

The Gift of God  
4<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost  
Romans 6.18–23

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit—one God—Amen!

Today, we hear from Paul, in the letter to the Romans, that the—wages of sin is death, and the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus (Rom 6.23).

What does this mean, that the wages of sin is death and that the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus?

Well, someone we remember today is the Holy Prophet Ezekiel. And Ezekiel wrote one of the longer prophetic books in the Old Testament. And one of the things that he is known for is the prophecy of the dry bones (Ez 37) .

We hear this prophecy Saturday of Holy Week, right before Holy Pascha. This is where Ezekiel looks upon a field and he sees all the people of God and they have died and asks Ezekiel—can these bones live? And Ezekiel responds—you know O Lord, and then God tells Ezekiel to say, rise up! This is, of course, prefiguring our own resurrection from the dead and flesh comes upon them and they are called back to life.

And what a beautiful, picture for us to have right before we go into the celebration of the Holy Pascha, our own resurrection because of the Lord’s resurrection.

Why is it that we are in this condition?

Well, we’ve gone over this many times, we’ve all heard this, there was the fall, and not just Adam’s sin but my own sin, which casts me out of paradise.

And if I think about what sin means, what does sin mean? Sin actually means to miss

the mark, right? It's taken from this idea of shooting at a target in archery, and the bullseye is the only mark that matters. Everything else, you've missed—you've sinned. You've not accomplished what you needed to accomplish.

This understanding of sin helps us when we think about why Jesus Christ is the only one that can save us, about why He's the only one that can give us life. . . It's because He's the only one that is life. Right? Our Lord is the only one that is life, that possesses life in himself. This is why it's only Jesus who is the way.

It's only him. Now, what does that mean for people who have never heard of him? We get people who bring up those questions and arguments. And that's, that's for another discussion but nobody in Church is saying that those people can't be saved. Because the Lord has his own ways of bringing all people to Himself.

This is not what we're about in the Church—saying that we know who's saved, and it's this one, and not that one.

What we do know though is that it's through Christ. If anybody's saved, it's through Christ. How that happens is difficult to explain but we are saved through Christ. He is the one who saves us from death which comes because of sin.

And if we think about sin in our own lives, why is it that it is so hard to hit that mark of being with Christ?

Well, there are so many other things that are vying for our attention and worship.

We have our own fleshly pleasures. Our stomach is one of those things. Well, actually, that's not freedom, because you're actually enslaved to your own appetite.

But whatever it is that you're desiring, you're enslaved to that desire, whether it's your belly or some other thing. We have sins of the flesh, whenever we enjoy sexual pleasure outside of the context of marriage, right—a deviation from what God has called us to do, right?

These other things that compete for our love, for our worship, they're not Christ. They're not bad, they're just not Christ. Right? So this is why the path is narrow and the mark is small, and we're going for just uniting ourselves to the Lord. And any other thing that we go after,

we're left with death.

We're left without our Lord. And this is why the wages of sin is death. It's not because God wants to punish us, or He enjoys punishing us but He can only give us Himself. He can only give us Himself. And He tells us this is the way. If you come to me, I am the way (Jn 14.6).

And so, how do we, how do we receive that gift of God, which is eternal life? How do we receive that? How do we join ourselves to Christ? How do we accept that gift? Well, one of the ways we accept it is that we, give a gift back. We give a gift back. And this is what we're doing when we're here today in this divine liturgy.

We are offering ourselves up in this divine liturgy. Before each of you came in here today, I said every one of your names, and every one of you is on that discus, and I'm going to bring it around, and all of us are coming up, and we're going into the altar, and we're offering ourselves to and with Christ.

This is what we're doing in this liturgy today. We're offering ourselves as a gift. And how do we offer ourselves? Well, first we come here. Then, we offer ourselves on the altar.

In making this offering we allow God to work in us to take control of our own passions and desires. And one of the ways we do this is through fasting. The Church offers us this tool of fasting so that we can learn to exercise control over our own desires, whatever those are.

Fasting starts with food, it doesn't end there thought. We can fast from food, we can fast from entertainment, we can fast many things.

The reason we do that is to say no to one thing for a little bit so we can say yes to the Lord. We can think, turn our mind to Christ and offer ourselves him this way.

And it's not that we're saying no to those things forever—no. We basically fast half the year and the other half of the year we enjoy food. We are just trying to put ourselves in a proper relationship to food or whatever it is we are fasting from.

This is what fasting is for to help tame our desires and put them in their place.

Another way that we can accept this gift of eternal life from our Lord and life out our own procession to the altar of offering is through prayer.

We pray, and we control those thoughts and words that come up into our hearts and minds. So the prayers of the Church are us submitting our own thoughts and words to what Christ has for us. This is why the Church gives us prayers. This is why we have the Psalms. This is why we have the Scriptures.

This is why we have the prayers of the Saints, so that we can be filled with the words of Christ and in this way offer ourselves to Christ. So that we can accept that gift of eternal life. And that we can be raised up with those right bones. When Ezekiel prophesies to the bones, he says—rise up. And we too can hear that word, because we've joined ourselves to Christ, who is the only one who is our salvation.

Through the prayers for the Holy Prophet Ezekiel, and Apostle Paul, Lord have mercy on us and save us, Amen!