

The Christian and His Boss

1 Timothy 6:1–2¹

Introduction

It has been said that there are three types of workers. For example, when a piano is to be moved, the first kind of worker gets behind and pushes, the second kind of worker pulls and guides, and the third one grabs the piano stool. You can imagine how the third work ethic might cause a strain between the employee and the employer.

Work is a hallmark of what it means to live. From the very first point of human history it has been man's responsibility to work (Gen. 2:15–20). We were designed to work hard. The Lord condemns those who are slothful in their work ethic and warns of the dangers of laziness (Prov. 13:4; 15:19; 18:9; 19:24; 21:25). You may think that you work simply because you need money to survive life. Yet the reason why we as humans work is theological more that it is practical: *we work because God worked*. God worked for six literal days creating the universe and all that is in it. Then Scripture records that God “rested on the seventh day from all His work which He had done” (Gen. 2:1).² This is part of the *imago dei* (Latin for “the image of God”; Gen. 1:26–27).

In the context of the workplace there are dynamics and relationships that are important. Your job contains not only people working toward the same goal as you but also a hierarchy to bring success and organization to those goals. The employee and boss relationship is vital to the success of a business and also to the success of a society. Those dynamics have looked slightly different over the course of time but the importance of those dynamics does not change. The challenge for this relationship is the sin curse. No two human beings can always get along together—sin affects all of our human interactions. Your view of your own boss may perhaps be negative because of your own sinful heart or the wrongs of her/his sinful heart against you. This is part of what Paul addresses in our text for today. Paul urges the Christian slaves of his day to remember this truth: *No matter what your personal opinion of your employer might be, you must regard him or her with honor so that God and His gospel are not held in contempt.*

1 Timothy 6:1–2 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. ² 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.

Paul urges Christian workers to:

- 1. Honor Unbelieving Employers**
- 2. Honor Believing Employers**

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations taken from the New King James Version.

² This verse also highlights the importance of taking time to rest from work.

Notice with me that the Lord urges you to—

1. Honor Unbelieving Employers (v. 1)

“Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke” — The word “servant” (KJV) is from the Greek word δούλος (*doulos*) which literally means “slave.” The term *slave* is a loaded term in our current day. However, in the ancient times it was not uncommon for people to work as slaves. In the Old Testament slaves were protected by Jewish law (cf. Deut. 24:14–15). “By Roman times Slavery was so extensive that in the early Christian period one out of every two people was a slave.”³ It should be no surprise then that the New Testament frequently gives instructions to the slaves who had trusted Christ. Each of these instructions give us a glimpse as to how Christian slaves were to represent Christ in their work spheres (see Eph. 6:5–8; Titus 2:9–10). The apostle Peter wrote:

1 Peter 2:18–20 ¹⁸ Servants, *be* submissive to *your* masters with all fear, not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh. ¹⁹ For this *is* commendable, if because of conscience toward God one endures grief, suffering wrongfully. ²⁰ 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, this *is* commendable before God.

In the above passage, slaves are exhorted to obey their own masters. This may have seemed like an unreasonable command considering how slaves could easily be mistreated (as evidenced by these commands to obey).

The phrase “under the yoke” may seem foreign to us. A yoke was used to hold to beasts of burden together so that they could work in unity. The Scriptures frequently use the word metaphorically. For example, Christ invited people to share in His yoke:

Matthew 11:28–30 ²⁸ Come to Me, all *you* who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light.”

In 1 Timothy 6:1 Paul simply refers to the yoke as a metaphor for slavery in conjunction with his explicit reference to slaves.

“*count their own masters worthy of all honor*” — This phrase is probably the one that the slaves of Paul’s day would have had a hard time appreciating. Paul refers to a slave’s master using a different Greek word than you would expect. Instead of using the more popular word κύριος (*kurios* “Lord”) he uses a stronger word δεσπότης (*despotes* “master, ruler”—related to the word “despot” which means “a ruler with absolute power” and a second definition adds “absolute power sometimes used in a tyrannical way”). Paul uses this word to refer to God in his second letter to Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:21 Therefore if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the Master [*despotes*], prepared for every good work.

Of course God is a good master but not all earthly masters are good rulers. These masters that Paul refers to in v. 1 are unbelieving masters (as evidenced by Paul’s explicit command regarding how to honor believing masters). Just as we know that all of humanity is fallen and come short of God’s glory (Rom. 3:23), so we know that not all bosses will lead or rule in a fair or righteous way. No doubt there were Christian slaves who struggled with their own reaction to their unrighteous masters. Yet Paul’s reminder could not be any more clear: slaves were to consider their unbelieving masters as worthy of honor.

³ Elwell, Walter A., and Barry J. Beitzel, “Slave, Slavery,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 1971.

We have seen Paul use the word honor a couple of times already in his letter to Timothy: honor widows (5:3) and honor excellent elders/pastors (5:17). In both of these cases, honor refers to financial remuneration or assistance. Here in 6:1 Paul uses the word honor in the sense of respect and obedient service. Slaves were to obey their masters and by doing so they considered (or “estimated”) their masters worthy of their respect regardless of how righteous the master was or was not. But why were slaves to view their unbelieving masters in this way?

“so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed” — Paul gives two reasons why slaves are to honor their masters:

- (1) So that the name of God is not blasphemed — The “name of God” is a reference to both His holy nature and his divine reputation. When slaves displayed an attitude and work ethic of disrespect and disregard for their unbelieving masters, they were in essence giving that unbelieving master a chance to blaspheme the name of God and His reputation. As a Christian you represent God by your words and actions. This highlights the importance of fidelity to God and His Word and obedience to Scriptural precepts. Jesus reminded His disciples:

John 14:15 “If you love Me, keep My commandments.”

- (2) So that God’s doctrine (teaching) is not blasphemed — The second reason to honor masters is because God’s doctrine will be blasphemed if a slave does not. By the word “doctrine” Paul most likely has in mind the gospel of Jesus Christ. Unbelieving masters will have opportunity to blaspheme the gospel—the very message they need to hear!—when a slave disrespects and dishonors his master.

Titus 2:9–10 ⁹ Exhort bondservants to be obedient to their own masters, to be well pleasing in all things, not answering back, ¹⁰ not pilfering, but showing all good fidelity, that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things.

How can you adorn the gospel of Christ when you are spending time giving the unbeliever a wrong view of God and the gospel?

Here is the key point: a slave’s interaction with his or her boss would give that unbelieving master a perspective of God and the gospel. Most Christians would not connect their disrespect or bitter attitude toward their employer as a gospel issue. Paul, however, reminds us that actions and words reflect on God’s reputation and character before the watching eyes of the unbelieving world. Your life is supposed to be characterized by holiness because God Himself is holy:

1 Peter 1:13–21 ¹³ Therefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and rest *your* hope fully upon the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; ¹⁴ as obedient children, not conforming yourselves to the former lusts, *as* in your ignorance; ¹⁵ but as He who called you *is* holy, you also be holy in all *your* conduct, ¹⁶ because it is written, “*Be holy, for I am holy.*” ¹⁷ And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one’s work, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay *here* in fear; ¹⁸ knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, *like* silver or gold, from your aimless conduct *received* by tradition from your fathers, ¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. ²⁰ He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you ²¹ who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.

One Bible scholar wrote “the decisive factor for both 1 Timothy and Titus is apparently that so many slaves who have become Christians have non-Christian masters. The ever-present concern to evangelize these masters and not to set their minds against Christianity must be taken into

consideration by those Christians who are nearest to them and are the Christians seen by these non-Christians more than any other, i.e., the slaves themselves.”⁴ How important it is that we adorn the gospel and magnify God with our words and actions!

The second reminder that the Lord gives is for Christian slaves to—

2. Honor Believing Employers (v. 2)

Not all slaves had unbelieving masters. Onesiphorus, for example, had a believing master in Philemon (see the book of Philemon). These Christian-with-Christian relationships are equally as important and just as theologically significant.

“And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren” — There might be a temptation for Christian slaves to expect special treatment from their Christian masters because of Christ. When a Christian master would not give preferential treatment, a believing slave might well have “despised” (Gr. *καταφρονέω* “look down on” or “regard slightly”) that master. But Paul reminds Christian slaves that they are not to despise them “simply because they are believers.” The phrase “because they are brethren” refers to the reason why a slave might despise a Christian master (in other words, the very reason he is looking down on his master is because of the fact that his master is a Christian!).

“but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved” — Rather than looking down on their Christian masters, slaves were to serve them as slaves. Paul reminded the church in Ephesus of why it was important for slaves to serve their masters:

Ephesians 6:5–8 ⁵ Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, ⁷ with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men. ⁸ knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether *he is* a slave or free.

When slaves served their masters (whether the master may have been a believer or not) *those slaves were ultimately serving Christ* (cf. Col. 3:22–25).

The very reason slaves wished to despise their masters (namely, because their masters were Christians) is the very basis for why they are *not* to despise them: they are “faithful (Gr. *pistis*) and beloved (Gr. *agapetos*)” (KJV). Christian employers believe in God and are thus loved by Him (cf. Eph. 1:6 “accepted in the beloved” KJV). *To despise a Christian employer is to despise the one whom God loves.* They, like the believing slaves, get to enjoy the benefits of knowing and loving God. How much more ought a believing employee serve with joy, humility, and diligence a believing boss?

In short, Christians are to work at their jobs with humility and submissive service, so that the name and reputation of God and the gospel might be adorned in such a way so as to draw unbelieving employers to Christ, and to encourage believing employers to Christlikeness.

⁴ Knight, George W. *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGCT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 243.