

## **Instructions To Slaves**

### **1 Timothy 6:1-2**

#### **Introduction**

In the last chapter Paul instructs Timothy about people in the church. Paul has spoken about older saints (5:1-2); widows (5:3-16); church leaders (5:17-25). Paul now addresses problem groups. What groups might cause problems? Slaves (vv.1-2); false teachers (3-5) and the rich (vv.6-10).

In the ancient world of Rome slavery was a deeply entrenched institution. Some scholars estimate that the Roman Empire included some 60 million plus people who were slaves (see Barclay; *Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians: p.14*). The number of freedmen or former slaves would have also been quite large. This means that roughly half the people in the Roman Empire were slaves or former slaves.

In that ancient world many slaves found spiritual freedom in Christ but remained slaves. Slaves might be tempted to disobey their masters. Paul argued that slaves exercise respect towards their unsaved masters so that they might respect the name of God and His Word. Slaves with believing masters might be tempted to take advantage of their believing masters and Paul also warns against that temptation as well. The New Testament has a great deal of instructions to slaves (see 1 Corinthians 7:21-22; Colossians 3:22; 4:1; Titus 2:9-10; 1 Peter 2:18-25 and the whole book of Philemon!).

You might think; “Why doesn’t the Bible and the New Testament simply condemn slavery as a sinful blight, a moral outrage, a crime against God and humanity?”

Good question.

Paul will lay down principles of love and justice that will eventually lead to the abolition of slavery. Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1865. You might think; what does this have to do with me? Francis Foulkes writes, “. . .the principles of the whole section apply to employees and employers in every age, whether in the home, in business, or in the state” (The Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians. Tyndall New Testament Commentaries; p.167). Are you employed? Do you employ someone? What principles might we glean from this section that will help us honor God and present Christ in the work place?

#### **Our Duties To Masters: Think Employees (v.1)**

*1 Timothy 6:1–2 (NKJV)* *Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.*

Paul speaks to bondservants (read slaves) who “are under the yoke”. The word yoke is *zugon*; it means submissive service under another person’s authority. It did not necessarily contain the elements or baggage of an abusive relationship. Submissive service did not always mean

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abusive service (think of Jesus' words take my yoke). But the word does carry the idea of a heavy weight—and I am going to suggest that Paul understood the oppressive weight of slavery!

Slaves by definition are in submission to someone else or something else. Paul provides instructions—duties if you will for the bondservants and then provides a reason.

*So that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed.*

In the name of God we have the character of God. In the doctrine of God we have the revelation of Christ and the gospel. **Paul makes clear how believers act while under the authority of another reflects on the Gospel of Christ. Think of what Paul is saying; a proper attitude of submission and respect, and performing quality work helps make the message of the Gospel believable.**

In Paul's world there were also people who refused to work. "For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: if anyone will not work, neither shall he eat" (see 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

How do we maintain a Biblical work ethic in a world that rejects the Biblical concepts of work?

In other places in the New Testament Paul uses the Greek word *Kyrios* for masters of slaves. But here and in Titus 2:9 Paul uses a different term; *despotes* (another place is in 1 Peter 2:18). The other six times it appears in the Greek New Testament the word applies to God as the Sovereign Lord of all. The Greek scholar Thayer says this word "*denoted absolute ownership and uncontrolled power.*" Trench—"the *despotes* exercises a more unrestricted power and absolute domination" (p.96). The ancient Greeks at first used this word to describe the power of the gods over mortals; it later was used to describe the unrestricted powers of masters over slaves.

We return to our unanswered question. Why doesn't Paul and the New Testament come right out and condemn human slavery in an unambiguous manner?

The Romans would have put down a slave revolt in the most brutal terms possible. It would have resulted in the deaths of millions of slaves. In the ancient world slavery was a brutal and horrible practice. Slavery in ancient Rome was still very different than the slavery of 16th-19th century Europe and the Americas. Slavery in the Americas was race based. In the ancient Roman world slavery was economically rather than racially motivated. People often became slaves because of war (capture); or poverty (they sold themselves into slavery).

In the ancient world slaves were medical doctors, lawyers, tutors, estate managers, entertainers, musicians, librarians and personal secretaries. They were considered living tools. The Roman statesman Cicero said, "Slaves are the excrement of mankind."

Contrast that with John Wesley's description of slavery in his own day; "That execrable villainy, which is the scandal of religion, of England, and of human nature."

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Slaves were bought, sold, inherited, exchanged or seized to pay their master's debts. Masters had unlimited power and could punish for any reason or no reason. In the first century slaves that were productive were often treated with leniency and rewarded. It was not unusual for a master to teach a slave his trade and form genuine friendships. The Romans did not view slaves as people under the law but the Roman Senate in AD 20 granted slaves accused of crimes the right to a trial. It also became quite common and popular for slaves to exercise the right to purchase their own freedom.

In the ancient world if Christians led a slave revolt it would have eventually left millions dead. Christians opposed anarchy and promoted order and peace. When Paul wrote these words Christians were a small but growing portion of the total population. The Life Application Commentary (*1&2 Timothy & Titus p. 115*) adds; *“Christians were, for a long time, such a small minority that they would have been wiped out. Their allegiance to Christ was already highly suspicious, and many believers lost their lives for love of Christ alone. The Romans would have crushed such a seditious response to their power.”*

The writers add that the Christians in the first century believed the world was on the very edge of extinction, that it would soon pass away. Since the world would soon pass away the highest priority should be given to the gospel—and the real problem of personal sin rather than social or cultural justice.

Paul will attack the problem by providing a Biblical worldview on what it means to be a human being. Slavery is a Satanic device meant to destroy people, physically, emotionally, financially and certainly spiritually.

Slavery continues to exist. In the past it was motivated by economics. In the distant past it was motivated by race. In the present it can be motivated by economics, race, religion, war and sexual gratification. All of these horrors have a common thread; they all deny God's revelation that human beings are made in the image of God.

Abraham Lincoln famously said, “Whenever I hear anyone arguing for slavery, I feel a strong impulse to see it tried on him personally.”

In the ancient world slaves were viewed as living tools or machines or technology. And so a great legal gulf separated the free and the slave.

Paul's Holy Spirit inspired strategy is far more subtle and far more clever. Paul will lay down principles—like honor and respect and love and justice to help facilitate the collapse of institutional slavery. Paul notes that when a slave receives Christ as Lord and Savior there is an immediate **spiritual equality among all believers**. *“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28)*. How radical is that? Paul seeks to change the hearts of slaves and

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masters! In the Expositor's Greek Testament there is a summary of how Christianity went about destroying slavery:

*“Here as elsewhere in the NT, slavery is accepted as an existing institution, which is neither formally condemned or approved. There is nothing to prompt revolutionary action, or to encourage repudiation of the position. . .the institution is left to be undermined and removed by the gradual operation of the great Christian principles of. . .*

- \* *the equality of men in the sight of God*
- \* *a common Christian brotherhood*
- \* *the spiritual freedom of the Christian man*
- \* *the Lordship of Christ to which every other lordship is subordinate” (see S.D.F. Salmond. The Epistle to the Ephesians. “The Expositors Greek Testament VOL 3 p. 377).*

What was the result? The New Testament makes it impossible for Christian slave owners to continue to exercise abusive behavior.

How can we apply some of these principles to ourselves? How do you see your work? As a punishment for debt? As a necessary evil? Or do you see work as something allowed by God or ordained by God?

Do you honor (esteem, count, regard) your employer?

### Our Duties To Christian Masters: Think Employers (v.2)

*2And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved. Teach and exhort these things.*

What was Timothy to teach and exhort? Some combine the previous verse and the following verse. Whatever else it must mean Paul expects Timothy to embrace his strategy and instructions. Slaves were to respect and honor masters. Paul did not see honor and respect of masters as support of the evil institution of slavery but rather as way to avoid reproach of the gospel. What is Paul's advice? Honor both unbelieving and believing masters (think employers). Why would a slave be tempted to despise (think against) masters who were believers? Do not despise them because they are brethren! The slave might assume that spiritual equality might somehow lessen earthly authority. Because a person is a believer does not necessarily diminish temporal authority.

Give greater service to believing masters knowing that **faithfulness bears fruit**. Do you work for a Christian employer? Don't reduce your effort; increase your effort!

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Paul seems to think that the greatest temptation that the Christian slave faced with a believing master was to despise (think against) that Master. Slaves were not **to use Christ as an excuse for dishonor or disrespect. Paul uses the term believing masters (faithful and beloved) who benefit from the slaves service.**

You can imagine that in the ancient world people find excuses not to work, or to slack off in work, that a believing master would understand and be less likely to reprimand, discipline or punish bad behavior.

Does it shock or surprise you that in the ancient world people found excuses for not doing their job?

Imagine a world where both master and slave attend the same church. Listen to the same sermon. Imagine a world where the slave serves as Pastor and master sits in the congregation.

Paul argues that the Christian slave does not take advantage of the Christian master but rather gives greater service and better service and sincere service since the master will benefit from such service and since both are believers both are dear to God in Christ.

When we look at the testimony of the Scripture concerning work we discover several things.

Work or employment is ordained by God. Clearly God works (see Genesis 1) and then ceases from His labor (Genesis 2:1). You might think—“Since you brought it up—isn’t work a curse according to the Bible?” Not really. Human beings were placed in the Garden of Eden “to tend and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). It is true that in the fall God told Adam “By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground” (Genesis 3:19). We might think that working is a curse, but rather we interpret this passage to mean that men must work and that God intends for people to work as long as they live. We work, whether we are paid or not, we perform meaningful work and purposeful work.

We are made to serve. What constitutes meaningful work to you? What work do you find meaningful even enjoyable? My Anthony told his brother that he would be willing to cook his own going away celebration meal! For Anthony cooking isn’t work. The writer of Ecclesiastes 2:24-25 intimates that a person “can do anything better than. . .find satisfaction in his work. This too, I see, is from the hand of God, for without Him, who can eat or find enjoyment?”

Ecclesiastes 9:10 reads; “*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grace where you are going.*”

Work serves several functions: it provides income, money, resources to supply the basic needs of life; but also to provide for a quality of life and satisfaction in life. Work also helps provide for the needs of others and to serve the Lord and the work of the Lord.

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#### **Conclusion**

Paul reminds slaves that they are not to rebel or run away or act with insolence or do as little work as possible.

There seems to be some evidence that Christian slaves commanded a higher price in the market place. They were more productive. In the ancient world people were willing to pay a higher premium for faithfulness, loyalty, integrity and excellence.

Paul's instructions focus on honoring God, and opportunities to witness for Christ and bring glory to God's gospel.

If slaves were to serve their masters honestly, in obedience and integrity; how much more are we to serve our employer with honesty and integrity and faithfulness? And what is Paul's reason? So that masters would learn to respect the name of God and the word of God! Paul's instructions help us understand that our work is a part of our obedience to the Lord. We do not work hard simply because the boss is looking or we are scheduled for our Work Performance Evaluation. "Servants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God"(Colossians 3:22).

Work should be honorable, legal, biblical, ethical before the Lord. In our culture and society we sometimes separate the sacred and the secular but there is no such division in God's universe. All work that honors and glorifies God and fulfills needs can be done to the glory of God. "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Corinthians 10:31). Work provides an opportunity for witness, your work speaks about who you are and what you believe and what you care about. Does your work reflect your love and commitment and obedience to Christ? Matthew 5:16; "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

**Work becomes worship when done for Christ.**

**"For anything worth having one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love and self-sacrifice" (see John Burroughs).**

**I cannot work my soul to save,  
For that my Lord hath done;  
But I will work like any slave,  
For the love of God's dear Son.**