

Sermon 53: Romans 6:20-22: Freedom from righteousness or slaves to God?

OUTLINE

Freedom from righteousness
Slaves to God

INTRODUCTION

Different cultures and generations have different worldviews. Your worldview is your set of basic assumptions about God, the universe and yourself. Based on your worldview you hold certain things to be good true and beautiful. A generation ago when we were more Christian in the western world one of the highest values was, 'to be good;' to be upright and moral, well behaved and a contributor to the common good. The goal of being good defined the laws that were made, the way institutions were run, the basis upon which people were hired or fired, how you voted for a political party, how you did your parenting, drove your car, etc. However, we now live in a Post-Christian culture, and one of the highest goals that drive our society now is, 'to be free.' We are seeing as a result of removing God and His word from the centre of what defines us, and replacing God with ourselves, a human honouring way of doing things, not a God honouring way of doing things is the basic value which informs everything that is being done. Anti-smacking laws, more protection for the prisoners than the victims, gay marriage, uncensored material on the internet, and on and on we could go. These things are indicators of the basic worldview and values that are driving our generation. 'Be free!' not 'Be good!' is the present tyrannizing paradigm. This is due in part to the influence of what we call Post-Modernism, this is the growing conviction that eternal truths that we are all accountable to are not there or not accessible. Given the pressure of living in a global village, the multitude of religious views, a human rights centred approach that puts all people on a par with the obligation in honouring a protecting all, to call someone right and another wrong is an exercise in alienation. Saying, 'no one is right' or 'everyone is right' is the peace keeping politically correct thing to do, therefore, 'Be free!' is the logical conclusion of this scepticism towards being able to know anything with certainty. Whether I choose rightly or whether I choose wrongly is irrelevant, as long as I was the free person who made the choice. This is the underlying philosophy that is assumed when things like abortion, as a mother's right to choose—pro-choice is pursued. This is the philosophical foundation for euthanasia and the right to end one's life rather than suffer. This is the assumption that has been bought into by those who support gay marriage as a right to choose one's love.

We can be angry and get all worked up about it, or like Jesus on the cross we can be filled with compassion and pray for the world, 'Father forgive them for they know not what they do.' The truth is no matter how much you dress up this generation's addiction to choice. You can call it, progress, liberty, a new era, you can think of it as a new day free from the controlling institutions of yesteryear where each man and women is the captain of their ships and destiny. All this make-up is surface propaganda, the artistic work of a make-up

artist in a funeral home who makes dead bodies look pretty. The bible however has a very different analysis of the situation. The Bible calls it sin, bondage and a terrible judgement.

The bible describes one of God's scariest judgements as being handed over to ourselves to rule ourselves by our own freedom. Free from rules and conscience, the path of pursuing our sins unhindered is God's prison cell for those who He is sealing in their unbelief for judgement. Like the last meal of a man on death row, he can have anything he wants for a last meal before he dies, God hands us over to ourselves and our sinfulness as a punishment. So as we look at our present society in light of recent laws and developments, in light of prevailing attitudes and actions, we should pity this generation and pray for them. All they have to light their way now that they have thrown out the objective eternal standard of God's word is the darkness of their own sinful desiring. Free from righteousness they are slaves to sin.

Once again these themes of true slavery and freedom are the thoughts of the verses before us in Romans 6:20-22. Paul echoes these thoughts in this section. Paul has been calling on the Roman Christians in v19, 'just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.' He now adds extra motivation to his call to dedicate themselves completely to holiness. He maps out the condition of life and the final consequences of the two opposite paths. We will look at what Paul says about being free from righteousness and being slaves to God.

Freedom from righteousness

If we were to announce to the world that they are free from righteousness we would expect that we would hear a hearty 'Amen!' from them. Freedom by the modern conception is freedom from authority, having freedom from conforming your will to the will of another, freedom from religion, freedom from restrictions on desires, freedoms from old traditional values that stifle joy, etc. However, Paul gives us several points as to what he thinks freedom from righteousness is.

Firstly, notice in v20 that Paul describes the state of being free from righteousness with the description, 'slaves to sin.' 'For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness.' Paul is using the word 'free' in relation to righteousness ironically. Paul is working on the biblical assumption that there are only 2 types of people in the world, those who are slaves to sin and those who are slaves to God. We were created to serve and we will serve something, either we are serving the right master in God, or the wrong master which is anything else. Either you are born again with a new desire for holiness that you are following, or you are not. There is no third in between category of people who are partially born again, or half children of God. We do not inhabit a neutral territory from which we decide whether we will serve God or sin, we are born in sin willing slaves to our desires and need rescuing by God through the preaching of the word, as we believe in Christ and repent of our old self-serving life.

We have to add at this point that being an unbeliever, even though we may have been moral people and upright citizens, this description of being free from righteousness is still an accurate one. This is a truth that many Christians struggle with. They see non-Christian people that may be better parents, husbands, wives, workers, etc., and they feel that it seems impossible to say that they are unrighteous. True righteousness is only found in those whose hearts have been turned from their idols and are pursuing the glory of the only true God. Any good deed that is done, but not for the glory of God is at worst idolatry as we do it in service of something else, and at best syncretism as there may be those who are not Christians who try to do things for the God of the Bible, but having hearts that are still idolatrous they are double-minded and have mixed motives, therefore mixed worship. God hates syncretism as much as idolatry for He will not share His glory with another.

Secondly, he tells us in v21 that the life of freedom from righteousness on hindsight is something that we are ashamed of, 'But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.' Once again this is a test of our salvation, are we ashamed of the past sins that we used to engage in? By the light of God's word and the renewing work of the Spirit we share God's perspective on sin and now cringe at those things that we once used to think, say and do. Part of our repentance was not merely to grudgingly give up the idols of our hearts but to gladly abandon them as liars for the truth of God as the only true God. Paul shows us that one of the bondages in being free from righteousness is freedom from shame. What a terrible place to be. To be able to sin with no remorse, no sense of the wrong of what we do. As unbelievers we raged against those things that pricked our consciences because we wanted nothing to spoil the enjoyment of our sins. Perhaps you can think back to those times as a young child when you first stole or lied. Do you remember the shame you felt while your conscience was still tender? But then we went onto to worse things and were able to sin without shame or remorse. In describing our life in sin Paul writes in Ephesians 4:19, 'They have become callous and have given themselves up to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.'

However, that is what we were and not what we are now. Our hearts have been regenerated and we have been filled with the Spirit so that we are tender towards sin. In fact I remember as a young Christian being so tender I wished I had no conscience at all. Young Christians are still full of all the bad habits but have a freshly awoken conscience and their experience can be extremely intense. If that is where you are at what a blessed place to be. This is evidence of a new heart and the convicting work of the Spirit, don't run from it but allow the Spirit to reveal your sins and go to your Father who is righteous and just who will forgive us our sins when we repent and confess them. The trouble is when we revert to these old patterns of behaviour. We call this backsliding, where you slide back to where you once were. The symptoms of being backslidden in the area of our conscience are revealed in the fact that we do not feel guilt after sin. This indicates that our hearts are hard and we are in desperate need of the softening work of the Spirit. I pray through psalm 51 or 119 to do this. A lack of emotion in our Christianity is a good indicator that we are hardened. Spiritual backsliding does not come with pain but with numbness, it steals over you like anaesthetic. It is a silent thief that we only wake up to when we have become so

hardened that we have sinned in a large fashion because we were indifferent to the small snowballing ones that led to it. Keeping short accounts with God and confessing soon after the sin and often will ensure that the Spirit does not withdraw His convicting work due to our unwillingness to listen and feel the shame Paul tells us marks the new work of God in us.

Freedom from shame is a modern pursuit, psychology tells us that guilt and shame breed a low self-esteem, and people with a low self-esteem are unproductive. Yes there are forms of shame that are lies which do break people down. Guilt that arises from failing to meet unrealistic expectations or parental wishes can cause a person to feel bad about the wrong things. However, Christians are those who pursue a proper sense of shame as a vital part of one's life. Since we are sinners and often wrong, and since God is holy and we are in a relationship with Him. Guilt and shame are an indication of His Fatherly involvement in our lives. It is true that the devil can take advantage of our vulnerability in this area and make us feel unsaved or try and crush us with the truth of our sin. But shame and guilt are part of the truth of what we are as sinners in relation with God. There is a form of shame and guilt that older generations have used to manipulate and control younger generations so that they feel the need to cast off this controlling restraint. However, we cannot throw the baby out with the bathwater there is a place for shame and guilt, the hurt that heals and draws us to God for forgiveness and holiness.

Another symptom is the longing for our old sins instead of the feelings of shame that Paul talks about. If we are thinking this way it means that we are evaluating our past behaviour not from the perspective of the Spirit but the flesh. We are thinking in terms of instant gratification. We are thinking in terms of self-serving not serving God. We have forgotten that true joy comes in doing what we are made to do—be holy image bearers of God, not sin. Walking in the flesh begins with thinking in the flesh and feeling after the flesh, i.e. not feeling shame. Once born again we have to maintain our walk in the ways of the Spirit continually taking straying thoughts captive to the truth that our hearts might run in it too.

Thirdly, Paul tells us that the freedom from righteousness results in death, he repeats this twice in this section in v20 and 23. Paul has been mapping out the bad consequences of our actions showing us how lawlessness snowballs and leads to more lawlessness (v19); how we are enslaved to impurity and sin (v19-20); how we produced fruit which we are now ashamed of (v20). However, the most serious consequence of sin is not merely that it makes our lives miserable, and it does, but that it leads finally to our death. Now the word death can mean many things in the bible and we have to answer the question what does Paul mean by the word death here? Death here is not merely the cessation of bodily life, the separation of soul and spirit, but eternal death, the state of eternal separation from God in the punishment of our sins. This has to be the case for two reasons, firstly the wages for sin is death. All people die but Paul is linking a particular type of death to those who are not Christians and slaves to righteousness but slaves to sin. Secondly, in the context the contrast is between 'eternal life' and death. In other words, eternal joy in the presence of God in the new heavens and the new earth, or the second death in torment for eternity.

For all of the pleasure of sin, which in truth is never truly satisfying, we take that temporary pleasure at the cost of our eternal souls. This is what is hanging in the balance. You can reject God now, have an average life of fleeting, average, self-destructive joys, for many of the desires that we pursue end up harming us. If we make an idol of alcohol, food, sex, partying, work, success, fame, gaming, TV, relationships, they are all harmful to us while they are killing us. We are like the wolf that finds that razor blade frozen into the middle of a block of bloody ice. We lick and lick numbing ourselves to the pain of the blade that is killing us and bleeding us, and at the end of it all, when the feeding frenzy clears and the pain kicks in, we will die bled out in the pursuit of pleasure. Jesus said, Matthew 16:24-27, 'Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.'

We will return to this teaching on death next week.

Slaves to God

Paul has sought to motivate our leaving sin behind by showing us the consequences of our sins. He does the same thing motivating our holiness from the benefits that come to those on the path of holiness. V22 shows Paul reflecting on the past, present and future benefits that God has brought to bear upon us as our motivation. He shows us the wonder of our new situation again in that 'you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God.' Adam sold us into slavery, but Christ paid the ransom of His life that we might be set free from the slavery Adam sold us into. We are now in the position of being dead to the power of sin that used to rule us controlling us and guiding our destinies. Added to this we have experienced an ontological change where we have become from the heart, slaves of God. Think of Paul helping us to look back at the past work of God in our salvation bringing into a wonderful position through our union with Christ. Paul then moves into the present as he reminds us of the Spirit who bears fruit in our lives producing real change—sanctification, 'the fruit you get leads to sanctification.' Here Paul is speaking about real growth in holiness. This is the healthy picture of the Christian life, a life that bears fruit. Jesus tells us that those branches that do not bear fruit are cut off and thrown into the fire. They may have originally appeared to have been disciple's of Christ, but their lack of fruit shows that they had never experienced the union with Christ where as a branch grafted into the vine we inevitably bear the fruit of righteousness. Paul then points us to our future, '...and its end, eternal life.' We need to be careful here for our holiness does not buy heaven for us, we are justified by faith not sanctification. However we do need to emphasize that the road of salvation that begins with justification by faith and union with Christ always issues in a life of holiness that ends in glorification. Those who say they have believed but are not walking the holiness road need to ask whether they are truly united to Christ. There is much more that I would like to say on this so we will reserve that line of thought for next week.

There is just one last thought I would like us to ponder as we consider these verses. We have seen that the idea of freedom from righteousness can at first glance appear positive but Paul has exposed it as an unhappy slavery that ends in death. Likewise we need to take another look at the concept of 'slaves of God' which at first glance does not appear very attractive. Given the day in which we live in where the institution of slavery is a terrible evil we need to see how Paul meant this positively. Added to this there is another false conception that I want to clear up as well. We have been talking about holiness, and we have been discussing overcoming our personal addictions and idols, we have been gazing inward at the work of our union with Christ and the state that we have been brought into and the fruits that we are checking to see is grown or is growing in our lives. In many ways our discussion of holiness has been very self-centred and we need to make sure that our discussion is not an exercise in navel gazing but true holiness as it is outlined in the word. So then trying to kill two birds with one stone, in that I want to portray holiness as slavery positively, and I want to balance the individualistic thrust of our discussion, I would like us to consider Christ as the slave of God and the servant of others.

Our picture of slavery these days looks something like the latest headline out of Cleveland Ohio where a bus driver kidnapped three women and held them closed up in his boarded up home against their wills for 10 years. This is the opposite picture of slavery that the bible is seeking to convey and Christ's relationship to the Father as obedient Son captures the picture that we are to pursue. The shape of our holiness is not one of monasticism where we imitate the mystics of this world in self-affliction and a refusal to interact with the world, but the shape of our holiness is Christlikeness. He is the perfect human being and we are being conformed into His image.

Firstly, let us remember Jesus as the one who yet equal with God became man, taking the form of our humanity He became a servant, where Jesus Himself says, 'I seek not my own will but the will of Him who sent Me.' And in becoming a servant submitted Himself to death as our substitute. Let me analyse of the likely motives that would have informed Jesus obedience unto death. Although a slave to God He was a Son and He loved with a Son's love and served as a Son not with a slave mentality. By slave mentality mean one who serves out of fear not joy, for gain not to glorify and please God, out of guilt and not acceptance. Truly Jesus would have served God faithfully as Son because He knew the Father's perfection and would give Him His due. Also, Jesus being perfected would have delighted in holiness and not sin and would naturally serve God. But the motive I want to draw your attention to is that Jesus would have served the Father with joy knowing that the Father loved Jesus and delighted in Him. We know that the Father delighted in His Son when both at His baptism and transfiguration there is the voice of the Father calling Him beloved and the One in whom He is well pleased. Jesus would not have felt like slave who would be cast off, as someone despised and being abused. Jesus enjoyed the perfect love and happiness of God and this would have drawn out His soul in corresponding love and joyful service. Does this sound like slavery to you? No it is Sonship, yet Jesus gladly takes the form of a slave because He is the Son (Phil. 2:7). Well, here is the rub. John 17:23, 'I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.' God loves us like He loved His

Son in His incarnation. We too have the same grounds to give ourselves to God as slaves even though we are sons and daughters of God.

And to draw us away from individualistic inward gazing holiness where we measure our growth by the length of our quiet times, how many times we have read the bible, and the sense we have of God's presence. Think of holiness as three different spheres of love. Firstly, our love to God which does consist in personal holiness keeping ourselves in self-control, pursuing personal devotions and thinking pure thoughts. Secondly, love towards those who are in the Church. Jesus said that the world would know that we are His disciples by our love for each other. Instead of measuring your holiness by how many times you have read your bible through, and yes you should do that, measure it by your service of those in the household of faith. I have been really convicted by Acts 4:34-35, 'There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.' Not a needy person among them. Wow, think about our church and the needs, physical, emotional, spiritual, financial, etc., our holiness and the measure to which we are Spirit-filled is revealed by this barometer. Thirdly, love to the world. Jesus had compassion on the masses, he healed them, fed them, taught them, sent out workers amongst them and He died for them. His holiness was evident in loving the world. He was imitating the Father who loves the good and the bad, this is true holiness. Love that manifests itself in providing justice and mercy in our communities is a measurement of our holiness. We will say more about this in Romans 12 and following but I felt it necessary to emphasize the Christ shaped nature of holiness that we do not fall into an individualistic version of it.

Let us heed Paul's words then and present our members to God for righteousness knowing that the only alternative, freedom from righteousness is a path of empty suffering that ends in death; but true holiness is a satisfying sonship that transcends monkish exclusivity but reaches out in love to God, the church and the world, this is true freedom and the path that ends with eternal life.