

SOUND WORDS FOR SLAVES

by Ray C. Stedman

At the time the Apostle Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy, half the population of the Roman Empire -- about sixty million people -- were slaves. Many of them had been taken as prisoners of war by the Roman legions. Some were taken away out of their own countries, while others were kept captive within their own lands. Some slaves were highly educated, literate men and women. A few of them became secretaries to leading Romans and others, but most of them were illiterate, as were many of the Romans.

Slavery, then, became an immediate problem in the early church, as both slaves and their masters were being converted to Christianity. Many of you are probably feeling that this is not very relevant to us today. We no longer have slavery in this country, nor do most of the countries of the world practice slavery. Yet you will discover that this is a very relevant passage. The principles stated here apply, for instance, in employer-employee relationships or in any situation in which one is expected to work under someone else or for someone else.

Many of you here this morning are "wage slaves," you work for wages. You have made an agreement to sell a portion of your time and labor to some company or employer, and you receive a certain sum of money in return. You are functioning as a servant or a slave for that period of time. You are a lot better off than the slaves of the New Testament times. You get paid for your work, but they did not get paid anything; they worked only for their room and board and a few pieces of clothing now and then. You are able to take the weekend off. At the end of the week you can say, "Thank God it's Friday," but they could not; they were slaves twenty-four hours a day for their entire lifetime, with very little hope of ever being freed again.

So the question, "What does the Lord say to slaves?" arose in the early church. And it comes home to us yet today, "What is the Lord saying to us in these relationships where we work for someone else?" Here are the apostle's words, First Timothy 6, Verse 1:

Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be defamed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.

Teach and urge these duties. {1 Tim 6:1-2 RSV}

Many people today are troubled by the fact the New Testament does not denounce slavery; in fact, it seems to accommodate to it. Passages like this sound as though slavery is accepted and acceptable in a Christian relationship. People ask, "How can a religion of freedom and liberty ignore conditions of slavery imposed upon a people against their will?" Many have felt that Scripture is not relevant to life because it seems to treat this question with such indifference.

But the truth is that, though Scripture does not denounce slavery, neither does it approve of it. There is no defense of slavery in Scripture; there is no attempt made to perpetuate it in any degree. In fact, although there were sixty million slaves in the Roman Empire at the time this letter was written, by the end of the second century slavery had widely disappeared, largely because of the impact of Christian teaching and influence of Christians throughout the Empire. So it is apparent that, though Scripture does not come out in strong language against the institution of slavery, nevertheless, Christianity is the major reason why slavery has disappeared around the world.

This is true in modern times as well. History will vindicate the fact that even those nations that practiced slavery in the last century -- including our own -- came to enlightenment and finally settled the issue (either with or without violence), on the basis of the teachings of Christ. Christianity has historically proven to be the

major factor that sets men free. When Paul wrote to the Galatians, and said, "In Christ there is neither bond nor free" {Gal 3:28 KJV}, he laid the foundation for a reaction in the Christian churches that would ultimately deliver the world from the curse of slavery.

The process was never to be one of armed revolt, even of strikes or boycotts or riots. Rather, it was by obedience to words such as these in Paul's letter to Timothy, where it was laid upon both Christian slaves and Christian masters to look at each other in a different way and to treat each other with honor and respect even though the institution of slavery continued. Slaves were to look to God to change the practice.

The great principle, of course, is the belief that God is in charge of life. If slaves did not believe that God determines the affairs of men they had no hope. He lifts the load of bondage and frees people; or, in other ways and at other times, allows a once free people to go into bondage. God does that on the basis of the reaction of human beings to the Word of truth which he has caused to be spread among us. Christian slaves in the 1st century church were expected to treat their masters with respect and honor. They believed that God would then work to change the situation (when and where it could be changed), and finally to bring about freedom without violence.

God, after all, has announced himself in Scripture as committed to human freedom. He does not like slavery; he speaks against it both in the Old and the New Testaments. He declares himself on the side of those who are oppressed, those who are in captivity. But God also has his timing and his way of bringing about change. These words in the Scriptures reflect the fact that God moves in different ways than we think. When Christians obey what he says, then God acts -- more slowly, perhaps, than we think he ought to.

That is one of my problems with God. I am always wishing he would act more quickly and take advantage of some of the opportunities that I can clearly see to change situations overnight. Almost weekly I propose solutions to him which he seems to ignore. This, of course, is because he sees far more than I do. He is working on far greater problems than I see involved; he is manipulating and moving millions of people whose intimate lives are involved. Only God can work those out.

We have a great lesson in this regard in the Scriptures in the story of Joseph, the favorite son of Jacob, who was sold into slavery in Egypt by his own brothers. Joseph was a brilliant, well-educated, young Hebrew lad, yet he became a slave in an Egyptian household. There he served faithfully until he fell into further trouble, which was not his fault. He was accused by the wife of his master of assaulting her, and was thrown into prison. He must have been tempted to feel attacked, humiliated, and bitter that God would allow this to happen to him when he was doing everything he could to be a godly man. Joseph was a normal young man. He was subjected to temptations just like any of us would be, yet he found grace to wait on God's time, believing that God was working things out and would change the situation.

That is exactly what happened. Joseph dreamed his dreams and it looked like his circumstances were going to change even before they finally did. But two years later God worked it out and he was released from prison and given the very highest position in the Egyptian government.

This is a lesson for us of how God works. Unless we have that clearly in mind, there is no hope that we can ever act in a godly way in an unrighteous situation in our own day. Some of you have tyrants for bosses. I have worked for such men myself. You want to punch them out every day you go to work. They irritate you, they frustrate you, you see them as ignoramuses who do not know the end from the beginning; how they ever got the job in the first place you cannot believe. Yet there they are in charge; they have you in a stranglehold because they control your paycheck. The word of Scripture is that you are not merely to treat them with respect, but that you "regard them as worthy of respect," worthy of honor.

Everything is going to rest upon how you feel about them. If you think they are ding-a-lings who are unworthy of your respect, then no matter how polite you may be when they are watching, your attitude toward them will be one of bitterness and resentment; you will be constantly trying to find ways to goof off and justify it, because of their attitude toward you. But Scripture says, "regard them as worthy of respect" -- no matter what they are like, no matter how they treat you. Why? Because they are made in the image of God. Just like you, when God's grace touches them, they are capable of reflecting his glory and beauty; they are the potential

bearers of God himself, so they are to be treated with respect.

The Bible never looks at man as being wretched and worthless. It sometimes uses language like that, but then it is only reflecting the language of human beings who think that way. The Bible's view is that man is God's creation, made in God's image, and, though he has fallen, he is not worthless; he is the victim of a supernatural, malevolent being who holds him in unwitting control and feeds him all this vileness, evil, anger, hostility, etc. If you regard mankind as a victim, you can see the individual as worthy of respect and honor because of what God has made him to be -- a man or woman for whom Christ died. This is how Christian slaves were to regard their masters in this 1st century day. If they were unbelieving masters, slaves were still to look upon them as "worthy of respect," in order that the name of the God who created them and stamped his image upon them might not be defamed, or his teachings scorned by the world.

The Satanic view of man is exactly the opposite. Satan thinks men are worthless; he regards them with scorn and despising. When you think of people as worthless and useless, you treat them that way; you talk about them that way, you curse them, ridicule them and use language about them that is disparaging, and depersonalizing. When you do that you are reflecting Satan's view of man. Whether slaves or masters, Christians are to treat each other and all other men as "worthy of respect," and not use language like that, lest the name of God be defamed.

What about those slaves who had believing masters? Such a slave might well feel, "Christ has made us one, and, since we're brothers, my master should no longer treat me as a slave but as his brother. That means I have a right to special favors, a special position in the household, etc." Some of these slaves in Ephesus were doing that. But Paul says (Verse 2):

Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brethren; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. {1 Tim 6:2a RSV}

That is a wholly different attitude. I am always amazed at the attitudes some Christians have when they do business with other Christians. They seem to feel that the fact that they are buying something from a Christian businessman means that he ought to give them a discount or favor, or treat them in a different way than he would any other customer. Some men have told me that they hate to see a Christian come into their stores because they know they are going to be asked for some special favor. I do not know what it is about some Christians that makes them think that way, but it reveals that they are using Christianity to their own advantage.

Paul turns this idea around. He says, rather than thinking you deserve special favors because of your Christianity, you ought to remember that these men are your brothers. You ought to be trying to find a way to bless them and go beyond what others would do in your courtesy and respect toward them. You do not have to pay them more than you would anyone else, but you ought to treat them with additional courtesy because they are brothers, "believers and beloved."

I have been embarrassed at times by certain Christians who actually asked for discounts in stores because they were Christians. I have been in stores with pastors who somehow feel that pastors have a right to some special treatment from Christian merchants. It was so embarrassing I almost turned around and walked out when some of them said, "I'm a pastor. Don't you have a 10% discount for pastors?" The merchant would have been justified in saying, "No. I add on 10% when a pastor comes in here," because pastors often get a lot of advantages that others do not enjoy.

Notice that the Scriptures recognize the equality of believers before God. Paul recognizes that, "Yes, you are slaves and your masters are Christians, therefore, you are brethren," but nevertheless, the institution of slavery remained in effect until it could be changed by normal, nonviolent processes which God would effect as Christians obeyed what God wanted done.

That is how the church changes the world. I believe with all my heart that if Christians in the South 150 years ago had treated the slaves who were becoming Christians as brothers in Christ, had loved them, accepted

them, and allowed them full freedom within the church, that the institution of slavery would have disappeared from these American shores without violence, without the Civil War, or the race riots that we went through a decade ago. It is the church that is to blame. It is only as Christians reflect these words and these activities that God moves to change society.

I know these are hard words for the flesh to hear. There is nothing more difficult, especially to a young person, than the words, "wait," or "submit," or "accept," or, the hardest of all, "trust God." Those are hard words; our flesh does not bear them easily, and so it was in Ephesus. I am sure Timothy would be hard put to get everybody in the congregation there to accept these teachings. That is why Paul says, "Teach and urge these duties."

So, recognizing that there would be some among them who would not accept this, Paul tells Timothy what to do. Verse 3:

If any one teaches otherwise and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching which accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit, he knows nothing; he has a morbid craving for controversy and for disputes about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, base suspicions, and wrangling among men who are depraved in mind and bereft of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.
{1 Tim 6:3-5 RSV}

Paul says there will be some who will not accept this; in fact, they will stand up and teach the contrary. But when they do, remember two things about them:

First, their actions are wrong; they are opposing "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Verse 3). Paul takes us back to the Lord himself.

It is always helpful for us to remember that these words about submission, acceptance, and showing a proper attitude in the face of persecution or injustice -- loving your enemies and blessing those who persecute you -- do not come from the apostles but from the Lord Jesus; it is he who tells us to live this way. Paul calls these words, "the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ." These are realistic words that reflect the reality of life. These are the kind of words that will smooth things out without violence and disruption in society.

Our Lord understands life. He ordained it, he set up the rules. When Jesus tells us to live this way, it is not merely an option that we are offered, which we can do if we like and ignore if we do not. If we do not do what he says, we create havoc and disturbance in families, in communities, in states and in nations. These are the "sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ." To teach or to try to impart another basis of activity is to take an opposite view to the Lord himself; to do so is to follow the philosophy of the devil.

Second, Paul says, those who do this ignore "the teaching which accords with godliness" (Verse 3). We have seen this word *godliness* several times in this letter. It is really the word *wholeness* -- the teaching that makes men whole, that makes them unified, that destroys division and creates unity. Jesus once said, "He that is with me gathers. He that is against me scatters," {cf, Luke 11:23}. If you want to know whether a man is for or against Christ, do not listen to what he says, look at what the effect of his life is. If he divides and scatters people, then, no matter what he says, he is against Christ. Does he unite people and heal them? Then no matter how poorly he states it, he is with the Lord; he is for him. That is our Lord's test. The teaching that is in accord with wholeness is the exact opposite of the devil's philosophy, which divides men.

Those who ignore "the teaching which accords with godliness" are always doing three things in any situation of controversy. First, they are escalating it. If you teach somebody to get even, to take vengeance into his own hands when his neighbor throws garbage over the fence, by putting gophers in his lawn or throwing dirt on his washing when it is hanging out in the back yard -- your evil minds will think up plenty of things to do, as will mine -- what you are doing is immediately escalating the situation. The neighbor has to do something worse in return, and so conflict grows.

And it not only escalates, it polarizes: others join the fracas. Your neighbors, your family and others get in on

the act. Soon you have one community opposed to one another, fighting one another, writing nasty letters to the newspaper, and attacking each other.

Then third, it perpetuates the situation. I am watching a conflict right now between Christians in one church who attacked another church, calling them a cult. This has begun to escalate and to polarize, and others are being drawn into it. It is becoming a knock-down, drag-out fight in which they are airing it all on the printed page, spreading it around the country. Those are the kind of things that bring disgrace and disrepute upon the cause of Christianity.

The apostle says there are three motives that prompt one to act this way:

The first is conceit. Though he knows nothing, he thinks he knows everything, Paul says. "He is puffed up with conceit, though he knows nothing." When you listen to some of these adherents of various causes, how profound they can sound, how convinced they are that they have the only right view, and how angry they become at anybody who opposes them! This always reveals conceit.

Many, many years ago as a young Christian I was involved in a controversy between Christians. Somebody stood up in a meeting once and quoted the proverb, "Only by pride comes contention." I never forgot that. Whenever you have contention somebody is acting out of pride -- probably both sides to some degree. It is only when that pride is recognized and you are willing to lose face (which is another expression for pride) and knowledge that you are wrong, that the contention ceases.

The second motive is that there is a love of controversy, a craving for a fight. There is a definition that says, "An Irishman does not know what he believes but he is willing to die for it." Some people cannot get along unless they get a fight going. Such people come into churches and before very long they will whisper something here and then something there. Soon they have people calling each other up, and a fight begins. Then they feel good; something exciting is happening. This reveals a morbid love of controversy, of word-wrangling, and debating over the meanings of phrases and words.

The third motive is that such an individual sees gain as his only objective in life. Why is he religious? Why is he a Christian? Why is he in church? Because it is a big help in making money. It gives him a respectable position. A lot of people are involved in the church because of the honor and deference that comes from those who show a concern for religious values. Many a man has come into the church because it will advance him in his business. Paul says that is a terrible motive. It is part of the devil's philosophy. (This passage leads on to Paul's survey of the Christian position on making money, which we will take in another message.)

The apostle is saying here that submission to difficult conditions is not a curse; it is something God has given as an opportunity to display the true character of Christ. If, against the dark background, a light shines, it shines all the brighter because of the darkness. So difficult conditions are opportunities given by God to reflect a clear testimony before the world. It is God's way to blessing. He can and will change the situation. He is committed to human freedom which he will bring into being when the purpose for which he has allowed difficult conditions to arise have been fully achieved.

Remember the words of Peter concerning our Lord Jesus: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return [He did not give back what he got]; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly," (1 Peter 2:23 {RSV}). Jesus did it all at the cross. God turned the cross into the greatest opportunity for deliverance and freedom that the world has ever seen. That is what he will do in our lives as well.

This is the power of Christianity to free, to deliver from any form of slavery.

All of us are slaves in one way or another. We are bound with bad habits of eating, drinking, smoking, whatever.

All of us are slaves to habits of the emotions, such as hot tempers and lustful thoughts.

We are all slaves to attitudes of resentment and bitterness, etc.

But God can free us when we act as his children in the midst of the circumstances in which he has put us. The little sign we see frequently these days,

Bloom where you are planted!

is a great word for Christians. Are you slaves, working in difficult conditions? Then, bloom right where you are planted. Are you free, but have other kinds of problems? Then, bloom there, where God has planted you. Where he has put you is right where he wants you to be.

Think these things over, remembering that they apply to our world today as much as they did in the 1st century world.

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