

## Romans 6:12-23 (29 June 2014)

In the centre of Bristol, where I used to live, you will find the impressive statue of Edward Colston. Colston is a major figure in the life of Bristol. He was extremely wealthy and became the city's most generous benefactor. Over the course of his lifetime and after his death in 1721 he gave the city a sum worth £75 million in today's money. Even today, the statue stands next to Colston Tower on Colston Way. Just off Colston Way is Colston Hall, the city's premier arts venue. Further up the hill you can retire to Colston's almshouses. Bright teenage students have the chance to attend either Colston's Boys' School, or Colston's Girls' School – or indeed St Mary Redcliffe school, which was also part funded by Colston. And my children both attended Colston's Primary School for the 5 years we lived there. You can even eat a Colston bun and remember him on 13<sup>th</sup> November, which is Colston's Day. No surprise you might think, that his statue bears the inscription: 'Erected by citizens of Bristol as a memorial of one of the most virtuous and wise sons of their city.'

But there's a problem. Specifically a problem with how Edward Colston made his money. Put bluntly, Colston was a slave owner and slave trader. The Colston family owned a large plantation in the West Indies. His wealth was built on the back of slaves – taken from West Africa, relocated to the Caribbean, set to work on his plantation, which then transported the tea, sugar and other produce back to England.

The slave trade is a terrible stain on the history of this nation. Use whatever arguments you like about the culture of the time, the figures are still horrifying. In Bristol alone, a total of 2,048 crossings were made, carrying an estimated half a million slaves from W. Africa to the Caribbean. In total, Britain was responsible for the forcible relocation of 3.5 million slaves over 2 centuries. Add together the slave trade of all the nations of that time and you reach a total of 10 million.

We might have been the first nation to turn against the slave trade, thanks to the efforts of people like William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and Hannah More, but even now, I find these figures absolutely appalling. I also found the fact that so many institutions are still named after Colston quite disturbing too. When I read up on the history of Bristol, I wrote to the head teacher of my children's school urging them to consider a change of name – unsuccessfully.

The point is – slavery is an emotive issue. Any civilised person now considers it to be wrong. But our challenge for today is that at the heart of this passage we have the language of slavery, don't we? And it's hard for us to disentangle all our thoughts about that when we approach this passage, isn't it? We don't like the word – so what on earth does it mean when Paul says that we were slaves to sin and should now be slaves to righteousness? That's our task for today.

First, some background. It might be hard for us to accept today, but in Roman times, slavery was a fact of life, an accepted part of the culture. A significant proportion of the population – perhaps even the majority – were slaves of some sort. And the point of a slave is that you have a master who owns you and has the right to control you. You are bound to work for him and will do so for the rest of your life, unless you can buy your freedom. The word for buying your freedom is redemption, by the way.

At this point in the book of Romans, Paul is trying to describe the consequences of what Jesus Christ has done for us by his cross and resurrection. We've thought a bit about that already at the baptism, haven't we? When we baptised Quincy and Janice, the symbolism for anyone who gets baptised is that you die with Christ, and then are raised with him. We are united with Christ who becomes our Lord, our boss, forever. In short we are saved, we are set free! How good is that?! But what happens next? What are the consequences? If it's a free gift from God, if he has bought us out of slavery – or to use the religious language, redeemed us (that's where the word comes from) – does that mean we can do what we like? Do we have to obey the Jewish law? How do we obey God when the OT makes it clear that even the best human beings go can't manage it?

These are the sorts of questions Paul is trying to answer – and today he gives us a really important way of looking at what it means to be a Christian. He uses a familiar idea for his time – the idea of slaves. And he basically says there are ultimately only two ways to live in this life, with two different outcomes. And we'll look briefly at those today.

**So first, two ways to live.** Paul makes it clear that in this life, in the end you can only serve one of two masters: READ v16. It's quite a controversial idea in our modern world, isn't it? We're not very big on sin anymore. We use the language of crime, or abuse, or being naughty – but sin? That's a difficult word – it's a word which relates to God. It means when we do wrong, we don't just hurt ourselves or other people, we disobey God, we fail to be what God intends for us to be. Simplest definition of sin – 'i' is in the middle. I decide how I live, what I do, how I run my life. I make my own rules – not you, God. That is sin, and it affects every single person on this planet.

But Paul takes it further, doesn't he? It's not just that we sin – but we are enslaved by it. It has control over our lives. It's a relationship we can't break out of by ourselves. And it's worth remembering that this idea wasn't Paul's, it was Jesus': John 8:34 'Everyone who sins is a slave to sin.'

Do you think sin controls your life? Here's a test for you: try to go as long as you can without thinking a bad thought about someone. How long will you last: a few hours, a day, a week, a month, a year? I doubt most of us would get longer than a couple of days, probably less. There's something inside us, it controls us.

Notorious example this week – who's been following the Luis Suarez saga? Question we keep coming back to – *why* did he do it? He knows it's wrong, he knows if he gets caught he not only lets his country down, he gets banned for a long time. Why does he do it? I think there's a compulsion, isn't there? Doesn't matter how high the stakes, or how serious the punishment, there are moments when he just can't control it. That is the sort of thing Paul and Jesus are talking about. And it's not just famous people and high pressure situations: it's the little stuff of everyday life. Without God, sin controls us.

So how do we get free from that? Just like it was rare for a slave to buy his or her freedom unless they got some help from someone, we need help with this. And this is the great news of the gospel, the great hope we find in Jesus. When Jesus dies and rises again he breaks the power of sin. He gives us a way out, a way to buy or freedom – only not with money but with the blood of Jesus. By his life, he demonstrates that a human being who is completely filled with the Spirit of God can live free from sin. By his death, he takes the punishment of our sin for us. And then by his resurrection he offers us new life, a fresh start. And everyone who believes in him goes through the same spiritual journey. This takes us back to last week's passage: READ v6-7 (EXPAND).

So Christ's death is our redemption money – it buys our freedom. So a new way to life opens up for us: READ v17-18.

Why use the language of slavery, though. I thought being a Christian was about freedom? Well, it depends what kind of freedom you mean. Not a free ticket to live as you want. Paul's opponents used to criticise him fiercely for this – excuse to live how you like. Popular today – pray a prayer and it'll be OK. Perform these religious obligations on a Sunday and you can do what you like the rest of the time. And Paul wants to say to his listeners a big, fat 'NO' to that idea. As he said last week: READ v2. Christ didn't die for us so we could just live the same lives as we did before. Being a Christian is a whole new way of life. We are following Jesus now, and he gives us his Spirit, his power, to enable us to do that. We have a new controlling influence in our lives: not sin, but righteousness. = Doing the right things, being right with God. 'Offer yourselves to God' Paul says (v13).

The point of the 'slave' idea here is that, if we follow Jesus, God has the right to run our lives. But he's not a harsh master, like a typical slave owner, or like sin. As Jesus says: he is gentle and humble in heart, his burden is light. He wants us to obey him for our *flourishing*. And that's the second point (much more briefly). Two ways to live have **2 outcomes: death or life**. If our master is sin, then his ownership leads to death. If our master is God, then his ownership is the way of life: READ v20-22.

What you invest in determines where you're heading. It's a famous verse, but that's what Paul means by v23: READ. If you work for your master sin, it'll pay you a wage and that wage is death. But God has another plan. In fact the best bit about it is that he gives it to you. You don't earn it, like a wage. He gives it to you: READ v23b. How awesome is that?

As I close, I have an inspirational friend. His name is James Ewins. He's a trained lawyer, but for a couple of years he worked for an amazing organisation called International Justice Mission (IJM). It's a group of Christian lawyers who stand up for the oppressed around the world. James moved his family to India and his job was basically to free slaves. There are more slaves now than ever: including bonded labourers, an estimated 24 million. Every so often, we would get an urgent prayer request. I'm going to this brick kiln or that factory today to rescue xxx bonded labourers – please pray! One occasion – asked us to pray for 20 – a group of us felt we should pray in faith for 40 – freed 45. 45 people with the chance of freedom.

Not just more literal slaves in world – more spiritual slaves too. But I have some good news this morning. God is in the business of freeing slaves. In fact, it's so important he sent his son to do just that. Jesus bought our freedom on the cross. Two ways we celebrate that today – baptism, and shortly communion.

Who's your master? What controls you? Are you on the path to death or life? The greatest deception of our modern age is that sin is a myth, that we are all basically good. Like the Matrix – look beneath the surface of our freedom and we're all slaves to a deeper force. But the great news of the gospel is this: God is in the business of freeing slaves. READ v23. Jesus buys our freedom. Thanks be to God!