

Christians and Masters: Then and Today

Then – Christian Slaves and Masters

Paul briefly deals with the subject of the relationships between slaves and masters in the first 2 verses of 1 Timothy chapter 6. So too, will my approach be this morning. We will be setting aside time after the message to spend examining the possible merger of Canyon Bible with First Baptist Tijeras. As I begin our message found in the Word of God this morning you will soon discover it is a message of application for my life and your life and shows us aspects of how we are to live in this unsaved world.

Follow me as I read the first two verses of 1 Timothy chapter 6 “Let all who are under a yoke as ~~bondservants~~ slaves 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.” (1 Timothy 6:1–2_{ESV}) Some Bible translations use the word “bondservant” in verse 1, but this is not correct. The correct word in the Greek is “doulos” or in the English language “slave.” Both the practice and even the concept of slavery were becoming repugnant because of its abuse of people groups against other people groups and its racial implications. When King James had the Bible translated, into the English language (spanning from 1604 to 1611 AD) the translators exchanged the word “slave” for a new word “bondservant” to soften the impact. “Let all who are under a yoke as ~~bondservants~~ slaves 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) What is important to understand in this verse is the relationship between saved slaves and their masters. As best as the slave was able,

Paul says, they were to live and act in ways that would not bring any dishonor to God. A slave was to behave and carry out his duties in ways that showed honor to Christ and their master. By this behavior both the master and the world would see Christ living in the slave.

Palestine Slavery

A little background on Palestine Slavery will help us put these verses into perspective. There were differences between slavery in Palestine at the time of Paul's writing and slavery of the Roman Empire, and the slavery of Europe and America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that we are familiar with. Understanding these differences will help with understanding our passage better this morning. Once these differences have been explained we will move on to see how the relationship between saved slave and unsaved master and the relationship between saved slave and saved master relate to the workplace in our society structure today.

In context, just as we saw in chapter 5 that Paul instructed honor and care was to be given for true widows and honor and respect was to be given to elders. So too, here in chapter 6 a master or in our time an employer are to be given honor and respect. This is to be done not because they provide a paycheck, but because of their position and one is commanded by God to provide good service as part of our witness for Christ.

Roland de Vaux who lead the team in the first work on the Dead Sea Scrolls and also wrote a two volume work entitled "Ancient Israel" said, "In Israel and the neighboring countries, there never existed those enormous gangs of chattel slaves which in Greece and Rome continually threatened the balance of social order." He continues, "Nor was the position of the slave ever so low in Israel and the ancient East as in republican Rome, where *Marcus Terentius Varro (116 BC – 27 BC)* could

define a slave as ‘a sort of talking tool’ ” (Roland de Vaux 1903-1971). Slaves of the Romans and Egyptians were treated both well and horribly depending on the disposition of their master. They were property or “a sort of talking tool” and could be treated as their master wished, including having them killed. They were there purely to serve the lives of the Roman elite and there was always tension between slaves and the Roman society.

In Israel slaves provided service for the good of the family. They were managers, cooks, teachers of children, farm labors, etc. They were considered part of the master’s household and as such they had value and certain rights. “Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years. And the LORD had blessed Abraham in all things. ² And Abraham said to his servant, the oldest of his household, who had charge of all that he had, ‘Put your hand under my thigh, ³ that I may make you swear by the LORD, the God of heaven and God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, ⁴ but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac.’ ” (Genesis 24:1–4) One can see the influence and authority entrusted to Abraham’s servant. This servant was not just used for labor of service.

Comparing slavery in Israel to American history we might relate slaves to indentured servants of the Colonial era who gained their freedom after a determined period of time.

In the history of Israel slaves were obtained through prisoners taken in war, they could be purchased, some people sold themselves into slavery so they would have a place to sleep and food to eat, and others were sold into slavery to pay their debts. The Old Testament does not forbid slavery but guarded the rights of slaves. For example we read in Exodus, “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing.” (Exodus 21:2) Slaves were not to be mistreated as is made clear a few verses later in Exodus chapter 21,

“When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye.²⁷ If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.” (Exodus 21:26–27)

The Bible does not condone slavery, but deals with it as part of society’s structure.

In Paul’s writings he often appeals to God’s order. Concerning marriage and the church Paul writes of God’s creation order, “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.” (*Quoting Genesis 2:24*) The order in marriage implies order in the church, “This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.” (Ephesians 5:31–32) God instituted marriage and blesses marriage. Christ instituted the Church and blesses the Church. Paul also appeals to divine order between parents and children when he wrote, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.² ‘Honor your father and mother’ (*Commandment #6 - Exodus 20:12*) (this is the first commandment with a promise).” (Ephesians 6:1–2) **Paul makes no defense of or condemnation for the practice of slavery. He does not address slavery as God’s will.** In fact, Paul encourages slaves to leave that situation, when leaving is possible, “Were you a ~~bondservant~~ slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.)” (1 Corinthians 7:21) Paul gives counsel to those in the difficult position of slaves who have been called by Christ, writing, “For he who was called in the Lord as a ~~bondservant~~ slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a ~~bondservant~~ slave of Christ.²³ You were bought with a price; do not become ~~bondservants~~ slaves of men.” (1 Corinthians 7:22–23) Our jobs here on earth are not directly related to our position with Christ. However, every position can be used to serve Christ and others.

Today – Employee and Employer

As we examine our two verses this morning we want to see how they apply to us this day. Reading 1 Timothy, chapter 6, verses 1 and 2, “Let all who are under a

yoke as ~~bondservants~~ slaves 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.” Society at the time of Paul had casts; the elite, which included those with political power and wealth, the merchant class, those employed by merchants, farm labor, the poor and slaves. Some things do not change, as we see most of these same classes within our society today. The difference is the ability today of one being able to move up in our social-economic structure.

Unlike society, in the church everyone is equal, spiritually equal. There is a leadership structure within the church that people are to submit to as they submit to the will of God. But, **all Christians being spiritually equal set up unique relationships that had not been experienced before.** Poor and rich were equal before God the Father and Christ. In fact you could have an elder from one of the lower classes and a wealthy member of the church having to submit to their authority. If we go one step further - you could have a slave who is now spiritually equal to his master and the slave might even have a position within the church giving them some authority over the master.

As one might expect this could have created tension within this new church community structure. You have this new church that was no longer part of the Jewish religious system and now it also set Jewish society on its head, at least within the church, and the social-economic structure of 1st century society. Paul is saying that a saved slave is to show honor and respect towards his unsaved master in order that the master will see the love of Christ in action. Paul then continues in verse 2 saying a saved slave of a saved master must show respect and do his job with excellence so that he is a good witness to those around him who are lost and do not know who Christ is.

Today it is the same. If you work for an unsaved boss or business owner you are to do your job with excellence in order to be a creditable witness to all who observe you. This means giving great effort to talk and act in ways that show honor for Christ and one's employer. We are to avoid crude language and we strive to do our jobs as best we are able. Until recently in my secular job I worked for a business owner who during our Monday morning staff meetings often became vulgar in his language and sexual innuendos. I simply would get up and quietly leave refusing to be part of such behavior. I was respectful and would explain to him in private why his behavior was wrong both as an employer and as someone who calls himself Christian. His unchanged behavior was one reason why I resigned.

As a Christian employee, you should show up for work early or on time and stay until it is time to leave. You should not take advantage of breaks by going beyond what is right. I had one employee who every time I showed up on the jobsite he was on his cell phone. I explained to him that this is stealing. He was consistently taking time away from his job and being paid for time he was not working. A Christian employee is to do their work well and show respect towards their employer as a witness of Christ. As Christians we are to do right no matter what the circumstances.

Paul wrote that one is able to live holy in difficult circumstances as a witness of Christ. “*Servants or employees, be subject to your masters or employers with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*”¹⁹ For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly.²⁰ For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God.²¹ For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.” (1 Peter 2:18–21)

Since Christ suffered for the glory of God the Father should we not expect to suffer

for the glory of Christ! Why should one expect an unsaved employer to act as saved?

Just as a Christian slave should not take advantage of a Christian master, neither should a Christian employee take advantage of a Christian employer. I have had several times in my life where a person who said they were Christian wanted privileges that would not have been appropriate for an employee. They wanted to use their Christianity to gain special favors from their Christian boss. I have had times where employees tried using their Christianity as an excuse for not doing a good job and hoping their Christianity would gain them consideration because I was a Christian employer. The truth is their behavior brought shame to the name of Christ. It was these types of situations that Paul wanted to avoid in order to not damage the reputation of Christ.

Theologian R. C. H. Lenski said it well in his commentary of 1 Timothy chapter 6 concerning the behavior of slaves and it applies well also to employees today, “If a Christian slave dishonored his master in any way by disobedience, by acting disrespectfully, by speaking shamefully of his master, the worst consequence would not be the beating he would receive but the curses he would cause his master to hurl at his miserable slave’s God, his religion and the teaching he had embraced: ‘So that is what this new religion teaches its converts!’ Instead of bringing honor to the true God and the gospel of his high and holy Name, as every Christian should be anxious to do, this slave would bring about the very opposite, to the devil’s delight.” A disobedient slave or employee turns their employer and fellow workers from God.

Israel, God’s chosen nation and people, became apostate and brought reproach to the name of God by its insubordinate behavior. The United States, having claimed to be a Christian nation, has followed the same insubordinate path. Paul wrote in his

letter to the Romans, “You who boast in the law dishonor God by breaking the law.

²⁴ For, as it is written, ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because

of you.’ ” (Romans 2:23–24) This behavior is becoming more true of America each year. Look at this election, we have no right choice and are left to vote for the lesser of the evils. But, if we believe God is in control then we will trust Him to place into office the person He will use for His plan of redemption. It is not our plan or the political leaders plan, but God’s plan that He designed before creation.

So as Christians were do we stand? Simply, we rest in our faith in Christ. Know that every job has fundamental value because it is were a believer’s work exposes the world to who Christ is. Christianity is not a religion lived out apart from the world, but one lived in this broken world. Christianity has survived the horrors of this world. Christianity has survived Nero, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and it will survive Clinton or Trump. What we are called to do is live out our faith in every aspect of life; marriage, family, work, serving others and on and on. We are called by Jesus to be, “You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet.”

¹⁴ “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵ Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. ¹⁶ In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:13–16)

I want to be faithful to God’s calling and I want to stand strong by living my faith in this fallen world. I want to see my job as an opportunity to live the gospel of Jesus Christ. I want to be salt and light. I pray you desire this same challenge and opportunity - to be a light for Christ. So I say to you, “Live for Christ, live fully, live with a glad heart even in the midst of the world’s darkness, live and work as a “light shining before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.’ ” Amen and amen!