

Romans 6:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

Analysis

Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey—ouk oidate hoti hō paristanete heautous doulous eis hypakoēn, douloi este hō hypakouete (οὐκ οἴδατε ὅτι ὃ παριστάνετε ἔαυτοὺς δούλους εἰς ὑπακοήν, δοῦλοι ἔστε ὃ ὑπακούετε). The rhetorical question assumes the principle is self-evident. Doulous (δούλους, slaves) is emphatic—total ownership and submission. Voluntary enslavement was known in Roman law (debt slavery); Paul applies the principle spiritually: whoever you obey is your master, regardless of claims to freedom.

Whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness—ētoi hamartias eis thanaton ē hypakoēs eis dikaiosynēn (ἢτοι ἀμαρτίας εἰς θάνατον ἢ ὑπακοῆς εἰς δικαιοσύνην). Two mutually exclusive slaveries, two opposite destinations: serving sin leads to death (both spiritual and eternal), serving obedience leads to righteousness (right standing and right living). Hypakoēs (ὑπακοῆς, obedience) is personified parallel to sin—obedience to God/righteousness. The destinations are inevitable consequences: sin's wages are death (v. 23), obedience's fruit is righteousness. Middle ground doesn't exist—neutrality is impossible. Everyone serves someone; the question is whom.

Historical Context

Roman slavery was ubiquitous and total: slaves had no legal personhood, no rights, no autonomy—complete subjugation to their master's will. Unlike American chattel slavery (race-based), Roman slavery resulted from conquest, debt, or birth to slaves. The metaphor would be viscerally understood. Voluntary enslavement occurred when someone sold themselves to pay debts or gain a powerful patron's protection. Paul's point: despite claims to autonomy, everyone is enslaved—either to sin or to God. True freedom is serving the right master.

Related Passages

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Study Questions

1. What evidence in your life reveals which master you're truly serving—sin or obedience?
2. How does understanding that 'neutrality' is impossible (you're always serving someone) change your view of 'small' sins?
3. What areas of your life need to be brought under obedience to God rather than remaining in service to sin?

Interlinear Text

οὐκ	οἶδατε	ὅτι	ὦ	παριστάνετε	έαυτοὺς	δοῦλοί	εἰς
not	Know ye	that	to whom	ye yield	yourselves	his servants	to
G3756	G1492	G3754	G3739	G3936	G1438	G1401	G1519
ὑπακοῆς	δοῦλοί	ἐστε	ὦ	ὑπακούετε	ἵτοι	ἀμαρτίας	
obey	his servants	ye are	to whom	ye obey	whether	of sin	
G5218	G1401	G2075	G3739	G5219	G2273	G266	
εἰς	θάνατον	ἢ	ὑπακοῆς	εἰς	δικαιοσύνην		
to	death	or	obey	to	righteousness		
G1519	G2288	G2228	G5218	G1519	G1343		

Additional Cross-References

John 8:34 (Sin): Jesus answered them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin.

2 Peter 2:19 (Parallel theme): While they promise them liberty, they themselves are the servants of corruption: for of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought in bondage.

Joshua 24:15 (Parallel theme): And if it seem evil unto you to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.

Matthew 6:24 (Parallel theme): No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Romans 6:17 (Sin): But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.