

1 Timothy – The Household of God

This charge I entrust to you, Timothy, my child, in accordance with the prophecies previously made about you, that by them you may wage the good warfare (1 Timothy 1:18 ESV)

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, ¹⁵ if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:14-15 ESV)

Slaves and Masters

May 29th, 2022

1 Timothy 6:1-2

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Timothy chapter 6.

Some of you are very astute listeners. I received some text messages wondering why verses 1-2 of chapter 6 weren't unpacked at length last Sunday.

“Are you dodging a difficult passage? Did you think that we wouldn't notice? What are you trying to hide, pastor?!”

I'm kidding. I did receive some texts, but they were friendly and curious. Truth be told, when I had asked Matt to preach for my week off, we *were* scheduled to hit verses 3-10. But I had made an adjustment which shifted the series, and I didn't think it would be fair to throw him a curveball with a week's notice.

Having said that, if you noticed that we skipped verses 1-2, then you get a gold star. Rest assured, we will always preach on what's next – unless I prebook a guest and mess up the schedule again. But *even then*, we'll come back to what we've missed.

By way of reminder, this letter is from the Apostle Paul to his protégé Timothy. In this letter, he is giving this young pastor instructions on how he is to lead the church. We're now in a very practical portion of the letter where Paul is addressing some of the specific challenges that

Timothy was facing. Today, Paul speaks to the challenge that Timothy will face leading a church that consists of a large number of slaves. By the way, this would have been true of nearly *every* church in the first century. As one commentator observes:

It is claimed that half the population of the Roman Empire in the first century was composed of slaves.¹

50% of the population! And the percentage of slaves in the church would have likely been *even higher* because early Christianity spread amongst the disenfranchised. When this letter was read, it is likely that more than *half the church* would have been made up of slaves.

Think about that for a moment. Is that the church that you envision when we read through the Pauline letters? When Paul writes to the Philippians about the secret of contentment, or to the Corinthians about unity, bear in mind that he is not writing to a healthy, wealthy sunshine club.

How do you shepherd people who are still living under the yoke of slavery? When your church is facing injustice and oppression, what is it that they need to hear from their pastor? Look with me to 1 Timothy 6:1-2. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. ² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

Teach and urge these things. (1 Timothy 6:1-2 ESV)

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Before we consider the instructions that Paul lays out in this passage, I think it would be beneficial to take a moment to address the larger issue of slavery in the Bible. Does the Bible promote

¹ Ralph Earle, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary (Ephesians - Philemon)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 11, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1978), 382. John Stott in *Guard the Truth* claims that the number was closer to one third of the population (143).

slavery? Your unbelieving neighbour thinks so, and they might even point to a passage like this to make their claim. So, let's consider their objection:

Does The Bible Promote Slavery?

At the beginning of the lockdowns when we were still doing joint services with Cornerstone, we preached through a series called "Ten Hard Questions". One of the questions was, "Doesn't the Bible Promote Slavery?" I preached that sermon on June 28, 2020, and you can find it on the Cornerstone website². If you have questions about this topic, I would encourage you to go back and to listen to that sermon. Today, I'm going to try to summarize some of that content as a bit of a refresher, because this continues to be an enormous stumbling block for those who are new to Christianity.

So, let's ask the question that your neighbor is asking: Does the Bible promote slavery?

The first thing that we would want to address in response to that question is we would want to define our terms. Most anyone who is raising that question today is envisioning the racially motivated, man-stealing African slave trade of the 18th and 19th centuries. When they hear the word "slavery" *that* is what they envision. And we can say with absolute clarity that the Bible *clearly opposes* that form of slavery. It opposes it in the Old Testament where God declares:

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, **shall be put to death.** (Exodus 21:16 ESV)

That's pretty clear, isn't it? God's solution for slave traders was the death sentence. And God's disdain of slavery doesn't diminish in the New Testament. In fact, in the first chapter of the letter that we're studying today, Paul writes:

understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers,¹⁰ the sexually immoral, men who practice

²<https://cornerstoneorillia.org/teaching?sapurl=Lys5bnZoL2xiL21pLytyOXA3am45P2JyYW5kaW5nPXRYdWUmZW1iZWQ9dHJ1ZSZyZWNIbnRSb3V0ZT1hcHAud2ViLWFwcC5saWJyYXJ5J5Lmxc3QmcmVjZW50Um91dGVVbHVnPSUyQm55cm4yN2o=>

homosexuality, **enslavers**, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is **contrary to sound doctrine** (1 Timothy 1:9-10 ESV)

Old Testament and New, the racially motivated man stealing of the African slave trade was clearly forbidden. As Tim Keller observes in his book *The Reason for God*:

The Bible unconditionally condemns kidnapping and trafficking in slaves (1 Timothy 1:9-11; cf. Deuteronomy 24:7). Therefore, while the early Christians did not go on a campaign to abolish first-century slavery completely, later Christians did so when faced with New-World-style slavery, which could not be squared in any way with Biblical teaching.³

In this quote, Keller draws a distinction between ancient slavery and New-World slavery. This is the piece that your neighbour likely hasn't ever considered. In the ancient world, slavery was primarily motivated by economics – not race. A person became enslaved when they couldn't repay their debt. A person became enslaved when their nation was overtaken after war. In fact, it was not uncommon for people to willingly sell themselves into slavery in order to ensure their accommodations and protection.

In short, the slavery of the Bible was not the African slave trade. The Bible outright condemns that practice and God himself declares that anyone guilty of man-stealing deserves the death sentence.

That being said, I don't want you to hear me as suggesting that ancient slavery was pleasant or condonable. Even though it was motivated by economics, it was still awful. Men and women were made to be property. Ancient slaves were frequently mistreated. So, why didn't the Bible condemn *that* institution?

Well, the more that you read your Bible and the more that you understand the gospel, the more you will come to see that the Bible *did* undermine the slavery system of the ancient world – but it did so by changing the *people within the structure* rather than changing the structure itself.

Listen: The New Testament doesn't contain laws and sanctions for Graeco-Roman society because the New Testament was not written to law makers and power brokers. It was written to slaves and outcasts! It was written primarily to a fringe group of believers living in the midst of powerful

³ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 2008), 115.

empires. Of course Paul didn't use his letters to write new laws for the land! That would have been a waste of papyrus! Instead, he used his letters to teach believers how to live faithfully as salt and light inside the broken systems that they found themselves in. As one author writes:

True, no prooftext dismantled Roman slavery with a single blow. Yet taken as a whole, the Bible decimated slavery with a thousand hits.⁴

There is not a single verse in the New Testament that endorses slavery. Instead, the Bible undermines slavery with its teaching that every man and woman is made in the image of God. The Bible undermines slavery by teaching us that the first will be last and the last will be first. The Bible undermines slavery by celebrating our unity in the midst of our diversity.

The Bible is not a political manifesto. It's not an instruction manual for parliamentarians. It is the story of a sinful humanity, a holy God, and a plan of redemption through our Lord Jesus Christ. *That* is what matters to Paul. *That* is his priority.

And that brings us to our text. Timothy has a church filled with slaves – a church filled with disenfranchised, hard-done-by, oppressed people. What would Paul have him preach to those slaves? What should a pastor preach to those who are living under oppression?

What Should A Pastor Preach To Those Who Are Living Under Oppression?

First, Paul tells Timothy:

1. **Remind them to honor everyone – even their oppressors**

We see this in verse 1. Look there with me:

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as **worthy of all honor** (1 Timothy 6:1a ESV)

⁴ Aaron Menikof, *How and Why Did Some Christians Defend Slavery?* <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-and-why-did-some-christians-defend-slavery/> Accessed June 22, 2020.

That's a counterintuitive instruction, isn't it? Was Paul pandering to the slave owners? Was he too cowardly to address the social injustices of his day? Was he trying to create a state church?!

Or did Paul simply have his eyes fixed on Jesus, the Saviour who – while his oppressors drove nails through his wrists – cried out:

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do. (Luke 23:34a ESV)

Paul had been transformed by the King who taught us:

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 ESV)

Paul had been the recipient of that radical love. Remember, before Paul was a Christian, he was a terrorist. He hunted down the followers of Jesus and held the cloaks of those who stoned them to death. For most of his life, Paul had *been* the oppressor! But the gospel has the power to change the heart of the vilest sinner. The gospel extends mercy to people who don't deserve mercy.

So, Timothy, when you stand up to preach, and they're spitting mad because they've been treated unjustly again, here's your sermon: Slaves, regard your masters as worthy of honor.

What an impossible command! Some of these slaves had miserable masters! Some of them were mistreated on a weekly basis! Was Paul oblivious? Perhaps he misspoke. Perhaps he was guilty here of over-generalizing. Perhaps he was only referring to the masters who *deserved* honor.

That's what we would expect, but that's not what Paul says. He gives no disclaimer. He gives no exception clause. Slaves are to honor their masters. Period.

The Apostle Peter gave the same instruction to the church in Asia Minor, and he *did* include a qualifying statement, but he used that qualifying statement to say the *opposite* of what we want to hear. He wrote:

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, **not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.** (1 Peter 2:18 ESV)

It would be one thing to call for half-hearted, disgruntled obedience, but *respect?! Honor?!* How could Peter and Paul make such impossible demands?

Because we are the followers of Jesus, and this is the example that he set for us. The Bible teaches us that all men and women are created in the image of God and are therefore worthy of respect and honor. On page one, we read:

So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Genesis 1:27 ESV)

The slaves needed to see their masters as image bearers and to treat them as such. Interestingly enough, this same doctrine was instrumental in bringing about the abolition of slavery in the Western world. The gospel declares the humanity of the slave *and* of the slave owner – both the oppressed *and* the oppressor. As John Stott describes it:

Every human being is worthy of honour, even pagan slave owners, because they have been made in the image of God. Once we perceive the intrinsic worth of human beings by creation, and therefore recognize them as worthy of honour, all our relationships are enriched and ennobled.⁵

As I read this text, I am reminded that the job of the under-shepherd is NOT to say what the people want to hear. Your Youtube feed will do that for you. Your social media echo chamber will do that for you. Your circle of likeminded friends will do that for you. But I CAN'T do that for you or else I have abdicated my responsibility. My job is NOT to tell you what you want to hear! My job is to point to the text and to tell you what God says in His word.

And if Timothy could look out over a congregation full of slaves – some of them perhaps even bearing wounds from the flogging that they received at their master's hands – if he could look out at *them* and call *them* to honor their oppressors, then I have no excuse to do any less from this pulpit.

⁵ John Stott, *Guard the Truth – The Message of 1 Timothy & Titus*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 144.

Some of you have given yourselves permission to be disrespectful to your employers. You gossip. You slander. You think he's a fool. You think she's unqualified. You think that you're justified in the posture of dishonor that you have adopted. But you're not. Now, you're not a slave – praise God! You can find another job. You can quit. But you can't continue to dishonor your employer. That's wrong.

Some of you have given yourselves permission to dishonor your Prime Minister. Perhaps this application feels like a hermeneutical stretch, but when Peter gave his instructions to slaves, it was intertwined with the command to submit to and honor the governing authorities. In 1 Peter 2:17, he wrote:

Honor everyone. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. **Honor the emperor.** (1 Peter 2:17 ESV)

Some of you felt like you were treated like a second-class citizen. You felt villainized and oppressed by the one who was supposed to protect you. You can't even say his name now without adding a snarky remark. Through your example, you've taught the watching world that *this* is how Christians respond to mistreatment. You justified that dishonor, but it was wrong.

Others of us have given ourselves permission to dishonor those who slander us. Christians – people that we had walked with for years – said things to us and about us, publicly and privately, that cut deeper than they'll ever understand. While we tried to navigate through challenges that we had never before faced, we were attacked by the brothers and sisters that we were trying to serve! And that felt unjust! And we allowed ourselves to hold grudges. And we allowed ourselves to withhold honor. And it was wrong.

Paul leans in, and he tells Timothy – as you look out over those slaves – over those victims of injustice – don't tell them what they *want* to hear. Tell them what they *need* to hear. Remind them of the Jesus way. Remind them to honor everyone – even their oppressors.

We'll move quicker now, but we needed to hear that. Second, Paul tells Timothy:

2. Remind them to put the gospel first – even over personal freedom

Look again with me at verse 1:

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, **so that** the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. (1 Timothy 6:1 ESV)

The Ephesian slaves are to show honor to their masters because the advance of the gospel is more important than anything else! When you dishonor your master, you prove that you care more about *your* comfort than you do about *his* eternal soul.

To be clear – Paul understood that slavery was awful. Elsewhere he wrote a letter to a slaveholder named Philemon calling on him to release his slave Onesimus. In Paul’s earlier letter to the Ephesians, he warned the slave owners in the church that they would one day answer to the God who shows no partiality between slave and free. And, in his letter to the Corinthians, he wrote:

Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) (1 Corinthians 7:21 ESV)

“If you can gain your freedom, then you should!” Paul was not pro-slavery.

But – and this is the piece that folks find offensive – neither could he be described from his letters as *anti-slavery*. Meaning – Paul did not give any of his word count to overturning political systems. Paul did not use his life to try to stick it to the man. He wrote to slaves and to slave owners, and his primary concern for both was that they would look to Jesus and serve him with all their might.

Now, did Paul expect that the gospel would lead people to forsake slavery? It sure seems that way. In his letter to Philemon, he strongly urged Philemon to see Onesimus not as a runaway slave, but as a brother in Christ. Paul understood that the advancement of the gospel would lead to the rejection of slavery.

However, that simply wasn’t the priority in Paul’s mindset and ministry. Paul gave of himself – even to the point of death – to tell the world about the salvation that is ours in Jesus Christ! THAT was his message, and THAT was the driving priority in his life!

Now, does the gospel lead to transformed living? You bet it does! That's why the second half of Paul's letters are always devoted to gospel implications. But they are *personal* implications – not *political*. Political change flows downstream from personal change. Paul understood that the tool with the power to change the world is not statecraft – it's the gospel! And if your pursuit of your political vision hinders people from seeing and receiving the gospel, then YOU HAVE LOST THE PLOT!

In this passage, Paul is calling on the Ephesian slaves – men and women who probably spent a lot of time thinking about freedom and autonomy – to instead prioritize evangelism and mission. Because in Paul's life and ministry “the cause of Christ has priority.”⁶

How many of us have hardened our employers to Christianity by the way that we have fired back at them at times when we were wronged? How many of us have hardened our neighbours to the gospel by the way that we responded to them when they complained about our long grass or our noisy kids? How many of us have hardened our community to the gospel by the way that we've conducted ourselves over the last two years?

Paul is teaching us here that, even if you *have* been wronged, for the sake of the gospel you can and you *must* show honor. Because these offences against us are temporary, but hell is forever! Woe to us if we prove by our actions that we care more about our rights and freedoms than we do about the salvation of our oppressors. That is NOT the example that Jesus set for us.

So, remind them to put the gospel first, Timothy. Even above their personal freedom.

And finally:

3. Remind them to be radically selfless

In verse 2, we read:

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles – World Biblical Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 327.

Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.

Teach and urge these things. (1 Timothy 6:1-2 ESV)

We catch a glimpse here of the wildly complicated dynamics in the early church. Think about this: There were slaves and masters worshiping together in this congregation. They were breaking bread as brothers in the worship service, but then throughout the week, one was master over the other. This was a thing. And it was complicated.

This letter to Timothy has nothing to say about how masters should relate to their slaves, however, when he wrote to the church as a whole in a previous letter, he addressed both groups. In Ephesians 6, Paul wrote:

⁵ Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, ⁶ not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. ⁹ Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him. (Ephesians 6:5-9 ESV)

So, he addressed both parties in his first letter to this church, but in his follow-up to Pastor Timothy, he only addresses the slaves. This suggests that the masters in Ephesus were following their instructions, but that the slaves were being obstinate. Perhaps they felt that they could get away with a lesser work ethic because they knew that their master was a gracious man. Perhaps they understood that the gospel clearly undermined the institution of slavery, and they were frustrated with their believing master who was slow to connect the dots.

Whatever the case, Paul swiftly rebuked their mindset. He told them that they had it backwards! They should work *harder* for their believing master because, in doing so, they had the opportunity to bless their brother!

This is radical, so I want to make sure that you see it: Timothy was to remind these slaves that they should be more concerned about the comfort of their master than they are about their own. They should see it as a *privilege* to pour themselves out to make their brother's life better.

Again, that sounds offensive, tone-deaf and perhaps even dangerous. How could Paul possibly say such a thing? He could say it, because his priorities were shaped by Jesus who taught us:

whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:26b-28 ESV)

Did you deserve grace, Christian? Did you deserve it when the perfect Son of God was beaten, mocked, and hung on a tree in your place? Did you deserve it when he took all of *your* sin – all of *your* injustice, and *your* oppressing and the awful things that *you* have done – did you deserve it when he took all of that upon himself and removed it from you forever at the expense of his life?

It was a pretty scandalous grace, wasn't it? It was a pretty remarkable gift! Well, now, having *seen* that and having *received* that, can you tell me again why you are giving your brother in Christ anything less than your best?

Does he deserve it? Perhaps not, but neither did you. And yet, Jesus served you. He served you with such an extravagant kindness. Therefore, what a blessing it is when you have an opportunity to share that kind of selfless love with your brother or your sister in Christ! What a privilege it is to be used by the Lord to make another person's life better.

Remind them of that, Timothy. Remind them to be radically selfless. Even when they feel hard done by. Even when they feel like they haven't gotten a fair shake. Even when they feel like they're always on the losing side of the deal. Remind them to rejoice with those who rejoice. Because, at the end of the day, when we stand before God, all the temporary pleasures, comforts and accolades will fall to the floor. In the grand scheme of things, your eternal joy will have nothing to do with who had more toys in this brief life, but it will have everything to do with how you loved Christ and his church.

Conclusion

That is the note that young Timothy is to ring out in his church. They will want him to wage war with the corrupt system, but instead he is to wage war with their grumbling attitude. They will want him to cry out for freedom, but instead he is to call them to submit out of love for their oppressors. They will want him to rebuke the wealthy and the powerful for being part of the problem, but instead he is to rebuke them for not desiring the best for their brothers in Christ.

And that's why we read through the whole Bible. Because the sermon we want is rarely the sermon that we need.

Paul knows that comfort is good. Freedom is good. Fairness is good. But if he had no comfort, and he had no freedom, and he had no fairness, Paul would still have MORE THAN ENOUGH, because Paul has Jesus! And so does Timothy! And so do the Christian slaves in Ephesus! And so do you, Redeemer! You have Jesus! You have everlasting life! So, if God calls you to forego comfort, or freedom, or fairness so that the people who oppress you might come to know Jesus, will you pay that price? That was Paul's heart cry! Is it yours? Is it mine? Is it the heart cry of this church? O that God would grant us hearts and minds that embrace the Jesus way. And praise God that there is forgiveness for the times that we have fallen woefully short. To that end, let's pray together.