

## **SALT AND LIGHT BEFORE A WATCHING WORLD** **(1 Tim. 6:1-2 September 10, 2006)**



Slaves, obey your earthly masters.

Many Christians hear these words and cringe.

We know they are there in the Bible – but the picture that springs to mind is an African slave in the American South – cruelly mistreated – but told to obey his master. It seems so out of touch with today's world – it is so politically incorrect – that many want to tear those passages out of the Bible.

In fact many have a great deal of sympathy with the position of the Nobel Laureate, Steven Weinberg, who lists among his reasons for rejecting belief in God that “Christianity, like other world religions, lived comfortably with slavery for centuries, and slavery was endorsed in the New Testament.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words – he rejects God because no true God would fail to condemn slavery.

Slavery has also caused Christians other difficulties. Evolutionists blush at the reality that racism and racially based slavery found a staunch ally in Darwinism – but then they say – well Christianity also has its slavery skeletons in the closet – we have all made mistakes.

And of course slavery becomes the touchstone to get rid of any biblical teaching someone finds difficult to deal with.

The argument goes like this. Slavery was culturally accepted in the world of the first century – but not today. In the same way, homosexuality and women in authority were

---

<sup>1</sup> Weinberg, Steven. 2000. “A Designer Universe?” (pp. 241-248) in *The Best American Science Writing* edited by James Gleick and Jesse Cohen. The Ecco Press (an imprint of Harper Collins p. 247.

culturally unacceptable in the first century – but not today. So let's just get out our scissors and cut out every passage dealing with slavery, homosexuals and women.

Let's make the Bible politically correct.

Slavery is a difficult issue. There is no doubt that the very word – slavery – brings out deep dark feelings.

But I am sure that for us – the very word brings forth mental pictures of the slave trade in the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.



So the thought the Bible might condone or turn a blind eye to this evil institution causes a great deal of trouble for many.

In light of this, I think it is important that before we look at our passage in 1 Timothy – a passage that deals with slavery – I need to take a small detour and give you a potted history of slavery and Christianity.

Make no mistake, slavery has been a part of our world since the very earliest days. From the very first written records we have accounts of slavery. Every race, every society, every people has slavery somewhere in its history.

And because of our fallen sinful hearts it means that the history of slavery is not one of kind gentle masters – but one of abuse and cruelty.

But the question that many want answered is this:

Does the Bible condone slavery? Does it think slavery is acceptable? Why does it seem to give a seal of approval to this institution by not clearly condemning it but instead it tells slaves to submit to their masters?

Let me say right up front – I think the Bible is incredibly strong that abusive, inhumane, relationships are wrong – abusive slavery is sinful and wrong.

Have no doubt, the type of racially based abusive degrading slavery such as that in the American South is wrong.

Christians should have stood opposed to this. And fortunately the ones who stood up against this evil were Christians.

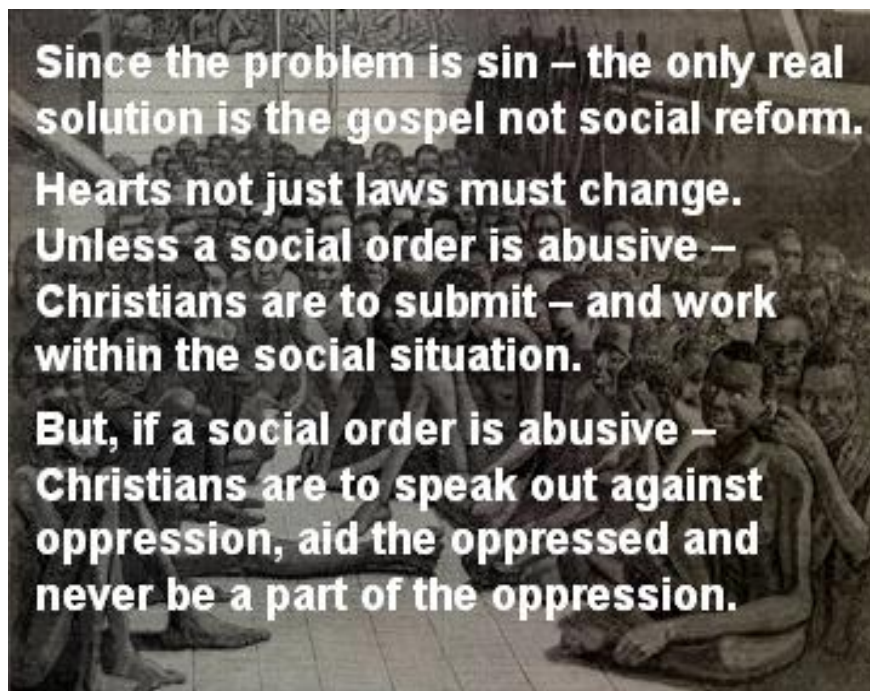
Men like John Newton and William Wilberforce led the campaign against the abuse of slavery in England. Wilberforce campaigned for 59 years until his fellow parliamentarians listened.

In North America it was ministers and Christians who led the fight against abusive slavery.

Interestingly enough, it is Christianity and Christianity alone which has said that slavery which degrades and abuses is wrong. Muslims, Buddhists, other religions – they did not stand opposed to this evil. In fact even today, numerous international organisations document that abusive slavery still continues in some Muslim and other countries.

But the question is – how are we to understand slavery in a Christian worldview?

Here is the key to understanding the Bible's teaching on slavery – it is seeing this world through a Biblical lens:



Since the problem is sin – the only real solution is the gospel not social reform. Hearts not just laws must change.

Unless a social order is abusive – Christians are to submit – and work within the social situation.

But, if a social order is abusive – Christians are to speak out against oppression, aid the oppressed and never be a part of the oppression.

We should work to change laws – but men will flaunt laws. It is the gospel that is the hope to end abuse.

This is our worldview. It affects how we respond.

For example – we submit to governments – but if governments are wicked – we speak out – we proclaim the truth of Christ – we aid those who are oppressed.

In other words – we submit to the government of Australia. But when we see oppression – such as the killing of the weak in abortion – we are speak out. Or if we lived in Nazi Germany, we should have been in lined up with Bonhoffer and other Christians opposing Hitler.

I was sharing with a man who left South Africa many years before Mandela came to power. He white and well educated – but he had been opposed to apartheid. He finally left in protest.

He said his problem with Christianity is that he had watched as church after church refused to speak out against apartheid – or lined up in support of apartheid. He said it destroyed his faith in a good God.

I said to him, “I would like to think that if I had lived in South Africa, I would have opposed apartheid.”

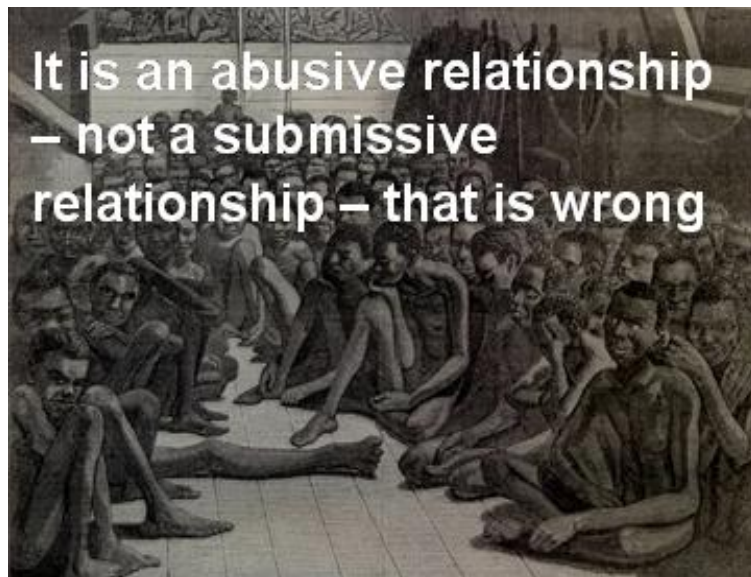
He looked at me and said, “I would like to think so too, but I doubt it. Where were the Christians?”

He might be right, I would still like to think that I would have spoken up for the oppressed because it is what the Scriptures tell us to do.

Similarly, Christian wives are to submit to husbands – even those disobedient to the word – unless the relationship becomes abusive – then she is no longer under bondage.

We see this again and again.

Our role is to be heralds of the truth of God’s gospel and we are to proclaim that God is on the side of the weak and oppressed.



*The other principle that we have to understand is that the Scriptures teach – that it is an abusive relationship – not a submissive relationship – that is wrong.*

Just before the Bible says – Slaves obey your masters – it tells us we are *all* to submit to one another – and then it gives some special circumstances – wives submitting to husbands, children to parents.

Somewhere or other we are all in submissive relationships – parents, governments, elders – somewhere in our lives we are in this type of relationship.

This is not wrong. *Abusing* this relationship is what is wrong.

It is the *abuse* of a master-servant relationship, not the submission and service that was evil.

There is nothing inherently immoral or unjust about one man serving another. Indentured slavery, indentured servitude, practiced without the abuses that have often accompanied slavery, was no more immoral than the modern relationship between a business owner and a contract worker, or a soldier and an officer, or a citizen and a politician or policeman.

Make no mistake, all abuses of slavery **are** condemned in Scripture, either directly or by clear implication. For example, the man-stealing on which the slave trade in early America (and much of Roman slavery) was based is expressly condemned in Scripture (Exod. 21:16 and 1 Tim 1:9). Cruelty and injustice towards slaves is likewise denounced throughout Scripture (Lev. 19:15; Isa. 10:1–2; Amos 5:11–14).

So what is the real problem? I think much of the difficulty with the concept of slavery comes from the emotional freight that the word brings with it. Racism, cruelty, hopelessness.

For example, we are reluctant to use the word slavery. The word that the New Testament uses for – slave – *doulos* – is often not translated as slave.



In the King James version, which was the version used in the time when Western slavery was at its peak, the word *slave* is used only once (Jer 2:14), and the word *slaves* is used only once (Rev 18:13) and the word *doulos* – is *never* translated as slave.

It translates *doulos* as servant, servants, or other similar words.

There were six other words that meant servant – but *doulos* specifically meant slave. But the idea of slavery carried baggage so it was often not translated as slave.

But slave should not be seen as a negative word. We find this:

The apostles are called the *douloi* – the slaves – of the Christians.

Christ took on the form of a *doulos* – a slave.

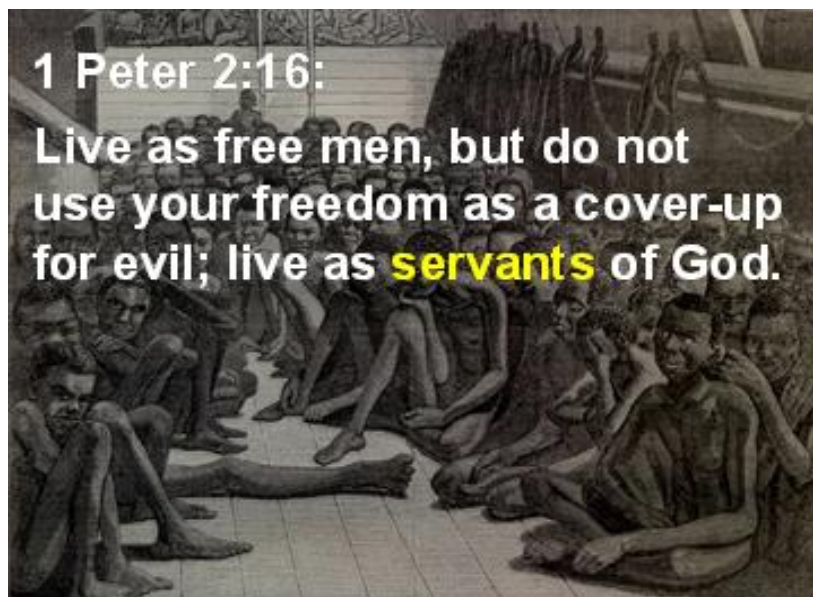
Paul designates himself as a *doulos* – a slave – of Christ.

We don't like the word slave and the situation is barely better in most modern translations. Consider Romans 1:1.

The NASB and NKJV has "bond-servant," the KJV, NIV and ASV have "servant," and the Darby Bible has "bondman" we have to go to something like the New Living Translation to find "slave,"

Or consider 1 Peter 2:16:

Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as *servants* of God.



Since Peter is contrasting living as a free man with living as a *doulos* – a slave – that seems the *only* possible translation.

But since slave has a lot of negative baggage – every major translation uses the word servant or bondservant.

But the reality is – we **are** all slaves and are to live as such.

The problem with using servant as a translation is just that today the words slave and servant carry different meanings for us.

*Servant* – we think of maids and butlers – employees.

*Slaves* – we think of the cruel, racially based enslavement of Africans in America's South.

Much of the problem lies in the fact that American slavery is the only kind of slavery we know of. This was quite different to the slavery of biblical times.

Scripture makes sure that abuse and degradation were forbidden.

Consider slavery in the Old Testament.

Slaves were captured in war or sold themselves into service when they were destitute.

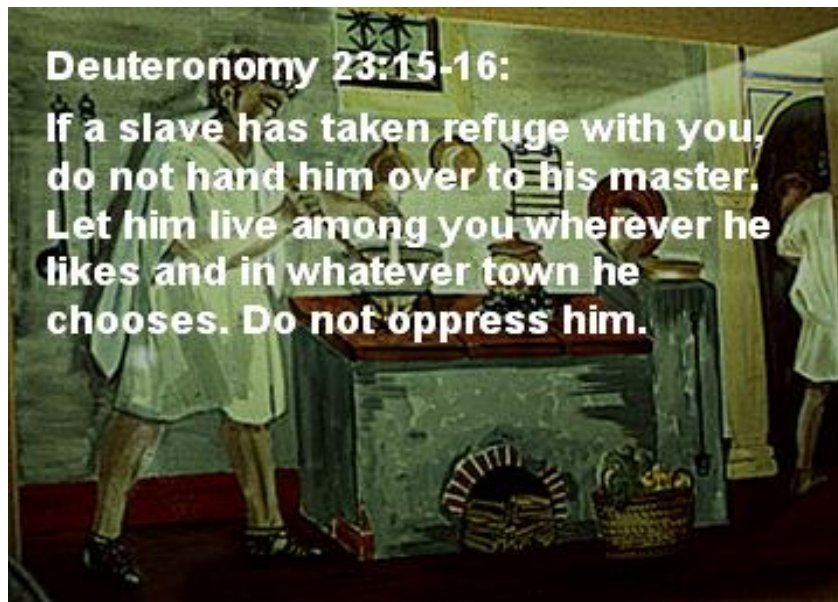
This form of slavery is an indentured slavery, meaning that the slave entered into slavery by contract with the slave owner—usually for a set period of time (cf. Exod. 21:2–6).

The Bible gave strict instructions so there was nothing inherently oppressive or unjust about such the relationship. In fact, the slave-master relationship was supposed to work much like modern employer-employee relationships in which contracts are involved.

Consider Abraham's slave Eliezer. He ran Abraham's household and carried out all his master's business. While Abraham was childless – this man was his heir – he would have inherited everything. He was a part of the family.

Consider the 318 slaves in Abraham's household. When Lot was taken, Abraham armed these men and they went to rescue Lot. These were trusted employees – part of the wider family – not repressed, degraded men.

It is important to note that Scripture gave slaves great rights. If a slave wanted out – he only had to run away and could *not* be returned. Listen to Deuteronomy 23:15-16:



**Deuteronomy 23:15-16:**

**If a slave has taken refuge with you,  
do not hand him over to his master.  
Let him live among you wherever he  
likes and in whatever town he  
chooses. Do not oppress him.**

If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.

That sounds nothing like the slavery I saw when I watched *Roots* as a child.

In fact again and again we read in Scripture that slaves were not to be oppressed but treated fairly and justly. Slaves were to be looked after as a part of the household and then set free after an agreed time.

Slavery was often used as a way to help the oppressed, the poor, those who could not fend for themselves. It was like employment to help them through financial hard times. They were taken into the family and looked after. Many did not want to be released but asked to stay as servant forever.

Listen to Exodus 21:5-6:

If the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

Could you imagine Kunte Kinte asking to be a slave forever? This was nothing like the slavery of Southern America.

Slavery among the Jews was carefully regulated and controlled.

When we come to the New Testament – the slavery that existed had arisen in the world. This slavery was not as regulated as Hebrew slavery – but it was still quite different from African slavery.

Let me give you an idea of slavery in the Roman Empire.



From the time Rome was founded as an agricultural community on the left bank of the River Tiber – Rome had slaves.

But the expansion of Rome in the third and second centuries BC was accompanied by a huge expansion in slavery.

As lands were conquered and the people subjugated – the Romans had a choice – kill them or enslave them. The need for a workforce in the growing empire made the choice easy – whole peoples were enslaved.

Initially, this slavery came with no rights. Masters could kill, rape, maim or abuse their slaves with impunity. They were their property. Their children were their property.

But you can imagine what happened. The numbers of slaves in the Empire rose until it is estimated that around a third of the total population were slaves.

This is an explosive situation. Huge numbers of slaves – up to 50% in some cities. Many were well trained – as gladiators. There were no laws protecting the rights of slaves – so they were treated very poorly.

This led to a number of slave revolts. The most famous were the Three Servile Wars. And the most famous was the Third Servile War in 73 to 71 BC in which the gladiator Spartacus led a slave revolt numbering 120,000 that took years for Rome to end.

But the result of these uprisings was that Rome realised it had to start passing laws to regulate the treatment of slaves.

From 70 BC onwards slaves were given more and more rights, more and more protection.

In fact by the time of Nero, slaves gained the right to take legal against their masters in court.

Slaves could own property, marry, even own other slaves.

And for most, slavery was only temporary.

Slaves could buy their freedom – or be released by their masters. In fact it is estimated that 50% of first century slaves were released before they turned thirty.

Because masters now were forced by law to provide for slaves in a variety of ways – many masters found it cheaper to release their slaves and then pay for their labour than to provide for them as slaves.

In fact, it is questioned whether it was the rise of Christianity or pure economic realities that finally brought slavery in Rome to an end.

So at the height of slavery it is estimated that 20 to 30 % of the empire were slaves and especially in larger cities. But by the mid-first century, the time of the New Testament, the numbers were dropping rapidly.

Slaves were required to be well paid for their service and many were trained as tutors, doctors and in government. They became the wealthy, educated middle class of the day.

Many became far wealthier than ordinary Roman citizens. In fact they began to rival the old blood Romans for wealth.

We have records of one freedman who possessed 4,000 slaves of his own.

Slaves came from every race and were able to mix easily in Roman society. You could not tell a person was slave or free just by looking at them. There was no strong stigmata associated with slavery.

In fact if your master were a man of standing, to be his slave brought great prestige. To be a slave of Caesar was an important position.

And slaves could move up the social ladder. In a single generation, a family might move from slavery to social prominence. In AD 193 Publius Helvius Pertinax, the son of a former slave, became the emperor.

I want to be clear about this – I am not saying that slavery was benign. Men are sinful. Many men abused their slaves, flaunted the law and were oppressive.

But, overall slavery was in many cases not the dehumanising experience we often think of. While many slaves did long for freedom and saved to pay their freedom or ran away – many were quite content with their lot.

It is hard to get an accurate picture of how good or bad slavery was in the mid first century. All the accounts we have are written by citizens not slaves.

But it seems that while some masters were horrific, many were quite reasonable and slavery was not degrading and terrible.

So while I am not saying that slavery was good, we do need to understand that there were important differences between *Southern American slavery* and *Roman slavery*.



Southern slavery was racially based. It was based on the premise that black men were inferior and fit for subjugation. Romans had slaves from every race and every race could own slaves.

Southern slavery had no rights. They were seen as less than human. They could own nothing, could be treated as their master pleased. Roman slavery had rights and protections.

Southern slavery had no hope. You could not earn your freedom. And even if you were released – Southern America would not recognise your freedom. All black men were slaves.

Roman slavery had hope. It is estimated that few slaves died as slaves and most did so because they wanted to remain as slaves. You could work hard and become wealthy.

The son of a slave became Emperor. Even in the US – the end of slavery certainly did not mean the end of racism and social slavery. We see the lingering effects. Black men are still black – and racist hearts still treat men differently. How many generations will it take for a descendant of a slave to become President?

The real problem is racism and cruelty.

Let me sum things up.

The Scriptures *do* renounce abusive slavery.

But the Scriptures see the gospel as *more important* than social reform.

What do I mean by this?

Imagine that you are a slave in Ephesus in the first century.

You hear the Apostle Paul preach on Christ and you are cut to the core of your being. You turn from your idolatry to serve the true and living God.

You know that in Christ there is no male or female, Jew or Gentile, slave or free – all are saved the same – viewed the same.

What is your priority?

Is it to overturn the institution of slavery – or to seek your freedom – or is it to seek the salvation of your fellow slaves, your master and those around you?

If you have a non-Christian master – what will be most likely to win him for Christ?

You turning up and saying: Hey boss, I am a child of God, I am free in Christ. Slavery is wrong – I am out of here.

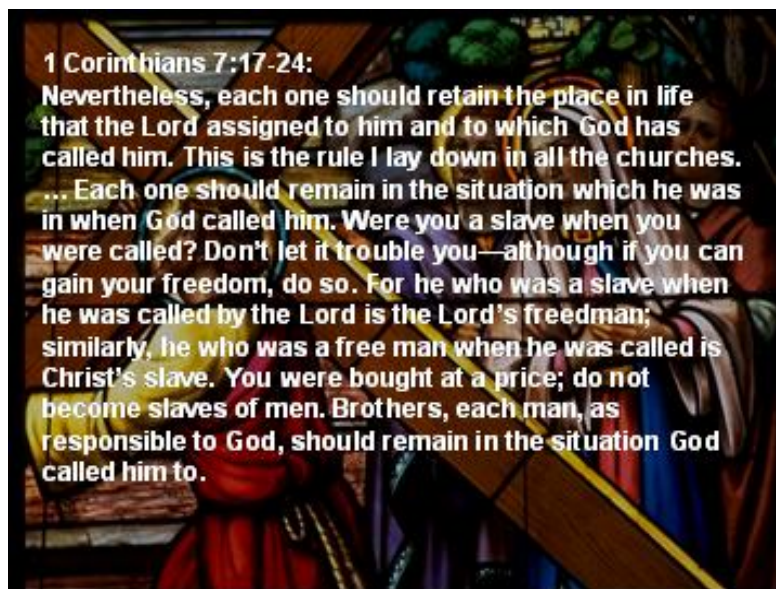
Or to be the best slave you can be? To work as hard and diligently as he can. To show his master what a transformed life looks like.

That is what will spread the aroma of Christ.

The Bible is consistent. If you are a slave – that is OK. In one sense we are all slaves – but in truth we are free in Christ. Live as slaves to Jesus.

If you can gain your freedom – great – but don't let that be what drives you – let Christ drive you.

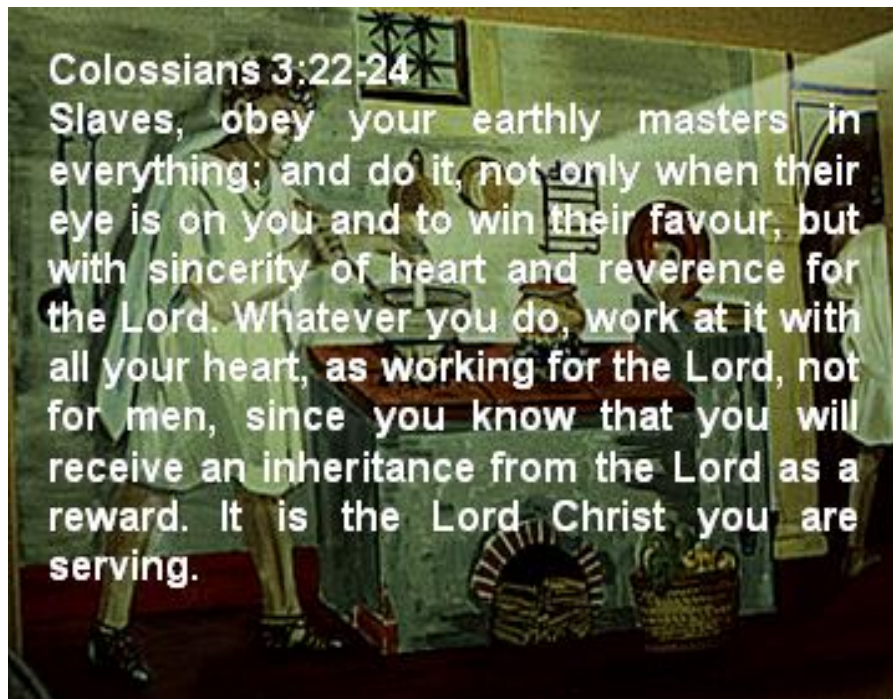
Listen to what Paul says. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24:



Nevertheless, each one should retain the place in life that the Lord assigned to him and to which God has called him. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ... Each one should remain in the situation which he was in when God called him. Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble

you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brothers, each man, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation God called him to.

More important that your physical freedom is your testimony to a watching world. Listen to how Paul makes this point in Colossians 3:22-24:



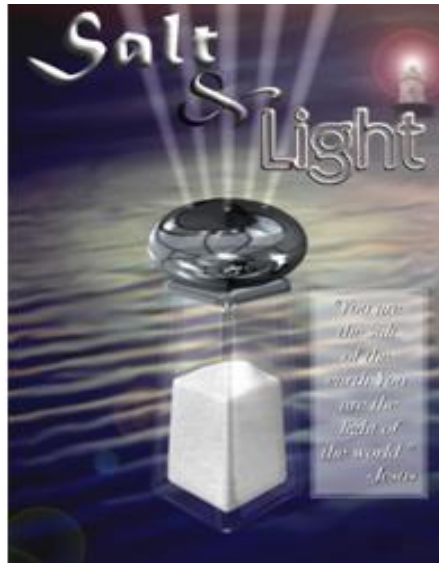
Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.

We work for God – He is the one we are ultimately serving.

So with all of this background to the issue of slavery – we can now turn to our passage in 1 Timothy 6.

And the main point of this passage is this – regardless of our social status – we are to be salt and light before a watching world.





Remember what is going on here. There were false teachers in Ephesus who had caused no end of trouble in the church.

Two teachings in particular had caused much havoc.

As we have seen – these teachers were saying that the resurrection had already taken place.

They said that because we are in Christ, we are done with this world and institutions of this world. So the roles of men and women are eliminated. The roles of slave and master are eliminated. They belong to the world not to those in Christ.

In one sense they were right. When we are finally raised – these worldly institutions will be finished. But they were wrong in their timing.

The other teaching that had caused much angst is found in chapter 6 verse 5- they said that godliness is a means to financial gain!

This is our right in Christ.

So these two teachings impacted greatly on slaves.

Some slaves were viewing the master-slave relationship as over. Others were slacking off – work benefited the master – not them – but godliness was supposed to make them rich.

So Paul says this. 1 Timothy 6:1:

All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.

If you are a slave – don't fight the yoke of slavery, don't disrespect your masters – be the best slave possible.

Otherwise the name of God and the teaching of the gospel will be slandered.

Christians should be the greatest employees on the face of the earth.

- We work hard – not just when the boss' eye is on us but at all times.
- We are honest and trustworthy.
- We are respectful and obedient.

I should be getting calls night and day from employers saying – do you have any Christian employees available.

Every classified section in the paper should be clamouring for Christian employees.

Unfortunately, that isn't the case.

In fact, I know several employers who will not employ Christians because they have had bad experiences.

Why? It varies.

I know some Christians who see their Christianity as dominating their earthly employment. So the boss's time and computer and photocopier are fair game for preparing Bible Studies and doing church work.

Don't do it. It is wrong.

I know some who see work as simply a place for witnessing. They share with every customer and employee. They evangelise at length on the boss' dollar.

There may be times to share – but all the follow-up is done on your dollar – in your time.

Even more unfortunate, the reality is that many Christians just aren't good employees – and I find that tragic.

Are you:

- A hard worker– not just when the boss' eye is on you but at all times.
- Honest and trustworthy.
- Respectful and obedient.

Are you the type of employee that bosses clamour for?

Do you work as serving God?

Do you teach with passion and love?

Do you serve customers with joy and courtesy?

Do you make a difference where you work?

Do you bring the aroma of Christ?

Two weeks ago when Ian Wright was here – he shared about the death of his sister-in-law – Diane. Clearly she made an impact on those she worked with. They closed the entire country hospital – staffed it from Ipswich so everyone could attend her funeral.

Even the unbelievers said – She was Jesus to us in that hospital.

That is what you want.

What do your employers think of you?

Are you the critical, whining, slacker? Or are you the employee they long for?

And even more importantly what do your employers think of your Jesus and your gospel?

Do they look at you and see someone so transformed from within – so different – so heavenly – that you adorn the gospel of Jesus?

Or do they say – man – if that is Christianity – give me a good Muslim – give me a good Mormon – at least they are trying to earn their salvation so they work hard.

The attitude of the slaves in Ephesus was bringing the gospel into disrepute.

But it was not just slaves with non-Christian masters. Look at verse 2:

Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them. These are the things you are to teach and urge on them.

It is hard to know the percentage of slaves in Ephesus – but probably around 30-50%.

Almost certainly the church there would have had a number of masters and their slaves in the church.

If these slaves were thinking – in Christ there is no slave or free – and in Christ there is great financial gain – it was a recipe for disaster.

Hey, we are all Christians, I don't have to work my tail off – let the non-Christian slaves do that.

As a Christian – I think I deserve a few kudos here – maybe head slave.

Paul says – absolutely not. Show the masters even more respect. Serve them even better. Rejoice that it is a believer who benefits from your service.

I know some Christian employers who cringe at the thought of employing other Christians. They think they are owed something. They think they don't have to work quite so hard. They think they can get away with more.

I mean is the boss going to chew out a fellow Christian – or worse yet fire him?

A friend of mine was telling me about someone who just took over as the head of a major Christian organisation. He was shocked. People came to work at all hours – goofed off – took liberties.

He called them in and told them it was about to change. They were serving Christ. They had to work harder than people in the world. They were now accountable.

And the complaints flooded in.

Somehow we seem to think that if we work for Christians – we can get away with less.

Paul says – it is an opportunity to do far more because you are serving Christ not men.

In one sense – this passage doesn't apply to us. Slavery has passed – it is not part of our culture.

But in another sense – this is absolutely vital to us.

Three sets of eyes are on every one of us – the world's, the church's and the Lord's.



*The world* looks at us to see if our gospel changes us. Are we transformed? Are we different? Are we salt and light?

I think of a patient a friend of mine operated on. This patient was a minister in a church. But this patient caused havoc on the wards – always complaining, abusing, unhappy.

He talked to me nearly in tears – the nurses knew this person was a minister – and he felt that the testimony of Christ was being destroyed.

It should never be. We should be the best employees, the best neighbours, the best soccer mums. The world is watching.

What do they say of you? Are you the sweet aroma of life?



And then – *the church* – other Christians are watching. Do we live as transformed men and women in the family of God? Do we love and forgive and go the extra mile – or do we take advantage of the graciousness of the saints?

On our church directory we add a little statement at the end.

Please note: This directory is to be used for church purposes *only*. Please do not use it for business reasons.

We added that after we had an episode where someone took advantage of a couple of young Christians in the church in a business deal.

It is easy to take advantage of Christians. Direct marketing targets churches. They know how hard it is for one believer to say no thank you to another believer.

Keep it out. We are here to live for Christ. Serve one another not take advantage of one another.





And finally, the most important set of eyes – *the Lord* – is watching. Are we working to please Him in all things? Are our lives truly transformed?

If so – slavery – even to a cruel boss – while not pleasant would have been OK – because it is Christ who strengthens us so we can do all things. We would be living for eternity.

Brothers and sisters – true Christianity transforms the world. It transformed the Roman world.

It helped end slavery in Britain and America.

And it wasn't through radical social revolution. It was through the gospel and transformed lives.

We should not be ashamed of slavery. In fact – the epitaph – slave of Christ – is a badge of honour.

We should aim to be the best slaves of Christ we can be – and in this our Lord will be well pleased.