

The Rightly Ordered Church: *The Gospel at Work*

1 Timothy 6:1-2

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❖ Introduction

- I still remember one reason my dad gave me – back in the day – for why he thought I should attend medical school.
- It'd be so hard, so challenging, that once I got through it – I'd be able to handle almost *anything* that came my way.
- Now I don't know about being able to handle *anything*. (That's before I had kids.)
- But I do know one thing.
- After seven years of intense training, months and months of endless rotations, and the constant change of upper level residents and attending physicians, I know what it's like to work with the best and the worst of bosses.
- I'm not saying I know how to work *well* with the best and the worst of bosses.
- I just know what it's like.
- And for those of you in school, you know what it's like to have teachers or professors that you like or dislike. I mean, you like them or dislike them for a reason, right?
- At your workplace, what if you have a boss who takes credit for things you've put time and sweat in, but never acknowledges you? She makes it seem like she did it all herself.
- What if you have a boss who micromanages and keeps track of every little thing you do?
- What if you have a boss who tells you to do things one way, but does things another way himself?
- What if you have a boss who's just plain *mean*?
- These are real life situations that many of us face every day.
- Now it's one thing to work for a boss who's reasonable, easy to get along with, and gives you the kind of respect you deserve.

- But it's another thing to work for a boss who *isn't* like that.
- Our passage this morning tells us to respect and honor those in authority at our workplaces – to keep doing good work and to not slack off – even if you feel like you're being mistreated.
- What's it going to take to pull something off like that?
- Now before we jump into the text, let me give you some context when we read about “bondservants” and “masters” in the New Testament. If you're reading in the NIV or other English translations, it'll usually read “slaves” and “masters.”
- If you're here this morning and still on the fence about Christianity, you might be thinking to yourself, “Why would I ever want to be a part of a religion that still talks about slaves and masters? This is what makes the Bible so outdated! Why doesn't the Bible just openly condemn the practice of slavery?”
- To all the Christians here today: how would you respond to that? Does the Bible really condemn slavery? How do you deal with a passage like this without just resorting to: “Well, it's just really about employees and employers?”
- It's not easy.
- So I just want to take a few minutes to unpack the bondservant and master relationship for us before we try to apply it directly to our lives in the 21st century.

❖ **The Bondservant/Master Relationship in the NT**

- The word for “bondservant” in the Greek is “*doulos*,” which can also mean “servant” or “slave.” It's used 126 times in the NT.
- The first thing you got to know is that in NT times, slavery was so engrained into society that in early Christianity, “one out of every two people was a slave.”¹
- Did you hear that? One out of every two people was a slave.
- So assuming that the early church more or less mirrored the social conditions of its day, it was a normal thing to see Christian slaves and their Christian masters worshiping together in the same congregation.²
- They were brothers, they were sisters in Christ.

¹ Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, “Slave, Slavery,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 1971.

² Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 393.

- Knowing this, I think it makes a little more sense now why the Apostle Paul would feel such a need to address these two groups of people so often in his letters.
- The second thing you got to know is that whenever you read about the slave/master relationship in the NT, don't automatically connect that with the transatlantic slave trading that took place between the 16th and 19th centuries.³
- It's sad, but true, that Christians in the American South used passages like this one to justify enslaving almost 4 million African slaves for their economic gain.⁴
- But a *doulos*, or "bondservant," in the New Testament describes someone who was, yes, "bound to serve his master for a specific...period of time." But he was also someone who could "own property, achieve social advancement, and even be released or purchase his freedom."⁵
- Now that's *way* different from the racialized slave trade that turned innocent Africans into property who were then sold at the hands of greedy businessmen.
- And yes, the Bible *does* directly condemn slave trading.
- In 1 Timothy 1:10, in a long list of things that are considered "lawless and disobedient" to God, Paul calls out those who are "enslavers."
- And so verses like the one we're studying this morning, along with several others that talk about the worth and dignity of every human being as made in the image of God, eventually compelled men, like William Wilberforce, to fight for the abolition of the horrific slave trade enterprise among Western nations.
- So with all that in mind, I want us to take a look at 1 Timothy 6 not with the cultural lens of the African slave trade, but with the mindset that Paul and the early Christians themselves would've had.
- I want to look at the actual situations that were being faced by early Christian bondservants and their masters. And then draw out the necessary implications for our lives today.
- I do think that it's still legit to draw principles for ourselves from a passage like this because it's talking about honoring people who God has placed in authority over us at a place of work.

³ "Atlantic slave trade," *Wikipedia*, accessed May 30, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atlantic_slave_trade.

⁴ "Slavery in the American South," *Constitutional Rights Foundation*, accessed May 30, 2018, <http://www.crf-usa.org/black-history-month/slavery-in-the-american-south>.

⁵ "Preface," in *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), viii.

- So here's the question: what's it going to take to show honor and respect to a boss who may or may not be worthy of that respect – for the glory of God?
- You can follow along as I go through these points in the outline printed in your bulletin.

❖ **First, the call to honor your earthly master is a call to embrace your Gospel-rooted identity (v. 1a)**

- I get this from 1 Timothy chapter 6, verse 1. Look down there with me: “Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor.”
- Over the past couple of weeks, we've been looking at specific ways that the Apostle Paul calls the Ephesian church – under the leadership of young Timothy – to give honor to specific groups of people.
- Remember, this is all about the rightly ordered church.
- And so in chapter 5, verse 3, we read: “*Honor* widows who are truly widows.”
- In chapter 5, verse 17: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of *double honor*, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”
- And now here in chapter 6, verse 1: “Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of *all honor*.”
- You might be wondering here, “Well, showing honor to widows and church elders I get. But why does Paul all of a sudden jump to bondservants and their masters? It seems kind of out of place here.”
- But commentators suggest that there may actually have been some conflict going on back then between Christian slaves and their masters.⁶
- Maybe some slaves who'd just become Christians were beginning to understand their new identity in Christ – that they were actually “freedmen of the Lord,” like it says in 1 Corinthians 7:22.
- This new identity, this newfound freedom in Christ may have caused Christian bondservants to also feel the freedom to disregard social expectations of bondservants and their masters both inside and outside the church.⁷
- And so Paul felt the need to speak into this situation before things got out of hand.

⁶ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 46 (Mexico City, Mexico: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 325.

⁷ Philip H. Towner, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2006), 379.

- But I think it's helpful to pause here and think about the importance of identity.
- These bondservants understood themselves to be freedmen in Christ because they were now under the *lordship* of Christ.
- They understood themselves to be on the same level in terms of worth and dignity as other human beings because they too were created in the image of God.
- But think about this. Even for us, we Christians who don't find ourselves under the bonds of slavery are to still consider ourselves a *duolos*, a bondservant, of Christ (1 Cor. 7:22).⁸
- In Scripture, the Apostle Paul, James, Peter, and Jude – each of them refers to himself as a servant (a *duolos*) of Christ (Rom. 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1).
- The point is this: let your identity in Christ motivate the way you work. Let your identity in Christ – your allegiance rooted in Jesus Christ as your ultimate Lord and Master – motivate the way you work.
- One author puts it this way: “*Who* you work for is more important than what you do” (emphasis mine).⁹
- Don't get me wrong. What you do is important. But it takes second place to who you work for.
- And the *who* in this case is not merely your direct supervisor or CEO.
- But ultimately, if you're a Christian, it's Jesus Christ.
- And so this changes *everything*.
- Because now, instead of clocking in and clocking out every day, being a people pleaser – doing your job out of “eye-service” as the Bible calls it – we're freed to do good work out of a “*sincerity* of heart, fearing the Lord” (Col. 3:22, emphasis mine).
- We're freed to show honor and respect to any and every boss, whether good or bad – because we work “as for the Lord and not for men” (Col. 3:23).
- Some of the hardest nights of my life were as a resident physician working on call at the hospitals.

⁸ Eugene E. Carpenter and Philip W. Comfort, *Holman Treasury of Key Bible Words: 200 Greek and 200 Hebrew Words Defined and Explained* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 393.

⁹ Sebastian Traegar and Greg Gilbert, *The Gospel at Work: How Working for King Jesus Gives Purpose and Meaning to Our Jobs* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013), 14.

- I remember thinking to myself sometimes that this is as close as I'll probably get to feeling like a slave. I felt like a slave to the hospital.
- I'd imagine a hospital CEO sitting in his nice, comfortable chair in a nice, comfortable office.
- And then think about the fact that here I was, tired and exhausted from the shift before, walking into the hospital to start *another* night shift again.
- The only thing that kept me from completely losing heart those days was the thought that, yes, I was working for my upper level, my attending physician and, indirectly, that hospital CEO.
- But more than that, I was serving Jesus.
- *He* was the ultimate reason I could push through each night, do good work, and be the best resident physician I could be.
- I used to pray walking from my car in the parking lot to the hospital: "God, my heart is yours. I'm serving you. In and of myself, I don't want to do this. But help me work hard tonight because you're my Lord and Master and I want to honor you."
- And you know what?
- This was the kind of mindset that kept me sane especially if I had a difficult boss that night. My gut instinct may have been to do shabby job as a passive aggressive way to get back at him.
- But my desire to honor Jesus above all else kept me wanting to do my job with excellence.
- So, Christian, how will this work out for you? Maybe you're in a situation right now where your boss is just completely unbearable.
- You might be thinking: Jonathan, you don't know what kind of horrors my boss puts me through. And you're right. I probably don't.
- But God calls "all who are under a yoke as bondservants [to] regard their own masters as worthy of all honor" – not just the nice masters, but the mean ones.
- Not just the ones who communicate their expectations clearly, but the ones who don't. And not just the ones who are reasonable, but the ones who aren't.

- And so look to this challenge as a way to turn your “job into an act of worship,”¹⁰ knowing that God and the riches of being in a relationship with him are yours through the Gospel, for all eternity (Col. 3:24).
- So work hard, show honor and respect to your boss through your tone of voice, your body language, your responsiveness to emails, to calls, and to requests.
- And do this, remembering that your call to do so is ultimately rooted in your Gospel identity.

❖ **Second, the call to honor your earthly master is a call to embrace your role as a Gospel-displaying witness (v. 1b).**

- Let’s go back to verse 1. Look down there with me: “Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor.” Why?
- “...so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.”
- As Paul’s writing this command, he’s got one thing in mind: the honor of God and the public perception of the Gospel.
- The idea of being “under a yoke” here implies that these bondservants were probably under great stress, working under harsh conditions.¹¹ It wasn’t easy being in a position of servitude.
- You might be wondering, “Well why doesn’t Paul just straight up advocate for the abolition of slavery right here and now? Why all this talk about submitting to a social system where there’s just so much inequality?”
- Good question. And scholars – men much smarter than me – believe that even though the idea of treating humans like property was displeasing to God, it wasn’t the right time to “overturn” such a “deeply rooted system.”¹²
- Doing so would probably have led to serious “violence and bloodshed” in that society.¹³
- Instead, God caused Paul and other NT authors to put theological truths into writing that would eventually pave the way for slavery’s abolition.

¹⁰ N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 12, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 153–154.

¹¹ Towner, 381.

¹² Donald Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 14, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 123.

¹³ James A. Brooks, “Slave, Servant,” ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1511.

- But in the meantime, it was actually more conducive for the spread of the Gospel to call bondservants to *stay* where they were and freely submit to their masters out of a love for Jesus.
- Let me say it a different way.
- Paul must have felt that to call for a direct revolution against the social structures of his day would've brought shame to the name of God, making it even harder for the Gospel to advance.¹⁴ That was his thought process.
- And so what does this mean for us today?
- Listen to this: not only is who you work for more important than what you do, but the *way you work* is more important than what you do.
- Because the way you do your work – in this case, how you relate to your boss in a public workplace – can either help or hinder the progress of the Gospel in our city.
- Others around you see what you do. And whether you like it or not, they're judging the credibility of the Christian faith by the way you react to criticism, the way you gossip or hold your tongue about your boss and other co-workers, or the way you handle stress even in a hostile environment.
- Tim Keller writes this: "*Excellence* in work is a critical means for gaining credibility for our faith; if our work is shoddy, our verbal witness only leads listeners to despise our beliefs."¹⁵
- And excellence in work, in our case here in 1 Timothy chapter 6, has to do with the way we submit and show honor to those in positions of authority over us in our workplaces.
- Many of you still remember Jesslyn Lin, who was a member of our church until recently when she moved to Austin.
- (I did get her permission to use her as an illustration, by the way.) Jesslyn is one of those doctors who I've looked up to all throughout my training because of the way she presents herself, how she interacts with others, and how she takes her work as a doctor seriously.
- I've never once heard her complain about her bosses, about the work environment. I've never once heard her gossiping about others.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 334.

- She was also one of the doctors who trained me at my first job in a diabetes clinic.
- A couple years ago, the company we both worked for started to have financial problems. And one day, she was abruptly let go – apparently part of the first wave of employees to be asked to leave in order for the company to cut down on costs.
- What stood out to me was the way she handled that situation.
- I still remember on her last day of work, she sent an email to all the employees at the company telling them what a joy it was to work with them. And that she only wishes she could have spent more time with each of them.
- She graciously left the company without saying one bad thing about her supervisors, about the CEO, about the company culture.
- And that, combined with her strong work ethic – I believe – made the Gospel *shine*.
- *This* is what *Christ* can do in a person who'd been dedicated to the company, working hard, but just lost her job out of nowhere.
- Now imagine with me, hypothetically, if Jesslyn – on finding out she was being let go – stormed out the office and started talking behind her boss's back.
- How do you think that would affect her credibility – her Gospel witness – if she tried to have dinner later on to reach out to some of her former staff?
- Brothers and sisters, our allegiance to Christ has got to make such a difference in the way we work that others see into our lives and are *attracted* to the Gospel.
- At this point, you might be thinking, “That makes sense, Jonathan. You make good points. But where am I going to get the strength and motivation to stand up under the pressure of a hostile work environment? What if my boss's demands are just genuinely crushing to the point I can't handle it anymore?”
- Now I'm not saying that it's wrong to leave a bad work situation. Don't hear me saying that. Paul even tells bondservants that if they can gain freedom, to take the opportunity to (1 Cor. 7:21).
- But if you have to stay and you're convinced that leaving your current work situation *isn't* what God wants you do, let me encourage you to keep preaching the Gospel to yourself and to let those truths strengthen your resolve.
- In 1 Peter 2:18, the Apostle Peter calls Christian servants to “be subject to [their] masters with all respect, *not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust.*”

- And he reminds us that when we endure suffering even after doing the best work we can for our earthly masters, “this is a gracious thing in the sight of God” (1 Pet. 2:20).
- Why?
- Because this is exactly what Christ did for us.
- From the beginning, we were meant to live in harmony with God. He was to be our God. We were to be his people.
- But sin, evidenced by our rebellious will and our rejection of his authority over our lives, has broken God’s original intention for a relationship with us.
- And none of us, in and of ourselves, have what it takes to restore this relationship with God.
- But the message of Christianity is a message of good news!
- God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ.
- Like a good and faithful worker, “he committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22).
- Unlike when we face criticism from our bosses, Christ, when he was insulted and mocked, didn’t return a harsh word.
- He suffered in hostile and antagonistic environments, and yet didn’t threaten back, but continued entrusting himself to God (1 Pet. 2:23).
- The Gospel tells us that Christ “bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Pet. 2:24).
- Christ worked hard for our salvation so that we wouldn’t have to work *at all* to gain it.
- I’m not trying to get you to double down on your own willpower and simply work harder at being a better employee. No, the point I want to make clear here is that the power for every good change in our lives comes first from believing in this Gospel.
- I want to invite those of you this morning still undecided about Christianity to take that one more step of faith – repent of your sins and believe in this Gospel.
- Christ died for you, so that you would live for him (2 Cor. 5:15).

- *This* is the Gospel we want to lift up high, not only by telling people at work, but through the actual *way* we work.
 - So to the Christians in this room who're struggling to endure the harsh realities of working for a difficult boss, look to Christ as your example.
 - Fix your eyes on him.
 - Seek his help for every trying moment at work.
- ❖ **The call to honor your earthly master is not only first, a call to embrace your Gospel-rooted identity and second, a call to embrace your Gospel-displaying witness, but third, it's also a call to embrace a sense of Gospel-centered service (v. 2).**
- So far we've seen two good reasons to stay at it, to continue doing good work for your bosses, whether good ones or bad. The first is because you're ultimately serving and working for King Jesus.
 - The second is because the way you do your work can either help or hinder your credibility and witness to the Gospel.
 - But there's a third reason to keep at it. Let's say your work conditions are great. You love your job. You might even have a Christian boss.
 - Even then, you should honor your boss by doing good work simply because work itself was ordained by God from the beginning of creation. It's a way of serving and blessing humanity and helping society flourish.
 - This is what Paul's trying to get at in verse 2. Look down there with me: "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."
 - So in this particular situation, we have Christian bondservants working for Christian masters – people I imagine who'd be sitting and worshiping together in the same congregation week after week.
 - These Christian bondservants probably wrongly thought that being equal to their masters because of a shared faith in Christ now meant that the usual rules at work no longer applied to them.
 - But look at what Paul says instead.
 - He tells these bondservants to work even harder, to "serve all the better," *because* they and their masters were now fellow believers of Christ (1 Tim. 6:2).

- This term “good service” in verse 2 can also be translated as “act of kindness.”¹⁶
- And if read this way, Christian masters are to see the labors of their Christian bondservants as a labor of love, as acts of kindness.¹⁷
- So what does this have to do with us?
- You know, one thing this should cause us to do is to pause and glory in the power of the Christian Gospel to unite people from all sorts of different social backgrounds.
- People who wouldn’t normally run in the same circles because of their status in society sit next to each other here in these very pews and worship the living God together week after week.
- I still remember at one point in my small group, we had a dental professor at the UT Dental School as well as one of his dental students coming every week.
- Outside of the church setting, this student would probably have few opportunities to interact with his professor on a personal level.
- But at church and in our small group, they were fellow believers of Christ and saw each other as people they could turn to for encouragement and prayer.
- The Gospel brings bondservants and masters, employees and employers, students and teachers together – why?
- Because “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for [we] are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).
- We’re “fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God” (Eph. 2:19). And so let’s treat each other like family and do good work for one another simply because of our unity in Christ.
- If you work for a Christian boss, don’t fall into the trap of thinking that “the rules don’t apply to me” or that you can just “ignore the protocols” now that you work for a fellow believer.
- Instead, “serve all the better” because “those who benefit by [your] good service are believers and beloved” (1 Tim. 6:2).

¹⁶ Mounce, 328.

¹⁷ Ibid.

❖ **Conclusion**

- So what's it going to take to show honor and respect to a boss who may or may not be worthy of that respect – for the glory of God?
- It's going to take a whole-hearted embrace of the call to your Gospel-rooted identity, your Gospel-displaying witness, and your Gospel-centered service.
- Let the fact that you're working *for* King Jesus and *suffering* like him if you have to, empower you to serve others with all your heart – just like King Jesus.
- All so that the Gospel of such a King would be lifted high for the world to see – *that he is worth every square inch of our allegiance.*

❖ **Closing Prayer**

- *Father, indeed, you are worth every square inch of our allegiance. You are Lord and Master of our lives. And so help us to take these truths from your Word and apply them to our lives and to our schools and to our workplaces so that others might look at our lives and be attracted to your Gospel. In Jesus' name, amen.*