

**1 TIMOTHY**  
**January 29, 2023**

**1 Timothy 6:1-2**

**Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. <sup>2</sup> Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. <sup>1</sup>**

*“This is the Word of God” – “Thanks be to God.”*

A challenging verse for Americans, certainly. Books and sermons and commentaries and numerous conversations have been held about the concept of slavery and what it says in scripture.

Two verses in Paul’s letter to the pastor of the church of Ephesus leads some to think that maybe slavery is okay in some instances.

By that logic, it would lead some to justify plural marriage, no-fault divorce, promiscuity, homosexuality, identity politics, nationalism, and any number of culturally affirmed sins that have developed over time.

It is right and wise to understand the cultural makeup of when a passage of scripture is written. It is right to know that the God-breathed words inspired by the Holy Spirit to godly people ages ago is absolute truth – for all people, all times, and all circumstances. It is proper to read and pray and seek understanding by the Spirit’s lead.

It is wrong to ignore the fullness of scripture and the teachings presented in God’s Word in order to live as we desire with a cultural worldview of fairness and to excise short passages from scripture without

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<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version\*](#). (2016). (1 Ti 6:1–2). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

understanding context in order to justify one's own preconceived idea of right and proper teaching.

In other words, to have a belief in mind then to search for a Bible verse to support it is not how expositional learning and biblical teaching is to be done.

The examples of poorly applied verses abound, even in areas that surprise us.

For example – have you ever heard someone say “Where two or more are gathered, he is there” as a reference to prayer or God’s presence? Amazingly, it keeps popping up as a form of pseudo-encouragement for people needing a “God moment” and yet, it reeks of idolatry or worse yet, a version of seeing God as a spiritual good luck charm who is brought into the place if another shows up. Yet, that passage is not about making God appear because two are in the room, but about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the process of enacting church discipline on a church family member.

Now, that passage is not the focus today, but the parallel is clear. For many in history, the concept of slavery was accepted and even celebrated as Christian and godly and right and many based those beliefs on this passage from Paul’s letter to Timothy.

### **Slavery Dehumanizes**

Before we go further, be it known that slavery is sinful. The Bible condemns slavery that undermines God’s creation.

#### **Genesis 1:27**

**So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.<sup>2</sup>**

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<sup>2</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Ge 1:27). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Of all that has been created, knowing all that exists is from the creative hand of God, only humanity, only man and woman are created in his image. Therefore, every single man, woman, boy, and girl is an image-bearer of the one, true and holy God.

Slavery ultimately undermines this truth by denying the equal dignity of all image-bearers.

History is replete with slave stories. From the Old Testament, the Israelites experienced what has been called Hebrew servanthood. In Leviticus a system is set up for impoverished members of the people of God. This system of servanthood provided for the poorer Israelites and their family members. This was a process of provision for God's people. Poverty was impacting many and poverty is a reality in a sinful society and that is why there have always been the poor, as Christ stated, and there have always been people, man-focused groups, and even government agencies set up to address the issue with the intent of eliminating poverty. Yet, it's futile. As long as the world is sinful there will be poverty.

In Hebrew society, based on what is found in Leviticus 25, the Israelites facing abject poverty could sell themselves into servanthood. This was so they could survive. Yet, the clear intent was the Hebrew was to be treated as a servant, not a slave. It was a contractual arrangement.

And, as has always been the case, there were some who abused the relationship and servants became abused slaves.

In the first century, Roman slavery was so common it is estimated that one-third of the Roman empire were slaves. That equals about 60 million people. Incredible.

The Roman slaves were diverse in role, position, status, and culture. In the empire, the skin color differences were not the fundamental identifier of slaves, but economic status and social status.

While some may say that Roman slaves experienced more humane circumstances than others in history, do not be fooled into thinking it was kind, just, and right.

### **Slavery Demeans**

Slavery is sinful.

While indentured servitude existed in the colonial era, which allowed those who could not afford the journey across the ocean to what would become America, it would eventually graduate to a full-borne slave trade, not created here, but embedded here by those from Europe.

The historical perspectives are many and of course, perhaps the darkest era in our nation's history is that which eventually led to and played a major role in the nation almost destroying itself in a war that was far from civil but certainly divisive. The African slave trade defined much of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Even Africans would capture others from varying tribes and sell them to European and American traders. The conditions on the ships were abhorrent. In most cases the slaves were subjected to the harshest, evil, subhuman conditions.

In the *Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary*, the authors share this:

The abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote about his former 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)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Platt, David, et al. *Exalting Jesus in 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus*. B & H Academic, 2013. 101

It may not be needed today to remind us of all of the horrors of our own nation's slavery, as well as the centuries of slavery throughout the world and history.

Biblical history is replete with perspectives on this from the servanthood in the Old Testament to the Roman era in the New Testament. Despite some seeking to soften the reality of slavery over the years and even justifying it at times, it is clear in scripture that slavery is not a part of creation order and therefore is a product of human sin.

From the Garden in Genesis there are distinctions between persons, but they are defined as male and female, both in God's image and to his glory. There is no distinction between master and slave from one human to the next. That reality did not become so until after the banishment from the garden.

These short verses to the pastor in Ephesus presume that the readers understand that slavery is a thing in the Roman Empire. Everyone is affected by it. It exists and while it exists there are some points for Christians to understand beyond an abolitionist movement – which as we saw in the US was needed.

### **Slavery Divides**

Paul expects the readers to understand what he had written in previous letters. In the letter to the church Timothy pastored, he said this...

#### **Ephesians 6:5-9**

**<sup>5</sup> Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, <sup>6</sup> not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, <sup>7</sup> rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, <sup>8</sup> knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bondservant or is free. <sup>9</sup> Masters, do the same to them, and stop your**

**threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him.** <sup>4</sup>

Here's the point – there are Christian masters in the Roman empire. There are Christian slaves and bondservants in the Roman empire. The ungodly reality of owning another is revealed as sinful, but Paul is focusing here on the heart of family. In the context of Timothy's letter, he is clarifying love in action for those in the church family – whether it be older men and women, younger men and women, widows, children, and in this case those in relation to others as servants and masters.

There is certainly more to say about this reality, but there is not less.

The transformed heart leads the individual to see others through a lens that heretofore has not existed. The biblical, godly worldview sees others not as their position or their role, but as an image-bearer of God. How you see others impacts how you can love them.

Love your neighbor...even if he's a slave. Even if he's a master?

That's hard Christianity right there.

Submission and honor and respect for the masters?

Why? Because the reputation of God's name demands it.

We esteem freedom and even in Paul's letters you see freedom mentioned, especially to the Galatians where he said "It is for freedom you've been set free!" – a great reality.

But...and this is not an easy reality...God's honor and the clear presentation and preaching of the gospel, of the good news, is **EVEN MORE IMPORTANT** than one's personal freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#). (2016). (Eph 6:5–9). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

Let that sink in.

Freedom and liberty are right and good and godly...but come on the list of most important AFTER the glory of God and the honoring of his name.

### **Christ Delivers**

Slavery was an ancient institution in Paul's day, but even in the first century, you begin to see the cracks in the foundation of this sinful, human system. What breaks this down? The perpetual proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christ changes hearts.

Christ changes circumstances.

Christ changes perspectives.

Christ changes relationships.

Christ changes everything.

Or he is not Christ.

In Paul's era, slaves in Rome could generally count on being set free. This was called manumission. Few slaves reached old age. Slave owners were releasing their slaves at such a rate that Augustus Caesar introduced legal restrictions to curb that trend and keep the slaves in place. Despite this fear-based move by the Caesar to keep order in the empire, it has been discovered that almost 50 percent of Roman slaves were freed before they turned thirty.

But what does that mean for us?

What about the evils that are evident in our own history?

Every story has chapters that are dark. Even the Christians in this nation during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were blinded to the evil before their eyes. Hindsight lets us call it what it was – evil.

Even when slavery ended, the discrimination and dehumanization of other image-bearers continued. With hindsight we can rightly call segregation evil and the churches who sang “There Is Room at the Cross for You” but ensured that the only ones who heard it in their buildings were of the right skin tone were sinful. You cannot sing “There Is Room at the Cross for You” and desire segregated seating at the foot of the cross. **There’s no back of the bus on the way to heaven.**

I hope and pray we are beyond this sinful, racist, divisive, caste-system that prevailed for so long.

But, I’m not so sure. Why? Because the cracks in the foundation of humanity that began outside the Garden of Eden remain. Sin permeates the creation and we are all infected and impacted by it.

Masters, servants, slaves, brothers. Family.

Oh my. There’s much here in Paul’s writings and the world was shifting even then.

And while some seem to think the point of these verses is slavery and servitude, it is actually about the family of God and the proper love of fellow image-bearers of God.

While slavery may seem like nothing but a historical reality to some, be aware that the sinful reality exists today and this month is actually Human Trafficking Prevention Month.

But, sadly a defined emphasis for a calendar month won’t change hearts.



## **Christ Defines**

But Christ can. And Christ will.

Here's what you need to leave with today.

The Master willingly became our servant, so that we can righteously become his slave.

The Master – God

Became our servant – the Suffering Servant – Christ,

So that we may righteously and selflessly become his slave.

Don't like that term? Sorry. It's biblical.

Everyone here today is either a slave to sin or a slave to God. One is defined by death and evil. The other is life and glory.

God is the king. He is the master. He is the Lord. He is Father.

*He rules the world with truth and grace.*

*And makes the nations prove*

*The glories of his righteousness*

*And wonders of his love*