



A Study of 1st & 2nd Timothy

1st Timothy 6:1-2 Christian Slaves...

I am reading from 1st Timothy chapter six, verses one through two. If you're using one of the pew Bibles, the passage is located on page 993...1st Timothy 6:1-2.

This is what God's Word says:

ESV 1 Timothy 6:1...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. ² 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. Teach and urge these things.

I have been making the point over the course of our study that 1st Timothy that the letter itself was written by the Apostle Paul to his younger son in the ministry, Timothy, to encourage him to stay on in Ephesus. Paul wanted Timothy to go there, to stay there, and to fight it out with the false teachers that had become squatters in the church. They had done so in an attempt to take over the ministry in Ephesus. Their motivation for doing what they were doing has been unclear

until up to now but today's text makes it clear that their motivation was in as least in part good old-fashioned greed.

Paul wants Timothy to stand against them, to fight it out with them...to turn them out...or at very least to turn them back. He wanted Timothy to do that because the gospel itself was very much in danger of being forever lost there in Ephesus.

Now the imagery Paul uses to encourage Timothy to fight it out with the false teachers there in Ephesus is absolutely brilliant.

Paul compares the gospel, not the church itself, but the gospel to a wonderful treasure. He wants Timothy to see himself as an ever mindful guard placed there in Ephesus to protect that treasure. He uses that particular imagery four times in his letters to Timothy. Let me just remind you of two instances where he does so.

First of all, Paul uses the metaphor of guarding treasure at the end of 1st Timothy.

ESV 1 Timothy 6:20...O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you.

Secondly, he repeats the idea and the imagery at the beginning of 2nd Timothy.

ESV 2 Timothy 1:14...By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you.

The idea is that Paul as an apostle has been entrusted with the stewardship of the gospel and he wants Timothy as his official representative, as his stand-in, to take up the task in his place.

You see what I mean.

Now just how does Paul expect Timothy to do that?

Well in 1st Timothy, Paul wants Timothy to fulfill his charge by doing three different things.

He wants Timothy to relentlessly preach the gospel.

He wants Timothy to appoint godly men to serve in the oversight of the church.

And then finally, he wants Timothy to invest some serious effort in instructing the Ephesians as to how they ought to conduct themselves on an ongoing basis.

Once again, the three things are: preach the gospel, appoint godly men to leadership, and instruct the Ephesians as to how they ought to live and try get along with one another.

You can see why those three things would be important.

Relentlessly preaching the gospel would keep the true gospel before the eyes of the Ephesians. It would provide them with a standard by which to compare the utter foolishness of what they were hearing from the false teachers who were trying to take over Ephesus.

In a way, he wanted the Ephesians to become something like the young oriental boy who accepted an apprenticeship to learn to carve jade.

The first day he arrived at his new master's hut, his master gave him a small piece of jade to hold in his hand. His master said, **"Hold this piece of jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say."** With that admonition, the boy's teacher went about his chores. Finally at the end of the day, at the end of many hours sitting and holding the jade, the master asked the boy to give him the stone and sent him home.

The next day the boy, looking forward to carving his first piece of jade was disappointed when his mater asked him to do the same thing all over again. His master repeated, **"Hold this jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say."**

The boy grew tired of holding the jade and was glad when dark came and he was able to go home, but the next day it was the same thing all over again, even the very same words. **"Hold this jade, squeeze it, rub it. Do not put it down until I say."**

The same tiring routine went on day after day, until after two or three weeks the boy decided he absolutely could take it no more. He made up his mind; he would simply find another vocation. So, when he saw his master he blurted out. **"Today is my last day. I am wasting my time and yours. You have taught me nothing. I have spent all my time squeezing a stupid stone. I cannot endure that stone or you another day."**

He expected his master to explode in rage. But the old man peered into eyes and softly said: **"Ah, just so. I understand. Well since it is your last day and you have learned nothing perhaps you would in kindness humor your master and repeat the same old stupid task one last time."**

With that, he reached out his old wrinkled hand and dropped a beautiful lime green stone in the boy's hand. The boy instinctively began to rub it and as the old man shuffled off to do his chores, he realized something was wrong. He looked down at the stone and turned it over in his hand and then looked up at bowed figure of the old man and suddenly he found himself shouting, **"Master, Master!"**

The old man turned around and the boy wondered why the old man was smiling a toothless smile. **"Yes, my son?"** he asked.

Breathless, the young boy stammered, **"Master, I do not know what this stone is you gave me, but I do know what it is not. It is most definitely not jade."**

There is a sense in which that is what Paul wanted Timothy to do with the Ephesians...to relentlessly preach the gospel in such a way that they would come to know whether what they were hearing was the real gospel or not.

On the other hand, Paul wanted Timothy to appoint godly men, gospel loving men, to leadership in the church at Ephesus. Doing so would increase the ranks of the faithful standing against the false teachers. A threefold cord is not quickly broken. Appointing such men is one of Paul's three principal concerns throughout his letter to Timothy. It is the particular focus of chapter three. I think Paul wanted Timothy to see that appointing men that loved the gospel to rule in the church was absolutely essential to getting rid of heretical teaching in Ephesus.

Finally, Paul wanted Timothy to remind the Ephesians themselves as to their obligation to treat one another with respect and kindness in light of what the gospel had already accomplished in their lives.

Now these three divisions are not quite as tidy chronologically as I have presented them to you in the last few minutes. In actuality, these three themes are somewhat interwoven together throughout the letter. Over the course of the letter, Paul focuses first on one theme and then another. Sometimes he will take up one of the three themes and then lay it down for a bit only to take it back up again. Still the overall content of the letter *can* and ought to be thought of along those lines. Chapter five, for instance, focuses on the last of the three themes...the theme of how the Ephesians should get along with one another. And that theme carries over into chapter six. But somewhere near the middle of chapter six Paul turns back to the theme of relentlessly preaching the gospel.

I hope you'll remember that last week I pointed out that chapter five focuses on properly dealing with a number of different groups in the church. It starts off with instructions on dealing with older men. It then transitions into dealing with younger men. After that, it moves on to dealing with older women and then on again dealing with younger women. It then moves, in a surprisingly long section, on to the issue of dealing with widows in the church. After that it turns to the proper treatment and care of teachers in the church.

And yet even after all that, Paul is not quite through.

At the beginning of chapter six, Paul addresses the behavior of slaves in the congregation at Ephesus.

Now there is something odd about what Paul has to say to the slaves in Ephesus. It is, at least, odd to modern ears. I think modern ears expect Paul to tell Christian slave owners to deal gently with their slaves. But he doesn't. He deals not with

slave owners but with slaves themselves. I think most modern readers are genuinely taken aback by that. I think modern readers have a tendency to want to chide Paul for not taking a more progressive stance on slavery. I think modern ears are disappointed that Paul doesn't do that. Paul doesn't tell the slaves in Ephesus to throw off the yoke of slavery. Instead, Paul tells them in 1st Timothy 6 to be *better* slaves.

As I said, I think Paul's admonition here disappoints a lot of modern readers.

There are other places, of course, where Paul says just about as plainly as he can that if a man is slave and can get free, he ought to do just that. I am thinking in particular of 1st Corinthians 7 starting in verse twenty-one.

^{ESV} **1 Corinthians 7:21**...Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ.

Still here in 1st Timothy 6:1-2, Paul does not tell the slaves in Ephesus to rebel against their masters. Instead, he tells them to get along with their masters, to show them respect. He tells them they are particularly obligated to that if their masters are Christians. Paul really does tell the slaves in Ephesus to try to be *better* slaves.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 6:1**...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. ² 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. Teach and urge these things.

Now, I have to tell you there is even a part of me that screams out against listening to what Paul says here in the text. I mean I can't help but focus on the injustice of the thing. There is a sort of a deep William Wallace growl welling up in my soul that wants to just scream, "**Freedom!**" And yet, I know that when I feel way it is principally because I am choosing not to allow Paul to speak. I am working to censor him. That is, I am choosing not to allow Paul to speak simply because he does not say what I wish he would say. I can tell when I do that that I am spending considerably more time thinking about what Paul does not say than I am thinking about what Paul does say.

And when I do that, I am guilty of doing the exact same thing women's right advocates or gay and lesbian advocates do when they read the text and attempt to reconstruct the text in order to find support for their views they hold that are absolutely contrary to the overall intent of the passage.

I suppose we are all fairly content to let the text speak when it speaks to other people's sin. I suppose we are never content to have it speak to our own sin.

I bring that point up because when you look in the academic literature regarding 1st Timothy 6 you find a measure of disappointment regarding both Paul and his message here. There are some commentators that think Paul really misses the opportunity to strike a blow here against slavery. There are others that flat out reject Pauline authorship here simply because *what is said here in 1st Timothy* seems to go against what Paul says elsewhere about slavery. A few writers get *really* creative and even pose the idea that there are two different Pauls. What they mean that, of course, is that there is a real Paul and a fake Paul. The real Paul almost always holds their view while the pseudo-Paul almost always gets it wrong...that

is, he almost always disagrees with their view. They, of course, do not think this is the real Paul.

I mean, almost everyone likes the Paul that wrote Galatians 3.

^{ESV} **Galatians 3:27**...For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Americans like it. Texans like it. Even practicing homosexuals like it. They like it because they understand here that Paul is bowing his neck unwilling to bow a knee to anyone...unwilling to conform to anyone's attempt to place him in their mold. They like it because Paul refuses to be constrained by the times in which he lives. They like this Paul because is not constrained by anything. Some find justification in this passage to throw off whatever chains or restrictions they think are holding them back from realizing their individual dreams.

You can just hear them saying, **"I'm not going to listen to my parents. I'm not going to listen to my pastor. I am not going to listen to my husband. I am not going to listen to my wife. I am not going to listen to my boss."**

Such people understand this passage to speak not to equality in the person of Christ but rather to a kind of pervasive libertarianism that permits them to whatsoever they bloody well please.

Fewer people like the Paul that wrote 1st Timothy 1:9-11 where he argues that the law was made for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, for men who practice homosexuality, for enslavers, liars,

perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine. Oh, they don't mind the part about the law being made for enslavers or even murderers, but they dislike very much the part about rebellion against their parents or calling out their sexual immorality or homosexual sin.

Even fewer people still like the Paul that wrote 1st Timothy.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 6:1**...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. ² 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.

Some commentators try to smooth over the tension created by this passage by arguing that slavery in New Testament times was not nearly as dreadful as the slavery that plagued the United States before the civil war. They argue that the slavery that Paul is addressing here was intrinsically less evil than the slavery we think of when think of slavery in America. And there is a sense in which they are partly right. That is, there is a sense in which it is true that slavery, generally speaking, was not as terrible in New Testament times as it was in the United States and elsewhere prior to Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery in Europe and beyond.

Listen for example to this rather lengthy quote from one of my favorite commentators, Philip Ryken.

It helps to understand what slavery was like in the Roman world, for it *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 color of

someone's skin, except for slaves captured in ethnic warfare. This is in contrast with the inherently racist premises of slavery in the West, which denied the full dignity of people of color 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. There were other differences as well. Because slaves were members of a household, most of them had a fair degree of security, with opportunities for advancement. They enjoyed **"a good deal of freedom and social mobility. Many earned a living or worked in partnership with their owners. Some actually held positions of authority within businesses or administrative posts in lower levels of government."** They sometimes worked in highly skilled occupations such as education or medicine. There were even slaves who *owned* slaves! Most important of all, slavery was not necessarily permanent, because there were a variety of ways for slaves to win or to buy their freedom.¹

Almost sounds inviting doesn't it.

No, it doesn't. It wasn't. It was still slavery, and it was bad.²

It is true that most slaves, at least in Israel, were slaves for only seven years after which time they were set free by the commands of the law. It is also true that in Roman society many slaves were released from their bondage at the age of thirty. That was the law generally speaking. But it wasn't quite as kind as it sounds. The life expectancy of most slaves was just about that. That is, most slaves were freed around the age of thirty...just in time to crawl off some place and die. The truth is that at the age of thirty most slaves were thought of as liabilities rather than assets. Most slave owners had no desire to be burdened by the expense of an older slave so they often just turned them out. The truth is many slaves were mistreated. Many slaves were abused physically, sexually, and psychologically. Slaves were sometimes killed for the most gratuitous of reasons. Listen for example to this story written by the ancient historian Cassius Dio:

This same year Vedius Pollio died, a man who in general had done nothing deserving of remembrance, as he was sprung from freedmen, belonged to the knights, and had performed no brilliant deeds; but he had become very famous for his wealth and for his cruelty, so that he has even gained a place in history.

Most of the things he did it would be wearisome to relate, but I may mention that he kept in his ponds huge lampreys (the actual world may be better translated morays as in moray eels) that had been trained to eat men, and he was accustomed to throw to them those slaves he desired to put to death.

Once, when he was entertaining Caesar Augustus, his cup-bearer broke a crystal goblet, and without regard for his guest, Pollio ordered the poor fellow to be thrown to the lampreys.

Hereupon the slave fell on his knees before Augustus and supplicated him, and Augustus at first tried to persuade Pollio not to commit so monstrous a deed. Then, when Pollio paid no heed to him, the emperor said, **“Bring all the rest of the drinking vessels which are of like sort or any others of value that you possess, in order that I may use them,”** and when they were brought, he ordered them all to be broken and thus the slave was spared.³

Other ancient writers also wrote and spoke against the evils of slavery...Justin Martyr (First Apology 27), Clement of Alexandria (Paed. 3.3.21.1), and even the Roman philosopher Seneca. Listen to Seneca’s warning to his readers.

Kindly remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies. It is just as possible for you to see in him a free-born man as for him to see in you a slave. As a result of the massacres in Marius's day, many a man of distinguished birth, who was taking the first steps toward senatorial rank by service in the army, was humbled by fortune, one becoming a shepherd, another a caretaker of a country cottage. Despise, then, if you dare, those to whose estate you may at any time descend, even when you are despising them.⁴

My point is that slavery was bad in New Testament times, perhaps not as consistently as terrible as slavery in American history but still quite dreadful. It

was dreadful...and there were a lot of slaves. There were certainly more slaves than there were freedmen. Some scholars estimate that perhaps as much as 70% of the population was slaves. That would certainly explain why Paul chooses to address the slaves in Ephesus rather than slave owners. Still, it doesn't really answer the question as to why Paul fails to castigate slavery.

Why then does he encourage the slaves at Ephesus to endure their slavery and to treat their masters with a measure of respect? Why does he go out of his way to make the point that they ought to especially submit themselves to their Christian masters? What's Paul up to here in 1st Timothy 6?

I think the point, the overall point, that Paul is driving at here in 1st Timothy is that the overall freedom and good of any Christian individual, no matter how high or how low, is subordinate to the preservation and advance of the gospel.

Listen to Luther for a moment, **"A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."**⁵

That's why this morning I want to simply work our way through the text, make a few applications, and then and then stop to give you time to fellowship a bit and to wish each other a Merry Christmas. Alright then, let's put in at verse one.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 6:1**...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.

The first thing I want you to notice is that Paul starts of the chapter with a universal command.

Let all...

His point is not that some slaves ought to regard their masters as worth of respect while other ought not to. Rather, his point is that all slaves should regard their masters as such. I think Paul is speaking here to worthiness of their masters and that is point is that the Christian slave sin Ephesus ought to regard their masters worthy of honor whether they are worthy of honor or not.

Now the second part of verse one refers to the slaves as those who are **“who are under a yoke as bondservants.”** A yoke is a kind of harness that hooks up an ox to pull a plow or a heavy burden of some kind. Paul’s point...his concrete image...is that that their burden as slaves is really that...a burden.

Near the end of verse one, Paul gives the reason why the Christian slaves in Ephesus ought to regard their masters as worthy of honor. And what is that reason?

...so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.

Notice Paul’s reason for the wanting the Christian slaves at Ephesus to bear up under the burden of their slavery is two-fold. First, Paul wants the Christian slaves there to do so with the intent that the name of God might not be reviled. Secondly, he wants them to do so that **“the teaching”** might not be reviled.

That of course raises the question, **“How does being a crummy slave revile God’s name?”** Well it does so, of course, because the poor work ethic or poor attitude of the slave winds up being attached to the name of God. You know how that works,

“Lucius, do you see that slave over there? He’s the one slave I own that is a Christian...and he is a terrible slave. He is obstinate and he is lazy. I don’t know much, of course, about his faith or his god but I do know that his faith has brought me nothing but misery.”

The same idea carries over, of course, to **“the teaching.”** Being a bad slave winds up causing **“the teaching”** to be reviled. So what then is **“the teaching?”** The teaching is the same thing as the deposit or the treasure that Paul has entrusted to Timothy. It is the gospel itself. And you see his point. If a Christian slave is a disrespectful, obstinate slave, he causes the gospel itself to be reviled.

In both cases the word **“reviled”** means to be disparaged or spoken poorly of.

The reason the Christian slaves at Ephesus were to regard their masters as being worthy of respect and honor is so that they will live and work in such a way that both the name of God and the gospel itself will not be spoken of poorly.

Now there is one other word I have left out of my exposition so far and that word is the word **“own”** as in **“Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honor.”** Paul’s point, I think, is that the regard they are to give is not theoretical. They are not to simply think about honor in the abstract. Rather they are to honor their **“own”** masters and they are to do their own masters won’t revile the Lord God or the blessed gospel because of their failure to perform.

You can almost imagine a slave responding, **“Yes, very well I understand doing that if I enslaved to a pagan but what if I am enslaved to a Christian master. Doesn’t he have an obligation to cut me some slack?”**

Paul's response, of course, is that everything he has said regarding being enslaved to an unbelieving master goes double for those enslaved to Christian masters. Look at verse two.

^{ESV} **1 Timothy 6:2**...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.

You see Paul's point. Christian slaves are not to suddenly become disrespectful simply because they are owned by a Christian master. Rather they are to serve exceptionally well...to go beyond what is expected. They are to do so on the basis that it will honor the Lord God and the gospel and even beyond to benefit the Christian brother that owns them as well.

Now you may be thinking, **"You all that's well and good, and thank you for explaining the passage but what's that got to do with me? I'm no slave nor do I intend to become one."**

As employees our work, our effort, ought never to bring dishonor to the cause of Christ. It is true we are not bound by chains to our employers as New Testament slaves were. We can, in good conscience, move from one job to the next without sinning or bringing dishonor to the name of God. We do not have to endure abuse or mistreatment or immorality at the hands of our employers. We have legal protection from those things and may employ them as needed. But are not free and will never be free to be mediocre either in terms of our work ethic or in terms of our work output. We are obligated to excellence as an integral part of our Christian faith because our work bears witness to the truth of the gospel and the beauty of our God.

Luther was once asked by a cobbler who had come to faith, **“What should I do now that I have become a Christian.”** Luther’s answer surprised him, **“Make a better shoe.”**

Let me end with this. I am borrowing this from one of my students who used it in a devotional he delivered in my Bible class.

A farmer needed an extra hand to help on his farm. One young man came to interview for the job. "What are your qualifications?" the farmer asked. "I can sleep when the wind blows," the young man said. The farmer had no idea what that meant, but he was desperate for help and hired the young man. The young man was a diligent worker all through the harvest season, but the farmer still didn't understand what the young man's answer had meant.

Autumn ended and the first cold storm of winter came late one night. The farmer panicked as heard the howling wind outside. He thought about all the terrible damage the wind might do to his farm. Getting up, the farmer grabbed his coat and pulled heavy boots on his feet. He was disappointed to look out the window and see the lights still out in the bunkhouse. He was angry that the young was still asleep in bed at a time like this. So the man ventured out alone planning to herd all of the animals into the barn. He mumbled about the young man sleeping and with all the farm equipment out in the field, collecting rust from the snow.

However, when the farmer reached the barn all the animals were tucked safely inside. In fact, clean hay had already been set out for the new day. The tractor with all its implement was perfectly secured in over in one corner of the barn. It was only then, the farmer realized what the young man had meant when he said, **"I can sleep when the wind blows."**⁶

Let's pray.

¹ Philip Graham Ryken, *1 Timothy (REC)* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P& R Publishing, 2001), 236.

² Allen Dwight Callahan, Richard A. Horsley, Abraham Smith, "Slavery in Text and Interpretation" in *Semeia* no 83-84 1998, p 1-15. The authors write, "Before and after Patterson's study, New Testament studies depended on the very different picture of Greek and Roman slavery constructed by a classics scholarship enamored of classical humanism. Before Patterson's study appeared, New

Testament scholars followed classics scholars in arguing that the slavery of antiquity was somehow better, more humane, than the institution in its modern forms. In contrast with how inhuman slavery is depicted in modern terms, slavery in the ancient world was characterized by "a somewhat loftier humaneness" (Stuhlmacher). Yet ancient Greek and Roman slavery, like modern slavery in the United States, applied the sanction of law and custom to kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder. The slaveholding ancient elite agreed with all master classes in all slave regimes that the use of the ruthless physical violence of torture, along with the psychological violence of terror, was more than a prerogative of dominical power. "There is no known slaveholding society where the whip was not considered an indispensable instrument" (Patterson: 4). Masters could and did crucify their slaves, and the excruciating death of crucifixion was recognized as capital punishment especially suited for their dishonored status (see Hengel: 51-63)."

³ Cassius Dio, book 54, chapter 23

⁴ Seneca, *Moral Epistles* 47.

⁵ Luther, *On The Freedom of a Christian*.

⁶ Adapted from Albert L. Zobell, Jr. *Story Teller's Scrapbook*; Bookcraft, SLC, Utah 1948: pages 111, 112.