

True Freedom

Scripture

Romans 6:12-23

Introduction

The two Bible readings you heard earlier are the Gospel and Epistle readings in the lectionary for today. They complement each other very nicely. The **Matthew 10** passage deals with the obligations of disciples of Jesus to others. What we often call social action. The **Romans 6** passage deals with salvation.

Over recent months we have emphasised social action. For example, I've referred to the Good Samaritan and loving others in a couple of my sermons, as have others.

So today I have chosen to preach on the Romans reading. I suppose I could have chosen to preach on both, to emphasise their necessity and complementarity. But there's more than enough in **Romans 6** for today.

Illustration

In the 14th C, in the land now known as Belgium, there was a Duke by the name of Reginald III of Guelders. The death of his father, the King, led to a bitter succession quarrel between Reginald and his brother Edward. Edward was eventually victorious over Reginald, but instead of killing him, he imprisoned him in the castle of Nijenbeek. According to legend, Edward had a room built around his brother and promised him that he could regain his title and property as soon as he was able to leave the room.

That would not have been difficult for most, because the room had several windows and a door of near normal size. And the windows and doors were not locked or barred. The problem was Reginald's size. You see, he was a very big man, in fact, obese. He was commonly called by his Latin nickname Crassus, which means "The Fat". To regain his freedom he needed to lose weight. But Edward knew his brother so very well. Each day he sent a variety of delicious foods to his room. Instead of dieting his way out of prison, Reginald grew fatter. When Edward was accused of cruelty, his answer was: *"My brother is not a prisoner. He may leave when he so wills."*

Reginald remained in that room for 10 years. Then Edward was mortally wounded in a battle in 1371 and Reginald was released. Wikipedia says that the walls had to be cut away so that he could leave, according to legend. However, his health was so ruined that he died only a few months later and was buried in Graefenthal Abbey.

Though he could have left his prison whenever he wished, his own actions kept him imprisoned, a slave to his own appetites.

That story, based at least in part on fact, illustrates well the Romans passage, because it too is about freedom, and what we are captive to or enslaved by.

Analogy

There's an analogy that runs right through this passage. It's an analogy with slavery. In the NRSV, the word *slaves* occurs 7 times and *enslaved* occurs once. It's not a perfect analogy, and Paul is aware of that.

First part of v19a: *"I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations."*

But it is still a powerful analogy with much truth.

Paul says we can be slaves to sin and wickedness or slaves to God and righteousness.

He compares and contrasts the two.

Slaves to sin are in a downward spiral of greater and greater iniquity.

Slaves to righteousness are in an upward spiral of sanctification (which means holiness or Christ-likeness).

He's writing to Christians. He says that they used to be on that downward spiral, but they changed when they became Christians and gave their lives to God.

Second part of v19: "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."

Paul goes on from there to highlight the dramatic contrast in the outcomes or results.

The outcome of slavery to sin is death. The outcome of slavery to God and righteousness is life.

V20-22: "*When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness... The end of these things is death. But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life.*"

He expresses the contrast even more succinctly in the final verse, which is both a summary and the punchline of his argument.

V23: "*For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life.*"

Apart from the contrast of death and life, there is also the contrast of earned wages and free gift.

The result of sin, its natural consequence, is death, but God gives life as a free gift.

I didn't actually finish that last verse, did I?

V23: "*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Those last words ("*in Christ Jesus our Lord*") are crucial. Jesus hasn't been mentioned anywhere else in our passage. But if you read the first half of the chapter, it's all about Jesus' death and resurrection and the new, resurrection life we can have through him, as symbolised by baptism.

Choice

What Paul presents through his slavery analogy is not just a comparison or a contrast but a choice.

Which master are you going to serve?

There's a Bob Dylan song titled: "*Gotta Serve Somebody*". It begins:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France You may like to gamble, you might like to dance
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes Indeed you're gonna have to serve somebody
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord But you're gonna have to serve somebody"*

Jesus said it long before.

"No-one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other." (Mt 6:24 & Lk 16:13)

It may seem strange to talk about choosing who we will be slaves to. We tend to think of Roman slaves at the time as people captured in war or purchased under terrible circumstances in the slave markets. But there was such a thing as voluntary slavery. People in dire poverty, unable to feed or house themselves, could offer themselves as slaves to someone.

Even in the Jewish Law there was a provision for such an arrangement. A Hebrew slave who had been purchased was to be set free, debt-free, after 6 years of service. But if the slave wanted to stay, then there was a procedure for that to happen. They were called bondslaves or bondservants.

There's a word that Paul uses several times in this passage that underlines this aspect of choice.

The word is translated in different ways in different versions and in different places – sometimes as "*offer*", or "*present*", or even as "*yield*".

“Yield” isn’t used so much in the modern translations, but quite frequently in the old King James Version. I quite like it in some cases, because it has that connotation of giving up or giving into. Like that old hymn that some of you will know: *“Yield not to temptation, for yielding is sin.”*

But back to our passage. Here the translation is “present”.

V13: “No longer present your members to sin as instruments 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 of righteousness.”

V 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 to obedience, which leads to righteousness?”

V19 (which I read earlier, but let me read again): “...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.”

It’s the same idea as in a later better-known verse – Romans 12:1.

“I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present (or offer) your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God...”

Paradox

There’s a paradox in what Paul says in this passage and in his use of the slavery analogy (and perhaps that’s where the analogy struggles). The paradox is that unrestrained indulgence in sin becomes bondage while yielding to God and righteousness becomes true freedom.

It’s the same paradox we find in Jesus’ teaching.

“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

(Mt 16:24. Compare Mt 10:39.)

Conclusion

I’d like to close with a quote from William Tyndale. The wording is a bit old fashioned, almost 500 years old, but I think you’ll get the gist of it. The quote is from his preface to Romans in his English translation of the NT. Essentially it’s a translation of the preface that Martin Luther wrote to Romans in his German NT published about 10 years before.

I was going to use it as a benediction because it begins “Now go... “ But I’ll read it now, as long as you don’t go just yet!

“Now go to, reader (listener)... Remember That Christ made not this atonement, that thou shouldest anger God again; neither died he for thy sins, that thou shouldest live still in them; neither cleansed he thee, that thou shouldest return (as a swine) unto thine old puddle again; but that thou shouldest be a new creature and live a new life after the will of God and not of the flesh.”

May God help us all so to do.

Bibliography

- John Stott’s commentary on *Romans* in the Bible Speaks Today series Including the William Tyndale quote at the end (p.182)
- Reginald III illustration from Sermon Central (“*The Grandfather in My Bones*” by J. Jeffrey Smead, Anglican from Pennsylvania) with additional information from *Wikipedia*.