

The great achievement of a writer is to build sentences in which every word works. There is no dead wood. The words build a window, and reality, like sunlight, comes streaming into a person's thoughts and feelings. The Apostle Paul wrote such a sentence in Romans 6:23: **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** That sentence has 20 words. We would need a ten-minute meditation on each word to frame the window. I have built my meditation on two of those words: **gift** and **life**. Think about **gift** first.

## Gift

Do you ever give someone a gift and not expect something in return? It's hard to do that. One gift definitely falls into that category, the anonymous gift. I was on the Market Street Mall in Wilmington last month to give blood, and on the corner of 9<sup>th</sup> and Market a man in his 50s or early 60s was standing there playing his violin for all he was worth. His violin case was open for people to put in money. Musicians who do that may not say anything to the people who give them money. They won't see those people again, and the people who give are just as happy to put in a few coins and move on. They can feel good about themselves for giving, and there's no fuss, no expectations, no awkward thank you for the pittance they gave. Here's the question: Is that the best kind of gift? Isn't it better to give someone a gift and expect something in return?

My instinctive answer to my own question was, "No, it is not better." I trusted my instincts enough to stop what I was doing and find out why it might not be good to expect something in return for a gift. The reason came fast and furious. Fear of being exploited by another person makes us suspicious, when someone offers to give us something, especially something of value.

We have learned, usually the hard way, that if something seems to be too good to be true, it probably is. "What's the catch? What's in it for you? What is this going to cost me?" We would be foolish in our kind of world not to be on guard. That's what lay behind my instinct to say, "Stop. Hold it. Time out! Something's not right here."

I get it. I haven't minimized the danger in what I say today. But another voice inside me says: that danger is not the whole story. Most giving is not anonymous, and I refuse to believe that all giving is a cynical exploitation of other people. We often give and expect something in return without trying to use someone for our own advantage.

Suppose parents give their four-year-old a bicycle with training wheels. Are they trying to exploit their child? They have expectations, certainly. They expect their child to squeal with delight; and they are seldom disappointed. They expect their child to want to ride it and some day to ride it without training wheels. They expect their child to obey them when they teach the child how to be safe on a bicycle. There is nothing sinister about their expectations.

And isn't a gift with such expectations superior to anonymous giving? Anonymous giving can be a lovely thing, but it deprives the giver of something he can't do without for very long: thanks, appreciation, friendship, and even a gift in return. Gifts with proper expectations make all those human goods and many others possible, and they make the world a kinder, gentler place.

Let's remember this meditation on giving, as we consider the apostle's magnificent summary of spiritual reality: **The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** Now, let's link **gift** with another theme in Romans: friendship with God.

## Friendship

Romans 6:14 will help us make the link. **What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace?** Paul was asking questions because of what his readers needed to hear. Let's take his main idea there and use it for what we need to hear. **We are not under law but under grace.** Once again, every word is working, carrying a load of meaning. We can offload some of that meaning, if we think about friendship with God.

Friendship with God is “the fulfillment of (your) transcendent dignity and calling (as a) human person.” (*First Things*, “Pornography and Acedia, April, 2012, 45) Jesus Christ has reestablished friendship with God. **When we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his son** – Romans 5:10. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has created a new community of faith, the Church, which has been restored to friendship with God. Your faith in Christ and your participation in the Church give you a share in that friendship. Growing friendship with God is the work of a lifetime. Friendship with God is the big story in which our little stories find transcendent meaning. Friendship with God is the heart and soul of the message of Romans.

Now, think small. Think about someone who is your friend. I got an e-mail last November from Frank, one of my closest high school friends. We had not seen or spoken to each other since the mid-sixties. It was not just memories that came flooding back. Affection and issues we both care about immediately took center stage in our e-mail exchanges, as if we had been talking every week. I hope you have friends like that.

Here's the question: Is the focus of your friendship keeping rules? Do you have a checklist of behavior for your friend? “Does Frank's life measure up?” Of course not! Friendship doesn't thrive on rules. It thrives on common purposes; it thrives on affection and even on the addition of new people to the circle of friendship.

**We are not under law**, wrote the apostle. Our friendship with God does not thrive on rules. That's not what you expect a preacher to say, is it? The apostle did not say it lightly. Painful, personal experience lay behind that statement. His honesty is so potent, we should hear what he said. You find it in Romans 7:7.

**What shall we say, then? Is the law sin?** Is the law a bad thing? Is keeping the rules a bad thing? **Certainly not!** Here comes the statement you don't want to miss. **Indeed I would not have known what sin was except through the law.** You understand that. The quickest way to be sure that your child will do what you don't want your child to do is to tell him . . . not to do it. That's what Paul said God's law does to us.

Keep reading verse seven for specifics. **For I would not have known what coveting really was if the law had not said, “Do not covet.”** That's the Tenth of the Ten Commandments. **Do not covet.** Do not yearn to possess. Verse eight: **But sin**, the streak of lawlessness in each of us, **seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, produced in me every kind of covetous desire.** The quickest way to be sure that you will do what you should not do is for someone to tell you not to do it. And once we deliberately break a Commandment, our disobedience can go viral.

Theologically considered, the root of our present economic recession is covetousness. The yearning to possess wealth infected the great financial houses of Wall Street, and the same yearning to possess caused people to deplete the equity in their homes to buy expensive toys and caused them to buy houses they couldn't afford. And the world teetered on the brink of another great depression. What did the apostle

say in Romans 6:23? **The wages of sin is death.** We all feel it, and some of you have experienced up close and personal the death of jobs, the death of meaningful work, and extraordinary strains on marriages and family life.

Back to Romans 6:14: **We are not under law.** Our friendship with God does not thrive on rules. No friendship thrives on rules. It thrives on common purposes; it thrives on affection and even on the addition of new people to the circle of friendship. In the language of verse 14 it thrives on grace. **We are not under law but under grace.** And friends give each other gifts, not to use the friend for personal advantage but as an expression of friendship. That brings us back to the apostle's 20 weighty words of Romans 6:23: **For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.** What is this gift He has given us in Christ our Lord?

### Eternal Life

**The gift of God is eternal life.** Do you ever think, "I might not be?" If that one sperm and that one egg had not joined forces, I would not be. Close call! If my mother had gone through with the abortion, I would not be. If the truck that struck our car had been one inch to the left, I would not be. Life is a gift, a treasure, and it was God's idea. And along come Israel, Jesus, and the Church, and the gift finds a staggering extension: eternal life.

Some people don't like the idea of living forever. Two of my favorite writers, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien, caught in a few words a hellish version of living forever. Here's the way Lewis said it: "she has unwearying strength and endless days like a goddess. But length of days with an evil heart is only length of misery." (*The Magician's Nephew*, 157) And now Tolkien's version: he talks about a mortal who "does not die, but he does not grow or obtain more life, he merely continues, until at last every minute is a weariness." (*The Fellowship of the Ring*, 76)

No friend would give such a gift, and certainly not our Father in heaven, who went to such lengths to restore friendship with us, when we could have cared less. We come closer to the truth to say that eternal life is unwearying strength and endless days with a good heart. Eternal life is a new, indestructible body that does not die and in which we grow and obtain more life, until at last every minute is joy and peace.

And there is one more idea suggested by these weighty words **gift** and **eternal life**. Is the gift of eternal life like a box of chocolates, or is it like that child's new bike? The box of chocolates is good, but when the box is empty, the gift has pretty well exhausted its possibilities. The memories linger for a while and then fade altogether.

The bike is a gift that goes on giving. It contains new possibilities. The child learns a new skill. It's a big day when the training wheels come off. If the whole family rides, they can travel their neighborhoods. They can strap their bikes on the back of their car and ride together in places they've never been before. As strength increases, Bike to the Bay becomes a possibility, not only for exercise and challenge, but also to help raise money to find a cure for MS. And on and on! You get the idea.

I hope you get the idea. It is central to the slashing truth the apostle captured in Romans 6:23: **the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord. Eternal life** opens up new possibilities, which we can experience now in our spiritual childhood and undreamed of possibilities at all future stages of spiritual growth, including heaven. Eternal life has already begun for the friends of God and offers endless possibilities for human flourishing right now and for all eternity.

**Antidote to Moralism**

Wilfred McClay is a Professor of Humanities at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. In 2006, the State Department invited him to give lectures on the separation of church and state in Turkey. He spoke high praise for their warm reception and their keen interest in religious tolerance. The highlight of his trip came among Islamic scholars on the Asian side of Istanbul. After he spoke, the audience asked him questions – none more penetrating than one offered by a Muslim woman. She asked if he accepted the Christian view of the primacy of love. He said he did, and she posed this question: “*how can it be love, for you or me or anyone, to permit another person, someone we love, to believe something that we know to be false?*” (*First Things*, “Liberalism After Liberalism,” May, 2012, 30) My answer to her question is rooted in a story from the Gospel of Mark 10:17ff.

A man asked Jesus, “**What must I do to inherit eternal life?**” Verse 19: “**You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’**” Jesus didn’t say, “Oh well, you know, different strokes for different folks.” He honored the moral foundations of human behavior. He was about to put them in a different context.

The man said with a straight face, “**Teacher, all these I have kept since I was a boy.**” Verse 21 is priceless: **Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.**” Hey, we’re talking about eternal life. What’s it worth to you? **At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.**”

“Well, come on, Jesus. You’re not going to let him just walk away, are you? I thought you said you loved him.” And I can hear Jesus say, “That’s why I won’t go after him. I love him too much to do that. Until he can freely return my love, I will let him have his way. I will not force even eternal life on unwilling people.”

That’s my answer to that Muslim woman’s question. That’s how friendship with God works. Friendship with God does not coerce, and it does not thrive on rules, not even on the Ten Commandments. It thrives on common purposes; it thrives on affection and even on the addition of new people to the circle of friendship. It’s the best antidote I know to moralism with its air of superiority, which gives pastors and other Christians their reputation as joy-killers, hypocrites, and hateful.

I said that friendship with God is the work of a lifetime. This church has a specific task it must accomplish at this time in history in our little corner of the world. I will frame that task in the form of a question. Can Brandywine Valley Baptist Church hold firmly to the moral foundations of human behavior without any air of moral superiority, and can this church deepen its friendship with God with common purposes, affection, and the addition of new people to the circle of that friendship?

That’s how we can experience more possibilities of human flourishing that are inherent in **the gift of God, which is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.** I can lead you in that task. If several hundred of you catch the same vision, many thousands of people in the next 20 years will be blessed through this church.