

Romans 6:20

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness.

Analysis

For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness—*hote gar douloi ēte tēs hamartias, eleutheroi ēte tē dikaiosynē* (ὅτε γὰρ δοῦλοι ἦτε τῆς ἀμαρτίας, ἐλεύθεροι ἦτε τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ). The imperfect *ēte* (ἦτε, ye were) indicates past continuous state, now ended. *Eleutheroi tē dikaiosynē* (ἐλεύθεροι τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ, free from righteousness) is ironic: their 'freedom' from righteousness was actually slavery to sin. Dative *tē dikaiosynē* (τῇ δικαιοσύνῃ, with respect to righteousness) indicates righteousness had no claim on them—they owed it no allegiance.

Paul's point: total slavery to sin meant total freedom from righteousness's demands. But that 'freedom' was destructive (see v. 21). The implication: now, as slaves of righteousness, believers are 'free from sin'—sin no longer has legitimate claim. The language exposes the folly of sin's promised 'freedom': autonomy from God is slavery to death. True freedom comes through submission to righteousness. The verse sets up vv. 21-23: examining the 'fruit' of each slavery to prove which is genuinely beneficial. Past slavery to sin produced shame and death; present slavery to righteousness produces holiness and life.

Historical Context

The concept of 'freedom' was prized in Greco-Roman culture—Roman citizenship, Greek democracy, philosophical virtue all promised freedom. Stoic philosophers taught freedom through mastery of passions; Epicureans through moderation of

pleasure. Paul radically redefines freedom: not autonomy but slavery to the right master. In Roman law, a freed slave (libertus) gained certain freedoms but owed loyalty to former master as patron. Paul's paradox—freed from sin to become slave of righteousness—would be understood in this patronage context.

Related Passages

Colossians 1:16 — All things created through Christ

Psalms 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. What 'freedom' from righteousness did you experience before Christ, and how was it actually slavery?
2. How does understanding that you're now 'free from sin' (just as you were once 'free from righteousness') affect your battle with temptation?
3. What areas of your life still operate as though 'free from righteousness' rather than serving your new master?

Interlinear Text

ὅτε	γὰρ	δοῦλοι	ἦτε	τῆς	ἀμαρτίας	ἐλεύθεροι	ἦτε
when	For	the servants	ye were	G3588	of sin	free	ye were
G3753	G1063	G1401	G2258		G266	G1658	G2258
τῇ	δικαιοσύνῃ						
G3588	from righteousness						
	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.

