

1 Timothy 6:1-2 A Sermon

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We are continuing this week with our study of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, picking up at chapter 6, and concentrating on the first 2 verses of that chapter. This morning's study will bring to a conclusion a sub-section in this letter which has addressed Timothy and his congregation on a number of "people groups" within the congregation - firstly widows and then elders and now finally on those who are slaves. While the specifics of each address are different, the overall goal has been the same: **to offer some practical instruction in each of these areas which, if taken to heart, would have promoted the good order and functioning of the Ephesian church, and would have been a great encouragement to Timothy** - which, of course, has been Paul's goal for this letter all along. At every point in this study we have listened carefully to Paul, *overhearing* his instructions and gaining some valuable insights for faith and life in our own day and it is our hope that God will be pleased to continue to apply his Word to our hearts in that same fashion this morning. Before we listen to the text, let's pray and ask God, the Holy Spirit, to please come and teach us.

(Pray and read)

Now due to the brief nature of Paul's comments, and because I do not want to short change our study of upcoming passages, this morning's message will be *uncharacteristically* brief - 50 minutes, instead of 55.....just kidding...Seriously, we will not be trying to accomplish too much this morning and, as a result, our main efforts will be focused on just a few things:

- 1) Understanding what this passage is and is NOT saying/and or implying about the institution of slavery.
- 2) Understanding how Paul wants Christian slaves to respond to their circumstances - and why.
- 3) Understanding how this situation - and more importantly the *principles* which lie behind it - might influence us in our own faith and practice today.

Firstly, then, let's think about *what this passage is and is NOT saying and/or implying about the institution of slavery*, since that is the subject matter of these verses. Because, as you read Paul's words here, some of you, no doubt, will be puzzled by what he says or, more precisely, by what he *doesn't* say here. He seems to direct all his comments to those who are slaves - which we will look at

in a moment - but has nothing to say about slavery as *an institution*. Further, even though he talks to slaves about how they should respond to their masters, including their Christian masters - he has no corresponding words to the masters themselves - at least not at this point. Now, to be fair, Paul does address Christian *masters* in other places (e.g., Ephesians 6:9), but here he is silent on the subject.

So, what does this all mean? Is the lack of comment on these things to be seen as an endorsement of slavery? What is the Bible's view on this issue? Those are all good questions and, while we will not attempt anything like an exhaustive treatment of them, it is appropriate that we make a few observations at this point and, Lord willing, we will add to them as we come to this issue again in future studies. But for now, just a couple observations.

For starters, it is important to understand that the slavery spoken of here was not quite the same thing as the kind of slavery that was such a significant part of our own American history. The slavery that was once institutionalized here in the South had a very dominant *racial* component to it. The slavery in Paul's day, and before that in the Old Testament period, did not have such a prominent racial component to it. Indeed, the slavery of which the Bible speaks was, in fact, much more complex. Its reasons for existence were multi-faceted. Some were enslaved as the consequence of war. Some were enslaved as a consequence of crimes they had committed. Some, of course, were enslaved because of actual slave trading or "person stealing" - as one writer has put it. And some were enslaved by their own choice and decision to become indentured servants. In fact, many had done this.

So, people in that day were slaves for a variety of reasons but however it was that they came to it, the reality is that slavery was common place in the OT and NT period and was a large component of every civilized culture that we know anything about. That is not a statement of approval or recommendation, merely a statement of fact. It was a truly *universal* phenomenon and it is not an exaggeration to say that the world economy of that day was fundamentally dependent upon it - so much so that if one were to go back in time and, in an instant, remove every trace of slavery's existence and influence from a particular culture, the effect would have been absolute chaos and anarchy. Again, that is not a statement of defense or approbation, simply a statement of fact and of how dependent the world culture had become upon this institution.

As far as what the Bible has to say on this matter, it must be said, at the beginning that this is a subject that has historically generated a great deal of heat and occasional bursts of light. Southern and Northern Christians, during the period of the Un-Civil War, both appealed to the same Bible to defend opposing positions on the subject.

For example, you have passages like Exodus 21 which the ESV has sub-titled “Laws about Slaves” - and which contains all sorts of instructions designed to regulate the institution of slavery and bring to it some humanity and justice. Of course, *regulating* an institution and *endorsing* an institution are not the same thing, are they? The Bible also has “laws about divorce” which, as Jesus explained, was only “permitted” because of the hard-heartedness and sinfulness of humankind. And so, the regulation of slavery in the Bible could be classed with other such things as divorce which are clearly not God’s ideal or ultimate purpose for humanity.

Even further, when you read Exodus 21 you come across verse 16, which reads, “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” You see the echo of this teaching in our very own letter of 1st Timothy, chapter 1, verse 10 where Paul says quite plainly that “enslavers” or “slave traders” are among those who are acting in a way that is “contrary to sound doctrine”.

In other words, what we seem to have in the Bible is two processes in motion: One which is concerned to regulate an existing institution and bring some justice and humanity to it, as Exodus 21 does. And then there are other processes which, with time and application, would work to effectively undermine and eradicate the institution - not in an instantaneous, anarchy-generating fashion, but in a more gradual one. These same principles are also found in Exodus 21.

We see these same sort of coordinate processes illustrated in the NT as well. For example, in Ephesians 6:5-9, we see Paul addressing both *Christians* who are slaves and *Christians* who are slaveholders. Remarkably, and perhaps surprisingly to our 21st century ears, Paul does not say to the Ephesians - “Stop being slaveholders - it’s wrong”. We may have wished that he said that. We may have advised him to say that if we had personally been consulted about it. But we weren’t, were we? And the undeniable reality is that while you and I might have wished that Paul had said certain things, apparently *the Holy Spirit didn’t*. And who do you suppose is right? So, if we’re concerned to be a “people of the book”, we have to deal with these realities.

Nevertheless, while there is no explicit statement from Paul which says, “abolish the institution of slavery” there are numerous statements and truths and principles which, as they took hold of this small but growing band of believers in the early church - and as they spread the Gospel from nation to nation – as these things happened, and as lives were transformed, there would be a profound, under-mining effect upon the existence of all kinds of institutions, including the institution of slavery.

So, for example, as you read Ephesians 6, with its lack of an explicit prohibition against slavery, you see nevertheless teaching which, if employed consistently by both slaves and masters, would transform the relationship between them into

something which, in actual practice, would be not much different from the relationship between any employer and his/her employees. And so, at the end of the day, the thrust of the Bible's teaching on this subject seems to be twofold: 1) it *immediately* regulates and transforms the conditions under which slavery *did* exist and 2) it would *eventually* render needless and pointless the reasons FOR its existence.

Now, let me say again that that is admittedly a simplistic and unsatisfying introduction to the subject, but I trust that, in time and as we interact with more of God's Word together, we will develop a perspective on these things that is biblically informed - and increasingly so.

Well, having made, then, some very brief and *general* observations on this subject, let us turn to the passage before us to focus for a few minutes on some of Paul's specific concerns for the Ephesians that are related to this issue of slavery.

As you look at verses 1-2 of chapter 6, the outline is pretty straightforward. Paul shows by his words here that his concern for the good order and functioning of the church extends to ALL sorts of people and to *every* church member - including those who were slaves.

As has been noted already, Paul shows in other places that he is also concerned for Christian slaveholders, but, for reasons known only to him, addressing them is apparently not necessary on this particular occasion and in this particular letter.

So, Paul is, here, only talking to those Ephesian Christians who were slaves. And as he addresses them, he has in mind two possible situations. Either they have a master who is a unbeliever - which is the subject of verse 1 - or they have a master who is a believer - which is the subject of verse 2. His instruction to both of them is essentially the same - *be respectful*, which includes the idea of obedience, etc. -- so the instruction is the same but the motivations he gives in each instance are slightly different and specific to the differing circumstances he is envisioning.

So, for example, in verse 1, he says that he wants those who are slaves to regard their masters as worthy of all honor. Paul's words here call to mind the same sort of attitude that Christians are to have toward those who are in positions of authority over us in the civil government. We are to respect the office and function that they perform, in the providence of God. In a similar manner, Paul wants slaves to show respect to those who are in authority over them - their masters. This is part of their Christian duty. It is an expression of their faith IN God and their love FOR God.

And the reason they are to do this, says Paul, is stated negatively - They are to do this so that “the name of God and the teaching” – that is *the teaching about God - the Gospel* - may not be slandered. Now, of course, the showing of respect to masters is applicable to Christian and non-Christian masters alike, but it seems that the rationale that Paul provides here shows that he has in mind here, primarily, those masters who are NON-Christians since it is not likely that Christian masters would use their slaves’ disobedience as a reason to slander God or the Gospel.

And so one reason at least that Paul wants them to show respect to their masters is to honor and protect God’s good name. You’ve heard me quote Dorothy Sayers before when she said that God went through three humiliations in human history - the first was when he took on human flesh, the second was when he suffered the shameful death of the cross, and the third was when God entrusted his reputation to ordinary - and sometimes VERY ordinary people. But it’s true isn’t it? God’s reputation is on the line, every time God’s people come into contact with another person.

This is Paul’s concern for the slaves in Ephesus – that their manner of response to their masters would cause their masters to despise and hate God and to reject the Gospel as meaningless and powerless and hypocritical. Indeed, they might say, “...if this is what the Gospel produces -- if disorderly, complaining, lazy, disrespectful people are the product of the Gospel - then thanks, but no thanks – I’ll have none of that...” This same perspective is echoed in the letter of 1 Peter, chapter 2, verses 18ff:

Servants (and it means “slaves” here) be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 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....

Now, of course, none of us listening to this passage are slaves - at least not in the same sense as the Ephesians who were the subject of Paul’s attention. And yet, we, like them, do find ourselves in analogous situations, especially in the workplace. If you are working, and you are not self-employed, then there is a person or persons who is/are an authority over you - who has/have some sort of control and responsibility over your time and work and manner of life. You, like the slave in Ephesus, are in a relationship where you have the opportunity of showing respect or otherwise, to your “boss”. And, like the slave, your boss knows - or I hope he knows - that you are a Christian.

And so because your boss knows this then you are in the same position as the slave in Paul's letter - your actions and attitude will result in either praise or slander toward God and the Gospel. So ask yourself, "What sort of response am I generating?"

Of course, you may have a boss that is horrible. You may have a boss that is unkind, ungrateful, manipulative, harsh, unfair, dishonest, self-centered and juvenile. You may have a boss that is the cause of great hardship and suffering in your life. What are you going to do? You're going to regard your boss as worthy of honor - whether he is or not - for the sake of God, and for the sake of the Gospel. Now, to be sure, the people Paul spoke to were slaves. And were in no position to change their circumstances. And so, at that point, the analogy breaks down somewhat. There may be more that you can do in your situation than a slave could do. But while you are doing more, *you must not do less*. Regard your masters - those in authority over you - bosses, teachers, parents, etc. - as worthy of all honor

Does this mean you're a doormat, or a weakling, or a wimp? No, in fact it means quite the opposite. It means you are strong. It means you are truly free in Christ. You are so free, that, if those in authority over you misbehave, you do NOT have to retaliate. You are so strong in Jesus that you don't have to return evil for evil. You are free NOT to take revenge. Free NOT to try and balance the books on your own. *You are not controlled by them - or their misbehavior*. The Gospel gives you that freedom.

Jesus who for your sake and on your behalf did not retaliate - He gives you that freedom now to live as He lived. A thousand other people - in just your same circumstances, with a difficult situation - are chained and enslaved to their need to hit back, to vent their anger, to take revenge - *but not you*. That is what Paul was saying to those slaves that - in reality - they were no man's slave. They belonged to Christ - and to Christ alone. They were to remember that. You must remember that too. Why? So that the name of God and the teaching *about* God, may not be slandered. It is THAT important.

The other circumstance that Paul envisions is not only slaves who have unbelieving masters but slaves who have *Christian* masters. And in this situation, Paul seems to address and have in mind, another kind of potential difficulty. The situation in view here seems to be one where the slave, knowing that her master is a Christian, might be tempted to use that to her advantage - doing her work half-heartedly, presuming upon her master's good graces and kindness, and just doing inferior work all around, thinking that it will all be over-looked and that, if you do mess up, it's okay, it doesn't really matter because your boss has to forgive you anyway, right?

"Wrong", says Paul. In fact, he says, far from taking advantage of your situation, and showing your disrespect for your Christian master, you are to do the

opposite. You are to serve him/her all the more sincerely precisely *because* he IS your brother or sister in the Lord. You are to be that much more motivated and concerned to do the best that you can do because it is service that you perform for a fellow member of the Body of Christ - someone for whom Christ has died and who is part of your forever family.

And, once again, while you and I are not slaves in the Ephesian sense, we do find ourselves in analogous situations all the time where we are in submission to someone in authority over us who, like us, is also a Christian. As one commentator suggests, this would include situations such as a Professor and a Student, or a Teacher and a Pupil, or a Parent and a Child, or a Bank Manager and a Bank Teller, or an Army Captain and an Army Private.

But we find ourselves in these analogous situations all the time. And the temptation for us is the same as the one which Paul perceives in the Ephesian situation: we are tempted to take advantage of the fact that the person in authority over us is a Christian - expecting special favors, expecting extraordinary leniency, doing shabby, half-hearted work, cutting corners, presuming upon their good graces, etc.

And for us, the principle is the same. Paul's word to us would be that, rather than taking advantage of these things, situations, and putting those in authority over us in these awkward situations that we should never put them in - rather than doing that we should go the extra mile, we should be all the more concerned to handle our relationship with them -and whatever that entails - with extra care and concern and energy and a desire to serve them *even better* - because they are our brothers and sisters in the Lord, and He has loved them all the way to the cross and back, and if He loves them like that, then we ought to be concerned to model that same sort of love.

Now, of course, in hearing a message like this you are, or at least I AM immediately struck by how difficult these situations can be and by how often I have failed in precisely these things. My wife has, in the past, had difficult work situations on more than one occasion. I have had a few of them myself. And I would like to tell you that whenever these things have happened - to her or to me - that I have calmly reminded her and myself of Paul's words here in 1st Timothy - that we are to regard people who are in authority over us as worthy of all honor and respect. I would like to be able to tell you that this is what I have consistently done. But it isn't. Further, I would like to be able to tell you that I have never presumed upon the good graces of a Christian to whom I was somehow in submission. But that's not true either.

And so for me, these words are simultaneously, a reason for despair and a reason for hope. I suspect that they are the same for many of you. And they remind me, again, of the sinfulness of my own heart - and of all our hearts, and of our great need of the Gospel, the great forgiveness we have in Jesus, and the

great confidence we have in him: that we are completed in Him and that the things that we would despair of ever becoming a consistent reality in US are right now, a consistent reality in HIM, and one day will be mirrored in us as His image is perfected.

Let us then respond to God's Word here in an appropriate fashion, doing the heart work of repenting and believing that is necessary, and keeping in mind as we do that - *as we work out our salvation* in this particular matter - *it is God who is at work within us*, to will and to work for His good pleasure.....

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