Christ’s bondage, our freedom!

Text: Romans 8:3

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**Scriptures:** Genesis 2:15-17; 3:22-25; Romans 8:1-4

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 95, 137, 439, 277, 533

Series: Belgic Confession (Article 20)

Theme: The perfect mercy and justice of God in sending his own Son to take on human nature and to satisfy His perfect justice on behalf of guilty lawbreakers so that they could gain freedom from the penalty of the law and receive eternal life

Proposition: Through Christ’s being bound to our nature and to the cross, we have received God’s mercy and freedom from the condemnation of His law

**Introduction**

My wife Jenny has a couple of love birds whose home is a cage. Their movement is very restricted. They seem happy, but I wouldn’t be with only such a small space in which to exist! For us as human beings, it can be difficult and distressing living with limitations to your freedom. We here in New Zealand experienced that to some extent last year with the COVID Level 4 ‘lockdown’. Many people around the world continue to live with significant restrictions on their movement due to the containment measures put in place by governments because of the pandemic.

We all experience bodily limitations. There are somethings which not one of us can do, for example overcoming the gravitational force on ourselves, passing through solid objects, or knowing all that there is to know about everything. As we age, we are likely to experience increasing restrictions on what we can do (mobility, muscle mass and strength generally decrease over the years). When we are sick, or disabled through accident or some condition in our bodies, we also suffer limitations on what we can do. All this to say that we are all, to a greater or lesser extent, physically limited.

The same truth applies to the other aspect of our being: the spiritual realm. When Adam, our common ancestor rebelled against God’s rule, He lost the freedom to be able to live in the Paradise of Eden. He was not only physically limited, being prevented from entering back into the good garden from which God had expelled him (Gen 3:22-25) and being destined to die physically (Gen 5:5), but He also became polluted by his rebellion against God. Everything he then did, said and thought was then stained by sin (Ps 14:4; Rom 3:9-18; 7:18). Theologically this is called ‘total depravity’. He became filled with guilt which was manifested in the shame of nakedness (Gen 3:7). He was separated from the presence of God in Eden (Gen 3:24). He lost the freedom of his will to be able to obey the Lord God his Maker and became a slave of Satan. He, in the words of the Apostle Paul, being ‘of the (sinful) flesh’ was ‘*sold under sin*’ (Rom 7:14). As a consequence, all his descendants are conceived in sin (Ps 51:5; Romans 5:12-14). Theologically this is called ‘original sin’.

The Belgic Confession from Article 20 to 26 summarises the work of Christ in restoring the freedom which has been lost due to sin. We’re going to look at the pattern of sound words in Article 20 “The justice and mercy of God in Christ” under three headings as we focus on Romans 8:3: “*For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*”. We’ll begin by looking at the limitations of the law, with our first point:

1. **The insufficiency of the law**

How many of us here have had a vehicle speeding ticket or fine at some time (or maybe times!) in the past? Thankfully, this is a rhetorical question – you don’t need to reply or put up your guilty hand. 😊 The point is that although the New Zealand traffic laws are generally good in that they are designed to keep us safe on the roads: both from the consequences of our own driving and from that of others, they fail to prevent all road accidents. The laws of our country, not just the ones which apply to traffic, are limited in their effect.

The law of God is also limited in its effect. However, unlike human laws, His law is perfectly ‘*holy and righteous and good*’ (Rom 7:12). The Apostle Paul expresses the insufficiency of God’s law in Romans 8:3 writing: *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.* Paul is **not** saying that the law of God is in any way deficient or defective, but rather than the problem of law-breaking lies in ‘the flesh’. His use of the word ‘flesh’ here does not refer to our anatomy and physiology as human beings, but to our bondage to sin. That is our natural inability to obey God, the ‘total depravity’ that we are all conceived in.

The ability of God’s law to enable us to have true freedom is limited, not by the law itself, but by the inborn human nature which is bound to sin and Satan. It doesn’t matter how many traffic police or speed cameras line our roads, they will never stop everyone from speeding because the problem with going to fast in our vehicles is fundamentally not to do with the accelerator or the brake, it’s to do with us, with our heart attitudes. Whether it’s a conscious desire to go faster than we know we ought, or whether it’s carelessness in how we drive or inattention to the signposts we pass, the result is the same: people like us break the law. We drive too fast!

We saw this morning the insufficiency of God’s law in securing covenant blessings for Old Testament Israel when they entered the Promised Land. The law which they had received was both clear and extensive in its scope, not only had they been given the terms of their covenant with the Lord in the ten commandments, they also had numerous laws which defined in detail how they should live together before God. These good laws reflected the wisdom, righteousness, justice, faithfulness and holiness of God. God’s law is good and perfect, because He is good and perfect!

However, despite having God’s law given to them: the 10 commandments preserved and stored on two stone tablets which travelled with them in the Ark of the Covenant, this was insufficient to bring them freedom. When they entered the land of Canaan, they did not consistently experience the blessings of freedom from their enemies, freedom from hunger, freedom of movement, freedom to give generously and freedom to worship the Lord in the temple. Often they received the curses of breaking God’s law; the limitations of disease, drought, oppression and slavery and the violent death of themselves and their families.

The law of God itself could not prevent this, because the fundamental problem was not a lack of regulation, but a lack of love for the Lord Himself. No ordinary human being could fix this mess, only the justice and mercy of God in Christ is sufficient for such a humanly impossible task, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The satisfaction of Christ**

Perhaps the solution to people going too fast on the roads is automatic self-drive vehicles? Personally, I have some reservations about putting my own life, the lives of my passengers and those around me on the road in the hands of the software programmers of the AI systems being developed so that we no longer drive ourselves.

The Lord has **not** solved the problem of the bondage of the human will by turning us into automated, robotic human beings without any decision-making capability of our own. He could have done this perfectly and eliminated sin, but His ways are far wiser, more loving and wonderful than that. He has provided the solution to our sin problem in Christ. Paul writes that God has done what His own good law could not do, “*By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*”. Those words ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ need some explanation. They are very carefully chosen to avoid two possible misunderstandings:

1. That Christ only **seemed** to be a human being. This was the error of the Docetists who believed that the body of Jesus only appeared to be a real human one, but was actually either just an apparition like a ghost or else composed of a heavenly substance. If the words were ‘likeness of flesh’ this false idea would be conveyed.
2. That Christ, like us all, was **conceived in sin** (Ps 51:5) and therefore exactly the same as us in essence. If the words were just ‘sinful flesh’ then the false idea that Christ was polluted by the sin of Adam would be conveyed.

Instead, the words ‘*in the likeness of sinful flesh*’ reveal the truth that Jesus did take on human flesh, being a man with anatomy and physiology like ours, but that unlike us, He was not conceived in sin. As Paul writes in 2 Cor 5:21 He ‘*knew no sin*’. God did not send a pulse of powerful radiation to erase our minds and destroy our decision-making ability, then uploading a set-of instructions that we were programmed to follow like machines. Instead, He revealed both His perfect justice and mercy “*By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh*”.

God sent a substitute for us in the person of His Son to satisfy the need both for perfect obedience to His law and for the death penalty for sin to be paid. In order to do this, it was necessary for Christ to greatly humble Himself: in the words of Philippians 2:6-7: “*Though he was in the form of God, {He} did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*” (Phil 2:6-7). Christ willingly bound Himself to human flesh.

Before His resurrection, His body was limited as ours are. Although He had all the rights and privileges of being God, He laid these aside and became physically dependent on water, food and sleep as we all are. He became vulnerable to the effects of the sins of others, suffering injustice, hatred, mockery, violence and death because He had willingly accepted the limitations of the ‘likeness of sinful flesh’. Christ allowed Himself to be bound, constrained, limited so that all those believe in Him can be free.

At the cross we see this vividly and painfully portrayed. We know that He was nailed up there (ref. John 20:25) and that he was mocked as He died by the religious leaders who said: "*He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him*” (Matthew 27:42). The justice and mercy of God is revealed in the obedience of Christ who willingly remained bound to the cross and thereby satisfied the righteous anger of God against the sins of the many in whose place Christ substituted Himself.

Paul explains this most costly and wonderful exchange in these Holy Spirit inspired words: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*” (2 Cor 5:21). The Belgic Confession summarises this truth in the words of human author Guido deBrès: “*God, who is perfectly merciful and just, sent his Son… to make satisfaction in that same nature; and to bear the punishment of sin by his most bitter passion and death. God therefore manifested his justice against his Son when he laid our iniquity on him*”.

Brothers and sisters in our Lord, the limitations of the Law of God have been removed by Christ so that we can have freedom. These limitations of our ‘sinful flesh’ were taken away by the work of Christ in being bound to the ‘likeness of sinful flesh’, dying in the place of many to satisfy the justice of God and enabling the many to live forever in Him. This brings us to our last point:

1. **The great gift of immortality**

Many people think that freedom is the removal of all limitations. This is not true. The result of attempting this is actually bondage. Think of the person who eats as much as they like, as often as they like, and does not engage in sufficient activity to use up all that nutrition. They become bound by the food they consume. Think of the person who drinks too much alcohol or takes too many prescription drugs or any non-prescription drugs, they likely become bound; ruled by the substance that limits them. Think of the person who repeatedly breaks the speed limit on the road, eventually they are likely to lose their licence and be bound to use the bus, ride a bike or walk! Indulgence in any sin leads to bondage and a loss of freedom.

The way to freedom is not the removal of limitations, it is coming under the Lordship of Christ. Handing over your own ‘freedom’ to do as you please (which is no freedom at all) to Christ so that He can direct your life is the only way to have true liberty. Jesus put it this way: “*So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed*” (John 8:36). The freedom we have in Christ is expressed this way at the end of Article 20 of the Belgic Confession: “*Out of a most perfect love he gave his Son to die for us and he raised him for our justification that through him we might obtain immortality and life eternal*”. Our justification ‘just as if we had never sinned’ in Christ frees us from the certain judgement of God against us as the guilty. We are thereby freed from all need to fear and be anxious. The great gift of immortality frees us from the limitation of death.

Whilst we remain bound to the certainty of physical death (Heb 9:27), unless the Lord first returns, we are no longer bound to the ongoing limitation of spiritual death which is to be separated from God forever. Unlike Adam, expelled from the perfect freedoms of the Garden of Eden, we who are in Christ are free beyond physical death to be with the Lord; awaiting the time when He returns, and we receive resurrection bodies. Living on the New Earth I understand that these perfect new bodies will still have some of the physical limitations which we experience now. It’s very likely that we won’t be able to overcome the gravitational force on ourselves, or passing through solid objects, or know all that there is to know about everything.

We will still be finite human beings, but we will be truly free. Free from mourning, crying and pain. Free from sin; perfectly bound to Christ, the One who has set us free! Immortality in the good land where ‘the dwelling place of God is with man’ will result in great freedom because we will experience the fullness of life eternal.

I don’t know about you, but I wish I had more time. More time to be with other people. More time to be alone with the Lord. More time to pursue more activities, interests and learning. More time to enjoy the freedom I have in Christ. In this life we are limited by time, bound to the number of days which the Lord, in His inscrutable wisdom has allotted to each one of us (Ps 139:16). In the New Heavens and New Earth there will be no time limits! Let’s look forward to that glorious freedom, but remember and give thanks and praise to God that this is only possible because Christ was bound to the likeness of sinful flesh that we in Him would be free indeed!

AMEN.