

Christians Under the Yoke of Slavery

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I Timothy 6:1&2 "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. 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."

We are not a young people's church. We are not a young couples' congregation. We are not a singles' church. We do not target any group or class in our town and say, "Our church would especially suit you." Anyone may enter this building, and I would hope you are welcomed. Church membership is open to all who profess faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour and are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Then the most unassuming, poor individuals and the most servile groups in society may receive all the privileges of church membership.

Let us say that one of the lowest castes at the time this letter was written to Timothy were the slave class. Believing slaves could become deacons, elders and preachers in the church. Slave owners who did not have the gifts of leadership and ministry would sit in the congregation and listen to their slaves leading in prayer, or standing in the pulpit expounding to them how we Christians should live. Followers of the Lord Jesus who owned slaves saw freed slaves going out as evangelists. The effects of this were ultimately going to banish the very institution of slavery in Europe.

1. The Institution of Slavery.

First century slavery was very different from that portrayed in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." It was not the slavery John Newton was involved in before he was converted. Gordon D. Fee says, "Most people became slaves through war or economic necessity, although by the time of this letter, the majority of slaves were so by birth (born of slaves). Manumission, the freeing of slaves, was a common occurrence, although in many cases slavery was preferred to freedom because it offered security - and, in some cases, good positions in a household" (Gordon D. Fee, *New International Biblical Commentary, "1 and 2 Timothy, Titus"*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1988, p.136).

What was (and still is) degrading about slavery is that one human being is forcibly owned by another and so robbed of all freedom. John Stott points out that slaves have three defining characteristics. "Their person is another's property, so that they may be bought and sold; their will is subject to another's authority; and their labour is obtained by another's coercion" (John Stott, *"The Message of I Timothy and Titus,"* IVP, 1996, p.142). Paul is not detached and cool when he talks about slavery. He talks to people "who are under the yoke of slavery." He understands the culture and all the subtleties of first century life. He is not a foreigner imposing his own quasi-liberal ideas on a situation with which he is unfamiliar and which has been in existence for centuries. Paul says that slavery is a yoke, that is an implement you put on oxen when you attach them to a plough for a day's toil. Slavery is the bondage you are putting on people. So this passage is dealing with people who find themselves in a state of oppression.

Slavery was deeply embedded in the structure of European society. John Stott writes, "All well-to-do people had slaves, and very wealthy people had several hundreds. They were regarded as essential, especially as domestic servants and farm labourers, but also as clerks, craftsmen, teachers, soldiers and managers. It is believed that there were more than fifty million of them in the Empire, including one third of the inhabitants of Rome" (ibid, p.143).

2. How Christianity Affected Slavery.

Why didn't the Lord Jesus or the apostles criminalise slave-owning? Why was it not made a condition of becoming a Christian that a slave-owner had to release his slaves? Why did the early church not launch an anti-slavery campaign? The answers would be that the institution of slavery and the attitude to it was woven into every part of the ancient world. John Stott says, "to dismantle slavery all at once would have brought about the collapse of society. Any signs of slave revolt were put down with ruthless brutality. The fact is that 'monstrous evils' like slavery 'are not, like giants in the old romances, to be slain at a blow'. They are so firmly rooted that any attempt to tear them up may pull up the very foundations of society with them" (ibid, p.143).

Someone else has pointed out that slaves, because of their very numbers were always regarded as potential enemies. If ever there was a slave revolt it was put down with merciless force, because the Roman Empire could not afford to allow the slaves to rise. "If a slave ran away, if he were caught he was either executed or branded on the forehead with the letter F, which stood for 'fugitivus' which means a runaway. There was indeed a Roman law which stated that if a master were murdered all his slaves could be examined under torture, and could indeed be put to death as a body." Slavery was a yoke.

So the Lord Jesus did not lay it down as a condition that in order to become a Christian a person must first free his slaves. He did not launch social campaigns to end many of the injustices in society. When the gospel started there were just five hundred people in the entire world who had become disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ. Though they increased in a remarkable way their goal was to influence the entire world, most of which had no idea at all about Jesus Christ and his religion. How could Christians enter a new country and preach on street corners "We must end legalised slavery"? What if they should announce that they had secret havens for runaway slaves? Would the people of those nations have heard one more word about the life, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ? Those preachers would have compromised the whole message of the gospel. There would have been civil unrest, and the flames of class-hatred would have flared up everywhere. Civil war, mass murder, and the complete discredit of the church would have been the result.

Do you think that the bombing of certain countries in eastern Europe and also of the Middle East by Great Britain and America and Nato forces was good, successful or necessary? Do you think that the church should encourage its civil authorities to declare war on countries in the world where today there is slavery? We are given evidence of the enslaving of Christian people in the south of Sudan. There are utterly heartbreaking tales of the suffering of people in those areas, and these stories seem to be true. There are other parts of the world where servants are virtually slaves. There are young women in the so called 'sex-industry' of Thailand who are virtual slaves. One cannot bear to think of such lives. But is the answer to send the troops in? Is the answer for the Christian church in those areas to address this single issue alone?

Think of other great evils in the world - polygamy, so-called female circumcision, the caste system of India, alcohol abuse, easy divorce, idol worship, abortion, pornography, the demeaning of women - so that they can be murdered by their husbands if there is a hint of immorality. What are we to do about all such things? We are to speak about the Lord Jesus Christ as warmly and credibly as we can to any who will listen. We are to tell men and women about his life, his perfection, his teaching, his miracles, his claims, his death as the Lamb of God, his resurrection and ascension to heaven and his power and presence with us day by day and when we gather in his name. We are to tell them that one day he is coming again, and that after death all the world must appear before him to be judged by him. They will receive their eternal destinies from his lips. They must give an account to all men as to how they treated women, and slaves, and the vulnerable and needy. We are to tell them that they have sinned

greatly in all these areas, but that there is mercy with God. If they confess their sins God is faithful and just to forgive them for those very actions of theirs. He will give them new hearts and new strength not to go on living as they have been living. He will make everything new so that they can live holily, lovingly and blamelessly in this present evil world.

We are to gather such people into congregations where they are taught the word of God week by week, and where they learn to love one another and bear one another's burdens and together deal with the pain and injustice that they meet every day. This in fact went on century after century. The word of God was preached, the two ordinances were practised, prayer was made, Christian love and fellowship was evidenced, Christian homes were established, Christian living was credible and undeniable. Most of all the church cried mightily to God for the assistance of the Holy Spirit so that the gospel of Jesus Christ would not come in word only but in power, and in the Holy Ghost, and in much assurance.

Thus the message of the Christian faith would permeate Ephesus, where Timothy was, and every community where living vital congregations of Christians spent their lives. So they become salt and light in those places, and slave-owners were deeply affected by the Word and Spirit, and slaves also, so that the whole institution of slavery was changed, and ultimately ended. We are aware that neither men nor the world can be reformed by force or by legislation. The law can protect the weak and needy, but to put a law on the statute book there has to be enough people to want it. They must be persuaded to change their minds and values so that they actually feel sorry for what they once did, and are prepared to suffer loss for abandoning an unworthy lifestyle. The slow penetration of a society by the word and Spirit through the lives of a vital godfearing minority has had incalculable effect. Things have to happen in God's time, not in ours. Often there is the slow and steady way, and it is very effective. The way of bombing abortion clinics, and the imprisonment of homosexuals, and the preaching of revolution defeats its own purpose.

3. The New Testament's Exhortations to Slaves and Their Owners.

So let us examine what the New Testament actually said to Christian slaves who were under the yoke in their demeaning way of life. This has consequences for ourselves, directly so if we are married to a tyrant, or have the most demanding of parents, or if our boss at work is the most mean spirited man or woman we have ever met, but for this additional reason. We should be assured that obeying the Bible in the power of the regenerating Spirit by a small group of people can change the whole attitude of a nation towards real wickedness.

Let us look at this passage but also the other passages that speak of slavery. There are in fact six letters in the New Testament which refer to the conduct of slaves, and so it seems that they would have been a very evident segment of every congregation.

i] Let Slaves Become Free if They are Able to Do So.

Paul writes to the Corinthian congregation and says to the slaves whom God has called into fellowship with Christ, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you - although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (1 Cor. 7:21). There were some slaves who felt so frustrated by their yoke. God had made them the Lord's freedmen, but in the world they were at the beck and call of their masters. If only they could be freed, how then, they imagined, they would serve God and their fellow men. Some of them ached for a change of status and circumstances. They chafed under their yokes. Paul says, please "don't let it trouble you." The Christian's great boast to the world is that he has gone to the Son of God who has given him blessed rest. His yoke is easy and his burden is light. How will anyone listening to the gospel believe that to be true if they see the Christian slave is a Mr Melancholy, eyes down, sulking,

and clearly deeply unhappy. His body language is saying, "I am troubled" when his lips say, "Christ has given me rest."

"Let not your heart be troubled. Ye believe in God, believe also in me," says the Lord Jesus. There was a great principle which the apostle Paul sought to write indelibly on the consciences of every congregation, and that was that "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" (I Cor. 7:17). Whatever your social relation or position your relation with Christ is compatible with it. In every walk of life the Lord calls people to follow him. One can imagine how the gospel turned these Christians quite upside down. They had received new life in Christ, and there were not enough hours in the day or days in a week to tell other people about their Saviour. How could they stay a mere housewife, or a sailor, or the father of a large family or a fisherman when all around them were people who had never heard of the Lord Jesus. So a restlessness came from the degree of blessing received. Consequently families were suffering from the absence of breadwinners. Servants were leaving their masters. Deacons were never present in church. A religious wanderlust had gripped them. "Stay where God has put you!" says the New Testament. Show that you are a real Christian there. Live for God and in fellowship with him there. It was a rule Paul set out before every congregation.

However, if a Christian slave were able to become free then let him make the most of it. Let him save his money carefully and pay his master the price of his freedom. If he can gain his freedom then let him do so. Let men and women better themselves in the world. They should be able to, if they have access to the Son of God. They can say, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." Let the slave enjoy freedom if he can.

ii] Let the Slave-Owner Treat his Slaves with Justice.

This comes in a multitude of ways which, when you put them all together, is very subversive of the whole institution of slavery. For example, the apostle tells slave owners that slave trading is condemned by God's law (I Tim. 1:10). If merchandising in slaves is wrong then it is wrong for us to encourage a slave trader by purchasing a man from him. For example, dealing with drugs is illegal, and so I may not assist a drug dealer by purchasing heroin from him.

Again, it appears that the apostle once encouraged a slave-owner named Philemon to give a slave called Onesimus, his freedom. You will remember the incident. This slave had run away from his master in Colosse taking some money with him. He had arrived at Rome and through some extraordinary providences had come into contact with the apostle Paul. Through his witness Onesimus had become a Christian. Then Paul sent him back to his master, although he had been a great help to Paul. The apostle writes to him saying, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Phm.15 & 16). So take him back as your freely serving brother in Christ. Again, it is a revolutionary message, that the Christian master chooses to free his slaves.

Again, the apostle exhorts the slave-owners in Colosse to "provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven" (Cols.4:1). The same Lord in heaven protecting and judging the slave as the slave-owner. There was not a special superior lord on Mount Olympus with a different standard of behaviour for the rich. One Lord before whom all must appear and be judged by the same royal law. So they had to provide their slaves with what was right and fair, even though in those days there was very little that was 'just' for the slave. Paul tells the slave-owners in the Ephesian church, "Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him" (Ephs. 6:9). He tells both Christian slave-owner and slave in the Galatian congregation that

before Jesus Christ there is no slave nor free, "for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3:26). So when the slave-girl is praying to the Lord he doesn't suddenly look away and say to her, "Excuse me for a moment there is a wealthy slave owner who just wants a word with me." They both have intimate access to the Lord, may call him Abba Father, may know his presence and protection and look forward to being close to him in heaven. Such principles would lead inexorably to the abolition of slavery. We Christians are sad that it did not happen sooner.

iii] Consider Your Masters Worthy of Full Respect.

You hear those forceful words which begin our text, "All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect." (6:1). "Fully respect your masters," Paul exhorts. We may think that he is referring here to Christian masters, but he is not, because he goes on to deal with them in the next verse. He is referring to pagan masters that they are men who should be considered worthy of full respect. We may think that he is referring here to kind and just masters, but that is not at all the teaching of the New Testament. The apostle Peter makes that point clearly and at length, "Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh" (I Pet.2:18).

It is easy to submit to good considerate people. The Lord Christ addresses his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount and says, "You are kind to those who are kind to you? So what? What credit is that to you?" You will give a loan to those who treat you in the same way. You greet those who greet you. You buy drinks for those who will buy a drink for you. Are you being a wonderfully generous man? But should a man forget he is in your debt, and fail to offer you a cigarette in turn, then you will badmouth him behind his back.

Are you Christians any different? You must be different from the world. Your righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. So we submit to those masters who are crooked and perverse. Peter is talking about those who are dishonest about our salaries, and inconsiderate about our working conditions, and who say one thing and do another. Peter is talking about thoroughly disreputable bosses, only this is not your 'boss' whom you can walk out on handing in your notice. This is your owner. You are his slave for life. Submit to him, says Peter.

This is the real challenge of following the Lord Jesus. This is what he expects from me. I keep submitting to such a master. I do a thorough job, and I do not retaliate. That is the standard Christ requires of me. The battered slave girl is not to go for the meat knife and attack her master. She is not to overcome evil with evil. She is to overcome evil with good. When her cruel master shouts at her at midnight to bring him some meat and bread, then she gets off her bed and does what he says. If he calls for drink she is to give it to him. He is her enemy but she is to love her enemy.

What do we have here? Do we have a weakling? A doormat? No way! We have strong men and women, so in control of themselves, mortifying an evil temper and the spirit of revenge, and powerfully loving another. Think of the religious conflict in Nigeria today. A Muslim mob burn down a church building. The Christians dare not retaliate and firebomb a mosque. If a preacher is murdered the Christians are not to retaliate and assassinate a mullah. We are not to consider revenge. It does not enter our thinking.

But the Lord Jesus and his apostles are not encouraging injustice and abuse. They are encouraging forbearance. Be an example to the world, the Word of God tells us. Be utterly different from them, as much as salt is different from putrefaction. Be light in that dark home. Your actions will speak louder than your words. Earn the right to be heard by your life there. Of

course, you cannot sin when they ask you to do something wrong. But you can honour them by the way you say no. You must not be contemptuous.

Peter says to the slave, "how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it" (I Pet. 2:20). You stole from your master and were found out and were punished for it? Your submission to that chastisement is no credit to you. You got what you deserved. But here is the Christian difference. You were innocent, and were doing your best, and then your Master falsely accused you, and chastised you. It is utterly unjust, but "you bear up under the pain" (I Pet. 2:19) says the apostle. That is to your praise.

That is exactly what happened to Joseph. The wife of his master Potiphar accused him of trying to seduce her and the young believer was thrown into prison. But Joseph was never bitter, and there is no record of any revenge he exacted on her and her husband when he became the Chancellor of all Egypt. He bore up under the pain. He was not sullen and glowering. He showed his freedom from all of that bondage as a believer in the Lord.

Your boss may be a pathetic man. You cannot escape from his weaknesses, his secrecies, his absences, his double standards, his sharp tongue, but you can escape from retaliating, from returning evil for evil, from burning yourself up with resentment, and looking for revenge. You can bear the evil patiently. You are a free man! You have broken the chain that binds most people to hitting out. Commit your life each day to the Lord. Have confidence in the justice of the Lord. Remember his words: "Vengeance is mine. I will repay says the Lord." There is no need for you to avenge yourself. Your boss and yourself must appear before the judgment seat of Christ. The Christian slave knows that he is Christ's freedman, and that he chooses to work quietly and humbly as he does. His service is not forced. It is voluntary.

So we are to consider our masters worthy of full respect, especially those who are harsh. How do we show that respect? You can go to the most fundamental principles of morality as when Paul tells the Christian slaves in Crete "not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted" (Titus 2:9&10). "Of course," you say, but let me remind you just how much answering back and dishonesty characterises our society today. How many places would be revolutionised if people could be fully trusted and there was no backchat? But, of course, I agree that much more than not stealing from them is required. You show them you consider them to be worthy of full respect by obeying them "not only when their eye is on you, and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart " (Cols. 3:22). It is easy to give an appearance of industry when the boss is watching, in order to curry favour, but the challenge is to work hard for him in his absence.

But the greatest challenge of all this, that to work as a Christian slave for an unbelieving master "with sincerity of heart and reverence for God. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men" (Cols. 3:23). These are the most incredible exhortations. You think of that impassive unbelieving man who is your boss, and you, a young Christian slave, and you know that whatever you do, cooking a meal, washing the dishes, cleaning out the toilets, whatever it is, you are to do it with all your heart, and you are to do it as if you were rendering this service for the Lord Jesus Christ who had died on the cross for your sins, and it is as if you were working for him not for that surly man. This law makes drudgery divine.

That is what the Christian slave has to do. That is the staggering way to end slavery. You see a slave with such intelligence, and dignity, and maturity, godfearing and righteous - and this man is a slave to a pathetic person whose only gift is that he has money. In the end even the world will see that there is no way you can justify slavery. So the Christian slave is to serve his master as if he were the Lord. That is what you are able to do. This is not some idealistic impossible

standard. I cannot believe that the Lord who knows men and women far better than we do, and has given us the indwelling Son of God, has given us some hopelessly impractical advice.

This, then, is how the evangelical slave is to act, considering his master worthy of full respect, and the result is that "God's name and our teaching may not be slandered" (v.1). When Christian slaves retaliate and defy their master then he has every reason to say, "What a religion! Jesus hasn't done anything for that guy other than making him a rebel." The teaching of the gospel is slandered. But when the Christian slaves' lives adorn their testimony that God is a powerful and merciful Saviour there is a very different response. "In every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive" (Tit.2:10). The other servants, the younger generation in the house, the wife and other members of the family are all increasingly dependent upon this totally trustworthy man of God. He is the hub around which the total household operates. He has made the Sermon on the Mount irresistible.

How does such a man behave as he does? They all know what his answer is - "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." That is the result of considering your masters to be worthy of full respect. You do not give the impression of intolerant superiority to the man. Rather you serve him as if he were the Lord himself.

iv] Serve Christian Masters Even Better.

"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" (v.2). There is another temptation if your master is a fellow believer to trade upon your mutual faith. You might produce shabby work and think your master will overlook it because he is a Christian. You might think that you are worthy of special considerations and special allowances because you are also a Christian. You might think you can do what you please because he is a fellow Christian who is bound to forgive you your mistakes as God has forgiven him. But you may not take liberties with him. You may not abuse the slave/master relationship. Rather you are to serve a Christian even better. He is your brother and you love him in Christ. How do we serve Christians better? "We ought to lay down our lives for our brothers" (I John 3:16).

Think of a similar relationship of authority between two Christians today. A professor and a student; a teacher and a pupil; a boss and a secretary; a captain and a private; a bank manager and a teller. They are in the same church. They break bread at the same Lord's Supper. They attend the same Christmas social and go on the same Sunday School outing together. The younger might have called the older 'Uncle' for many years. There ought to be a warm relationship as Christian friends, while still acknowledging the superior has legitimate authority and he actually exercises it. It is a delicate relationship, and the temptation for the older man at the place of work is to become austere and aloof to the young Christian, to deny that they are brothers. I knew of a school-teacher whose son was in his class, and he insisted on addressing him by his surname, without a hint that he was the boy's father. That is utterly unnatural and unfeeling and no witness to the reality of fatherly affection.

The temptation for the young person is to take advantage of the Christian trust and affection and to be less than respectful and obedient. But this is what the Lord Jesus Christ expects of us, to serve Christians with even more respect. He expects it of us when it is a Christian woman who is our boss, and we, as Christian men, have just joined the firm. We are to be especially careful in such an instance to submit to her authority in work, though in the church she must submit to your authority if you are a church officer.

This respect for those who are over us is the powerful means of evangelism God gives to every Christian in Islamic countries today. These are the biblical principles of winning people for the Lord in any society where Christians are a marginalised and despised minority. This the way a believer is to win her entire family for Christ when she is the only follower of the Saviour in that family. This is how the one Christian teacher in a school is to influence staff and pupils for Jesus. This method was so powerful under God in the days of the early church that soon the whole world was affected and Christians were everywhere.

As Pastor Wilhelm Busch once said, "Some of you may be wonderful Christians, but as long as other people continue to get on your nerves, there is something wrong with you. Is that clear? Perhaps you will say, 'But you don't know my neighbour - she's a real meanie!' And I would answer, 'As long as you don't love her, there is something wrong in your life. Because when Jesus has come into our life, we should stop being so sensitive and so easily irritated by those around us.'

This teaching does not mean that Christian slaves - or anyone under authority - become downtrodden, mute yes-men - "Uncle Tom's" as they are called today. Wilhelm Busch goes on to record this incident. "I have a very good friend who lives in a lovely flat. The landlord, however, is not easy to get along with and is a real penny-pincher. One day he wrote my friend an insolent letter: 'You will do this and you will do that, and you will pay such-and-such a sum.' My friend told me what happened: 'When I read the letter, I flew into a rage. I sat down at my desk with the intention of answering it then and there. But just as I was about to do so, the sight of Jesus on the cross, dying for me - and my landlord - flashed before me. I couldn't write the letter. Instead, I went to see him and said, 'Mr. So-and-So, do you think it is necessary for such offensive language to be used between us? It seems to me that both of us are men who are open to discussion. So why don't we just sit down and talk things over calmly? I like you, and I really don't think you need to speak to me like that.' The landlord was completely disarmed, and there was no more trouble. The two of them, the hard landlord and the disciple of Jesus Christ, eventually became good friends" (Wilhelm Busch, "Jesus Our Destiny," Inter Publishing Service, 1996, p.138).

Pastor Busch worked in a big city for many years, and time and again he heard people complaining, "I feel so lonely. Nobody loves me." He would say that he couldn't stand listening to that sort of thing any more. He always felt like asking them, "What about yourself? How many people do you love?" When we ourselves are a block of ice, it's not very rational to say that there is no love in the world. He once had a conversation with a communist worker. He said, "We demonstrated in favour of the coolies of Shanghai." "That's great," he replied, "And how are things going with your next door neighbour?" "I'll smash his face in!" he said. It is very easy to feel the moral outrage of slavery in distant parts of the world but how are you behaving to anyone who has authority over you? How are you acting towards those who are under you?

You cannot possibly act in the way that the apostle is telling slaves to act unless you have a new heart and a new nature. Unless the Holy Spirit indwells you it cannot be done. This life is the gift of God. And it hurts. For in the process Jesus shows us that we got on people's nerves even more than they get on ours, that it is harder for them to put up with us than for us to put up with them. Since we came to know Christ, he has often put his finger on wrongs we have done to other people, and we appreciate more and more and more the fact that the Lord Christ bore our sins on the cross and grants us total forgiveness.

The Lord Jesus is giving us in these verses the formula for the greatest revolution the world has ever seen. For it to be realised you must start with him, not with it. You must get right with him, and then find his strength to live as he requires. Put your trust in Jesus. How I would love you to be able to say, "I have found Jesus because he found me."