

How Much Are You Worth?

Romans 6:1b-14 & Matthew 10:24-39

Saint Paul's Memorial United Methodist Church

1001 W Colfax Ave, South Bend, Indiana 46616

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Romans 6:1b-14 (NIV)

¹ Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? ² By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? ³ Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. ⁵ If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. ⁶ For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — ⁷ because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.

⁸ Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹ For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. ¹⁰ The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹ In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. ¹² Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. ¹³ Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴ For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.

Matthew 10:24-39 (NIV)

²⁴ “A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. ²⁵ It is enough for the student to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If the head of the house has been called Beelzebul, how much more the members of his household!

²⁶ “So do not be afraid of them. There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known. ²⁷ What I tell you in the dark, speak in the daylight; what is whispered in your ear, proclaim from the roofs. ²⁸ Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. ³⁰ And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. ³¹ So don't be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.

³² “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. ³³ But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ “Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to turn “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law — ³⁶ a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’

³⁷“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

How Much Are You Worth?

A large train pulled by two engines was making its way across America. While crossing the Western mountains, one of the engines broke down. “No problem,” the engineer thought, “we can make it to Denver and get a replacement engine there,” and so they carried on at half power. Farther on down the line, the other engine broke down, and the train came to a standstill in the middle of nowhere.

The engineer needed to inform the passengers about why the train had stopped. He didn’t want the passengers to get too upset. So he tried to get them to look on the bright side of things by making the following announcement: “Ladies and Gentlemen, I have some good news and some bad news. The bad news is that both engines have now failed, and we will be stuck here for some time until the replacement engines arrive. The good news is that you didn’t make this trip in an airplane!”

Well, that would be good news under the circumstances. If you’re going to lose both your engines, better to do it on a train and not a plane. But I have some even better news for you today. God’s love for you, and me, is intimate and is beyond what we can ever imagine.

In Matthew 10:29-31 we have one of the most important Scriptural reminders of the love of our Heavenly Father for His children. It tells us how far reaching God’s love is: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” asked Jesus. “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care. And even the very hairs of your head are all numbered. So don’t be afraid; you are worth more than many sparrows.” What a moving testimony to the very intimate love that God has for each of us.

A second grader once asked his teacher how much the earth weighed. The teacher looked up the answer on the Internet. “One thousand trillion metric tons,” she answered. The little boy thought for a minute and then asked, “Is that with or without people?”

Viewed from one perspective, it might very well seem that people don’t really matter very much in the grand scheme of things. After all, we are but microscopic inhabitants of a somewhat miniscule planet orbiting a relatively obscure star in a small galaxy among the billions and billions of stars and galaxies that make up creation. Yet the God of all creation has counted the very hairs of our heads. Wow! What a magnificent picture of the love of our Heavenly Father.

But wait! There is a troubling side to Jesus’ teaching about the sparrows, and it has to do with those two engines that failed on that train: “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?” asked Jesus. “Yet not one of them will fall to the ground outside your Father’s care.”

THIS TEXT ACKNOWLEDGES THAT SPARROWS DO FALL FROM THE SKY.

It happens all the time. Jets suck them up in their engines. Predators prey upon their young. Sudden storms or droughts can deprive them of their food.

God's love does not protect those tiny sparrows from life's tragedies. Neither does it protect us. Engines have been known to fail on planes as well as trains, and it makes no difference in the world how many Christians were on those vehicles of when it happened.

Mature Christians realize this truth, but there are so many so called prosperity preachers who speak of Christianity as the path to ease and prosperity in our society that the point needs to be made. It is a troubling truth, but it is truth. Sparrows, innocent sparrows, do fall.

Thornton Wilder dealt with this hard truth in a story titled, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. A village has been hard hit by a pestilence. A priest, Brother Juniper, tries to understand the meaning, if any, of this tragedy. He draws up a chart of the characteristics of fifteen victims of this pestilence and fifteen survivors, rating them for such qualities as goodness, piety, and usefulness.

When he adds up the total for the victims and compares them with that for the survivors, his figures show that the tragically dead were five times more worth saving than those who lived through the pestilence. This unexpected result causes Brother Juniper great distress of mind.

And it causes us much distress as well. God's love does not protect us from life's problems. It is the most difficult dilemma that Christians face. Why do the righteous suffer? There is a common phrase: "Only the good die young. Scoundrels seem to go on forever." That's not always true, of course, but that is sometimes how it seems. Why in Heaven's name, should that be so?

One answer may come from ordinary family life. Those of you who are parents, let me ask you a question. Would you protect your young from all life's problems if you could? Without thinking many of us might answer yes. And it would be tempting. Deep in our hearts we would like to build a protective bubble around our children. After all, when they hurt, we hurt. When someone abuses them, it is we who are angry. When they are confronting a crisis, it is we who toss and turn in our beds with sleeplessness. We would like to protect our young from any and every hurt.

But what would happen if we did? They would never grow into responsible, competent, mature adults. Overcoming obstacles produces character and competence.

God has placed us in a world that is designed to bring out the best within us if we deal with life in an attitude of faith and love. That does not mean that God has forsaken us or forgotten us. It simply means that this world is a training school designed to produce souls fit to share eternity with Him. Sparrows do fall from the sky. There is a second truth related to this one.

GOD'S LOVE DOES NOT PROTECT US FROM LIFE'S PROBLEMS, BUT NEITHER ARE LIFE'S PROBLEMS GOD'S PUNISHMENT FOR OUR SINS.

This truth is made obvious in the *Book of Job*. Job was a wealthy man living in a land called Uz with his large family and extensive flocks. He was “blameless” and “upright.” Yet God allowed Satan to torment Job to test his faith. You know how the story goes. Job’s livestock, servants, and ten children all die due either to marauding invaders or natural catastrophes. When all this happens to Job he tears his clothes and shaves his head in mourning, but he still blesses God in his prayers.

Then, on top of all this, he is afflicted with horrible skin sores. His wife encourages him to curse God give up and die. Job refuses. Job curses the day he was born, but he refuses to curse God. Three of Job’s friends come to visit him. A big help they are. They accuse him of deserving his wretched condition. But Job knows he has been a righteous man. So in chapter 19, verses 25-27 Job says to his friends, “I know that my redeemer lives, and that in the end He will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; I myself will see Him with my own eyes — I, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!” Job refuses to give up, and the result is that Job’s faith is finally vindicated and God blesses him more than before.

The *Book of Job* still leaves many questions unanswered, but it is a mighty affirmation that adversity does not come as a punishment from God for our sins. Jesus’ disciples were undoubtedly familiar with the Book of Job, yet when they saw a blind man begging on the street, they asked Jesus, “Who sinned that he should be in this condition?”

How often people blame themselves, and ultimately blame God, when life deals them a difficult blow. From time to time I will hear someone say, “God must be using my child’s sickness to punish me for some sin.” What a petty God they must have — to injure a helpless child in order to punish that child’s parent. No, a thousand times no! Grief is tragic enough without adding to it the crushing burden of guilt.

Here is where our theology of the cross of Christ becomes critical. You and I live under the rule of Grace. That is, we believe that something happened on the cross of Calvary that has forever changed the relationship between God and humanity. Because of what happened there, the believer in Christ has all his or her sins forgiven.

Now, to be sure, as free moral agents living in a lawful world, we have to live with the consequences of our misdoings. If I abuse my body, sooner or later it will catch up with me. If I cheat on my income taxes, Uncle Sam may punish me. In terms of my relationship with God, however, those sins are buried at the bottom of the deepest sea never to surface again. They are gone forever. If you believe that Christ has atoned for your sins, you cannot believe that God is using some adverse circumstance to punish you. The two are mutually exclusive.

There is a story about actor Henry Fonda that can help us here. Fonda’s father disagreed with his son’s decision to become an actor. Only grudgingly did he attend his son’s debut performance with the rest of the family.

After the performance, Fonda's mother and sisters glowed with pride and were effusive in their praise. His father, however, said nothing — until one of his sisters made a tiny criticism of Henry's performance. "Shut up," said the elder Fonda, "he was perfect!"

Now of course Fonda was not perfect. No one is. But his father saw him that way.

You and I are not perfect either, but that is the way God sees us. That is what it means to live under grace. God's love does not protect us from problems. Neither are our problems God's punishment for our sins. As the Gospel of Matthew puts it, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous (5:45)."

Sparrows do fall from the sky. That is not because they have been good sparrows or bad — if sparrows can be good or bad. They fall because they are part of a lawful universe in which unfortunate tragedies do happen. But listen, here is the good news.

THE LITTLE SPARROW NEVER FALLS BEYOND GOD'S WATCHFUL EYE.

The child of God who knows that he or she is under the watchful eye of the Father can, by God's grace, bear any burden, triumph over any tragedy, get on top of any circumstance because they know that they are not alone.

Remember St. Paul's litany of his misfortunes? "Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked (II Corinthians 11: 24-27)." Yet, in all that, St. Paul heard the Lord's voice saying, "My grace is sufficient for you... (12:9)."

For many of us the injustice of this world, combined with the love of the Father, is the best assurance we have of a world beyond this one. Someday, somehow, somewhere accounts must be settled.

In Marjorie Rawling's beautiful novel, *The Yearling*, set in rural Florida, there is a scene in which friends and family gather around the grave of a little disabled boy named Fodderwing. Fodderwing could not do the things other boys could do, but he had a wonderful way with animals.

There was no minister present at Fodderwing's burial, so one of the men of the community offered up this simple but moving prayer: "Almighty God, it ain't right for us to say what is right. But if we had been making this boy, we would never have made him with his back bent and his legs crooked. We would have made him straight and tall like his brothers. But somehow you made it up to him. You gave him a way with critters.

“It comforts us to know that he is in a place where his being bent doesn’t matter no more. We would like to think that you have taken that bent back and those crooked legs and straightened them. And Almighty God, if it ain’t asking too much, we pray that you will give him some critters to play with — maybe a few redbirds and a squirrel or two. Thy will be done. Amen.”

I don’t know what heaven will be like. But I know what God is like. He is a God who cares for a child like Fodderwing. He is a God who notices a little sparrow fall from the sky — and He cares for us much, much more than He cares for sparrows. That means even though we still must face obstacles and crises, we do not face them alone, and someday, somehow all that which is hurtful will be turned into that which is helpful, and we shall live with joy in God’s house forever. Amen.

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