

Honor Masters

Let us turn to our Bibles, to 1 Timothy 6. 1 Timothy 6, verses 1 through 2. Paul is winding down his letter to the young pastor, Timothy, which he covers a number of matters related to the Church and the relationship of the Church to the members therein, and his responsibility, of course, as a pastor of these churches, this church, to do these things in the right, proper manner. Let us listen attentively to the word of God, 1 Timothy 6, verses 1 through 2. Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and his doctrine may not be blasphemed.

And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them, because they are brethren, but rather serve them, because those who are benefited are believers and beloved. Teach and exhort these things, let us pray. Gracious Spirit of God, as you've penned these words through the Apostle Paul, they are still for us today, although we are thankful that we no longer have slavery in our nation, but nevertheless, God, in those and such circumstances, we read what you require of them, and it seems very harsh and hard to our ears, perhaps, but we must accept, God, how you put some people in a very difficult position of humility.

Indeed, Lord, we've experienced that ourselves at times, although we've not always used that term or thought of it that way. When we find ourselves, God, limited in our providential options of getting out from under a very difficult problem, a burden, both financial, material, relational, whatever, especially spiritual, God, that we must cry out to you, and that's the only thing we can do. And in such a situation, Lord, we are called to do what we can to obey you and obey those over us, as we read in this passage.

May we learn this lesson anew if we need to. By your Spirit we pray. Amen.

So, again, we read of slaves and masters in the New Testament here, there, elsewhere, in the epistles such as 1 Peter. I covered that when I finished that epistle there. Specifically, chapter 2, verse 18, where we read of a similar description, although longer, Peter writes, Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear, not only to the good and the gentle, but also to the harsh.

For this is commendable, if because of conscience towards God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. For what credit is it, if, when you are beaten for your faults, you take it patiently? But when you do good and suffer, if you take it patiently, that is commendable before God. For to you, this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, leading an example that you should follow in his steps.

There we read of a specific situation, a hard-taught taskmasters ruling over the newly born Christians. What is he to do? Peter directs them, the same way as Paul does, to submit. And Peter offers a reason that they should be comforted in this submission before their hard and difficult master, that because Christ suffered as well, we should not be surprised when we suffer.

However, in our text, the situation seems to be a little different, and the reasons offered also differ as well, although they complement. There's not a contradiction here. Combining

the two texts gives us a more robust view of how Christians should deal not only with slave masters, if we were slaves back then, but also all the more towards our own bosses and leaders and our businesses and employment, who are not slave masters, although you might talk as though they are slave masters and talk that way.

We have a lot more freedom and liberty, but all the more we are bound, therefore, to these people and leaders and bosses, in particular, who are over us. So the first simple division of verses one and two for us here.

Called to Honor Masters

We are called to honor masters in general, that is, specifically, slaves, or bond servants is the translation here in the NKJV.

It's slaves. Servile condition, whatever word you want to use there. Let me give you a description of what it was like back then.

We read here in this helpful background commentary, illustrated background commentary by Zondervan, quote, ancient slavery was a variegated phenomenon. Lots of moving parts. Private slaves could be found in great misery, grinding flour in chains at a mill, or in relative prosperity, working on their own in a small business, from one extreme to the other.

Hardly different, in most respects, from their free neighbors, except that all of their profits were at the disposal of their master. Public slaves could be important government officials with lots of power and influence, or menial attendants in the public baths, for example. Slaves and freedmen were everywhere, and few households did not have one or more maids and slave boys to do the household chores, cooking and gardening.

It was that widespread. There was, as you heard there in my description, a variety of such positions from husbandry, field work, construction and building, as you read there in First Kings with the building of the temple, under Solomon, for example. Or they would be conscripted into military work.

And I didn't put this on my note, but it came to my mind. We had conscription as well. What's that against your own will? You can call that slavery, as far as I'm concerned.

We had it in Vietnam. Government work. They can be brought into government work and even have good high status positions.

Anything they thought they could use a slave for, they would. Now, household servants are kind of interesting. That's what Peter specifically talks about.

It's a different word than doulos. You've probably heard the word doulos. Sometimes ministries have that word used somewhere in their title, perhaps.

It just means servant or slave, often slave, just under bond servant and control of another man. Household servants, however, were not necessarily slaves, although they could be.

Many household servants had all kinds of interesting jobs, of course, field, animal household chores, something in the house or around the house on the farm.

Many people were farmers, as you know. Subsistence living was common. Cooking, mending, accounting, business management even.

If they trusted their servant, they'd get pretty high. Teaching children, they would use the slaves or household servants for as well. Pedagogues, that's the word right there.

They're out of the Greek. You've perhaps heard that. We use that sometimes in English.

It's there used in Galatians 4.1, for example, where Paul writes, Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, very much like a slave, though he is a master of all, that is, potentially, but is under guardians and stewards, pedagogues, until the time appointed by the father. So it's a common occurrence. Paul uses this as an illustration to unpack the freedom that we have in Christ, of course, here collectively in the New Testament era.

So what about the slaves' conditions in particular? They were owned. We know this, but we say owned. I point out that we had conscription within my lifetime.

I was born in 72. I think they maybe still had it up to there. I think we stopped the war in 74 or something officially.

They could not leave their jobs at will. They could not get married at will, in general, and they could be punished more severely than a freeman. That's our general description of slavery back then, and we understand this, but as I studied it more and more and got into more of the archaeology, we have found a lot more nuance and detail going on here than we realize.

It turns out from before the time of Christ, well before the time of Christ, into the Christian era after Christ, that slaves' burdens were lessening over time in the Roman Empire. Isn't that something? More slaves were released during this time than before. Many had good, disposable income, we found out.

Many had rights to their own families, so their families were not broken up. In fact, they were protected. Again, not all of them, but more than before.

In fact, in 20 AD, the Senate passed a law, the Roman Senate passed a law that criminal slaves should be tried like freemen. They were given the same rights as a freed man, like Paul, before the tribunal, before, of course, it was completely different, and they could be beaten and decided by the master. 20 AD, when did Christ die? 33 AD.

61 AD, a family was tried to enforce an older law that when a master was killed by a slave that all the slaves would die, not just that one who did it. A riot broke out. It was so large that the Roman troops had to quell it, and the slaves were never killed.

So there was already a sea change going on during the time of Paul. It's quite fascinating. Of course, the empire was large, the Roman Empire, as you know, Southern Europe and Northern Africa, and the Middle East.

There were different masters and ways in which they could still get away with things, right, on the small scale and the like. Some still could not get married at will. Others still had their families broken up.

Here we have another description. Quote, agricultural slaves usually slept in chains in a prison and were literally worked to death. Pliny the Elder, you may have heard of in history books, who owned over 4,000 agricultural slaves and prided himself on the fact that he did not keep them in chains.

So again, there was a sea change going on here, even amongst the intellectual Roman leaders. It's quite interesting. But still, wouldn't want to be a slave back then.

Now, on the flip side, the freedman, or freemen, quote, seldom had better conditions than the slave counterpart, believe it or not. Poverty was so widespread in the Roman Empire. You were either rich or poor, and very little in the middle, proportionally speaking.

The middle class as we know it today grew in the last hundred years. Unfortunately, it is shrinking. They could be hired and fired at will in a way that may be relatable to some of us today.

Certain laws, of course, to protect some abuses in this regard. It was either blue to white collar to self-employed was a freeman. But if you can't get a good enough job, you could be living on the streets.

There was no safety net. We have a safety net of sorts in the American scheme. It's kind of messed up.

We figured out my family. We're trying to look into that to help family members. But at least something's there.

They would be on the street. You could starve and die. Well, the slaves or the house servants always had a roof over their head, even if they didn't make money.

The estimate is 89% of your income would be taken up with basic necessities to survive as a freeman. Brothers and sisters, we're seeing that rise in my generation. You've heard some of me mention this in the sermons from the 80s when I was a kid to now, how much more of our income is being consumed by basic things because prices are going through the roof.

Thus, quote, it was not unusual to find people, what? Voluntarily submitted to slavery in exchange for economic benefits. Basic security. So, that's context.

That's the background. While slaves, of course, had all that covered, and sometimes were given a week more or more of disposable income a month compared to the freedmen who was out there living in a dog-eat-dog world, which, unfortunately, I think we're finding

ourselves more and more in our economic stress in America. So the situation, in other words, is what? More complex than it looks.

More complex than it looks. And so Paul describes it as being under a yoke to highlight the hardship of slavery, of course. I wouldn't want a yoke over my head.

That's that long crossbeam that an ox would have on their shoulder, for example, to control them. And there's different degrees of hardship, in other words, as some had it worse than others. The masters here, the word is despot.

Right out of the Greek. Now, of course, back then, it didn't necessarily mean a negative thing that they're all despots. But the American mindset kind of thinks that way, right? So the word could be used for good despots or bad despots, but despots, nevertheless.

They used to be, but by the time of Christ, much of the powers curtail, as I pointed out, although it's still a difficult burden. Reminder that they had more power than an employer or a boss today does, even to the point of flogging. You could be flogged by your master if you were a very bad slave.

During the reign of Hadrian, excuse me, the emperor was attacked by an insane slave, we read, but instead of being put to death, the slave was turned over to the care of a physician. Yeah, it was quite, I'm reading all these little details, I kept digging into this, and wow, things have really changed. Still, I wouldn't want to be a slave back then.

You could be flogged. You could die from a beating. Now, the word he uses here is honor.

Right? You honor a yoke, nevertheless, as he's saying here, count their own masters worthy of all honor. That's a hard thing to swallow. Slaves were called by the apostle of Jesus Christ to honor slave masters.

The word honor harkens us back to which commandment? The fifth commandment. We see that as well for presbyters. In chapter five, you're supposed to honor the presbyters, especially those who teach and preach in the Word and Doctrine.

You're supposed to honor who else? Widows, as well. Same word. And by implication, honor one another, older and younger and the like in verse one and two.

Paul's applying through this chapter and up to these verses the fifth commandment to the status and situation people find themselves in. And of course, the honoring of a widow looks different in practice than the honoring of a ruling elder, which looks different in practice than the honor of your master as a slave, doesn't it? Although it's the same word and description under the fifth commandment. And this is why the fifth commandment is used as the paradigm in which all these other commandments fit underneath.

How? Well, clearly, with the heart. Paul doesn't mention heart. Obviously, he means heart.

He's not a Pharisee. It always begins with the heart. What's your intent? Are you in your emotions and your will and your mind honoring your leader, your master, your boss and

situation today? All duties begin with the heart, but also ends with, of course, words at the end of the day.

And actions as well. As verse two tells them to serve their masters and negatively not to despise their masters. Presumably, again, not in their hearts, nor in their words, nor in their actions.

To show proper respect to that man over you. Look at the situation this way. Slaves were called to a greater measure of humility.

Far greater than what we would like to be under these days. But what is humility? Where does it come from? It is a fruit of the spirit, isn't it? God had put them in this situation, brought them to Christ while still a slave, a man without control of his own destiny. And Paul says, by the inspiration of the spirit, submit and even go beyond that, honor that man, and thus show and exercise humility.

Until their status is changed, they must honor and serve the ruler over them. And today, of course, we don't have slavery of that sort. I already mentioned a form of slavery of conscription.

We may be under a hard providence, to be sure, some losing their homes to a fire, as we learned recently of a pastor that used to be out here in Denver. That's a hard providence. Others losing not only their house, but their jobs, and even family.

These horror stories we know of. And yet they're still called, what, to have humility before God under such a hard, difficult situation and circumstance in their life. To submit to God's providence and hand over them, and to submit to the judges who decide these matters before them.

Or, in the case of a burnt-down building, the insurance company who has you over a barrel. There's not much you can do but wait, figure out what the decision is. And so, although different, we know that we are called to humility under such things as they were called under their bosses, their slave masters, which I could not imagine.

And our bosses as well. We may have a boss that's very, very difficult, that's part of our hard providence, seeming to do everything they can to make life difficult for us on the job, but we are still called to do what we can to work for them and even honor them. As Peter reminds us, his circumstance was a hard master.

We're gonna find out this circumstance is Paul emphasizing a good master, and how we're supposed to honor said good master. Now, why the honor? What's the reason Paul gives in verse one why they ought to implicitly, of course, submit, explicitly honor, you're gonna honor, you're gonna submit, their masters? So that, or in order that, the name of God and his doctrine may not be blasphemed. That's a tall order, isn't it? That's the reason he gives to the slaves.

The world was watching, in other words, as they watch us today, brothers and sisters, to see if Christian slaves would be troublemakers. Paul reminds them that God is watching as well,

that we're to honor the Lord and his doctrine, the gospel, to honor the gospels implied here, that therefore they ought to honor their masters. And the world should know that Christian slaves are different than the pagan slaves, who presumably, the complaint being in 1 Peter, for example, of backbiting and whatever else they would do, slow working, you know, slow down the job, be difficult to their masters.

It was a known phenomenon. We can read it in the literature of that day. Lots of slaves did the best they can to be difficult and undermine their masters.

And Paul's answer is, don't do that. Be humble before God and before your boss. Humility, as I'll remind you, is not simply a feeling.

It's a acknowledgement, a recognition of where you are in God's providence, your status and position. You're not a president. You're not a judge.

You're not a cop or a general with all kinds of power and influence, and you ought to acknowledge that and submit to God's providence and not fight against that. That's humility. That may be your goal.

Maybe you're gonna go to school and the like. That's true. You can work at it, but meanwhile, you're not that, and so you shouldn't be, what, angry and bitter and fighting against God's providence, and he's saying the same thing here.

You are humble. You are not free yet, and while you are not free, you must honor them. Today, we are freemen, of course, but the world is still watching us.

We must not dishonor Christ's name by being difficult workers, difficult employees, lazy or bad-mouthing one another or our bosses especially, and to work hard. We read that elsewhere. Work as unto the Lord, we're told, not just your earthly bosses as man-pleasers, we read in that text, as simply for their sake, so you can get ahead, but for the Lord, and if you do it for the Lord, that makes all the difference, doesn't it, in your attitude and your actions.

That leads us to verse two. Call to honor Christian masters. That's a harder calling, if you think about it, in some ways.

And those who have believing masters, verse two, let them not despise them because they are brethren. Rather, serve them because those who are benefited, the ones getting the good effort of your work, the fruits of your labor, are believers and beloved in the Lord. Again, they are called to honor and submits, but on the flip side, negatively, not to despise, so he says negatively, let them not despise them because they are brethren.

To scorn, to disdain, to look down, to disparage. They are believing masters. You can imagine how hard that is.

Brother, I'm a Christian too. You're my master, you're my despot, you're my leader and Lord. It would even use the word Lord.

And you're a Christian and I'm a Christian. And you can see how easily you can turn to anger and bitterness against your master, who's a Christian, and you're the slave. How hard it would be to listen to this letter read to the churches and you are told, you must not despise that man who is your master, although he is a Christian.

And of course, by implication, if he's not supposed to despise them, others aren't supposed to despise them either, right? Other Christians. By thought, word and deed, again, no jokes, talking behind his back and undermining him. In our hearts, especially, it's always the heart is assumed in these texts.

And think about it. Where we are today, we have unfair bosses and schedules and it feels like slavery sometimes and difficult on our jobs, especially if you have to do two jobs or work two jobs. I know people who do that.

They do it this way. The wife works and the husband works. We have families like that.

When I was growing up, you worked well, you got enough education, you paid attention, you put your nose to the grind, as we say, keep your nose clean and the like. You could find a decent job. You could support your family with just the Father.

The odds are greater, in other words. Today, it's harder and harder and harder. We have difficult co-workers, maybe even lying about us.

Things you have to put up with at work, terrible schedules, undermining you, taking away the tools that you need to get your job done. That can be very frustrating as well. You have to put up with all kinds of things, but you do.

You put up with it because you need that job. And Paul is saying, don't just put up with it. Just persevere.

Just grit your teeth. What does he say? He says, honor them on the one hand and do not despise them on the other. That's hard.

That's hard today. Imagine it back then.

Called to Honor Christian Masters

But that he is a Christian master, verse 2, the second part of verse 2, makes it doubly so that they ought to not be despised because they are all brothers in the Lord.

So the background here is under all kinds of conditions, the Christians thinking they have Jesus as king and that we are all now believers, things have changed. I pointed this out in 1 Timothy and it has not changed. You still have marriage.

You still have the civil magistrate. We read in Romans, for example, he tells the Romans, do not rebel against your pagan leaders. That famous passage there.

Presumably because they're thinking, now's the time. The kingdom of God is here. No.

Oh no. They are there by God's appointment. The magistrate is.

And the master is there by God's appointment as well. And that's a hard pill to swallow to be sure. And under those conditions, under those confusions, he's reminding them, things have not changed in that regard.

In fact, natural obligations that we have in society are not eradicated by Christianity but rather reinforced by the gospel. And that's what we're reading in 1 Timothy. You don't get to divorce your unbelieving spouse.

They can divorce you. That's true. But you don't get to divorce them unless you have proper grounds.

You don't get to treat your unbelieving wife differently because now she's a believer. No. She's still a wife.

That hasn't changed. The child hasn't changed and the work situation hasn't changed and submission to our leaders in society has not changed but rather reinforced. The reason here, as you can imagine, the temptation is to do less.

Surely, as a Christian, my master will let me get away with less. Maybe he'll even free me. Paul's like, whatever the case is, you shouldn't despise him.

The implication, you should honor him. He even said it in verse 1, honor all masters. The temptation would be very strong for them.

And that's the reason he gives in verse 2, the latter part of verse 2, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers. The one who gets the fruit of your labor is a believer. Isn't that a good thing? Don't you want to work, the implication is, for a believer than an unbeliever? I know I would.

And I am, by God's grace, as a pastor, of course, you're believers. But I've been in the real world. I've worked under unbelievers.

They don't want to give you Sunday off, for example. That's kind of a big deal, don't you think? A Christian boss would try to give you Sunday off if he could. I can't claim they can always do that.

That's one of the big differences. But here he's saying, look, you are benefiting a fellow believer. Isn't that a good thing? Paul's saying it's a good thing.

That's a reason he's giving here. And again, it's hard to swallow if you were back then and thinking about it today. But, nevertheless, that's what he tells them.

That's the reason. Now, he doesn't get into the master side. I know some people want to read text like this and start thinking, what about the master? What does he have to do?

What's he going to do? What's his responsibility to this Christian slave now that he's a Christian master? Well, it's mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.

Philemon 116, a private letter of sorts, Paul writes to the slave master, no longer receive back the one who has run away, this Christian slave. No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord? Ephesians 6, 9 is more explicit. And you masters, do the same things to them, that is, to the slave, giving up threatening, knowing that your own master also in the day of heaven, and there is no partiality with him.

See, it is explicit elsewhere in Ephesians that the masters need to be remembered, reminded they are Christians and God is their master, their Lord, and they ought to be kind to their servants, and, of course, all the more for believing servants. So, they do have a responsibility, a reciprocal relationship is what's always demanded in these things, as we know. We are called here, or Paul is calling all of us here to teach and exhort Christian to humility and service, particularly, of course, to the pastor in particular.

He has a specific duty to teach and exhort. We have a general duty insofar as we have circumstances arise, we have kids underneath us, we are talking to each other privately, but in a public and official sense, Timothy the pastor is supposed to teach and exhort these things about the slaves, about the Christian converts under that system. The new and minted slaves were to work even for Christian masters.

By extension, all believers were to do their duty no matter the circumstances. If they had to do it under harsh situations like that, harsh, difficult situations like that, how much more, all fortiori, do the rest of us have to do that under our lesser, less harsh, less difficult circumstances? You don't have slave masters. I know you call your boss a slave master, but he really isn't.

I don't doubt that they are difficult, and thankfully you can change jobs, if possible. Those are all the freedoms that we have in Christ by God's providence. Nevertheless, the argument is, and Calvin is very emphatic on this, he spends a lot of time in his sermon on this.

All fortiori, the reason is, in this case, from the greater to the lesser. If in a harsh situation you're supposed to do these things, how much more in a less harsh situation in which your master's not flogging you? Paul writes in Galatians 5.13, for all of us here, by extension, all believers, for you, brethren, have been called to liberty. Of course, he means liberty in Christ.

And do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh for sin. We talk about that in Sunday School class. But what? Through love, serve, doulos.

That's the same word. One another. And that would certainly apply between a Christian slave and a Christian slave master.

The doulos in the double fashion in that case. Christian liberty was, of course, in spiritual freedom that we have from sin and guilt he's talking about there. But that removal of the

burden of sin and guilt is no excuse not to serve one another as Christians, as husbands, as wives, as citizens, or even as slaves in the old days.

Or today, we may say, because it's true in some cases, in a metaphorical sense, slave wages, companies not really wanting to hire anymore and cutting into industries now with cheap foreign labor is a terrible problem that we are facing right now. This is especially hard in a nation that prizes freedom. Freedom is a fleeting thing as we know.

Economic freedom, physical freedom. These hardships come upon us. We find our freedom is fragile and can change.

And in all statuses and situations we find ourselves in life our Lord and Savior is with us and guiding us and protecting us brothers and sisters. Pray for wisdom to avoid sin when dealing with injustices at work with bosses who do kind of sometimes it seems like feel like they're masters over us. And pray for power to submit and honor our bosses and employers for the gospel sake because the world indeed is watching.

May the spirit of God strengthen and preserve us in this matter we pray. Amen. Our God be with us we ask that we would be good examples on our jobs and our employment or whatever work that we do.

It doesn't have to be a formal job as such even in retirement and the like. We do things that help businesses that help clubs that help politics and the like that we are laboring and working in these regards. And to be an example Lord and submit to those who are masters or leaders or bosses or whatever we want to call them over us our Lord and Savior.

And to do that with a heart of humility before you we pray. Amen.