



1 TIMOTHY 6:1-2

All who are under the yoke as slaves should regard their own masters as worthy of all respect, so that God's name and his teaching will not be blasphemed. 2 Let those who have believing masters not be disrespectful to them because they are brothers, but serve them even better, since those who benefit from their service are believers and dearly loved.

NOTE FROM PASTOR CODY

This study guide is for 1 Timothy 6:1-2. These two verses require careful study, which is why we have chosen to provide this study guide. We normally strive to be as original as possible in these guides. However, this one is very different. What follows is taken from the *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus* by David Platt. We gave this same book to our Growth Group Leaders, and I felt the content was perfect to prepare us all for this passage. The format is different, but the reading is necessary. This is not the entire chapter. I made some edits for the sake of space. I hope this reading prepares you well to discuss the hope of Jesus Christ as it relates to such a sensitive topic.

SLAVERY IN HISTORY

It will be helpful to provide some background and context to our discussion of slavery so that we can better define our terms. World history is filled with various types of slavery, which means we should be careful when we talk about this subject. When you hear the word slavery, it's likely that certain images immediately pop up in your mind, images that represent abuses and injustices. While many of these images may be historically accurate in certain contexts, not all forms of slavery have looked the same in their respective era or location. Consider below four different ways in which slavery has been practiced in history.

First, we have the model of Hebrew servanthood. When we look at God's laws for His people in the Old Testament, we see a system of Hebrew servanthood that was set up for impoverished Israelites to become servants. This servanthood was designed to provide for poorer Israelites and their families. Even though Deuteronomy 15:1-18 tells us that God desires that none of His people are poor, He nevertheless makes provision for those in poverty, since poverty is a reality in a sinful and imperfect world. Leviticus 25:35-43 helps us understand more about God's perspective on slavery:

If your brother becomes destitute and cannot sustain himself among you, you are to support him as a foreigner or temporary resident, so that he can continue to live among you. Do not profit or take interest from him, but fear your God and let your brother live among you. You are not to

lend him your silver with interest or sell him your food for profit. I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. If your brother among you becomes destitute and sells himself to you, you must not force him to do slave labor. Let him stay with you as a hired hand or temporary resident; he may work for you until the Year of Jubilee. Then he and his children are to be released from you, and he may return to his clan and his ancestral property. They are not to be sold as slaves, because they are My slaves that I brought out of the land of Egypt. You are not to rule over them harshly but fear your God.

This passage describes a system of servanthood in Israel whereby someone could sell himself into slavery in order to escape poverty. Such an individual was to be treated not as a slave but as a hired servant, a worker. The individual would basically enter into a contractual agreement with an employer, working until he could establish himself as a free and full citizen again. Now there were certainly unjust and abusive slaveholders among God's people. Israel's sin was, after all, apparent throughout its history. However, cruelty was not God's intention for slavery in Israel, for the slavery He chose to regulate was extremely different from the pre-Civil War slavery in the southern United States. In His mercy God even provided a reprieve for slaves by instituting sabbatical years when they had to be released (Exod 21:2-4).

Second, we'll consider Roman slavery. Slavery was deeply ingrained into the Roman Empire and its economy. Some scholars estimate that over one-third of the people in the Roman Empire were slaves—that's approximately 50 or 60 million individuals! Out of those 50-60 million slaves, there were a variety of different practices of slavery in this era of history. Some slaves were simply employees who did a variety of different kinds of work: teachers, craftsmen, managers, cooks, and even government officials. Many slaves owned slaves themselves. It's also important to recognize that Roman slavery was not fundamentally based on ethnicity or skin color but on economic and social status. In order to gain Roman citizenship and thus enter into Roman society, many people would sell themselves into slavery. In many cases slavery was beneficial for poorer individuals, providing security and stability for slaves in a variety of different venues. There were also opportunities beyond slavery, for many slaves were released by the time they were 30 years of age, as they had become capable of providing for themselves at that point.

Despite the more humane practices of slavery in some cases, we don't want to paint an idealistic picture of slavery. After all, a slave was still a slave—marginalized, powerless, and often prone to disgrace or insult. While some slaves were indeed salaried employees with great responsibilities, others were subjected to grueling labor and harsh treatment, including sexual abuse. Slavery could be and sometimes was extremely degrading and destructive. Yet we shouldn't make the mistake of thinking that all slavery in the Greco-Roman world was inhumane. This system, which was so ingrained into the economy of the Roman Empire, was in many ways different from the slavery of the antebellum South.

A third form of slavery we need to consider is indentured servitude. This form of slavery was more common in colonial America, as many could not afford to come to the new country on their own. They would contract themselves out as indentured servants and agree to work in certain households in apprentice-type roles until they could earn enough money to pay off their debt. Historians estimate that over one-half to two-thirds of European white immigrants who came to America came as indentured servants. This picture of slavery is much closer to Hebrew servanthood than anything else.

Fourth and finally, there is the picture of slavery connected to the African slave trade. This last example of slavery was promoted across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, such that millions upon millions of Africans were traded and sold across Europe. They were transported in cruel, grueling conditions that would leave many of them dead before arriving at their destination. Upon being sold into slavery, these slaves were subjected to harsh working conditions as well as physical abuse, sexual abuse, and torture. Frederick Douglass, a leader of the abolitionist movement in the 1800s, wrote the following about his first slave-master, Captain Anthony:

He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave-holding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip . . . till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayer from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. (Douglass, *Narrative*, 3–4)

Though I hesitate to share such an awful account, I cite this for two reasons. First, this account reminds us of the horror of what took place in slavery in our own country not that long ago. And second, we need to be reminded that this is not the kind of slavery Paul was addressing in 1 Timothy 6. While some slaves had unbelieving and sometimes cruel masters, this passage will be confusing to you if the only picture of slavery you have is the African slave trade. Some of the slaves the apostle was addressing were likely sitting in the church amid Christian brothers and sisters who loved them, cared for them, and were commanded to provide for them as fellow members of the body of Christ. Though Paul was not ignorant of the evils of slavery in his day, he was by no means condoning the mistreatment of slaves.

Now that we've looked at world history, we also need to consider biblical history. Biblical history is filled with various perspectives on slavery, from Hebrew servanthood in the Old Testament to Greco-Roman slavery in the New Testament. Slavery is not a part of creation (that is, God's original created order); it is a product of sin. Genesis 1–2 speaks of the distinction between male and female, but there is no distinction between slave and free persons, since slavery was not a part of God's creation. And if you move forward to the new creation in Revelation 21–22, you see once again that there is no distinction between slave and free in the new heaven and new earth. Heaven will have no poverty that leads to indentured servanthood and no class warfare that leads to a Greco-Roman type of slavery. And certainly there will not be any abuse and mistreatment like what took place during the African slave trade. Sin and slavery will be no more.

The fact that slavery is ultimately connected to sin in Scripture means specific situations in a sinful world warrant specific instructions to a sinful world. The instructions in the Old Testament and in 1 Timothy that speak of slaves are addressing specific circumstances surrounding slavery at a specific time. When we understand this context, we see that biblical instructions concerning slavery do not imply biblical approval of slavery. Slavery is not God's ultimate design. It is a product of sin. When Paul addressed slavery, he was not endorsing it; he was helping shepherd people who were trapped in a sin-tainted economic and social system that produced the need for slavery.

Consider how Scripture deals similarly with other issues. Was divorce a part of God's original creation? No, absolutely not. Divorce is clearly a result of sin entering the world; yet Scripture addresses divorce by giving us guidelines and regulations for this less-than-ideal reality (Deut 24:1-4; Matt 19:3-9). We see something similar with slavery. Even though slavery was a product of sin, God addressed it at different times and in different ways throughout Scripture.

SLAVERY IN SCRIPTURE

The most important question we need to answer is this: What does Scripture say about slavery? To begin with, there are some clear ways in which the Bible condemns slavery.

1. Specifically, the Bible condemns slavery that undermines God's creation.

Genesis 1:27 should shape our thinking here: "So God created man in His own image; He created him in the image of God; He created them male and female." Based on this truth we have equal dignity before God, but slavery undermines this dignity by functionally denying it. Remember, it wasn't President Lincoln who came up with the idea that all men are created with equal dignity; God did. Job implies this when he talks about why he refuses to mistreat his servants. He asks, "Did not the One who made me in the womb also make them? Did not the same God form us both in the womb?" (Job 31:15).

We see this same perspective in the New Testament. Our equal dignity before God can be seen in Galatians 3:28: "There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." In other words, even though we have differences, we all have equal dignity before God, and as believers we have an equal position in Christ. This equal dignity is also the basis James uses for arguing against favoritism in the church (Jas 2:1). In these and other examples, the Bible is not expressly prohibiting all forms of slavery, but it is definitely ripping apart the core foundations behind many forms of slavery. As we think about these biblical texts, we need to be reminded that the first-century Roman slavery of the New Testament period was not based on ethnicity or skin color like the African slave trade. The New Testament vehemently opposes any form of ethnic or racial superiority.

Just as all individuals have equal dignity before God, as believers, we are equally submissive to God. When Paul addresses slaves or their masters, he says that everything they do ought to be done in submission to Christ and in reverence for Him. In Colossians 3:22 Paul gives the following exhortation: "Slaves, obey your human masters in everything. Don't work only while being watched, in order to please men, but work wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord" (emphasis added; see also Eph 6:5; Col 4:1). One reason we are to submit equally to God is that we will receive equal justice from God. In Colossians 3:25 Paul tells us that God is impartial, and in Ephesians 6:9 we hear the following warning: "And masters, treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him." In other words, earthly masters have a Master in heaven who will act with perfect justice in response to how slaves are treated. As for Christian slaves, even though they may endure temporary injustice, eternal justice awaits.

2. The Bible likewise condemns slavery that violates God's Word.

In clear, unequivocal language the Bible speaks against slavery in two specific ways. First, the Bible denounces physical abuse. This prohibition would apply to many forms of physical abuse but particularly when this abuse is associated with the institution of slavery. In Exodus 21:26-27 God made clear that physical abuse is intolerable, for if the master of a slave caused the slave to lose an eye or a tooth, the slave was to be set free. In verse 20 of the same chapter, we read that if a slave died as a result of physical abuse, then the owner was to be punished. In short, physical abuse of any kind by masters of slaves was directly condemned by God.

Second, we know slavery is condemned because the Bible denounces human trafficking. Exodus 21:16 says, "Whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession." Kidnapping a slave is punishable by death, and that death penalty applies to the one selling the slave and the one buying the slave. We're reminded at this point about what Paul

said earlier in 1 Timothy concerning the need for the law to restrain evil. Paul explicitly mentions—alongside murder, sexual immorality, and homosexuality—the sin of kidnapping (1:10). The word “kidnappers” in the original means a “man-stealer” or a “slave-dealer”. Anyone who kidnaps people in order to sell them as slaves is “lawless and rebellious . . . ungodly and sinful . . . unholy and irreverent” (1:9).

I have emphasized the evil of human trafficking for two reasons. First, if these truths had been embraced and obeyed by Christians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, slavery never would have existed as it did in the South. The Bible is not at all silent on this issue, and it in no way tolerates the kind of slavery that took place in this country. Pastors and church members who used God’s Word to justify the practice of slavery were living in sin. Paul clearly considered the kind of practices promoted in the African slave trade as abominable, a violation of God’s Word, and a denial of God’s gospel.

Human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal enterprises because it is relatively low risk with high profit potential. Criminal organizations are increasingly attracted to human trafficking because, unlike drugs, humans can be sold repeatedly. According to the U.S. State Department, human trafficking is one of the greatest human rights challenges of this century, both in the United States and around the world. As followers of Christ, we cannot ignore these horrific tragedies. We need to see that this is a reality in the world today and that the Bible condemns it. We are called to stand up against these evils (Eph 5:11).

3. The Bible regulates slavery.

As we saw in Exodus 21 earlier, God mandates physical protection for slaves. Slaves abused by their masters were immediately to be set free and compensated for their injuries (Exod 21:16, 26-27). In addition, God requires financial provision for slaves. Leviticus 25:39-40 talks about impoverished Hebrew servants who sold themselves to a master, and it says the master must provide ample provision for the servant. Likewise, 2 Samuel 9:9-10 talks about the economic rights of slaves, including the right of slaves to have other slaves. Many of these passages communicate a similar idea, namely, God ensures caring supervision of slaves. Leviticus 25 prohibits masters from ruling ruthlessly over their slaves, even giving slaves the right to enjoy the Sabbath. The Old Testament also gives us examples of close, caring relationships between slaves or servants and their masters, such as the relationship between Gehazi and Elisha (2 Kgs 4–8).

Finally, we see that God promotes (and in some ways guarantees) eventual freedom from slavery. Several passages in the Old Testament prohibit masters from keeping slaves for more than six years, unless the slave consented to it (Lev. 25; Exod. 21; Deut. 15). All the slaves in Israel would be released in the seventh year of each seven-year cycle so that slavery would not be a perpetual state for anyone. God provided other ways to keep people out of slavery:

- He commanded the poor to be provided for during harvest times (Lev 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut 24:20-21).
- He commanded Israelites to lend generously to the poor without interest (Deut 15:7-8; Exod 22:25; Lev 25:36-37).
- He instructed that all of a person’s debts be canceled in the seventh year in order to guard against poverty (Deut 15:4).

God's promotion of freedom for slaves is a foretaste of the coming heavenly reality when, in the new creation, slavery and the poverty that fuels slavery will be no more. For that reason Paul encouraged slaves in 1 Corinthians 7:21 who could become free to avail themselves of the opportunity.

Our survey of the Bible on the topic of slavery has not been exhaustive, but it has provided a needed context for understanding our passage in 1 Timothy 6. When Paul addresses Timothy in verses 1-2, he is writing to the pastor of a church where there is likely tension between slaves and masters. The Bible encourages slaves who are forced to live in this imperfect situation in several ways. They are to honor unbelieving masters. That Paul is referring to non-Christian masters in verse 1 is clear from the fact that he made a contrast between unbelieving masters and Christian masters in verse 2. Slaves should treat their unbelieving masters as "worthy of all respect"; after all, they too are created in the image of God. The word "respect" here might also be translated "honor," and it comes from the same root as the command in 5:3, where Paul said to "*honor* widows" (NASB; emphasis added).

Paul wanted slaves to honor their masters. Slaves were to honor unbelieving masters "so that God's name and His teaching will not be blasphemed" (6:1). Let's break this purpose clause down into two parts. First, slaves act this way for the glory of God. This is the motivation that drove Paul, and it drives all of Scripture (1 Cor 10:31). In 1 Timothy we've already seen this in several forms. For example, we pray for all people, and we honor widows because this pleases God (2:3; 5:4). Elders must have a good reputation so that God's name is not brought to disrepute (3:7). Paul's deepest concern in addressing the conduct of slaves was for the glory of God to be made known, particularly before unbelieving masters. These unbelieving masters should see the grace of God in the lives of slaves who had become followers of Christ.

There is another related goal in the way slaves honor masters: for the advancement of the gospel. In Titus 2:9-10 Paul said, *Slaves are to be submissive to their masters in everything, and to be well-pleasing, not talking back or stealing, but demonstrating utter faithfulness, so that they may adorn the teaching of God our Savior in everything.*

This is a beautiful way to describe the goal of obedience—so that we may "adorn" the gospel. Paul's exhortation has a missionary motivation. Unbelieving masters should see the hard work of believers and be drawn to the glory of God and the fruit of the gospel. Christians should view their jobs as serving this great purpose.

If slaves are to adorn the gospel in the way they treat their unbelieving masters, how should they treat a master who is a believer? It seems that some slaves were taking advantage of their Christian masters, thinking that they no longer had an obligation to keep their agreements to serve. But Paul says that having a believing master is all the more reason to serve him with joy and hard work. In verse 2 the apostle says that instead of being disrespectful to believing masters, slaves "should serve them better, since those who benefit from their service are believers and dearly loved." Slaves are to work wholeheartedly in such situations and avoid slacking off. The same holds true for Christian employees in our own day. They should not take advantage of brothers and sisters in Christ who have authority over them in the workplace. Instead, they are to serve selflessly. This kind of selfless service is a fruit of gospel transformation. Does this characterize your life and work?

Ultimately, given everything we've seen so far, the Bible redeems slavery. By that I mean that God's Word takes slavery, a product of sin, and turns it into a powerful image of God's goodness. Consider the beauty of Christ and the gospel reality that our Master has become our servant. As Paul said in

Philippians 2:7, the same Jesus who was fully divine “emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men” (emphasis added). The word “slave” in Philippians 2 comes from the same word we see in 1 Timothy 6:1—*doulos*. Christ took the form of a slave. Jesus took this posture in John 13:4-5 when He wrapped a garment around His waist and washed His disciples’ feet. And Mark 10:45 says something similar with regard to the purpose for Jesus’ coming: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life—a ransom for many.” That’s the gospel in a nutshell. That’s good news!

The essence of Christianity is that our Master has become our servant and so, in turn, we gladly become His slave. The word Paul often uses to describe himself at the beginning of his letters is this same word—*doulos*—translated as “servant” or “slave.”¹³ A slave is one who belongs to another and is under the authority of another. That was the way Paul wanted to be identified, and it’s the way every follower of Christ should want to be identified. We are slaves of the Lord Jesus Christ, and unlike the sinful pictures of slavery we see in the world, slavery and service to the Lord Jesus is glorious freedom! It is glad service rendered to a gracious Master. At the end of the day, the question is not whether we are slaves but whose slaves we are. Either we will serve sin and Satan (John 8:34; Romans 6:11), or we will serve the King of kings.

REFLECT AND DISCUSS

1. What is Paul’s main motivation in instructing slaves according to verse 1, and why is this crucial for this important and sensitive issue?
2. Do you tend to treat Christian employers better or worse than non-Christian employers? If worse, how might verse 2 change your mindset in this area?
3. In light of the emotions attached to the issue of slavery, what kind of attitude should characterize our conversations about this issue?
4. Have you heard anyone criticize the Bible for what it says about slavery? What concerns have you had when you read what the Bible says about slavery?
5. How have Christian societies in the past used the Bible to justify slavery?
6. How was the American slave trade different from the slavery in Old Testament Israel or in New Testament Rome?
7. What is the difference between regulating a less-than-ideal situation, such as slavery or divorce, and condoning it?
8. How do the various forms of slavery violate the principle that all people have equal dignity before God?
9. In what specific ways can you honor your employer this week? How might that glorify God and advance the gospel?
10. How does our understanding of slavery help us appreciate what Jesus did for us? How does it help us understand our proper response?