

Ps 134:1,2  
 Hy 1B  
 Ps 119:49,50,51  
 Ps 19:3,6  
 Hy 19:1,4,5,6  
 Romans 6:8-23  
 1 John 5:1-5  
 Lord's Day 13

Yarrow, January 24, 2010

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We like the idea of being *free*. To be told what to do, unable to make our own decisions, simply sits wrong with us. Our land has its Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and we Canadians treasure the freedoms we've come to understand belongs to being Canadians. More, exactly because we're Christians we're also freed from the power of the devil – and we love that thought too. We're free and happy to be free, and we show our appreciation for this freedom by doing the things we like (as long as it's not too sinful), because, after all, Christians are free....

Our Lord's Day, brothers and sisters, challenges our perceptions about freedom. For Q 34 asks why we call Jesus “our Lord”, and we realise that those who call another their ‘Lord’ aren't exactly free.... Our Lord's Day drives that point home by its reference to being “His own possession,” the property of another. Yes, here's correction for our thought that we're free.... The Catechism would have us know that we're free indeed, *free to serve!* We are *not* our own masters!

## THE CHILD OF GOD IS A SLAVE TO GOD, AND THANKFUL FOR IT.

1. The curse of slavery to Satan
2. The privilege of slavery to God
3. The consequence of slavery to God

### 1. The curse of slavery to Satan.

The term ‘lord’ is no longer part of the daily conversation of modern English. There was a time it was, and that gave readers of the Bible an extra depth to their understanding of who Jesus is. For a ‘lord’, it was understood, is a Master, an Owner. In time past a ‘lord’ lived in his castle (literally), owned the land surrounding his castle, and was master over the people who live on his land. He protected these people living on his land, and in turn told them what to do (be it in terms of paying taxes or joining his army or staying out of a particular bush), and they better obey – or else. ‘Lord’ involved ownership.

This catches well enough what the Bible means with the word ‘lord’. The Bible, though, applies the term specifically to Jesus Christ, and it's concerning Jesus Christ as ‘Lord’ that the church makes confession in Lord's Day 13.34. To understand the force of this confession, and it's comfort too, we need to follow what the Lord has told us about Jesus as Lord.

The line of thought we need to follow with our Lord's Day begins in Paradise. Sovereign God was pleased to create a world, and in this world place human beings. Though the human race was created to act responsibly (and so have space to make decisions), it was clear from the beginning that God as Creator was Master over the creature man; the Creator was man's ‘Lord’, Master, Owner. God, then, sovereignly put man in a Garden and instructed him what to do in the Garden (he had to “work it

and take care of it," (Genesis 2:15) and told him too that he could eat of every tree in the Garden except that one in the middle (Genesis 2:16f). Man received freedom, but it was a freedom-under-God, and so involved acknowledging Him as Master and Owner.

It turns out that man rebelled against His Master. In so doing the human race established a bond with Satan, came to acknowledge Satan as his Lord, his Master. Being servants to Satan has a particular 'look' to it, as Paul makes clear in Romans 6. He speaks in vs 16 and again in vs 17 of being "slaves to sin". That's an interesting phrase, one we need to grasp correctly. The picture here presents Sin as an owner, a master, and so Sin telling you what to do. In vs 12 the apostle tells his readers that they must "not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires." The term 'reign' belongs to the realm of kings and lords, and that's precisely Paul's point; sin is a king, a master, that owns you and so tells you what to do. And since you are owned by Sin, you are in fact a slave to sin; you must do what your king –Sin!– tells you to do. Yet 'sin' is not a king in its own right; the Satan behind sin is the one you're enslaved to, and it's he who gives his instructions. That's the picture Paul is drawing: after the fall into sin in Genesis 3, the human race is the possession of the devil and Satan as Master tells his slaves what to do.

The question arises as to what slavery to this lord known as 'Sin' (or Satan) is like. Is he a kind and gentle master, so that slavery to him is in fact quite a pleasant experience? The answer of Scripture is patently No. I refer to a passage as Mark 5. The passage tells us of the demon-possessed man from the region of the Gerasenes. Concerning him Mark reports that "night and day among the tombs and in the hills he would cry out and cut himself with stones" (vs 5). It's not the picture of someone enjoying his life!

Now, it's true that the self-mutilation of this demon-possessed man does not characterize everyone in bondage to Satan in the same obvious manner. Yet there is something in the pain this man inflicts upon himself that actually does characterize all who belong to the devil. For this idea of knocking your head against a rock so as to cut yourself need not only happen physically, but can also happen metaphorically. And the fact is that those who belong to Satan have every reason to knock their heads metaphorically, for to slaves of Satan life makes no sense and has no purpose. The Bible speaks about walking in "darkness" (John 1:5), speaks of "frustration" (Romans 8:20) and "groaning" (Romans 8:22) and "meaninglessness" (Ecclesiastes 1:2) and "the empty way of life" (1 Peter 1:18), and that's how the slave of Satan and of sin feels deep inside.

This frustration can come out in various ways. It can come out in the "works of the flesh" that characterize those who do not belong to Jesus Christ, who are not renewed by His Spirit (see Galatians 5:18f), including attitudes as anger and selfishness and so on. It can come out in the dependence on drugs or alcohol or sex as a means to massage the ache in one's soul. It can come out in the art work ungodly people produce and their style of music. It can come out in the urge to be in control and so refuse to be dependent on anyone. That's why the child of God would not want to hang a piece of modern-style art in his living room; it speaks a message of frustration and senselessness, and that flies in the face of the hope of the gospel. That's equally why the child of God does not appreciate the music of today's post-Christian world; that music conveys a sense of the frustration and hopelessness that characterises those enslaved to sin – and the child of God has been set free from that hopelessness. Make no mistake: to be a slave to sin is no fun; it's a cruel bondage because Satan is a cruel master. And that, we need to know, is the setting of Lord's Day 13!

That brings us to our second point?

## 2. The privilege of slavery to God.

For what has God done for those by nature slaves to a master called Sin – and behind Sin a bigger Master called Satan? What God did?? He sent His only Son into the world! This Son, we confessed in Lord's Day 11, is 'Jesus' because "He saves His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). In the course of His earthly ministry He displayed what He came to do through miracles as casting out demons – for the demons (and the devil behind them) should not take ownership over people created to belong to God. More, He delivered so many from the bitter effects of sin's bondage, for He raised the dead, healed the sick, gave food to the hungry, and the list goes on. Yet all of that was possible only because at the end of His life He would die on the cross. His death on the cross involved atoning for sin as well as battling and defeating the devil. Concerning the payment for sin, the apostle Peter says, "it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Peter 1:18,19). As a result of the price Jesus paid to the Father, we have been purchased from the devil who owned us ever since our fall into sin, and have become Christ's property. Paul describes the result this way: God "has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Colossians 1:13,14). That's to say: we're back on God's side!

But now what: now that we're delivered from bondage to sin and Satan, now that we're restored to God's side, are we *free* people, free to do our own thing? We like to think so..., and that's the language we hear from time to time: Christians are free! But it is patently not so, beloved!

God almighty sent His only Son into the world to set free specific people from bondage to Satan. He accomplished this task through His sacrifice on the cross. God's response to Jesus' work was that God received Him back into the heaven He had left at His incarnation. But when God received Jesus back into heaven at His ascension, God did more than simply welcome His Son back – and then designate Him a spot in yonder corner; rather, sovereign God exalted His Son to the throne at His right hand, and that's to say that Jesus Christ was made Lord of lords and King of kings. Concerning His exaltation Jesus told His disciples, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Mt 28:18). So on the day of Pentecost Peter could tell the crowds before him, "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). There's the word of our Lord's Day: Jesus is 'Lord' over all God's creation, Master of it all, Owner. That's why Paul could tell the Philippians that every knee in heaven and on earth should bow before Jesus, "and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10,11).

But would you think then, beloved, that you who are restored to God's side and acknowledge that Jesus Christ is 'Lord' are actually *free* to do your own thing?? Make no mistake: that's a perversion of the Biblical message! Listen to what Paul writes to the Romans. We've already looked at the passage and noted Paul's phrase "slaves to sin" – a phrase that pictured Sin as a king and ourselves as slaves to King Sin and therefore obeying the instructions that this cruel master barks out. Then we're grateful to read in vs 18 that "you have been set free from sin," a thought that's repeated in vs 22 where the apostle says again that "you have been set free from sin" – delightful news! But he adds right away in vs 18 that we have "become slaves to righteousness" and in vs 22 that we have become "slaves to God". In the same way as Sin was seen as a king telling his slaves what to do (and Satan was obviously behind this king called 'Sin'), so Righteousness is seen here as a king telling his subjects what to do – and Righteousness here stands for God who owns us, whose slaves we are. The passage is plain: though we are most certainly freed from bondage to sin and Satan, we are not free in the sense that we now have full latitude to do our own thing, freedom to make our own decisions. We are, says the apostle, "slaves

to God". That's why the closing line of Question & Answer 34 says what it says: Christ Jesus has ransomed us from the power of the devil "to make us His own possession." That's a graphic picture; if we are "His own possession" we *belong* to Him in the same way that our shoes belong to us, and that's to say that He *owns* us. That's the force of the Biblical word 'slaves' as Paul uses it in Romans 6.

We, though, don't like the feel of the word 'slaves'; it has to our ears a negative flavour. It's negative to our ears perhaps in part because of North America's history in relation to slavery; those slaves suffered and it's that flavour of suffering and cruelty that we hear in the word 'slaves' and reject for ourselves. Yet at bottom, congregation, there's more, there's another reason why we're uncomfortable with the notion of being slaves. That's the whole concept of freedom. We cherish freedom, Canada even has a Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and now we need to confess we're somehow slaves?? We'll grant that those not redeemed by Jesus' blood are slaves to sin and Satan, but that we who are redeemed should still be slaves in some sense – no, that doesn't go down well. We're sure: Christians are free, and we want our Christian freedom! We can even find Biblical texts to defend our position, for does Paul not write in Galatians 5, "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free"? (vs 1, cf vs 13).

Yet, congregation, Paul's use of the word 'slaves' in Romans 6 is no accident. The exalted position of Jesus Christ as Lord of lords leaves no alternative but to understand that His people are His possession, His property. But now we need, brothers and sisters, to learn to hear the word 'slaves' in this context with Biblical ears. For: what kind of a Master is this Lord of lords? Satan, we well understand, is a cruel master, so that being slave to him is bondage indeed. But being slaves to Jesus Christ is an entirely different matter! Do not forget what the Son of God gave up in order to redeem you from Satan's power. Though He was with the Father in glory from all eternity, the Son *gave up* His heavenly glory, came to earth to die on a cross, shed His blood, so that with the price of His blood He might ransom you from Satan's cruel slavery. And after He's ransomed you He made you children of God, and sense you are children of God you are heirs with Him of His Father's world. That's the whole force of Lord's Day 12; we're Christians, share in Christ's anointing, and so even kings with Him in today's world.

But such labour on Jesus' part to free us from the devil and make us heirs with Him does not, brothers and sisters, mean that we have no Master anymore. Rather, Jesus' self-sacrifice in securing your redemption defines the love, the mercy, the care of the very One whom God has made your Master today. So there's the question: do you find it a tragic thing to be *His* possession?! Make no mistake: the only alternative is to remain slaves to the devil! There is no third option available! Sure, you can *deny* the reality of bondage to Satan, but that doesn't change the facts any. You can even insist that Christ has set you free and so you are free to do what you want – but that doesn't make it so. That's simple to say that you continue to live under a delusion from Great Liar, the devil. No, one is either a slave to Satan or a slave to Jesus Christ; there is no third option.

And being a slave to Jesus Christ is not a negative thing at all. Most certainly, as His property we're meant to listen to His instructions. But tell me, then: what's the nature of His instructions? Are His commands harsh, or hard? Given that His love for His people is so great that He laid down His life for His own, it's clear that His commands cannot be harsh. That's also what He Himself says. Listen to Psalm 19: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple" (vs 7). Life has its struggles so that we don't know the way forward, and that gets us discouraged and weighed down. The Lord says, My commands are wholesome, they revive the soul (see also Proverbs 3:1-8). This Lord gives instructions, most definitely, but His instructions are not

cruel or oppressive. That's why John could write, "This is love for God: to obey His command." And he adds, "*And His commands are not burdensome*" (1 John 5:3).

We need to add right away: that is not how we always experience it! We experience time and again that God's law gets in the road of our plans, and that irks us. That's why we chaff at the notion of being slaves; we want our freedom. We'll serve God, sure, for we're Christians, but we don't want too many rules telling us to do this or that, or telling us not to go here or watch that....

That brings us to our last point:

### 3. The consequence of slavery to God.

Why is it that we experience this chaffing? That, congregation, is because the Christ who has set us free from the power of the devil and made us His own possession *has not made us perfect yet*. To stay with the language of lords and slaves, perhaps I can best say it like this. That master called Satan and Sin refuses to admit that we're no longer his property, and so keeps barking (or perhaps whispering) his commands in our ear. At the same time the Lord who redeemed us proclaims His commands in our other ear. We hear these two sets of contrary instructions, and we're caught between deciding to listen to our gracious Lord and King Jesus Christ *or* listening to that cruel master Satan. To complicate matters more, our hearts remain sinful so that there's a big part of us that wants to listen to Satan's instructions. Do not commit adultery, says our Lord and Saviour, and He adds that His law is wholesome and edifying. A bit of pornography won't hurt you, whispers our ex-owner and your wife will never find out; why shouldn't you be free to enjoy yourself.... Do not lie, says our Lord and Saviour, but there's that other voice that says it's only a little lie, just this once, and look at what you're going to gain as a result.... That's the tension we experience day by day, the struggle of Christian living. And our natural bent is to give in to the whispers of the devil in the one ear instead of to the instructions of our Lord Jesus Christ in the other ear.

It's in that struggle that the Christian confesses who his Lord actually is, and that's to say that he confesses his determination to listen to instructions of his true Lord and not of his ex-owner! Caught in this confession that Jesus is our Lord, congregation, is the obligation to live the Christian life in all we do. You cannot confess that Jesus is Lord and ignore His commands; that's hypocrisy pure and simple. Yet to obey His commands in the dust and dirt of this broken life is hard work and takes much self-denial. That is why in turn the confession that Jesus is Lord drives the Lord's slaves ever and again to their knees asking for what His will for His people might be. Day by day, hour by hour, with each changing circumstance and each decision we need to make: "Lord, what do you want of me?" You cannot confess His lordship without being a man of prayer, ever seeking His will.

And the Master's answers, we need to know, do not come out of the sky as a bolt of lightning. They come instead to us through His Word. That is why a slave of God is deeply busy day by day with the Word of God. He is Lord, His will is revealed in the Bible, and so the child of God delights in that Word. That drives us to church to hear the Word, drives us to personal Bible study as well. In fact, the confession that Jesus is Lord of every square inch of life requires us to seek His will in every circumstance, and finding the right answers in the Bible can be more than we can manage on our lonesome. So there is need for talking with others, discussing the circumstances you're in, be it with your spouse or a good friend or a wise brother in the congregation or the brothers and sisters at communal Bible study. But no matter how you look at it, confessing Jesus' lordship requires that we seek His will for us in our every situation, and then humbly and obediently doing that will.

And that obedience, we need to know, gives us freedom! We are free from Satan, no longer his slaves. Yet obeying the commands he whispers into our ears will get us in a spot of trouble so quickly – and we're enslaved again to sin.... Such is your Saviour's love that He has freed you from Satan's cruel bondage, and now gives you wholesome instructions so that you flourish. In a word, it's a privilege to have Him as Lord and Master!