

Since the beginning of chapter 5 of his first letter to Timothy, Paul has addressed various group needs within the congregation. These have consisted of different age and gender groups, the widows and the elders. Now, lastly, as we come to chapter 6, he considers the special needs of slaves within the church (vv.1-2). Paul describes this group as “all who are under the yoke of slavery”. By calling slavery a yoke Paul recognises that the slaves’ existence is a burdensome and negative one which is not theirs by choice. But he does not recommend rebellion as the way out of their condition. (In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he encourages them to take their freedom if it is made available). Instead he advocates a positive attitude of respect towards their human masters, based on Christian beliefs and values (e.g. Ephesians 6:5-9).

Slaves formed a large part of the population of the Roman empire (on some estimates one in every three persons or more was a slave), and were obviously well represented in the membership of the Christian communities. Clearly the gospel had a special appeal to those without rights and with only the basics of existence (1 Corinthians 1:26-29). Slavery in the Roman world was different in many respects from the institution that later developed in Europe and America. In the ancient world slavery generally was not based on the colour of a person’s skin. This is in contrast with the inherently racist premises of slavery in the West, which denied the full dignity of people of colour as human beings made in the image of God. Also, in the ancient world many people were enslaved because of economic necessity. In some cases slavery was voluntary - people sold themselves as slaves in order to clear their debts, or in order to learn a trade. In addition, because slaves were members of a household, most of them had a fair degree of security, with opportunities for advancement. Most important of all, slavery was not necessarily permanent, because there were a variety of ways for slaves to win or buy their freedom.

Unlike marriage and parenting which are creational institutions, such practices as divorce and slavery belong to a fallen world in which men and women can exploit one another mercilessly. The Christian faith addresses people where they are to be found, without excusing their mutual wrongdoing. Paul did not recommend political action for the slaves, since such uprisings had been tried without success and with great loss of life. Instead he knew that the gospel was the power of God to change people in their deepest values and attitudes. Paul’s letter to Philemon is an actual example of how this change would take place, as Christian masters began by treating Christian slaves as brothers and human equals, and by implication choosing to set them free. As a result of the gospel working in people’s hearts, the quality of their relationships would be changed, and a new society of justice emerge. This is what in fact happened in the first centuries of the Roman empire.

1. When Your Boss is a Pagan

Even though slavery has been largely abolished in the West, what the Bible says to slaves is still relevant today. To begin with, the term Paul used for “slave” (doulos) can also be translated “servant” or “bondservant” - and so it covers a wide range of work situations. Just as the relationship between master and slave was the primary economic relationship in the ancient world, so the relationship between boss and employee is the primary economic relationship in the world today - and so we should apply the biblical teaching accordingly. Furthermore, it may fairly be said that many modern workers are “under the yoke” in that they have to slave away at jobs which are stressful or boring, often working long hours and enduring difficult conditions. Many working holiday visa students find themselves in this situation.

Paul says, “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” (v.1). In today’s context it means that every boss deserves a full-day’s work from every Christian employee. Paul has used the word “respect” or “recognition” before in 1 Timothy 5:3 in relation to the kind of honour or recognition that Christians ought to show to godly widows. In 1 Timothy 5:17, he applies it to the kind of respect Christians should give to

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good ministers. Masters deserve the same kind of treatment, even if they are not Christians.

When it comes to honouring your boss, the Bible does not grant any exceptions for bad work situations. Peter was even more direct in his first letter: “Servants, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh” (1 Peter 2:18). Respect is something every Christian worker owes to every boss, even in the very worst working environments.

The word “consider” is also important: slaves are to “consider their masters worthy of full respect”. This clearly allows for the possibility that someone’s master may not actually be worthy of respect. He may be incompetent. He may be unreasonable or overbearing. Nevertheless, he must be considered or regarded as worthy of respect. This is because God has placed him in his position of authority. To show honour to your earthly master is to show honour to your heavenly Father. Furthermore, Paul says that Christians should show “full” respect. It doesn’t say that workers need to show respect only when their bosses are in the office. It does not give employees the right to gossip about management as long as they are in the lunch room or out on a break when they do it. It does not even allow Christians to complain about their jobs when they go back home. No, the Bible says that workers should “consider their masters worthy of full respect”.

2. Work Before a Watching World

Showing full respect is necessary to the missionary purpose of the church. Paul gives two reasons why Christians need to respect their masters - “So that God’s name and our teaching may not be slandered”. If Christians are poor workers, then God and his gospel will be brought into disrepute.

God cares about his reputation. He is concerned about what outsiders think of Christianity. You will remember that in the qualifications for elders, Paul says that they “must have a good reputation with outsiders” (1 Timothy 3:7). And last week you will remember that he said that the church family should provide for their widows “so that no one may be open to blame” (1 Timothy 5:7). In short, God wants his people to be careful how they are coming across. He wants them to have the respect and admiration of their neighbours, including their co-workers. The way a Christian behaves on the job is a major part of his or her testimony.

Two things are at stake every time a believer clocks on for work. The first is “God’s name”, which stands for God’s character - his holiness, love, justice, and all the rest of his divine attributes. Since God’s people bear God’s name, the way they work is a reflection on God himself. So every time a Christian makes a delivery, turns in a report, hands in an expense account, makes a decision at a board meeting, pushes to get a sale, takes care of a patient, mops the floor, marks an exam, or decides it is time to leave work and go home, he or she is making some kind of statement about who Jesus is. A Christian who gives anything less than the very best effort puts Jesus Christ in a bad light.

The other thing that is at stake every time a Christian shows up for work is “our teaching”, the gospel of Jesus Christ. The teaching is that God sent his Son Jesus Christ to save sinners by dying on the cross. Everyone who accepts this teaching receives eternal life. But whether people will accept it or not partly depends on the way Christians handle themselves on the job. So every Christian who works in a non-Christian environment is a missionary. To Titus, Paul wrote this, “Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them, and not to steal from them, but to show that they can be fully trusted, so that in every way they will make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive” (2:9-10).

A wonderful example of how to “make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive” is the little slave girl who served in Naaman’s household. Naaman was a valiant general, the commander of the Syrian army. He had great wealth, but he also had leprosy, and this was

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his torment. One of Naaman's servants was a young Jewish girl who had been captured during the wars and carried back to Syria as a slave. She had heard about her master's disease. One day as she went about her duties she confided to her mistress, Naaman's wife, "If only my master would see the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy" (2 Kings 5:3). Her words got back to Naaman and he went off to Samaria to find a cure. Not only did God's prophet, Elisha, give him a cure, but he also led him to faith in the living God. This all came about because the little slave girl was an on-the-job evangelist. She wasn't pushy. She didn't go around pointing out people's sins. Instead, in the most natural way, as she went about her daily job, she gave a testimony to God's saving power. And God used her testimony to bring her master to saving faith.

In the same way, every believer is called to be a witness on the job, and not a closet Christian. Be sure that your employer and workmates know that you are a Christian, so that your work will be evaluated in the context of your faith. When you are offered a promotion, consider the implications it will have for your family and ministry in the church. When you talk about your weekend, mention what happened at church the day before. When people are talking about some current issue at lunchtime, give an answer from the biblical point of view.

A Christian who is committed to reaching the workplace for Jesus Christ will find plenty of natural situations in which to speak about spiritual things. Your co-workers may not be very interested in your Christianity. On occasion, they may even ridicule your faith. But when the day of trouble comes, to whom will they go for advice and counsel? When they are confronted with death, to whom will they go for comfort? And when the Holy Spirit awakens them to their spiritual need, to whom will they go for the words of life? They will turn to the man or woman who has loved them with the love of Christ, maybe for many years. Then you will be able to share the good news about Jesus Christ, so that they can know his love, too.

3. When Your Boss is a Believer

What if your boss is a Christian already? How is the work relationship different when both the manager and the employee are servants of the Lord Jesus Christ? Apparently, some Christian slaves were starting to be disrespectful to their masters. They thought that they could take advantage of them because they were brothers in Christ. People often treat their own family members worse than they treat guests. "It's only my brother", they say. "He'll get over it." Some Christian workers take advantage of Christian bosses. They assume they are entitled to special favours because they are brothers and sisters in Christ. They know their boss will be more forgiving (after all, he is a Christian!) so they take liberties they would never dream of taking in a secular workplace.

Sometimes working in a Christian organisation (such as a church, Christian school or Christian not-for-profit) can prove quite unpleasant. Everyone has high expectations for how everyone will behave. But eventually someone does something that does not quite measure up to Christian standards, and then everyone else gets offended. At the same time that some people take advantage of their co-workers because they are Christians, others forget that the Christians they work with are human beings - and therefore sinners. As a result of all this, the work environment in some Christian businesses is as toxic as anything in secular businesses. Christian organisations ought to be the very best places to work, and they can be, provided the workers behave like Christians. The distinguishing mark of Christian fellowship is love. Therefore, Christians in the marketplace should treat one another with deep affection. They must serve their brothers and sisters "even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them" (v.2). The word translated "service" in this verse is used in an unusual way here. It usually describes a donation given by some wealthy benefactor. Therefore, some scholars conclude that "service" is something slaves receive from their masters. But Paul's point is the opposite. Through humble service, Christian slaves even become the generous benefactors of their Christian masters. The reason these slaves are so generous is that their masters are so "dear to them". The word translated "dear" is the same word Paul used when he told

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Philemon to welcome Onesimus “no longer a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord” (Philemon 16). Masters should remember the love they have for their servants because they belong to Christ. In the same way, Christian bosses ought to have real affection for the believers who work for them.

What the Bible says about working for God in the marketplace is not easy teaching. A Christian in a difficult work situation may find some of these biblical principles very hard to put into practice. Yet there are two compelling reasons to work in a way that pleases God. The first is that God is your Master. This is the lesson Paul taught the Ephesian Christians in an earlier letter: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not men....” (Ephesians 6:5-7). If a slave belongs to Christ, then Christ is his ultimate Master. To serve an earthly master is actually one way to serve God himself. In other words, every Christian is on God’s payroll.

Not only is God your Master, but he has also become your servant, even your slave. The Bible tells us that God, the Son, Jesus Christ “made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7). The word for “servant” in Philippians 2:7 is the same word used for “slave” in 1 Timothy 6:1 (doulos). Jesus Christ became a slave when he became a man. He became our slave. He obeyed the law of God perfectly in our place - something we could never do because of our sinful human nature. He suffered the penalty we deserved - he died in our place. He paid for our sins when he died on the cross. While it is one thing to obey a master, it is another thing to obey a master who is so generous that he has willingly served as your slave. Since Jesus Christ has already done more for us - infinitely more - than we could or will ever do for him, we should at least do all that we can for him, and we should do this at our work as much as anywhere else.

Amen

Prepared by Rev. Grant Lawry, Canterbury Presbyterian Church, Canterbury, Melbourne, Australia for use of the Canterbury congregation.