you meet your God.

Suppose that on that battle ground we have met defeat. What is the result? The answer of the text and the answer of the whole Bible is short and plain. "The wages of sin," says the Bible, "is death" (Romans 6:23). I shall not pause just now to consider in detail what Paul means by "death" — except just to point out this interesting fact that if you want to find the most terrible descriptions of this eternal death you will find them not in Paul but in Jesus. It is the custom nowadays to appeal from the supposedly gloomy theology of Paul to the supposedly sunny philosophy of Jesus; but the strange thing is that it is Jesus, not Paul, who speaks of the outer darkness and the everlasting fire and of the sin that shall not be forgiven either in this world or in that which is to come. Paul is content in his Epistles to treat of the punishment of sin with some reserve — a reserve very impressive and very terrifying, it is true — but Jesus is more explicit. Jesus makes abundantly plain that the offender against God's law is facing something far more dreadful, to say the least, than mere annihilation would be. The teaching of Jesus has at the very center of it the fear of God and the fear of hell. No human law without sanction is complete; a law without a penalty is an altogether worthless and pitiful thing. Are God's laws of this pitiful kind?

There are some people who seem to think that they are. But as a matter of fact God's laws have attached to them sanctions compared with which all human penalties are as nothing.

The fact appears even in the course of this world. There is a deadly inexorableness about the laws of nature. Offend against the laws of health, and the result follows with a terrible certainty; no excuses will avail; crying and tears will count nothing; the retribution, however deferred, is sure. In the sphere of the physical life, it is certainly clear that the wages of sin is death. But many people think that the paymaster can be cheated, that after a life of sin we can present ourselves hopefully at the cashier's window and be paid in some different coin from that which we have earned. Do you

really agree with them? Do you really think that in this accounting you can cheat? Do you really think that by care in the physical sphere you can avoid the consequences of sin? There is something within us that tells us that such is not the case; there is something within us that reveals the abyss over which we are standing, that brushes aside our petty excuses, that reveals in the inner, moral sphere, as in the physical realm, the same terrible inexorableness of law. God grant that we may not deceive ourselves! God grant that we may not hope to cheat! God grant that we may learn in time that the wages of sin is death!

There is a definiteness and certainty about wages. Wages are different from a spontaneous gift; wages, unlike a gift, are fixed. A man has done his week's work; he presents himself at the paymaster's desk, and is paid off; the matter is not discussed; the employee does not try then to strike a bargain with the cashier. The amount of the payment has been determined beforehand, and the payment itself is a purely formal, impersonal affair. So it is, somewhat, with the wages of sin. The wages have been fixed already. I do not mean that all sins are punished alike; no doubt at God's judgment seat there is a delicacy of discrimination quite impossible under human laws. And I do not mean that the penalty of sin follows merely by a natural law that is independent of God. But however the law has been established, it is, when once established, inexorable. It is quite useless for a man to argue about the penalty of his sin; it is useless in the physical sphere of the laws of health, and it will be useless when we appear at last before Him who knows the secrets of the heart. Let us not deceive ourselves, my friends. The moral constitution of the universe is a very terrible thing. Let us not think that we can trifle with it. The world is governed by inexorable law. And that law establishes by an immutable decree the dreadful consequences of sin. The wages of sin is death.

At that point some preachers stop. Here stopped, for example, the noted preacher whose sermon gave us our text and our subject today. The terribleness of sin and the inexorableness of law — it is writ large in the physical organism of man and in the whole course of nature. It is also writ large in the Bible. But the Bible, unlike nature, does not stop here. "The wages of sin is death" — it is a great truth, but it is not the end of our text. The wages of sin is death — that is the law. But the Bible contains more than the law; it contains also the gospel. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23).

The free gift is contrasted with wages. Yet men persist in dragging it down to the wage level; they persist in trying to make the gift of God a product of some law. They persist in regarding salvation as proceeding by some natural process from faith or from some other quality of men. They regard Christianity as founded upon permanent principles of religion instead of being founded upon an unexpected piece of news. When will the vain effort be abandoned? Salvation is nothing, or it is a free gift; it is not a principle that has been discovered but an event that has happened.

The trouble is that we are unwilling to take God at His word. We persist in endeavoring to save ourselves. If we have learned to any degree that lesson of the law, if we have come to have a horror

of sin, we persist in thinking that it depends upon us to get rid of it. We try to make use of our own moral resources in this struggle, and we fall yet deeper and deeper into the mire. When shall we take God at His word? When shall we simply accept, in faith, the gift of salvation which He has offered?

It is certainly worth accepting. It consists in "eternal life." We need not now ask in detail what that means. But certainly it is as glorious as the "death" with which it is contrasted is terrible. It is certainly happiness as contrasted with woe, but it is far more than happiness. It involves service, and it involves the presence of God.

The free gift of God is an absolutely unaccountable event in the life of every man who accepts it. It is not the natural working out of a principle, but it is a thing that happens. But that happening in the soul is the result of a happening in the sphere of external history. The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. There we have the central characteristic of our religion; the central characteristic of Christianity is that it is not founded merely upon what always was true but primarily upon something that happened — something that took place near Jerusalem at a definite time in the world's history. In other words, it is founded not merely upon permanent truths of religion, but upon a "gospel," a piece of news.

The Christian preacher, be he ever so humble, is entrusted with that gospel. We could not hope to be listened to if we had merely our own thoughts; there are so many others in the world wiser and more learned than we. But in a time of peril in a beleaguered city the humblest of day-laborers is more worth listening to than the greatest of orators, if he has news. So it is with the Christian preacher in this deadly peril of the soul. The wages of sin is death — that is the law. But at the decisive point Christ has taken the wages upon Himself — that is the gospel. Inexorable is the moral law of God. But God's mercy has used, and triumphed over, His law. We deserved eternal death; but Christ died instead of us on the cross. Shall we accept the gift? The result will be a fresh start in God's favor and then a winning battle against sin. "The wages of sin is death; but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."



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