

# **Living in God's Church Today**

## **Bondservants and Masters**

*1 Timothy 6:1-2*

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## Bondservants and Masters

### Scripture

Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to deal with problems in the churches around Ephesus. He was to deal with false teachers and their teaching. And he also was to instruct God's people about living in God's church. Paul gave Timothy instructions about the treatment of widows (in 5:3-16) and elders (in 5:17-25). Then he turned his attention to a third social relationship, namely the behavior of bondservants toward their masters.

Let us read about bondservants and masters in 1 Timothy 6:1-2:

**<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>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. (1 Timothy 6:1-2)**

### Introduction

Do you think your boss is tough or unfair? Try working for the world's worst boss—Mike Davis, aka Tiger Mike. Davis started as a chauffeur and rose in the 1970s to become a Houston oil and gas magnate. But he earned even more notoriety as “the world's worst boss” and “the world's grumpiest boss.” Throughout his career he routinely issued grumpy memos to his employees.

For example, on January 11, 1978 he sent the following

terse memo to all his employees: “Idle conversation and gossip in this office among employees will result in immediate termination. DO YOUR JOBS AND KEEP YOUR MOUTH SHUT!”

A month later, he banned office birthday parties with the following memo: “There will be no more birthday celebrations, birthday cakes, levity, or celebrations of any kind within the office. This is a business office. If you have to celebrate, do it after office hours on your own time.”

In another memo, he explained why he could swear but his employees could not: “I swear, but since I am the owner of this company, that is my privilege, and this privilege is not to be interpreted as the same for any employee. That differentiates me from you, and I want to keep it that way. There will be absolutely no swearing, by any employee, male or female, in this office, ever.”<sup>1</sup>

The vast majority of people work for a boss. And far too often the boss is a difficult person for whom to work, although not always. So, how do we as Christians serve such a boss?

When Paul wrote this letter to Timothy, he addressed this question head-on. However, the social and economic setting in Ephesus was very different than what we know today. One commentator notes that “it has been estimated that there were between fifty and sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire, and that as many as one third of the populations of large cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus were slaves.”<sup>2</sup> Because Paul addressed the issue of how slaves—which the *English Standard Version* has translated as “bondservants”—were to serve their masters, we know that the churches in Ephesus had

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2016/october/3103116.html>.

<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 136–137.

a mixture of slaves and masters in the same congregation.

Let me briefly define terms. The Greek word for “bond-servant” (*doulos*) can be translated as “bondservant, slave, or servant” and it means “a person who is legally owned by someone else and whose entire livelihood and purpose was determined by his or her master.” The slavery that existed in this country until the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 was horrific and filled with abuses.

Slaves in Paul’s day were acquired in several different ways. Slaves were not always ethnically different. Prisoners of war that became slaves may have been ethnically different (Numbers 31:7-35; Deuteronomy 20:10-14). Slaves could also be purchased (Exodus 21:7; Leviticus 25:44-46). Some poor people sold themselves into slavery (Leviticus 25:39ff.; Deuteronomy 15:12-17); others were sold into slavery to pay their debts (2 Kings 4:1; Nehemiah 5:1-8). Slaves could be received as gifts (Genesis 29:24), or inherited (Leviticus 25:46). Still others were born to slaves and remained in that role.

Slavery was also different in Paul’s day than the slavery in this country. Slaves in Paul’s day were accorded the same social status as their owners. From outward appearances, it was usually difficult to distinguish slaves from free persons. Slavery was often preferred to freedom because it offered security. Moreover, as one commentator noted, “A slave could be a custodian, a merchant, a C.E.O., and even a government official. Many slaves lived separate from their owners. Finally, selling oneself into slavery was commonly used as a means of gaining Roman citizenship and gaining entrance into society.”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “Roman slavery in the first century was far more

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<sup>3</sup> R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, 138.

humane and civilized than American/African slavery practiced in this country during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Whereas nineteenth-century slavery was tragically racist, theirs was rarely racist but rather reflected the economic and political realities of ancient culture.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, that still did not make slavery right. One person still owned another, and a slave was still considered to be the property of another person.

The Greek word for “masters” (*despotēs*) is where our English word “despot” comes from. But unlike the English word, the Greek term does not carry the connotation of someone who is harsh, cruel, and abusive. It merely refers to “a person who has general authority over others (slaves or subjects); often as an owner as well as an authority figure.” This word was even used of Jesus (2 Timothy 2:21; 2 Peter 2:1; Jude 4). In Greek culture and terminology, *doulos* and *despotēs*, bondservants and masters, went together.

Paul was of course addressing the question of bondservants (or slaves) and their masters. Some have argued that Paul was soft on the question of slavery. They say that the Roman Empire was not ready for the abolition of slavery. If slavery had been abolished at once, the entire economic structure would have collapsed. Therefore, some scholars have argued that the New Testament set forth principles for its gradual elimination. For example, Paul wrote, in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

However, as commentator Philip Ryken argues, the New Testament does in fact take a strong stand against slavery:

To begin with, in contrast to what it says about other

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<sup>4</sup> R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1 & 2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, 138.

social relationships, the Bible never teaches that slavery is part of the created order—an omission that shows it is not part of God's permanent will for humanity. More importantly, Paul himself has already condemned the buying and selling of human beings at the beginning of his first letter to Timothy: "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, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, *enslavers*, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:9–11, emphasis added).

Paul mentions the slave trade almost in passing, but his condemnation could hardly be stronger: anyone who traffics in slaves is "lawless" and "disobedient." Here it is important to note that the Mosaic law condemned man-stealing as a capital crime. The Old Testament permitted some forms of slavery, including the capture (as opposed to killing) of foreign slaves in a holy war and voluntary servitude for Israelites who needed to pay off their debts (but only for up to six years, after which they were set free). However, the Mosaic law also regulated slavery to prevent abuse, and kidnapping slaves was punishable by death (see Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7); so was negligent homicide (see Deut. 22:8). This means that the whole Western institution of slavery—which began with the capture of African slaves and included the death passage to the Americas—directly violated the law of God.<sup>5</sup>

I believe it is important to keep this truth in mind as we approach today's text. Paul was not condoning slavery at all. Furthermore, he was not addressing masters but, rather, he was addressing slaves. Without approving slavery in all its forms,

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Daniel M. Doriani, and Philip Graham Ryken, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 238–239.

Paul was giving pastoral advice to people who were enslaved. He was addressing workers and how they should serve those who were their bosses. And it is in that regard that we can learn lessons for ourselves from today's text.

## Lesson

1 Timothy 6:1-2 teaches us how to serve different kinds of bosses.

Let's use the following outline:

1. Serving a Boss Who Is a Non-Christian (6:1)
2. Serving a Boss Who Is a Christian (6:2)

### I. Serving a Boss Who Is a Non-Christian (6:1)

First, let's examine serving a boss who is a non-Christian.

Paul wrote in 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.”** The expression **“under a yoke”** did not necessarily mean an abusive relationship. It was a current-day expression of submissive service under the authority of another person. I have already mentioned that **“bondservants”** were not necessarily poorly treated. They may well have had positions of leadership in the community, serving as doctors or government officials or merchants. The point is that they were under someone else's authority. They had bosses.

Apparently, some slaves had professed faith in Christ but were not showing proper respect to their masters. It is possible that the false teachers were teaching slaves to show insubordination to their masters. The slaves were not serving their bosses well. But, Paul made it clear that such insubordination

dishonored God and discredited the teaching of the gospel.

We no longer have the institution of slavery in our community. However, we do have relationships with employees and their bosses. There is a sense in which bosses to some extent have control over the livelihood of their employees. The principle that Paul wanted is that employees must serve their bosses faithfully. Of course, employees should never do anything contrary to God's law. They should work hard and honor their bosses. They should do nothing that will bring disgrace upon the name of God and discredit the teaching of the gospel.

Joseph is an example of not bringing disgrace upon the name of God. Joseph was a slave in Potiphar's house. Potiphar was captain of the Egyptian guard. Joseph was such a good worker that Potiphar "left all that he had in Joseph's charge, and because of him he had no concern about anything but the food he ate" (Genesis 39:6). But eventually Potiphar's took a liking to Joseph and tried to entice him into an illicit relationship. But even though "she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her" (Genesis 39:10). The reason Joseph refused Potiphar's wife was because he did not want to bring disgrace upon the name of God, as he explained in Genesis 39:8–9, "Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness *and sin against God?*"

Regarding discrediting the gospel, commentator Philip Towner tells of what happened to him and several of his friends who had just become Christians while serving in the military in England. He writes:

There were several of us who had just set out on the Christian adventure. In our enthusiasm to serve Christ we somehow concluded that we didn't need to concern ourselves with mundane rules about shined boots and clean, pressed uniforms. Our superiors quickly made the connection between our new faith and our sloppy appearance. And in that small corner of the world, Christianity was in danger of being linked with insubordination.<sup>6</sup>

Their lack of submission was causing their bosses to revile the teaching of the gospel. And that must not be done.

So, if you are serving a boss who is a non-Christian, serve him or her well. Do nothing that will bring disgrace upon the name of God or discredit the teaching of the gospel.

## II. Serving a Boss Who Is a Christian (6:2)

And second, let's look at serving a boss who is a Christian.

Paul wrote in verse 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.”** In some instances in the churches in Ephesus, the slaves and their masters were both Christians. Therefore, they were brothers in Christ. They were spiritually united. It is possible that the slaves were thinking that since Christian believers are all one in Christ Jesus, there was no longer any distinction between slaves and their masters. However, that did not mean that it did away with their economic, social, and employment status. Paul wanted Christian slaves to treat their Christian

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<sup>6</sup> Philip Towner, *1–2 Timothy & Titus*, vol. 14, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 1 Ti 6:1–2.

masters better because they were brothers in Christ. They were not to misuse their relationship with their masters. Similarly, masters were not to misuse their Christian brothers who were their slaves.

I became a Christian when I was an officer in the South African Air Force. Shortly after becoming a Christian, I was sent off to war in northern Namibia. I was in a camp with about 70 other Air Force personnel. I discovered that a young corporal was also a Christian. He had been a Christian for many years in contrast to my Christian faith of only a few weeks. However, he soon called me by my first name and that disconcerted me. He treated me as an equal and I struggled to know how to handle it. The truth is that I was a brand-new Christian and I did not know how to relate to a brother in Christ as his superior officer. I soon avoided the young man because I did not know how to handle it. I was at fault because I was a new Christian.

The lesson, however, is that Christians must still respect their bosses and not assume that their similar faith puts them on the same level professionally.

## Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of serving bosses in 1 Timothy 6:1-2, let us serve well for the sake of God and the gospel.

A 2015 article in *The Wall Street Journal* points to research that proves what many workers already know: employees fake a positive outlook when the boss is around, and all that fakery can be exhausting. The research, reported in the *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, concluded that workers tended to put on smiles and fake happiness when higher-ups

were in the room. By contrast, when workers hold meetings with peers or with lower-status employees, they tend to express themselves more honestly.

In one experiment, researchers selected nearly 150 full-time employees who regularly attended workplace meetings. The participants filled out surveys about meetings they recently attended. After the researchers collected the data, it was obvious that when superiors were in the room the participants reported that they tended to hide their authentic feelings during the meetings.

*The Wall Street Journal* article went to say, “All this faking can be exhausting: those who feigned positive feelings actually felt less satisfied when a meeting ended, researchers found. [As one of the researchers said], ‘Even if they act positive, those underlying negative feelings are still there. They feel inauthentic, which could result in lower satisfaction, or, eventually, burnout.’”<sup>7</sup>

Whether your boss is a Christian or a non-Christian, let’s not fake it. Let us serve well for the sake of God and the gospel. We do so because our Savior Jesus has done it for us. The Bible says that Jesus “emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). The Greek word for “servant” (*doulos*) in Philippians 2:7 is the same word used for “bondservant” (*doulos*) in 1 Timothy 6:1. Jesus became a “bondservant” when he became a man. He became *our* bondservant. He did it so that he could buy our freedman by his perfect obedience.

So let us serve our bosses well, because we have a Savior who has served us perfectly well. Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2015/february/8021615.html>.

# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church  
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and membership in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike maturity,  
equip them for their ministry in the church  
and life mission in the world,  
in order to magnify God's name.*

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