

“Promised Wages”

Liturgical Date: Lent 2 (A)

Primary Text: Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

Grace be unto you, and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The primary text for today, the Second Sunday in Lent, is the Epistle Lesson from Romans 4. The title of the sermon is “Promised Wages” as what payment we receive in eternity depends on *who* has earned the wages. AS WE COULD NEVER EARN OUR WAY INTO HEAVEN, GOD BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH GIFTS US WHAT HE HAS EARNED SO THAT WE MAY BE ETERNALLY RIGHTEOUS.

What is the best day at work? Or if you are retired or not currently holding a paying job, what was your favorite day at work? Payday, of course! I remember my first payday as a teacher. In those days you got an actual paper check, where as most people today have their pay direct deposited. I was not sure of the logistics of getting my check. So I asked a veteran teacher over lunch in the teacher’s lounge. Now to make sense of what I was told you need to know two things: the mascot of this particular school was the “War Eagle” and there is an old saying that when you get paid at the end of the work week “the Eagle flies on Friday.’ So this teacher said, the principal will come on the intercom and say, “The Eagle has landed and then we all go up to the office and get our checks.” I said, “Really?” Well, it turns out he was just having a bit of fun with me, the new and naïve 23 year old teacher. That of course is not how the checks were distributed.

But the concept of doing a job and then getting paid for it is not unusual. When you take on a job or a position of employment you agree to do certain things, meet certain production quotas, and often work for a

specified period of time. You receive promised wages. That's how it works. Right? We do work. We get paid. We spend the money. We go back to work and the cycle repeats itself until if we have performed good work for a long period of time we get to retire. Sounds pretty straightforward and logical.

This is how things work in the secular world. Specific work=specific pay. And there is really nothing wrong with that system in the fallen world we live in. Because if there was not something in it for the employee, very few people would work and thus our economy would not be very stable. But the problem is when people apply this system of works and rewards to God. Because when they do they end up believing that they can work their way to heaven. We must understand that God's system of payment works on a different track than the world: God's way is the way of grace.

Would anyone describe their employment situation as grace based? Even if your job involves serving other people, even providing care and mercy for others, it is not. You may go above and beyond for a certain person, but that is not why you get paid. You get paid for doing what your job requires. Those wages are due to you. You earned them. If you don't do the task and put in the hours you are supposed to, you won't get paid. And if that behavior continues, you won't have a job. Conversely, if you do the work that you are supposed to do and your employer doesn't come through with the wages they have promised, you probably won't keep working there long. This is a works based system, no doubt. As verse four of our Epistle Lesson said, *"Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due."*

And as I said, this is how most people in the world view God. God is the "big boss in the sky" so to speak. He gives us a list of rules to follow

and tasks to complete. If we do those things reasonably well, then God will be pleased. Perhaps we will even get rewarded by going to the “good place” in the afterlife. Every religion in the world teaches that the way to please God and to the pleasant afterlife is based on works. Except one. And that is Biblical, Jesus-centered Christianity. I make that distinction in specifically saying “Bible” and “Jesus-centered” because unfortunately some groups, and many individuals, who claim the name of Christ believe and teach that good works do at least in part contribute to salvation.

People make the error of thinking that pleasing God is a lot like pleasing your earthly boss. They make that error today and they made it in the past. This is what St. Paul is addressing in Romans 4 and the Scripture does in many other places as well. People were saying that Christians, particularly Gentiles who converted, must follow certain Jewish Old Testament Laws. They, as people will do today, point to places in Scripture with a wrong understanding or taking things out of context. Paul is making it clear here that what Abraham and David did was not to earn favor with God, but they did these things because they had faith. In our Old Testament Lesson from Genesis 12, why does Abraham pack up everything and move his family to a far off place? Because he had faith. Not to get faith and favor, but because he already had it. Why did he follow God’s command and become circumcised? Because he had faith. In fact, God states in Genesis that Abraham was declared righteous even before he was circumcised. Why was David called a “man after God’s own heart”? Because he earned it? No, he knew his righteousness came apart from works (verse 6).

Our text makes it crystal clear. Verse 5, *“And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as*

righteousness". And verse 16, *"That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace..."*.

You see when it comes to attempting to gain forgiveness, righteousness, and eternal life there are actually only two roads that you can travel: the road of works OR the road of faith. But only one of these roads leads to the desired destination. At the end of each road there is a payday of wages. At the end of each road is exactly the wages that God has informed us will be there. But the pay is very different at the end of each road because that pay is based on who has earned it.

The first road is the one that tragically most people will go down. It is broad, wide and well-traveled, well-lit, and you will have plenty of company. It is a road that is appealing, especially in a culture that likes to think hard work is rewarded with big compensation. It is a road that affirms our sinful nature that tells us, *"You can do it. You deserve it. Your sins aren't really that serious, just make sure you do some good to outweigh the bad. If I work hard, help others, be a "good person", and maybe jump through some religious hoops this is enough to make God happy."* At the end of this road one will receive exactly what their works have earned them. The wages due them will be delivered.

But if you travel this road, what will your wages be? Judgment. Death. Separation from God. Eternal damnation. Why? Don't even the best employees make mistakes and they still get a paycheck. Does this make God an unjust and unloving "boss"? No. Think about this. In most jobs if you mess up from time to time it is not a huge deal. If I accidentally give a student a 0 on something they turned in, I can just go back and fix it. If you are a server in a restaurant and bring out the wrong order to a customer, you may not get a big tip-but it can be corrected without too much long-term

impact. But for some jobs, doing the right thing even 99% of the time is not good enough. A nuclear power plant operator could make sure the tower is cooled properly 99 days in a row, but if he did it wrong once every hundred days the consequences would be grave. An air traffic controller at the Atlanta airport may correctly perform her duties for hundreds of flights on any given day, but if she makes one mistake of having two airplanes land at the same time, disaster would strike. And she can't just say, "Well, what about all the other times I did it right." Now think about how much more high and holy God is than even these key jobs.

The point is that God does not "grade on a curve." Only the righteous are good enough to enter heaven. And what does that mean? That means perfection. God is holy, perfect, without any sin at all. To be in His presence and live, so must we be. That means one sin, no matter how big or small is damning. Our works cannot erase them. One time doing what we are not supposed to do or not doing what we should and we have failed to meet the 100% standard of God. And we have sinned many, many more times than one. Furthermore, if God was obligated to give us salvation based on our own works, that means God would be indebted to us-which would be foolishness. When one goes down the road of works to attempt to please God, it is impossible task to do enough to erase our sin. We will get exactly what we earned: death.

This is grim, but it is the truth. But let me share another truth with you today. Remember that there are two roads. The other road is much more narrow than the first. The going on it can be more difficult. You will not be alone on it, but it certainly feels more lonely than the other one. And people will even tell you that you are crazy for going down it. But this is the road that you want to take.

It is the road of faith that is paved with grace. Those on this road readily admit, *“I can’t do it. I don’t deserve it. I am a sinner, and a big one at that. Yes, I will do good works but that doesn’t make me anymore deserving.”* But those on this road know that there is good news despite all of these things being true. They know that just as the Scriptures and Confessions teach us, *“If the promise were to depend upon our works it would not be sure.”* (AP AC XX 87) They know, just as we sang in our hymn of the day, *“Not what these hands have done Can save this guilty soul; Not what this toiling flesh has born Can make my spirit whole.”* They know that wages are paid at the end of this road too, but not the wages that we have earned-but the wages that God Himself has earned and so richly and graciously shared with us.

We see in verse 13 that “the promise” was made to Abraham and the Bible and Confessions use the word “promise” as a reference to the Gospel. The promise that as verse 17 said, *“gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.”* And what is, rather whom, is this promise? It is Jesus. It is God Himself in the flesh that came to earth. Who would do what we could not. The one who would keep the Law perfectly, without so much as one blemish or stumble. In this being the perfect sacrifice for the sins of the world, given upon the cross. Just as Jesus told Nicodemus in John 3, the Son of man would be lifted up. Death was defeated and Jesus burst from the tomb alive.

In this God Himself has won forgiveness overflowing. The price has been paid. And the benefits do not have to worked for or purchased by us. Because He had done all the work already. He has paid for it in His own blood. Again as we sang earlier, *“Thy work alone, O Christ, Can ease this weight of sin; Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, Can give me peace within.”*

And He gives it to all of His children freely, out of grace, His divine Fatherly goodness. Did you catch that? He *gives* it to us. *All* of it. When payday comes at the end of the road of faith, it is more than we can ever deserve or imagine. We are not paid with what *our* works have earned, but with what *His* works have earned. Faith is counted as righteousness. Forgiveness, righteousness, and thus eternal salvation-eternity in heaven with God and all His people is freely given. Why and how? For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.

In this earthly life we will have to continue the cycle of working, drawing pay, and then paying bills. But please don't translate that cycle to how God works salvation. This transaction operates on a different track. Righteousness has been delivered. Wages that we have not and cannot earn. The payment for our sin has been made by and delivered by God Himself. Completely given freely by His grace. Completely received in faith. Walk that road of faith in complete trust that you can stand on the promises of God.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Amen.