

Sermon: Working for More Than Wages

Text: Romans 4:4

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I have a big white dog by the name of Snowball. Snowball is a found dog which means we don't know exactly what breeds might be a part of his heritage. In the case of a dog that makes him a bit unpredictable. In fact, you might say that sometimes he needs psychiatric care, if they had such for animals.

There is one routine that he dearly loves. It has been our custom to give Snowball a big dog biscuit when we put him in his kennel for the night. Snowball loves his dog biscuit. Indeed, Snowball expects his biscuit, and if I'm not quick enough with it, he will even growl at me. He snaps that huge biscuit up in one quick movement, coming ever so close to my fingers.

Usually, despite his temperament problems, Snowball is a loving dog, and I have often wondered why he is so nasty about his dog biscuit. But, this week as I was preparing my lesson on Romans the answer occurred to me.

In Romans 4:4 of today's lesson we read,
"Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due."

Snowball is not grateful for the biscuit I give him every night. Snowball expects a biscuit. Indeed, his biscuit is seen as his due, his wages for work performed. If I were to close his kennel door without giving him the biscuit, it would not be a pretty sight.

Don't we behave the same way? We expect wages for the jobs that we do. We might have a good relationship with our employer. But, quite often we are not totally satisfied. We always want a little more. There is a sense of entitlement.

Sometimes we say that people don't really understand all that we "do around here." "One day," we say, "I'll tell those folks to take this job and ..." well, you know what I mean.

Unfortunately, some of us unwittingly treat our relationship with God in the same manner. Spirituality becomes a matter of doing certain things in order to gain God's favor. We try to make a deal with God.

"God if you'll just deliver me from this illness, I'll do whatever you ask." "God, if you'll just help my child become more responsible, I'll promise to do more work in the church." Whenever we have a need we want to make a deal with God.

Mind you, this is not the deal that God makes with us. This is the deal that we (usually subconsciously) present to God and just assume that God accepts it. In our mind, God becomes the great heavenly employer. We fulfill our end of the bargain, and God gives us payment for services rendered.

Religion becomes nothing more than doing and saying the right things in order to obtain our just due, our wages for righteous behavior.

But, as Paul put it in our lesson for today, there is no gratitude in a relationship based solely upon wages. In fact this makes a close relationship impossible. One thing I soon learned when I had to supervise people on my first job was that the boss had to maintain a certain professional distance. You can be friendly with the people who work for you, but you can't be friends. The working relationship has certain boundaries.

Now this pleasant but formal relationship is appropriate and even desirable in the workplace, but it is not the kind of relationship that we should want with God. More than that, this is not the relationship that God wants with us. God wants to be more than just a provider of goods and services. Remarkably, the God who is revealed in Jesus Christ wants to be our friend. (See John 15:15)

Friendships are not based upon payment for services rendered. Friendships are based upon trust and love and compassion. We Reformed Christians often quote Ephesians and say that salvation is not by works, but by grace through faith. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

But, we sometimes struggle to get a handle on what we mean by grace and faith. We talk a lot about amazing grace, but quite often we turn grace into a new kind of religious work.

It's not surprising that we have trouble with the concepts of grace and faith. People in our society are often judged by the time they put in at work and their productivity. It is understandable that they often bring that same sense of works righteousness to the church.

Faith for many is defined by how much we do or how much we pray or how much we give. Worship and Bible study can become just one more demand in a crushing schedule. Instead of bringing us solace, this kind of religion makes God into the ultimate employer who demands even more from us than anyone else because, after all, He is Lord, and He deserves it.

But, in Jesus we learn that God is the Lord of love. The yoke of Christ is not a yoke that requires us to work slavishly day in and day out for low wages. According to the Bible the yoke of Christ is the yoke of gentleness and humility and rest for our souls. (Matthew 11:29)

The religions of the world (some forms of Christianity included) often attempt to place a heavy burden upon us with their rules and regulations. Jesus often criticized the "religious professionals" of his day because they required such elaborate rituals that were burdensome to the ordinary person. Often these religious rules made by human beings kept people from attending to the more important things in life.

Unfortunately, we sometimes do the same thing. We get so excited about some program or job that we forget the importance of relationships and people. We forget that the word gospel does not mean "good advice." It means "good news."

This past week Home Depot finally sent a crew of men to replace the roof on my house. I was impressed with these guys. Roofing is hard work, but these guys worked especially hard. That first day they descended upon my house like a hoard of locusts, ripping off shingles at furious

pace. All the members of the crew knew exactly what to do, and they did it with a sense of pleasure and joy.

Later I asked the supervisor about this, and he said, "Oh, yes, these guys are part of the Brothers Roofing Company out of Chicago. They are a couple of brothers who started this roofing business and hired all of their family members. They love each other, and it shows in the work that they do."

It all made sense. Yes, they worked for a paycheck. But, more importantly they also worked out of a sense of family pride and their common business.

I think this is how we should view the life of faith. We don't grudgingly serve God for a paycheck. We serve God because we are a part of His family. We are His beloved children, and as such we are a part of the family business.

But, the job we have been given is a lot easier than roofing.

We have been called to spread the good news of God's love to the whole world. It's important that we don't turn the good news of the gospel into "good advice." It's important that we don't turn the easy yoke of Jesus into the burdensome yoke of the world.

God does not require us to do something to earn our salvation. God simply asks us to trust him. Salvation is not earned like a paycheck. Salvation is a gift that we could never earn in a thousand lifetimes.

I like David Stuart Briscoe's example of how this works. He wrote,

"Shortly before I married his daughter, my father-in-law said to me, 'Stuart, if you drive over to Austria and go to the little border town of Feldkirk, at a certain address you will find a person who has some funds that I have placed in your name. Go and collect them and you will have more than enough for three weeks vacation on the continent of Europe.'"

Stuart said,

"I believed him, traveled over, met the person, in faith claimed what he had promised, and found that my father-in-law, in sheer grace, had actually placed the funds in my account.

For me to have traveled around Europe bragging about my newfound wealth and pretending that it was the product of my work would have been as insulting to my father-in-law as it would have been removed from the truth.

If any boasting was permissible at all, it was to boasting about the generosity of another on my behalf."

In our Scripture lesson for today we see the same kind of dynamic in the life of Abraham. Abraham, at the behest of God, goes on a journey. There is nothing about Abraham that distinguishes him from other men. He is simply chosen by God for this special journey that will lead to a blessing for all the peoples of the world.

Abraham believed in the promise of God's blessing and that belief was credited to him as righteousness. The same is true for us. When we have faith in the promises of God, there is credit given to our account.

Have you seen that bumper sticker that says rather whimsically, "I owe. I owe so it's off to work I go." Many of us would not want to work at all, but we have to work. We have debts. We have financial obligations.

Well, suppose your debts were so high that you had no hope of ever paying them off. (I know. Some of us don't have to imagine that situation!) But, suppose your debts were overwhelming, and then it happened. You were one of the very few fortunate ones who managed to win the lottery. All your debts were now paid off, and you had all the money you needed to live comfortably.

Would you continue to grind away at the job you had before you received this great gift? Of course not. You would have greater freedom to do what you wanted to do and go where you wanted to go.

Paul tells us that something like this happens through the grace of God in Jesus Christ. Quoting Psalm 32 Paul wrote,

"Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the one against whom the Lord will not reckon sin." (Romans 4:6-7)

In other words, it's as if a bookkeeper is putting generous deposits to our account while at the same time refusing to debit our withdrawals. Instead those withdrawals are drawn against the bookkeeper's own account.

This is what God in Christ has done for us. And that kind of forgiveness can do amazing things.

This past Friday on ABC, reporter John Stossel did a special on common myths. What was the number one myth? "Revenge is sweet."

Stossel pointed out that many of us love those shot'em up movies where the hero gets revenge for some misdeed. But, he said research has shown that in real life revenge is not sweet at all. In fact, the desire for revenge can lead to all kinds of negative things like high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes.

He then told the story about a family on a camping trip in one of our state parks. During the night a man came slit a neat hole in the family's tent and abducted their seven year old daughter.

The mother was interviewed by Stossel, and she said her desire for revenge was at a murderous level. She said that she could have easily strangled this man with her own hands and smiled while she was doing it.

But, as her health went downhill she began to realize that revenge was not sweet. More than that, she was a Christian and understood what the Bible said about forgiveness and grace. She understood that the Bible commands us to forgive our enemy. She understood the fact that the God who forgives us freely requires us to do the same toward others.

So, she did what she didn't want to do. She truly forgave the man who abducted her daughter.

About a year later the man who did this terrible deed gave her a phone call. Among other things, this lady told the criminal that she had forgiven him for what he had done. The abductor was so taken by the genuine nature of this woman's words of forgiveness that he talked with her for over an hour. The police traced the call and captured the man.

Unfortunately, it was too late for the woman's daughter. She was already dead. The criminal committed suicide while in prison.

But, amazingly, this grief stricken mother befriended the mother of the man who abducted her daughter. Together they went to his grave and placed flowers on it as a symbol of her forgiveness.

Stossel asked this woman how she was doing today. She smiled and said, "Life has never been better." That's a picture of grace and forgiveness. That's a story of salvation.

But, that story or any other story won't do you any good unless you have faith in it, unless you put that story into practice in your own life.

When it comes to faith, the object of your faith is important. Some people act as if faith alone is all that's necessary. They say things like, "Just have faith." That's not true. If we put our faith in the wrong thing, it can be deadly.

For example, each winter there are people who have strong faith in thin ice. Some of them die by that faith. Conversely, some people have weak faith in thick ice. Standing on such ice is like standing on concrete. But, they are afraid to step out in faith because they do not believe in the thickness of the ice.

We can believe in something sincerely and be sincerely wrong. The important thing is the object of our faith.

As a man or woman on thick ice exercises faith in it after he or she knows about its thickness, so Abraham and those who stand in his tradition exercised faith in God because they knew that the promises of God were trustworthy.

Romans 4:17 describes two characteristics of this trustworthy God. God is "the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."

In other words, is anything too hard for the God who breathed life into the first human beings? Is anything too hard for the God whose Son forgave those who crucified him as he hung on a cross? Is anything too hard for the God who raised Jesus from the dead?

This is the God in Whom we believe. He is the Lord of the universe and our friend. He is the Creator of all that is and He is our loving, compassionate Father who welcomes His prodigal sons and daughters back home. He is solid rock on which we stand.

Friends, we need to work for more than wages. We need to work out of a sense of grace and love and joy. We need to make our faith journey with the assurance that God's grace is greater than all our sin. God's promise is stronger than the circumstances that threaten to overwhelm us.

We just need to come to God in faith.

Charlotte Elliott, as a young woman, was deeply concerned about her relationship to God. She grew up in the church, but she still didn't understand how to be made right with God.

One day an old preacher visited her home. In the course of a conversation he said, "Charlotte, when are you going to come to Jesus?"

Charlotte, surprised by the blunt question, replied, "Oh, I don't know how."

The preacher replied, "You don't know how? Why just come as you are."

Later that night she knelt by her bed, and as best as she knew how, put her faith in Jesus. And out of her experience she wrote a hymn that reflected her decision. "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me."

You don't have to work for salvation. You just come to Jesus today, just as you are. You'll discover for yourself that marvelous grace on which we stand.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN