

## Romans 6:12-23

12 Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions.

13 No longer present your members to sin as instruments[weapons] of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments[weapons] of righteousness. 14 For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

15 What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! 16 Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? 17 But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, 18 and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. 19 I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

20 When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. 21 So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. 22 But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. 23 For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

## Sermon: Seek the best master

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

In this text 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 our sensibilities.

After all, we are free men and women in a free country – didn't we just celebrate Canada day? Which, incidentally, not so long ago was called Dominion Day, but that word makes us uncomfortable as well – if we live in a dominion then we are either living the shame of being dominated, or living in the guilt of being the dominators – all of this language makes us uncomfortable and uneasy.

But, this is exactly Paul's point – while we would like to shy away from this idea of service and slavery of ourselves to others or of others to ourselves, it is happening anyway. We are all indentured, indebted – we are all bound, whether we like to admit it or not.

Some people serve intentionally – others serve unwittingly. Ironically, as we will soon see, those who are most sure of their own independence may be the most captured and bound of us all.

Let's begin by identifying our masters – who 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 perception allows us to willfully 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.

I will say this; 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, we are masters of our own domain. If any of you remember the movie The Matrix from ten or twelve years ago, you will understand this concept of enslaving a people by convincing them they are free. It's a commentary on our whole capitalist/consumer lifestyle that convinces us that because we can choose between Coke and Pepsi that we are free, even as our behaviour becomes ever more restricted. Capitalism and capitulation come from the same Latin root of caput – meaning head or headship, lord, master.

We all serve something or someone – more properly, we all serve several somethings or someones. Just because we did not intentionally decide to serve something or we avoid thinking about it, doesn't make it any less true.

We might be tempted to think that now, once we are aware of our situation, we can simply shrug off the yoke that binds us, that we can declare that we are now free beings, un beholden to anyone; we are nobody's slave, we can simply wake up from within the Matrix and live our lives as rational and aware human beings.

That is certainly the wisdom of our age. We live in a time when we are throwing off all kinds of shackles; most of us no longer live in fear of predators, in this country we have food security, fewer and fewer diseases to contend with; we live much more comfortably and safely than anyone else in history. We have control over nature which previous generations could only dream of – even the earth itself can no longer contain us; we've been into space, to the moon, and we are preparing to send people to Mars in the near future, as part of a reality tv show, of all things.

We are also casting off social and cultural bond as well. Things that were unthinkable a generation ago are now commonly accepted – even encouraged.

Given all of this, could it be that Paul's letter is outdated – no longer relevant? Have we indeed woken up and emancipated ourselves from all that binds us? After all, slavery was abolished a long time ago, at least on this continent, so isn't talk of being slaves just a little bit ridiculous? We are freer than any people have ever been.

I think Paul would have shook his head at this thought and perhaps even say something along the lines of 'you, of all people, are most to be pitied.' This lifestyle of ours – on the surface unfettered and free – places us in great danger.

Our current attitude of 'if it feels right, then it must be right,' and 'I want what I want when I want it,' sounds like freedom, but is in fact abject subjugation. This is exactly what Paul is writing about. This is what people who are slaves to their desires sound like.

Rudolph Bultmann 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 clamor and pressure of momentary motivations.'" Our liberation is an illusion.

Let's dig into this a little. This attitude of if it feels right it is right actually places us at the mercy of our desires. 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 'No longer present your members to sin as weapons of wickedness.' 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?

Boltmann wrote 'Genuine freedom is freedom which withstands the clamor and pressure of momentary motivations.' By this, he meant that our freedom must rest in something larger, something more transcendent than ourselves and our fleeting desires. We need to look outward, to something greater than ourselves.

Nationalism is one such thing. As we finish our celebrations and our neighbours to the south prepare for their own independence holiday we see that attaching our loyalties to a country is a more enduring prospect than merely serving the 'I.'

But this is problematic – when we submit to something, we submit to all of it, not just the parts we like or approve of. Since it's Canada Day weekend, I'll not pick on our own country but will look south of the border to illustrate my point.

By buying into nationalism as the 'greater something' that we serve, we also buy into an institution that subjugates and incarcerates more of its own citizens than any other country in the world, that casts off the poor, that is cutting social services and health care for the most vulnerable, that contributes to the increasing militarization of both the globe and its own communities, that grants ever increasing power to corporations over citizens, and that is actively polluting the planet for future generations. Curiously, the ones who declare their allegiance most vociferously in the U.S. also tend to be the very ones who are hurt the most by the policies that they support.

Clearly, in the search for something greater than ourselves, nationalism is not a good master. This master will chew up all but the most powerful and influential – and even those with power and influence are only delaying the inevitable.

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.

Even the church is not immune. If I track my own time and treasure then I have to say that the church is clearly my master. I tithe to the church, and also give money to people who come to the church and ask; certainly I spend plenty of time here – I'm usually in by 7:30 in the morning and for the past couple of months also here three or four evenings a week too.

Many of you are similar – 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 a multitude. 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 – 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 here on Sunday morning and ask God to serve us?

What sort of diminished view of God must we have to do that?

Our actions reveal our true allegiance and character. So, present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as weapons of righteousness. Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace. For the end is eternal life. The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

I speak to you today in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.