

*Slaves and Masters: 1 Timothy 6:1-2*  
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God cares very much about His church, and in this letter of 1 Timothy we've been learning from God's inspired Word about His design and His purposes for the church. In chapter 5, and in the first 2 verses of chapter 6, which we're going to study this morning, there are instructions concerning three groups of people and how the Gospel should be lived out in the context of each specific group. Chapter 5 began with Paul's admonition to Timothy of how he should treat various individuals in the family of God: older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers, younger women as sisters. Then there is an extended discussion of how widows should be cared for in the church. This is part of how the family of God cares for those within the family, and it is part of how the Gospel is lived out in practical ways. God has changed our hearts and changed our lives by the power of the Gospel, and the love He has shown us we should show to one another. The second group of people is the elders, in verses 17-25, which we looked at last week. The elders / pastors of the church are to be respected and cared for, they are to be held accountable, and they are to be appointed cautiously. This is how the Gospel must be lived out among the leaders of the church. These are important guidelines for preserving the purity of the church and the testimony of the church, so that the Gospel will not be slandered due to scandal in the church.

Thirdly, we come to the commands in chapter 6:1-2 which are addressed to slaves. Here we will see how this group, which would have made up a sizable percentage of the congregation in Ephesus, was to conduct themselves in a way that would adorn the Gospel.

I want to begin by sharing some observations about the Bible and slavery, because the very mention of slavery in these verses may stir up all kinds of questions in our minds. And I want to take a moment to address some of those questions. Secondly, I'll talk about the biblical theme of spiritual slavery, which uses this social institution as its backdrop. Thirdly, we'll think together about the application of this passage for today's workplace. And finally, we'll look at the broader application of this for all of life.

### **The Bible and Slavery**

As we look at these verses, you might be appalled by the fact that Paul doesn't simply command masters to release their slaves. Why doesn't he say "Let all who are under a yoke as slaves receive their freedom"? That's what we want Paul to say.

That's what seems just and fair and right. So why does Paul instead instruct slaves to honor their masters? Far from calling for the end of slavery, he almost seems to be in favor of it. That's not the case, as we'll see from some other verses, but Paul certainly doesn't denounce slavery in the way we would like him to. Why is this? Why doesn't the Bible speak out clearly against slavery?

Let me offer 4 brief observations. First, while the Bible doesn't condemn slavery outright, neither does it condone slavery. It doesn't clearly state that slavery is evil, but neither does it state that slavery is good or right. It simply assumes it. But it also transforms it from the inside out. The Bible doesn't attack slavery directly, but it speaks to the individual heart, of slave and master, and thus sparks an inner revolution.

In the passages where slaves are addressed (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-21) Paul and Peter are speaking to individuals right where they're at in society. They're not addressing the societal structures, but they're instructing individuals how to live godly lives in whatever position they find themselves.

A second observation that is very helpful is to notice that the institution of slavery is not grounded in creation. Marriage, in contrast, was established in God's good creation, and in creation God revealed His design for manhood and womanhood, for husbands and wives. Slavery, on the other hand, was not part of God's good creation, but rather something that came to be only in this fallen world. Therefore, when Paul talks about marriage or the roles of men and women, he can ground those instructions in creation. But not in the case of slavery. He does nothing to defend or preserve the institution of slavery.

Thirdly, we need to understand some of the differences between first century slavery and the slavery that was practiced in our country in recent centuries. One difference is that in Paul's day slavery was not based on racism. Race was not a factor in who became a slave. There was not one group of people who were forced to be slaves. All different kinds of people were slaves, and all different kinds of people were masters.

Another difference is that slaves could gain their freedom, and regularly did. In fact, most slaves were freed by the time they were 30 years old. Also, many individuals would actually sell themselves into slavery in the hope of moving up the ladder of society. They knew that after seven years or so they would be free again, and if they had served a well-to-do master, then they would probably have many more opportunities than they did before becoming a slave.

We should also understand that slaves in the first century served in many very high positions in society. There were many

slaves who did menial labor, but there were also slaves who were tutors and professors of higher education and philosophers. Slaves worked as business agents, accountants, and doctors. In many cases, there were slaves who were better educated than their masters.

I don't mean to conclude from this that slavery in the first century was a good thing. There were many horrible abuses, in addition to the inherent degradation of being owned by another human being. Slavery, in any form, is wrong and evil in this way, because it undermines the fact that we are all created in God's image. Humans can own animals, but we should never own another human being. But realizing some of the significant differences between slavery in the United States and slavery in Paul's day helps us understand a little better the stance that he took toward it.

A final observation about slavery in the Bible is that the Bible *does* give pointers toward the abolition of slavery. As I already said, we don't find a clear attack on slavery. But in various ways there is an undermining of slavery. Paul's letter to Philemon is a great example of this. Paul doesn't directly come out and tell Philemon to free Onesimus, but you certainly get the impression that Paul would love to see that happen. Also, here in 1 Timothy, in 1:10, Paul lists "enslavers" among the lawless and disobedient. And in 1 Corinthians 7:21 he encourages slaves to gain their freedom if given the opportunity.

The bottom line, I believe, of why the Bible does not come right out and call for the end of slavery, has to do with the nature of Christianity. Christianity is not a religion of social revolution. This is not primarily what Christianity is about. Christianity is primarily about how sinful human beings can be reconciled to a holy God, which happens only through the person and work of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the New Testament deals with the issue of being reconciled to God, and it deals with issues within the church. But social issues outside the church, in the society at large, were not of primary concern.

But here's what then happens: when individuals are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, and those redeemed individuals are joining together in local churches and growing in grace, then there will be a tremendous impact on the society. Not because social reform is our primary focus, but because the Gospel is our primary focus. John Piper, in his biography of William Wilberforce, says: "For the good of society, the good of society must not be the primary good" (*The Roots of Endurance*, pg. 122). The Gospel is the primary and ultimate good, and that is the focus of the New Testament writers.

## Spiritual Slavery

The second thing I want to talk about, which illustrates this point I've just made, is the biblical theme of spiritual slavery. In God's revelation of the Gospel in His Word, and in His providential plan, the New Testament writers picked up on the social institution of slavery and used it as a profound illustration of spiritual truth.

The world in which Paul lived was a world filled with slaves. In many places up to a third of the population were slaves. It was everywhere. Slaves, masters, slaves who were being released from slavery, poor workers who were selling themselves into slavery. It was the backbone of the economy, and it was simply a part of life for those living in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. Murray Harris, in his book *Slave of Christ*, gives a helpful definition of slavery that applies both to physical slavery and spiritual slavery. He says that a slave is "someone whose person and service belong wholly to another" (Murray Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*, 25). For the slaves of Paul's day, they belonged wholly to their master. Not just their work, but their very being, was owned by the master. This is what makes human slavery so evil and degrading. But this was the status of slaves. They did not have personal rights. They did not have free choice concerning their work or activities. They couldn't choose what they wanted to do. They were completely subjected to the master's will.

With that in mind, look at Romans 6:15-23 (page 943 in pew Bibles): "What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Maybe you've never thought of yourself as a slave, but you are. You're either a slave of sin or a slave of God. Some of you here are still slaves to sin. You have a cruel and wicked master who has enticed you with the pleasures of this world in order to utterly destroy you. That's what the text says. Verse 16, "Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" And verse 21, "But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? The end of those things is death." And verse 23, "For the wages of sin is death . . ." This is the cruelty of sin. It promises pleasure, and delivers on that promise in very small and shallow and brief ways, and yet it is destroying you all along and in the end condemns you to everlasting misery. Human slave masters have done some horrendous things to their slaves, but nothing compares to the eternal spiritual agony that is inflicted upon those enslaved to sin. If you are a slave to sin, you need to recognize how dire your predicament is. You are being deceived and abused by a wicked master. You are headed toward eternal punishment. And in addition to this, there is nothing you can do to free yourself. You are unable to choose for yourself a different master.

Your only hope is that God would come and deliver you from your bondage to sin and make you one of His own. Plead with Him to do that for you. Recognize the wickedness of your sins against Him, and ask Him for mercy. Look to the cross of Jesus Christ, and trust that His death is sufficient to cover your sins and set you free from your bondage to sin, and give you a new life, with a new master. Verses 17-18 show how this happens. Paul says, "But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness." These verses show the glorious change that takes place in a person when he or she is saved. We become obedient from the heart. Our behavior changes because our heart changes. And this is all because God sets us free from sin. We couldn't have freed ourselves, but God came and set us free from that slave master, and He made us slaves of righteousness. He made us His own. And in this slavery, there is true freedom. When we become slaves of God, we discover what true life and true freedom is. Because finally we desire to do what we ought to do.

From the illustration of slavery, I hope you can all see these profound spiritual realities that God's Word is revealing to us. Each one of us is a slave. The question we must each ask

ourselves is: to whom do I belong? Am I a slave of sin or a slave of God?

### **The Application for today's workplace**

This finally brings us to a place where we can consider the verses at the beginning of 1 Timothy 6 and apply them to our lives today. Understanding the nature of first century slavery, and also understanding the deeper reality of spiritual slavery, we can take these instructions to slaves and find some application for today's workplace. Maybe some of you remember when Tom Stellar was here with us about two years ago, and one of his talks dealt with this issue of slaves and masters. And he made a very helpful point in comparing the slave-master relationship and the employee-employer relationship. He said if God expects slaves, who have the least freedom, to work in a certain way and honor their masters, He certainly doesn't expect less from us, who have much greater freedom and privilege. So these verses certainly do apply to today's workplace.

Maybe you feel kind of like a slave in your job. Maybe you feel trapped. There aren't any opportunities for promotion or for a change, and you dread going to work. How does God want you to view your work, and your employer? How does God want you to treat your boss?

Verse 1 says, "Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor." You might want to jump in right there and object, But what if the guy is NOT worthy of all honor? He's not worthy of ANY honor! Paul is saying, regard him as worthy of all honor anyway. In verse 2 he speaks specifically to slaves who have Christian masters. But here in verse 1 he is speaking generally to all slaves, whether their masters are believers or unbelievers.

So if you're in the workplace and your boss is an unbeliever, and maybe a downright horrible person to work for, you still need to treat that person with respect. 1 Peter 2:18 says, "Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust." That may be hard for some of you to hear, if you work for a difficult person, if you work for someone who is unjust. Now, this doesn't mean you follow your boss into sin or injustice. But you are to show them proper respect as the one in authority over you in the workplace.

Why? Back in our passage, the rest of verse 1 answers the question, "Why?" It says, "so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled." You show respect to your boss, and you work diligently, because the reputation of God and the Gospel are at stake. What will people think about Christianity if they see you disrespecting the boss, slacking off in your work, coming in

late, leaving early? What kind of impression does that make on people, when they know that you call yourself a Christian and they see how that translates into your workday? Maybe you're argumentative with the boss. Maybe you think that because the boss has not treated you right, then you're going to get back at him or her by not doing the things you're responsible to do.

And your unbelieving boss and unbelieving co-workers will be making their assumptions about Christianity based on the things they see in your life. So-and-so is one of those Christians. He's always griping about the boss. He never gets his work done. That must be what all Christians are like. I don't want to have anything to do with Christianity. That is how the name of God and the teaching are reviled when Christians do not heed these instructions.

What should happen instead is this: the Christians should be the most respectful to the boss, they should be the ones working hard, punctual, responsible, reliable. The Christian in the office should be the one who the boss goes to when something really important needs to get done. God works in a lot of different ways, and we never know how He's going to use us to draw people to Himself. He may use our words as we testify to what He has done in our lives. And He may use a hundred little acts of kindness and respect and diligence in the workplace to impress upon someone that Christianity is for real. Christ really makes a difference in a person's life.

I remember during one summer break in college I worked at a chemical plant in my home town. I worked with a group of civil engineers. My boss's name was Peter Chmeler, and he was somewhat antagonistic toward Christianity. I remember sharing with him that I had hopes of becoming a pastor, and he kind of scoffed at the idea. But I worked hard for him all summer long. I worked diligently at a lot of very tedious projects. I respected him. I did what he asked me to do. I didn't goof off. And at the end of the summer he told me, You're the hardest working summer intern we've ever had. And he thanked me for my work. I wish there was a more exciting ending to the story. I wish I could say that he fell on his knees and repented right then and there. He didn't. Some time later I was going to be preaching at my home church, and I called Peter to invite him to come. He didn't come. But in some small way, in that small group of civil engineers in Midland, Michigan, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was put on display in a positive light.

Wherever you're working, whoever you work for, remember that the reputation of the Gospel is at stake. And also remember who your real boss is. If you're in a difficult working situation, remind yourself daily that your boss is not the person

sitting at the big desk plotting how to make your life miserable. That person is not your boss. That person is one of God's instruments whom He is using for your sanctification. If you have a difficult boss, you can thank God for that person. He or she is one of God's means of sanctifying you. But remember that your real boss is Jesus Christ. He's the One you answer to. Ephesians 6:7 says we should render "service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man." So go to work, not ultimately to please your human boss or to make that person look good, but to please Christ and to let people see how great He is.

In verse 2 Paul addresses the specific situation in which both the slave and the master are believers. "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." Here's the danger: your boss sits next to you in the pew on Sundays, so you think you don't have to work as hard for him during the week. You think that since we're brothers in Christ, certain things can slide. Paul says, that's exactly the wrong logic. Instead, since he's a brother you should work even harder for him. You should be even more excited about working for them since it's a believer who is going to benefit from your good service. So whether you are working for an unbeliever, or for a believer, work hard and respect your boss so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.

### **The Broader Application for All of Life**

I want to close by connecting this to a broader application that applies to all of life, not just the workplace. In Titus 2, where slaves are mentioned again, among other individuals, there are three purpose clauses that are parallel to the purpose clause here in our passage, "so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled." In Titus 2:4-5 there are instructions for the older women to "train the young women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, [and here's the purpose] that the word of God may not be reviled." Wives, the way you treat your husband and children says something about the Gospel. Your self-control, purity, home-making, kindness, and submissiveness to your husband—it all says something about the Gospel. Where those attributes are evident and growing, your life will adorn the Gospel. Where those attributes are absent, your life could cause the word of God to be reviled.

Then in verses 7-8 Paul tells Titus, "Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works, and in your teaching show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned,

[and here's the purpose] so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us." For all of us, we should be a model of good works (verse 7). Not that we are doing good works in our own strength or for our own glory. But as new creatures in Christ, our good works should be a witness to His grace. Our teaching as well, should accurately portray the Gospel. In both life and doctrine, we will either adorn the Gospel or undermine the Gospel.

Finally, in verses 9-10 he addresses slaves again. "Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith, [and here's the purpose] so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior."

I simply want to challenge us to think about what our lives communicate about the Gospel. In all areas of our lives, are we demonstrating the power of God's grace to change us and sanctify us, or are we just giving the world opportunities to scorn Christianity? Let's pray for God's help, so that His glory might be seen in our lives.