

Romans 6:16-17

16 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?

17 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.

Last lesson we left off in verse 16, seeing that this principle of obedience and servanthood is a transdispensational one, as Jesus clearly articulates this in John 8:34, and Peter also makes a similar point in 2 Peter 2:19. Considering everything we've recently learned about our new identity in Christ—that is, who God has now made us to be—why would we desire to be brought back into bondage to sin? The relationship of mankind to sin as we've discussed is one of violence and abuse. It is harmful and it subverts the will of the individual, that is, it brings one into bondage.

This word here in Romans 6:16, *servants*, shares the Greek root that is also translated *bondage* in Romans 8:15 and Romans 8:21 (*doulos/douleia*). The use of the word *servants* here is not to conjure up the image of the more civilized forms of servanthood mankind has contrived, but should be understood in the sense of a slave/master relationship, because of the very nature of the issue at hand: identity.

As sinners, we were slaves unto sin; we may have been able to help what we did in regards to individual actions, but we could not help who we were, and as we gave into one sin, as we will see Paul allude to in verse 19, this led to yet more sin, because sin is never satisfied until it brings forth death (James 1:15). The natural progression of sin is to grow.

Now we are given a new identity in Jesus Christ, and our slave/master relationship has changed. There is still a master, and we are still subject to His dominion, but we are no longer under the dominion of sin.

Now let's consider what Paul means here in verse 16 when he says,

whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?

We cannot come to this verse and isolate it from the context we find ourselves in. The temptation one might have when reading this is to say, sin leading to death must be speaking of eternal death, that is, *hell*, since it is contrasted with obedience leading to righteousness. But the issue we have been dealing with in chapter 6 has not been justification, or the issue of heaven or hell so to speak, but the issue of identity and functionality, that is, our sanctification. The righteousness spoken of here is not the positional, judicial righteousness obtained by faith in what Jesus Christ performed on our behalf, it is *functional* righteousness. It is *practical* righteousness.

A believer is declared permanently righteous by the decree of God at the moment of faith, because of the mechanics of the gospel which allow God to legally do so (propitiation, imputation, and their result, atonement), but in practical everyday life, he may or may not live that out. Their present state at any given moment may not reflect that position that they hold, which was part of the free gift of salvation. Thus, practically speaking, they could hypothetically go on to serve sin. The result of serving sin then, here in Romans 6:16, is also a practical and functional one. There are various kinds of deaths in the Bible, just as there are various forms of life: there is spiritual death, there is physical death, there is functional death, and there is the second or eternal death in the lake of fire. What is being spoken of here is referring to functional and even physical death. Nothing one does with the body can change the status of the justification we've received by faith alone, therefore this cannot be speaking of spiritual or eternal death.

What do I mean when I say *functional* death? Well, as we see, one can be spiritually alive by faith in the gospel, but then live in a manner that is not consistent with the identity we have in Christ; we can live after the flesh. The natural consequence of living after the flesh is that we cannot please God, thus we are not able to serve God. And so, in a practical sense, we are dead to God. We are in fact *spiritually* alive to God, but in our daily lives we are unprofitable to Him.

If one yields themselves servants of sin, they yield themselves servants of sin unto *functional death*: they cannot actually serve God by the Spirit, *which is the only way we can serve God*, because they will not be living out of their identity in Christ by faith in the word of God, but will be walking after the flesh.

And if one yields themselves servants of sin unto functional death long enough, they may face the natural, biological consequences of those sins, such as physical death.

And so the righteousness spoken of here is functional righteousness, it is the believer living out of the doctrine by faith, so that the life of Christ Himself is lived through him. It connects the Head to the member of the body, making it functional and a practically righteous asset. And this is what Paul touches on in the very next verse.

Romans 6:17

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.

These saints were (past tense) the servants of sin, but had *obeyed from the heart the form of doctrine*. We indeed have that same form of doctrine, and that doctrine, that truth, sets one free from the slave/master relationship of sin.

When he says *obeyed from the heart*, he is not saying that they simply performed some physical action and “put their heart into it.” As we have seen so far in this epistle, Paul does not give us any instruction relating to our physical actions until Romans 6:12, only *after* he has given us the doctrine concerning our identity. And this is often the pattern: Paul will deal first with godly thinking before he addresses our living and labor. Our manner of life and our labor for God *must* come out of the doctrine, it must come out of our inner man. This is *how* we walk after the Spirit. This is *how* we walk by faith. It is living by faith in what God has said, and who He has made us in Christ by the operation the Spirit performed in us when we believed.

The audience here first *believed* the doctrine, and that is how that doctrine became active in their lives; this is how they *obeyed from the heart* the doctrine. The heart itself was obedient unto the faith. The result of this is that they were actually made free from the power of sin. This *is* the obedience of faith Paul mentions in Romans 1 and Romans 16.

Romans 1:5

By whom we have received grace and apostleship, for obedience to the faith among all nations, for his name...

Romans 16:25-26

25 Now to him that is of power to stablish you according to my gospel, and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which was kept secret since the world began,

26 But now is made manifest, and by the scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, made known to all nations for the obedience of faith..

What often happens is that a believer, in their zeal for God, wants to obey God, but they think that they must simply obey a certain standard of righteousness if they actually believe. They invariably put the proverbial cart before the horse, and end up recruiting the flesh to try and perform. This is not what the obedience of faith is about. One must first bring *their faith itself into obedience*, that is, they must bring their thinking in line with what God has revealed about spiritual things, such as our baptism into Christ, our identification and union with Him, how that our old man in Adam was put to death and how we have received a new identity in Christ.

Either God Himself provided *everything* we need to live a life that glorifies Him, or He didn't. If He didn't, then recruiting the flesh to perform would be our only option. But in fact He did, and He will not accept any works we perform in the strength of our own flesh.

In considering these passages regarding the obedience of faith, I'm reminded of the passage in **Psalms 46:10**,

Be still, and know that I am God: I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in the earth.

Though this passage is in the context of the Lord's return in judgment, what we commonly refer to as "the second coming," at Israel's salvation and subsequent rise to glory, what we see today in Israel's fall and in Christ's absence from the kingdoms of this world, is that even still He has made a way for us to be still and know that He alone is God, and that all the power is *in* and *from* Him; even still He has made a way to be exalted among the heathen; even still He has made a way to be exalted in the earth, and that is through the excellency of the power of His word working in and through those who believe.

This *is* the obedience of faith among all nations. We must "be still," that is, cease from our own efforts, and simply trust and believe Him and allow His word to produce the fruit it was designed to produce in us.

When we bring our faith into conformity with what God has said, when we bring our thinking in line with God's thinking, we have begun to bring our faith itself into obedience. Our thinking must first be brought in line with God's thinking. This is the first aspect of *godliness*, or, "god-likeness."

We have the noun *God*, followed by the suffix *-ly*, which takes the noun and makes it an adjective, or a description word. The suffix *-ly* means "having the qualities of," or "having the form or nature of."

Thus *god-ly* describes one who has the qualities or nature of God. Thus we could say it is to be *god-like*. And what have we been learning in Romans 5 and 6? That we have inherited a new identity in Christ, that our old "in Adam" nature was crucified, and that we have now inherited a new nature which reflects God's Son. Jesus Himself said John 14:9,

He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.

And so if we have taken on a new identity which reflects Jesus Christ, then we have taken on a new identity which reflects God the Father. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the mechanism by which man is being restored to the image of God.

The suffix *-ness* denotes action, quality or state of being. If we add *-ness* to the word *godly*, we have the action, quality or state of being *god-like*.

If we are to understand what the process of being godlike consists of, where would we start? We would start with the mind of God, which reflects His character, His thoughts, and His will. Everything He does flows from *who He is*, from His identity. In the same way, what we do must flow from the identity we have in Him. And so the first part of our conformity to the image of God's son, of our *godliness*, is learning to see things as He sees them, and to think as He thinks. And it is the Scriptures themselves that reveal to us the mind of God.

In writing to Titus and Timothy, who were pastors of local assemblies, Paul makes the following statements:

Titus 1:1

Paul, a servant of God, and an apostle of Jesus Christ, according to the faith of God's elect, and the acknowledging of the truth which is after godliness...

1 Timothy 1:3-4

³ *As I besought thee to abide still at Ephesus, when I went into Macedonia, that thou mightest charge some that they teach no other doctrine,*

⁴ *Neither give heed to fables and endless genealogies, which minister questions, rather than godly edifying which is in faith: so do.*

1 Timothy 6:3-6

³ *If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness;*

⁴ *He is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words, whereof cometh envy, strife, railings, evil surmisings,*

⁵ *Perverse disputings of men of corrupt minds, and destitute of the truth, supposing that gain is godliness: from such withdraw thyself.*

⁶ *But godliness with contentment is great gain.*

We see here the main focus Paul is trying to drive home in these pastoral epistles is *godly edifying* that comes through faith—that comes out of the doctrine. To be edified is to be built up. But what are we being built up to?

Consider Ephesians 4:

Ephesians 4:11-15

¹¹ *And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;*

¹² *For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ:*

¹³ *Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ:*

¹⁴ *That we henceforth be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive;*

¹⁵ *But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ...*

We see here the purpose of the work of ministry is to perfect the saints and to edify the body of Christ. Notice in this passage all of the offices Paul names are those which minister the word of God: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. That is not to say that the other spiritual gifts did not minister the word of God: they did. Words of wisdom, words of knowledge, tongues: these two ministered the word. But Paul's focus here is not spiritual gifts. It is the

edification of the Body, which requires the unity of the faith (v13), doctrine (v14), the speaking of truth (v15): *the word of God*.

This process begins and ends with faith in the word of God. And so, in order to obey from heart the form of doctrine that's been delivered to us, as Romans 6:17 says, we must come to the word of God and allow that word to begin its work inside us.

In our last lesson we learned that, since there is something inherently wrong with the flesh, God had to have a way to circumvent or bypass the flesh, if He was going to have us somehow conformed to the image of sons; and in fact He did, and that process is *faith*. We cannot obey from the heart the doctrine if we do not understand it. That means we cannot simply "do good things" in our flesh (which we cannot) apart from the doctrine. For, as Paul will say in Romans 10:10,

...with the heart man believeth unto righteousness...

Though this is a passage dealing specifically with Israel, the principle here I want us to understand is that *with the heart man believeth*. We must obey from the heart the doctrine, and that means submitting our faith itself to what God has said.

There are many doctrines in the world and there are in fact many doctrines in the Bible itself. But there is only one *form of doctrine* delivered to the Body of Christ, to perform the work in us God wants to perform. There is only one form of doctrine which is after godliness for the body of Christ.