

**28<sup>th</sup> June 2020**  
**Free to Serve**  
**Romans 6:12-23**

It was disappointing that we couldn't be together this week, but it is better to be safe than sorry! We just have to put our restart on hold until further notice. Nola and I are having 5 nights at Phillip Island from tomorrow, 29<sup>th</sup> June. We will be back on Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> July. We don't usually do school holidays, so it will be interesting. Value your prayer for refreshment and renewal.

In our text this week from Paul's letter to the Romans, we are faced with the question 'Whom do you serve?' It's not really a question that most of us are comfortable with – generally we don't like to think of ourselves as serving anyone or anything. This idea of serving, not just willingly serving a cause, but serving in the sense of being a slave, powerless under the control of something or someone else, offends.

In Romans 6, Paul talks about slavery. It was an established institution of his time. There is no evidence that he tried to reform it. One of his letters was written to a slave owner named Philemon. During one of his 'vacations' in jail, Paul met a runaway slave named Onesimus. They got to talking, and Onesimus became a Christian. When his sentence was up, Paul put a letter in his hand, and sent him back to his owner, who was also a Christian. And Paul says, *"Now you get him back, as more than a slave - he's a brother."* It was a nice thing to say, but the young man was still a slave.

Even if he was so inclined, there was no way he could reform an institution like slavery, which was the economic backbone of the Roman empire. Slavery sounds strange and repulsive to us, but it was a part of his life and his culture. So much so, that he could see slavery as an image - or a picture - of some of the fundamental relationships in life.

Paul signs this letter to the Romans with the words, *"Paul, a slave of Jesus Christ."* The word in Greek is *Doulos*. That can be translated "slave." It can be translated as "servant."

William Carter, was speaking at the church in the US, and was about to read the opening words from this letter. Right before he started, he realized there were a number of African--Americans in the congregation. He didn't know how they would feel about slavery, so he changed it to; *"Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ."*

Afterward, one of the men that he noticed came up to him and said, *"I was following along in my Bible. I noticed you changed that word. Why did you change it?"* William began to explain how you can translate the word both ways and all of that. He listened with a smile on his face. Then he said;

*"You know, Paul calls himself a slave. And if you're going to belong to anybody, you ought to belong to Jesus. He is a tough master, but he is more than fair. And if you belong to Jesus, nobody else can have a piece of you."*

He's right. Paul believes that he has a master. In fact, if you listen to this whole passage from Romans 6, it sounds like Paul believes that everybody has a master. Somebody owns us!

Let's begin by identifying our masters – Whom do we serve? It's quite simple really – what do you do with your time and your treasure? Count the dollars and hours that you spend, and you will find what controls you.

When we are trying to honestly take stock of where we are, we have to consciously overcome our blind spots – our selective vision allows us to wilfully ignore some things that are glaringly obvious to others. We often are unaware of how many hours we spend in front of the tv or

computer, or we avoid actually adding up the amount of money that we spend on certain activities.

If there is an area in your life that is like this – a blind spot that you instinctively skirt around whenever it comes up – you’ve definitely found one of your powerful masters, one that has a very strong hold over you. A large part of the power that these masters have over us is that they remain in the shadows; we feel as though we are in control.

Our culture would like us to believe that we are free to do whatever we want, go wherever we wish, buy whatever we desire. Meanwhile, there are a lot of people telling us what to do, where to go, what to buy. We think we're free; what we're doing is merely accepting somebody else's story.

You only have to observe a group of teenagers hanging out at a shopping centre. It is a typical scene: clusters of teenagers, trying to think for themselves and trying to fit in. If you asked them, everyone would value independence and freedom.

But look at them: all the girls were wearing the same jeans. All the boys have the shoes, the head gear, and sometimes driving their parent’s cars and looking cool! "Be your own person" means, "Don't be a geek". Buy your clothes at a certain store and borrow your dad's car when you go 'Fountain Gate" or "High Point" to hang out with friends.

Paul is right. Even in a land of freedom and liberty, someone or something has shackled us in chains, whether we know it or not. The question is: *Whom do you serve?*

- Some people are slaves to shopping. They cannot pass up a sale, even if they have a house full of things they don't need.
- Some people are slaves to cholesterol. They have never met a donut or a 'Big Mac' they didn't like.
- Some people are slaves to their jobs. They do not like their jobs, but the company is paying them too much for them to quit, so they go to work in \$ shaped handcuffs.
- Some corporations are slaves to greed. Everybody answers to the bottom line. If the bottom line is not high enough, somebody has to go. In the last few years, we have had all kinds of revelations about that, but it's not news to anyone!
- As an apprentice I had a friend who was a slave to alcohol. If he didn't have a drink in his system, his body drove him crazy. He admitted that he was embarrassed about it, but he was addicted! Relationships, cars, his home all wrecked! What started as a social drink became the master! The question is: *Whom do you serve?*

Rudolph Bultmann, the controversial German Lutheran Theologian and professor of New Testament at the University of Marburg, writes;

*“the illusory freedom to do whatever we want merely “delivers us up to our drives, to do in any moment what lust and passion dictate...Genuine freedom is freedom which withstands the clamour and pressure of momentary motivations.”* Let’s stop there for a moment. The attitude of if it feels right it is right, actually places us at the mercy of our desires. This is what Paul is trying to tell us. Every desire we have is given fertile ground to grow and take root. There is no discernment, or distinction being made between what is good, or what is beneficial – only what is gratifying or expedient. We offer ourselves up to anything.

Paul uses some interesting military language in this passage – he could be conducting an inspection on a parade deck. After the call to present arms, Paul advises, *“Just as you used to offer yourselves /members as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves/members as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness’.*

What does this mean? The word members that Paul uses refers to the parts of our body – arms, legs, eyes, ears. When we present our minds to empty, vapid entertainment; our eyes to pornography, our mouths to addictive substances, our sexual organs to promiscuity, then our own members become weapons against our very selves. The wages we earn for this presentation of our members leads only to death.

Far from being free, our rejection of anything that limits our appetites is a certain prescription for falling back under the dominion of sin and death. The great illusion is that though we feel as though we have cast off the bonds of cultural expectation and rules, we are now subject to the whims of our baser selves, the tyranny of our passions.

All this is a result of thinking about 'I.' This is the mistake we tend to make when we declare ourselves free – we only worry about I. What would I like to eat; what would I like to wear? What would I like to do with my time and my money?

This 'I' and 'my' causes great injustice and suffering in the world, and curiously, by placing ourselves first, we actually place ourselves at the mercy of others.

- If I demand that I wish to be served, then I make myself dependant upon other people. They may serve me, they may not. I'm not really in control. But if instead I want to serve others, then who can stop me?
- Likewise if I want to be loved. Others may love me, they may not. But if I choose to love others, then who has the power to stop me?
- If I want to receive charity from other people, they may give it to me, or they may not. But if I choose to give charity, who can stop me?

In the upside-down logic of the gospel, a life revolving around me and mine will lead to frustration, whereas a life focused outward will lead to liberation. This is why our current culture of self-gratification in the name of freedom is such a dangerous illusion.

Rather than having a clear master, we are encouraged to present our members to every desire and appetite that our culture brings to us. In doing so we become the agents of our own demise – our weapons are turned upon ourselves and we willingly submit to a yoke that leads us to abject slavery and death.

Clearly then, freedom is not achieved through focusing on myself, but placing my focus elsewhere. But where?

- a) We could look to social causes to follow; there are plenty of movements to join that strive to redistribute wealth, give voices to the marginalized, cure diseases, shelter homeless animals. All of these are worthwhile efforts, but all of them eventually move from their original purpose, they either become institutionalized and calcified – charities who spend most of the money they collect just supporting themselves – or they become derailed by their own ideologies as they are carried to their natural conclusions.
- b) Even the church is not immune. We can spend heaps of time in "The work of the Lord", but very little time with the "Lord of the work"! I Like many of you, – you dedicate long hours and plenty of money to the church as your service. This is a good thing, but we have to realize that though the church was instituted by God, it is still a human run institution, and so it is imperfect.

Unhealthy dedication to the church will still use you up – the work will never be done, and so plenty of pastors and church volunteers burn out. I love the church, but the church itself is not God.

Every one of us has a master, many of us have more than one. It is inevitable that we will have a master, but it is whom we serve that makes the difference. I came across a quote by David Bartlett the other day '*There are loyalties that liberate.*'

God is the loyalty that liberates. God is the only master that we can serve who does not use us up, but instead lifts us up. Submission to God does not lead to death, but to life; abundant life – a life of freedom. This freedom and abundance is what we were created for!

We do not serve God out of dry duty or obligation. Our holy living is not something that we are commanded to do, as though our forgiveness had been bought on credit and now must be paid off with the hard work of serving our Lord. Quite the opposite.

Righteous living, v18 – our life of service to God - is not the condition of reconciliation with God, but the content and consequence of that reconciliation. We live for God, because we live by God.

We've already seen that living for 'I' enslaves us to our desires – it only leads to death. It is one thing for those who don't know of God to live that way, but how much more foolish is it for us to live our lives serving things that lead to death, and then come to church on Sunday morning and ask God to bless us? What sort of diminished view of God must we have to do that?

Our actions reveal our true allegiance and character.

*V19-23 "I am using an example from everyday life because of your human limitations. Just as you used to offer yourselves as slaves to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer yourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to holiness. When you were slaves to sin, you were free from the control of righteousness. What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord".*

I want you to remember says the apostle, and not only to remember but to demonstrate in every decision that you belong to God. That sin is no longer your master. That sin has nothing to offer. That God is our Master. And that He has everything to offer, and has offered us and promised us it all in Christ Jesus. For our good and for God's Glory! Amen

As members of the Body of Christ remember that we are bound to Jesus Christ. Not only that, He has bound Himself to us. We are never free from Him.

The good news, of course, is that in this kind of bondage, there is great freedom, freedom to serve!

John 8:31-32 (The Message)

*"Then Jesus turned to the Jews who had claimed to believe in him. "If you stick with this, living out what I tell you, you are my disciples for sure. Then you will experience for yourselves the truth, and the truth will free you."*

*V34-36 Jesus said, "I tell you most solemnly that anyone who chooses a life of sin is trapped in a dead-end life and is, in fact, a slave. A slave is a transient, who can't come and go at will. The Son, though, has an established position, the run of the house. So, if the Son sets you free, you are free through and through. Amen*

Prayer.