

10p

The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 13th March 2005
by Mark Ashton

Romans chapter 6:1-23

Enslaved to Freedom

Introduction: Good Belief and Bad Behaviour

The great Indian leader of the last century, Mahatma Gandhi, when asked once what he thought of Western Civilisation, said he thought it would be a good idea. He had some similarly astringent remarks to make about the Christian Church: 'I would suggest first that all of you Christians begin to live more like Jesus Christ. Second, I would suggest that you practise your religion without toning it down. Third, I would suggest that you put your emphasis on love, for love is the centre and soul of Christianity.'

Hypocrisy—the failure to live out what we believe—is the great accusation levelled at Christians:

'Like a mighty tortoise, moves the Church of God;
Brothers, we are treading, where we've always trod.
We are all divided, many bodies we;
Very strong on doctrine, weak on charity.'

The non-Christian has a great problem with the moral failure of the Christian. Non-Christians look closely at the life of the believer and see the life of a sinner. That perplexes them; it creates an obstacle to belief for them. But it may be that you and I, if we are Christian, have an even greater problem with the presence of sin in our lives. We are all too aware of it. At times it brings us almost to despair as we think, "Why do I struggle so much with selfishness and evil and greed and lust and pride?" Perhaps that thought has even brought us to the verge of abandoning our Christian faith altogether and turning our back on Christ as we think, "How can these things be true if I remain such a bad person?"

Well, in Romans 6, Paul addresses this matter of the relationship between the converted person and evil; the relationship between the believer and sin. And I suggest this is a problem both for the unbeliever and for the Christian. What he says in these verses is not easy, but it is important, so I would encourage you to look at them as we study them now. Does it matter—evil in the life of the believer? Yes, says Paul, it's a matter of life and death, or (as he puts it at the beginning of the chapter) of death and life.

1. Freed from Sin by Christ's Death

(vv1-7)

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection (vv 2-5).

Paul is using baptism in those verses as a code word for conversion. His emphasis is not on the human act of baptism (my decision to profess Christ and to get myself baptised). His emphasis is on what God did out of His grace, when I was converted. It all sprang out of the death of Christ. It is the death of Christ that makes anyone a Christian.

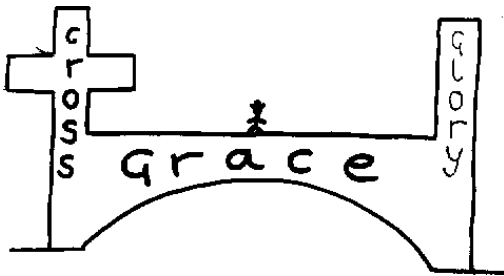
Because anyone who has died has been freed from sin (v 7). As Christians (if that is what you are this morning) sin has killed us, and that is why we are free from it. It does not own us any longer.

Notice: **we are not freed from its power to tempt us. We are freed from its power to kill us.** It can still seek to control us, in the here and now. But it no longer holds our destiny in its hands. We are freed from its ownership; it will not get us in the end.

ii) The nature of this new life viewed positively: **In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus** (v 11). What we are has changed, so what we do must change.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires (v 12). Sin no longer holds our destiny (it's not going to get us in the end; it's no longer our destination), so it must not control our journey. Have you ever had the traumatic experience of being sent as a young person on a foreign exchange to learn a foreign language by living with a family in a foreign country? It happened to me once. I finally managed to persuade my father to let me leave school, and I thought I was going to Paris to live with him and my mum in their flat there, but I discovered he had arranged for me to live with a French family. It was not my idea at all: I did my best to resist it. I listened to English radio programmes and hung out with English friends; but I nevertheless learned quite a lot of French. They were a very nice French family, and they would keep saying to me, "stop speaking English; speak our language." It didn't cut much ice with me: soon I would be back in England, forgetting all the French I had ever learned. But imagine that I had actually changed my nationality and I was never going to go back to England or to speak English again. Then when the mum in that family said, "Stop speaking that language," it would have been an altogether different thing. "That isn't your nationality any longer. You're a Frenchman now and the rest of your life lies here in France. Stop speaking English!" That's what Paul is saying to you and me. What we are has changed. We don't belong there any longer. "You're a Frenchman now and the rest of your life lies here in France. Stop speaking English!" We're going somewhere entirely different and we need to start acting, behaving, thinking, in a way appropriate to the destination to which Christ has called us, in saving us from our sins. **Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires** (v 12). Sin doesn't reign, so don't let it reign. We are to recognize to whom we now belong.

Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness (v 13). We need a more solid picture than our hammock. Think of a great bridge, spanning a huge gulf.



Remember where you are, says Paul, what bridge you are on. **For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace** (v 14). Sin will still try to act as our master. Remember we are not freed from sin's power to tempt us; we are freed from its power to

kill us. A voice still reaches us from that face behind the bars there.

So, we need to recognise to whom we now belong. The Law's condemnation has been completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ's death. A quite different voice speaks to us now. Not a voice telling us of our guilt and our sin and our condemnation, but a voice that tells us that we are forgiven. Every day it speaks graciously to me.

3. Free from sin, slaves to righteousness

(vv 15-23)

We live in an age obsessed with the idea of freedom. But, according to Paul, human freedom is an illusion: **Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness** (vv 16-18). Sin is much more powerful than we are. We may pretend to ourselves we are free. But no one is taken in by it. Human beings do not actually have the option of absolute freedom. But there is a power capable of breaking us free from sin. **I put this in human terms because you are weak in your natural selves. Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery 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 to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life** (vv 19-22).

That is what you and I, as Christians, have to learn to live as—forgiven sinners, under grace. Because that is where we are: ***you are not under the law, but under grace*** (v 14). And grace floods our hearts with gratitude. Gratitude is the motivator of Christian behaviour. Guilt has little power to change human behaviour. So much of what purports to be Christianity is actually fuelled by guilt: try-to-be-goodery, churchianity, do-goodery. The conscience of the non-Christian tells him/her that he should try to be good. But that guilt is not capable of changing behaviour.

The voice of grace says something quite different. It tells us that we are forgiven, through the death of Jesus. It tells us the price that God has put upon us. It tells us how much He cares for us. It tells us that He will never ever let us go.

Think what happens when gratitude is missing from our lives. We stop being grateful for our families, parents and siblings: they become a burden to us. Husbands, we stop being grateful for our wives: we start running after other women. Wives, we stop being grateful for our husbands: we start to nag them and be irritated by them. We stop being grateful for our jobs: they become a chore. We stop being grateful for our possessions: we become envious of what others have. We stop being grateful for our church: we start to moan and complain and be discontented with it. We stop being grateful for the gospel: we stop telling other people about Jesus Christ. Is that a picture of your life or mine?

Think how an attitude of gratitude changes all that: gratitude for our families, for our marriages, for our jobs and for our possessions. Gratitude for our church and for the gospel. What a different life! You show me a grateful person and I'll show you a person living a life quite different from the world around them. ***For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace... For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*** (vv 14,23).

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)