

Sermon Growth Guide

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Freedom's Gift | Romans 6:12-23

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Key Verse: Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Big Idea: As servants of Jesus, we’ve been given a tremendous gift that lasts forever: eternal life.



Foundations

Paul refers to us as slaves nine times in this week’s passage. This description would have resonated with many of his readers, for an estimated quarter of the workforce at that time were slaves.

Today, we balk at the idea of being slaves to anything or anyone. After all, we live in a country where we celebrate our freedom and independence! But Paul uses this image of slavery to set the stage for his message of freedom that we experience by serving Jesus.

Years ago, Bob Dylan wrote a song titled, “Gotta Serve Somebody.” The song was a declaration of faith, challenging listeners to ponder the consequences of their choices. It prompted a response from John Lennon with his own song, “Serve Yourself.”

Paul’s point is that serving ourselves will result in receiving what we deserve: death and separation from God. But serving God results in receiving what we don’t deserve: the gift not only of relationship with Jesus and the freedom He offers, but also of life forever with him.

Understanding God’s Word

Together, read Romans 6:12-23. Paul describes us in 6:22 as “slaves to God.” How do you feel about that phrase, and is it consistent with how you view your relationship with God? Paul exhorts us in 6:19 to “offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness.” What is he instructing us to do?

Applying God’s Word

When you think of eternal life, what comes to mind? What do you think shapes that perception?

Four characteristics of eternal life were suggested in the sermon: 1) The experience will be better than we can even imagine; 2) We’ll enjoy relationships more fully than we ever have; 3) It will feel like home; and 4) Jesus Christ will be front and center. Which of these do you find most reassuring, and why?

Witnessing God’s Word

How can your hope of God’s gift of life forever even more glorious than our current experience shape how you live today—and how can others see this hope in you in ways that might draw them to Jesus?

“Made like him, like him we rise.” Every Easter, we sing that. I don’t remember a thing about the first time I preached here 31 years ago, though I’m sure I was nervous. Today, the only thing I’m nervous about is how much Kleenex I’ll need!

Our current sermon series in Romans, Like Him We Rise, is fitting today. After celebrating Jesus’ resurrection last Sunday, we remember His promise of eternal life. We also celebrate church members who’ve gone to be with Jesus since last Easter. I invite you to turn to Rom. 6. But before we look at this text, I want to share some personal words.

During my college years I planned to be a schoolteacher, like both my parents. As I neared the end of my studies and began thinking about a job, though, I realized my heart wasn’t in it. While my friends started living out what they’d trained for, I didn’t have a clue what to do with my life. What I remember most about that period was a deep longing to somehow experience meaning in what I did.

Over time, two things happened to provide meaning far beyond what I’d longed for. First, God called me into a role of pastor that I never saw coming and didn’t feel qualified for. I remain mystified and humbled that He entrusted me with such a significant role on His behalf.

Second, God led us to this church 31 years ago. When we moved here in early 1995, I couldn’t have anticipated the deep, deep meaning I’ve experienced as your pastor, and the richness of relationship that we’ve shared together here over the years. This is where our kids grew up; this is where I also grew, with your love and encouragement. I will always be grateful for God’s life-changing call and provision for all I’ve needed in this role. I will always be deeply grateful for these years we’ve shared together, and how they’ve shaped my life.

Much has changed structurally at First Pres over the years: bricks were painted and the platform changed in the Sanctuary; the Fellowship Hall was converted to the Worship Center. What hasn’t changed is the character of this congregation: your love

and encouragement over the years. During my time here, I’m the fourth pastor to retire after more than 30 years: John Stevens, Jim Smith, and Jim DeJarnette. A couple other staff members have been here even longer. That’s a tremendous testimony to the health and vibrancy of this family of faith.

I thought I’d be as excited as kid on the last day of school, watching the clock tick down to summer vacation. However, excitement has been overshadowed by sadness as I think of not ministering to you any longer. I’ve been a pastor at First Pres for three quarters of my adult life following college. That’s not something easily moved on from, nor should it be. I love you all, and I’ll miss you greatly.

And so, we’re processing a goodbye that doesn’t feel good to many of us. That pales, though, compared to the goodbyes we say to loved ones when death approaches. In today’s passage, Paul reminds us that these goodbyes aren’t permanent. I’m not going to spend as much time in our text as we usually do; at this point, it’s not like my job security is riding on it! But let’s pray and then read Romans 6:12-23.

Throughout much of today’s passage, Paul offers a contrast between where we’ve been and where we are today. He notes that we were once slaves to our self-centered sin inclination, living for ourselves. And Paul declares that once we devote our lives to serving Jesus, we experience life and freedom. Thus, today’s theme is Freedom’s Gift.

This contrast between serving self and serving Jesus reaches its climax in our final verse: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (6:23) A wage is something we earn, that we deserve; Paul says that if we live for ourselves, we’ll get what we deserve. Not just a body running out of steam and breathing its last, but separation from God forever. In contrast to wages, a gift is never deserved, but given out of love by the giver. When we live for Jesus, we won’t get what we deserve, but will receive so much more.

Sometimes at a memorial service I’ll make the statement, “None of us are good enough for heaven.” And then I’ll let the words linger for a few uncomfortable moments, knowing

that someone in the room thinks that's how it works. Eternal life and relationship with God are never contingent on being good enough, but upon acknowledging that we're not good enough--that we regularly fall short of not only our own desires, but also of God's. We admit our need for what Jesus has done for us, and we receive God's gift of grace that He longs to lavish upon us.

Thus, Paul's words: "The gift of God is eternal life" (6:23). Would you say this with me? When you hear this promise of eternal life, I wonder what comes to mind? Our understanding of what comes after death can remain elusive and undefined. As a result, we tend to view eternal life more as a consolation prize thrown in with death than something we're eagerly looking forward to.

If we're going to spend most of our lives with Jesus in eternity, doesn't it make sense to spend at least a little time talking about it? So, I want to offer some thoughts on eternal life that I hope might cultivate greater eagerness. I've also shared these over the years with participants in our Grief Workshop.

When Billy Graham started out in ministry, he was in a small town and wanted to mail a letter. He stopped a young boy and asked directions to the post office. After receiving them, Graham invited the boy to a service that evening where he'd be telling everyone how to get to heaven. The boy responded, "I don't think I'll be there. You don't even know how to get to the post office." Talking about eternal life and trying to describe what's on the other side of the curtain of death can be daunting. The Apostle Paul wrote that no eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Cor. 2:9). Still, I believe there are four things about eternal life that we can look forward to.

First, our experience will be better than we can even imagine. For some reason, we tend to fear that eternal life will be a step down from what we're used to here on earth. We imagine it can't possibly be as enjoyable as what we're currently experiencing, likely because this is all we know. Thus, one of the better-known images is of a sedentary existence, sitting on a cloud with a harp.

When you think of eternal life, what comes/mind? Now, look at these images over the next few moments (pictures of nature's beauty). If God would create such beauty in a world we're in for just a few years, why do we think He'd scrimp for eternity? Before Bob Benson died of cancer at the age of 55, he wrote these words: "I used to think, loving life so greatly, that to die would be like leaving the party before the end. But now I know that the party is really happening somewhere else." While we can't fully envision what eternal life will be like, we do know something about the one who's created it. The Apostle Paul writes, "(God) is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). If you think of the best day or experience you've ever had, it will pale in comparison to what God has in store for us. When I first saw the Grand Canyon, my job dropped and I instinctively said "Wow!" That will be our initial response when we enter eternal life. We won't be bored and we certainly won't be disappointed.

Second, We'll enjoy relationships more fully than we ever have. Isn't that one of our concerns about eternal life: how we'll relate to those dear to us in this world? Again, we have a hard time imagining it will be as good as what we've experienced during these years. Let me challenge that thought.

Think how often our love for someone is hindered by busyness and other distractions. Think about how the self-focused nature of sin impacts the quality of what we give to and receive from others. Then throw in insecurities, misunderstandings, and conflict. All of these will be gone when we're with Jesus. We'll enjoy those dear to us on a deeper, more rewarding level than we have here on earth.

Perhaps there's concern that with eternal life we won't know those we love. There's no suggestion in the Bible that this is the case; in fact, Jesus states the opposite in one of His parables, alluding a rich man in hell recognizing a beggar in heaven. The Bible from beginning to end reveals a relational God; we were given the same characteristic when created in His image. Again, do we really think God would give

us this capacity for just a few years on earth, and then not provide relational opportunities just as meaningful for the rest of eternity?

Third, It will feel like home. Travelling is fun and exhilarating, but there's always something nice about returning to the familiarity of home. The Bible tells us that our citizenship isn't here on earth but in heaven; that's our true home. Though our only point of reference thus far is life here on earth, and it's hard to know what heaven will be like, home is not a place it takes some time to get used to. There's no reason to think it won't be familiar when we arrive.

One challenge of trips away from home is the luggage we have to haul around. During our years here on earth, we carry baggage that's less visible but no less tiring: personal characteristics that we wish were different; habits or addictions we can't shake; experiences of disappointment, loss, sickness, loneliness or anxiety that can crush our spirit. When we stop traveling these earthy years and finally arrive home, we won't be carrying any of these things. God assures us in the book of Revelation that there'll be no more mourning or crying or pain.

Finally, Jesus Christ will be front and center. Occasionally I'll read a best-selling book about heaven and be amazed to find no mention anywhere of Jesus. Yet when the Bible speaks of eternal life, Christ's presence is so obvious that it won't be like He's hiding behind Door #3! After all, He's the one who conquered death and made it possible for us to be with Him, and who's promised to go ahead and prepare a place for us.

Eternal life enables us to fully experience relationship with Jesus: to be deeply loved all the time; fully understood all the time; to experience purpose and meaning all the time; and to experience life and relationship with our Creator as we were initially created to experience.

Our hope and confidence in God's promise of eternal life shapes our remembering today of First Pres members who've gone to be with Jesus. We miss them and are grateful for what they've added to our

church and to our lives. But we rejoice in two ways.

We rejoice in the life and freedom that each of these dear folks are experiencing now with Jesus, on the other side of death. Friends, if Christine Weems, Rich Hughes, Susie Jenkins or any of these loved ones were here right now, they would affirm that God's promises of what awaits us beyond death are all wonderfully true. We also rejoice knowing that we'll be reunited again one day with these and others who've gone to be with Jesus, when we one day enter into our own experience of eternal life.

As we read these names in a moment, it may be that many are unfamiliar to you. If that's the case, use this time to think of others no longer here who played a significant role in your life, who you miss. Make this a moment to give thanks for them.

"For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (6:23). Today we celebrate dear ones who've taken God up on this gift. We also acknowledge that our own time in this world will one day end. What happens to us after we die is dependent upon what happens before we die.

Do you confidently know that you'll one day experience God's gift of eternal life? Are you experiencing today the life of freedom that comes from relationship with Him? If so, find comfort in Paul's reassuring words even as we acknowledge death's reality. If you haven't given your life to Jesus or begun to experience the life of freedom that He offers, can you identify what's holding you back from saying yes to all that Jesus wants to give you? If you sense His gentle tug upon your heart, would you be receptive to it today?

Friends, as servants of Jesus we are offered a tremendous gift that lasts forever. The gift of God: eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. May we each receive this gift and live fully into it.