What Is Scripture's View of Slavery?
Scripture: Titus 2:9-10
Code: BQ010813

Urge bond-slaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect. (Titus 2:9–10)

The fifth category of believers about which Paul admonishes Titus is not based on age but on social standing. *Douloi* (**bond-slaves**) refers to slaves, those who were owned and controlled by **their own masters.**

The Roman Empire depended on bond-slaves for most of its labor, and they were an essential part of society and the economy. Many, if not most, slaves were abused and often brutalized. For even minor infractions, or simply for displeasing their owners in some way, they could be severely beaten or killed. Many of them, however, were given great responsibility and authority in running a household and sometimes a family farm or other business. Some of them—frequently those who were captured in war—were highly educated and cultured, in many cases having superior education to that of their owners. Slaves were allowed to marry and raise their own families, their children becoming slaves like their parents. A slave sometimes was given a small parcel of land on which to grow crops to feed his family and perhaps earn a small income.

But Paul does not address the condition of slavery. He offers no judgment about its basic fairness or morality. He simply recognizes that it exists and deals with the attitude that Christian **bond-slaves** should have toward **their own masters**, whether those **masters** were believers or unbelievers.

Although slavery was carefully regulated under Mosaic law, neither the Old nor New Testaments condemns slavery as such. Social strata are recognized and even designed by God for man's good. Some people will be served and some will serve others. That is the nature of human society. How they treat each other is what concerns God. Slave/master relationships and responsibilities are dealt with much as those of employer/employee, and both testaments give considerable instruction about God's plan for these relationships and associated responsibilities. As I have written in the *Ephesians* volume in this New Testament commentary series,

Although slavery is not uniformly condemned in either the Old or New Testaments, the sincere application of New Testament truths has repeatedly led to the elimination of its abusive tendencies. Where Christ's love is lived in the power of His Spirit, unjust barriers and relationships are inevitably

broken down. As the Roman empire disintegrated and eventually collapsed, the brutal, abused system of slavery collapsed with it—due in great measure to the influence of Christianity. In more recent times the back of the black slave trade was broken in Europe and America due largely to the powerful, Spirit-led preaching of such men as John Wesley and George Whitefield and the godly statesmanship of such men as William Wilberforce and William Pitt.

New Testament teaching does not focus on reforming and re structuring human systems, which are never the root cause of human problems. The issue is always the heart of man—which when wicked will corrupt the best of systems and when righteous will improve the worst. If men's sinful hearts are not changed, they will find ways to oppress others regardless of whether or not there is actual slavery. On the other hand, Spirit-filled believers will have just and harmonious relationships with each other, no matter what system they live under. Man's basic problems and needs are not political, social, or economic but spiritual ….

Throughout history, including in our own day, working people have been oppressed and abused by economic intimidation that amounts to virtual slavery—regardless of the particular economic, social, or political system. Paul's teaching therefore applies to every business owner and every worker. ([Chicago: Moody, 1986], p. 324. For additional treatment of biblical teaching about slavery, see pp. 323–28 in that volume.)

Nowhere in Scripture is rebellion or revolution justified in order to gain freedom, opportunity, or economic, social, or political rights. The emphasis is rather on the responsibility of slaves to serve their human masters faithfully and fully, in order to reflect the transforming power of God in their lives.

In his letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul wrote unambiguously, "Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:5–6). After giving similar instruction to believers at Colossae (Col. 3:22–23), the apostle added, "knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve" (v. 24). And to Timothy he wrote, "Let all who are under the yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine may not be spoken against" (1 Tim. 6:1).

For many Christians today, as throughout church history, the most important and fertile field for evangelism is the place where they work. That is their mission field. As in almost no other place, unbelievers have the opportunity to observe believers in day by day situations and activities. They see whether the believer is patient or impatient, kind or uncaring, selfless or selfish, honest or dishonest, clean or vulgar in his talk. They have the opportunity to see how well the Christian lives up to the faith he professes and the principles of the Scripture he claims to hold dear. Inviting unsaved friends to church certainly has a place in witnessing for Christ, but it will be useless and even

counterproductive if one’s attitude, reliability, and honesty on the job are questionable.

As Paul points out in the passages just cited above, the primary purpose for working hard and for respecting our employer, even more than leading someone to faith, is to bring honor to Christ. And our most important compensation is not the possible praise or increase in pay we may receive from our employer but the assured reward that we will receive from our Lord. He is the One who determines and assures what the eternal compensation will be (cf. Rev. 20:12–13).

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