

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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The End of Transactional Religion

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Grace to you and peace from the God who cannot be bought, from Christ who eats with the excluded, and from the Spirit who creates community where the world sees only categories. Amen.

We live in an “if/then” world. If you work hard enough, then you’ll be safe. If you make the right choices, then you’ll be valued. If you keep up, then you’ll belong. If you fail, then you’ll be punished...or discarded.

In a culture shaped by capitalism, transaction isn’t just something we *do*; it becomes something we *are*. We start to interpret everything like a deal. We keep a running tally of all sorts of things; what I gave, what I got. What I’m owed. What I’ve earned. What I deserve. And that way of thinking doesn’t stay confined to money. It seeps into families, friendships, workplaces, politics, into our very sense of self. It can even seep into the church. We start to measure our lives like accounts: *Have I done enough? Have I been good enough? Have I prayed enough, served enough, believed enough?*

And then, almost inevitably, we project this onto God. We turn scripture into an “if/then” clause. If I do this, then God will do that. If I show up, then God will bless me. If I sacrifice, then God will forgive me. If I obey, then God will love me. We try and turn the living God into a vending machine: insert the right coins (piety, morality, suffering, sacrifice) and receive the desired product (protection, success, heaven, peace).

But the texts today are a holy disruption to this notion. They are God’s refusal to be turned into a commodity. They are Jesus’ announcement that the marketplace is **not** the kingdom of God. Jesus quotes Hosea: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” And in doing so, Jesus dismantles transactional religion and calls us into something messier and far more beautiful, a life of grace that cannot be bought and a righteousness that is fundamentally relational.

Psalm 50 begins like a courtroom drama. God speaks, not as a needy deity waiting to be impressed, but as the Creator who already owns everything. And then God says something that should permanently embarrass every attempt we make to bribe heaven: “Not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you... I will not accept a bull from your house... For every wild animal of the forest is mine... If I were hungry, I would not tell you.”

That’s divine sarcasm, holy humor aimed straight at the fantasy that God is somehow dependent on us. As though the Maker of the cosmos needs our religious products. As though God is short on resources, affection, or power.

And we should notice what God is criticizing. God is not critiquing worship, God is critiquing worship that has become performance, transaction, a way to manage God. Sacrifice becomes a tool to control outcomes: *I offer, God responds*. I perform; God provides. I pay; God returns blessing.

Hosea names the same sickness from a different angle. Israel has treated repentance like a strategy. They say, “Come, let us return to the LORD,” because they assume they can manage the relationship. They speak of return and healing and binding up wounds as though it’s a guaranteed exchange.

But God’s response in Hosea is grief mixed with clarity: “Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes away early.” It’s fickle. It evaporates. It’s there when convenient and gone when costly. Then the line Jesus will later quote: “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice; the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Mercy, not sacrifice. Not because sacrifice is evil, but because sacrifice has become a substitute for what God actually wants, which is a people who live in right relationship. A people who practice *hesed*, steadfast love. A community where the vulnerable are not exploited, where neighbors are not treated like tools, where truth is not weaponized, where the poor are not blamed for their poverty, where righteousness is not reduced to a show.

God doesn’t need our stuff. God doesn’t need our performance. God doesn’t need our religious hustle. God desires mercy, *hesed* – steadfast love and covenant faithfulness that shows up in how we treat one another. And that is the first death of transactional religion, God refuses to be bought.

Now, if God can't be bribed, there's another thing transactional religion tries to do, it tries to control the *flow* of grace. In Matthew 9, Jesus sees a man named Matthew sitting at the tax booth and says, "Follow me." And Matthew gets up and follows. Then Jesus goes to Matthew's house, and the table is full of tax collectors. "Sinners" are eating with Jesus and his disciples. This is not an abstract theological point. This is a scandal.

Tax collectors weren't merely disliked; they were seen as collaborators with empire. They participated in a system that extracted wealth from the people and kept them under Roman control. To sit at table with them wasn't just to be "nice" to someone morally questionable. Table fellowship was social meaning. It said: *These are my people. This is my community.*

The Pharisees see it and ask the disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" That question is transactional religion in one sentence. Because underneath it is a whole system:

- The table is for the *worthy*.
- Belonging must be *earned*.
- *Purity* is the price of admission.
- If you break the rules, you pay by being *excluded*.

That's not only a religious system; it's a social control system. It sorts people. It ranks them. It creates insiders and outsiders. It makes holiness into a commodity that some people possess and others lack. And then it uses that commodity to justify who gets dignity.

Jesus answers with a proverb and a prophecy: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."

Jesus does not say: *These people are fine, nothing matters, nothing is broken.* Jesus uses the language of sickness and healing. Something is wrong. Harm is real. Sin is real; both personal and systemic. But Jesus refuses to make exclusion the remedy. Jesus refuses to make shame the medicine.

Jesus is the physician who goes where the pain is. And “Go and learn what this means” is a direct challenge. Jesus is saying, you have studied scripture, but you have used it to build a gate. Hosea was given to tear down that gate. The sign of faithfulness isn’t spotless sacrifice; it’s mercy. The sign of knowing God isn’t perfect boundary maintenance; it’s compassionate relationship.

Jesus is ending transactional religion at the table. Because the table is where transactions happen; where deals are made, where debts are counted, where power is displayed. And Jesus turns that table into a sign of the kingdom instead; grace given freely, people gathered who do not “deserve” one another, a community created by mercy rather than merit.

If Matthew 9 tears down the gate, Romans 4 goes after the scoreboard. Paul is wrestling with a question that still haunts the church: *On what basis does a person belong?* And the temptation is always to answer with transaction; on the basis of the right performance, the right identity markers, the right track record, the right spiritual résumé.

Paul points to Abraham and says: Abraham did not receive the promise because he achieved something impressive. “The promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham... through the law but through the righteousness of faith.” And “faith” here is not a work we perform to earn salvation, as though we can say, *If I believe hard enough, then God owes me.* No. Faith is trust. It is open hands. It is receiving.

Abraham’s righteousness is relational. Abraham entrusts himself to God and even stakes his life on God’s promise. Abraham is drawn into a relationship where the decisive action is God’s; God who gives life to the dead, God who calls into existence things that do not exist.

That line is everything. God calls into existence what does not exist. That means God isn’t responding to our worthiness; God is creating worth. God isn’t rewarding our righteousness; God is creating a people. God isn’t waiting for us to become impressive; God is bringing life out of death.

So if the promise is gift, then the whole “if/then” system collapses. You can’t earn a gift. You can refuse it, you can distrust it, you can try to replace it with something

you can control; but you can't **earn** it. And once righteousness is redefined as relationship, it changes everything.

Transactional religion asks: *What do I need to do so God will approve of me?*

Relational faith asks: *What does it mean to live as someone already claimed by mercy?*

Transactional love asks: *Are you worth it?* Relational love asks: *How do we stay connected, truthful, and accountable without turning each other into debts?*

Transactional religion keeps score. Relational faith practices mercy.

So what does it mean to live this call of Christ's? It means we have to leave the marketplace. Not literally, perhaps. We still live in an economy, we still pay bills, we still work jobs. But spiritually, socially, morally; we have to stop treating people as transactions. We have to stop treating God as a deal-maker. And that begins with letting God end our bargaining.

Some of us were taught a faith that sounded like this: *If you're good, God will bless you. If you suffer well, God will love you more. If you do enough, you'll be safe.*

And what that produces is not peace. It produces anxiety, over-performance, exhaustion, and often cruelty; because if we believe everything is earned, then we will inevitably treat the suffering as people who failed to pay the price.

But the God of Psalm 50 does not need to be fed. The God of Hosea does not want to be bribed. The Jesus of Matthew 9 does not guard the table from the wrong people. The God of Romans 4 gives life to the dead. So the call is not: *try harder*. The call is: *trust deeper*. And then: *practice mercy*. Mercy, not sacrifice.

Mercy looks like refusing purity tests that exist to protect the comfort of the powerful. Mercy looks like making room at the table, not as a charitable gesture from above, but as a recognition that we are all kept alive by grace we did not earn. Mercy looks like solidarity; mutual survival, shared burden, shared risk. Mercy looks like telling the truth about harm while refusing to turn justice into vengeance or exclusion into holiness.

And yes, this is messy. Relationship always is. Transaction is cleaner. Transaction gives the illusion of control. Transaction lets you walk away when the deal no longer benefits you.

But God's economy is not scarcity; it is abundance. God's economy is not exchange; it is gift. God's economy is not gatekeeping; it is communion. And in that economy, you are not a commodity. Your neighbor is not a commodity. The outsider is not a commodity. The person you were taught to fear is not a commodity. In Christ, we are not buyers and sellers of worth, we are members of one body, learning the costly freedom of mercy.

So hear the good news: You do not have to earn God. You cannot purchase grace. You cannot out-sacrifice your way into being loved. God does not want your bribes. God wants **you!** Alive, honest, connected, merciful.

And as you come to the table of Jesus, this table where sinners become friends, where outsiders become family, where the dead are given life; may you hear the end of transactional religion and the beginning of something better: "I desire mercy, not sacrifice."

Leave the marketplace. Drop the ledger. Abandon the purity tests. Practice non-transactional mercy. Receive grace freely and share it prodigally; especially with those the world tells you to ignore. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.