

# 1 TIM. 6:1-21

By Ashby L. Camp

Copyright © 2006 by Ashby L. Camp. All rights reserved.

## XVI. Instructions for Slaves (6:1-2a)

6:1 As many as are slaves under a yoke, let them consider their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching not be slandered. <sup>2</sup> Let those who have believing masters not take them lightly because they are brothers; rather, let them serve them all the more, for beloved believers are the ones receiving the benefit of the service.

A. There apparently was a problem (or potential problem) in Ephesus with the relationship between Christian slaves and their masters. It would be easy for a Christian slave to resent being under a non-Christian master, to think that a pagan should not be ordering around a child of God. It would also be easy for a Christian slave to take lightly the social authority of a Christian master, one to whom he was spiritually equal (similar to the problems that arise when one becomes "too familiar" with one's boss). This would be especially true if the slave were an elder and the master were a member of his flock.

B. Paul urges the slaves generally to consider their masters worthy of honor, so that the God and the gospel of Christ not be bad mouthed, which would hinder the spread of the gospel.

C. He says specifically to slaves with Christian masters that they should not allow the fact they and their masters are spiritual equals, brothers, to cause them to fail to give the masters the respect their social position deserves. On the contrary, they should serve Christian masters all the more because their labor is blessing a brother or sister in Christ.

### D. General comments on the Bible and slavery

1. IF the Bible actually endorsed some form of slavery, the correct conclusion would be that that form of slavery is not immoral, not that the Bible is wrong. The Bible is the word of God. From whence do we derive a standard by which to judge it? Once one says the Bible is not authoritative regarding social institutions and relationships, what is left of its authority? It would, for example, no longer speak authoritatively about the relationship of parents and children.

2. BUT, the Bible does not endorse or approve of the practice of slavery; it simply tolerates it.

(a) Unlike marriage and parent-child relationships, Scripture nowhere suggests that slavery was ordained or instituted by God; it was a product of sinful humanity. This is evident from the fact that in 1 Cor. 7:21 Paul urges, "Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you -- although if you can gain your freedom, do

so." He would never give such advice to spouses or to parents and children. In this regard, it is probably more than coincidental that, from all indications, neither Jesus nor the Apostles owned slaves.

(b) The Bible does not assume the goodness of slavery but takes slavery as a fact of life and regulates people's involvement in it. In fact, the seeds for slavery's dissolution were sown in Phlmn. 16 ("no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother"), Eph. 6:9 ("Masters . . . do not threaten [your slaves]"), Col. 4:1 ("Masters, provide your slaves what is right and fair"), and 1 Tim. 6:1-2 (masters are "brothers"). Where these seeds of equality came to full flower, the very institution of slavery would no longer be slavery. Also, Jesus' teaching about mercy and forgiving debts (e.g., Mat. 6:12, 18:23-34) implies the inappropriateness of debt-slavery.

(c) The fact God allowed Christians in the first century to own slaves does not necessarily mean there was nothing wrong with first-century slavery.

(1) It could be like divorce. God, through Moses, permitted divorce, despite the fact it was contrary to his ideal for mankind. He did it as a concession to the hardness of men's hearts (Mat. 19:3-9). Perhaps first-century society had gotten so deformed that God did not insist on the abandonment of slavery at that time.

(2) That would not mean that such a concession must exist under different social conditions or for any kind of slavery, such as the slavery that existed in early America. Slavery in the first century was a very different institution.

[a] S. Scott Bartchy states in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:66-70 (paragraphs are not continuous in original):

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.

It must also be stressed that, despite the neat legal separation between owners and slaves, in none of the relevant cultures did persons in slavery constitute a social or economic class. Slaves' individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities were entirely dependent on the status of their respective owners, and they developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as "slaves of the world unite!" would have fallen on completely deaf ears. (From p. 69: "The great slave rebellions, all of which were led primarily by

prisoners of war between 140-70 B.C.E., never sought to abrogate slavery. Rather, these rebels sought either escape or to turn the tables by enslaving the owners.")

Furthermore, by no means were those in slavery regularly to be found at the bottom of the social-economic pyramid. Rather, in that place were those free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any certainty of finding it (day laborers), some of whom eventually sold themselves into slavery to gain some job security.

Large numbers of people sold themselves into slavery for various reasons, e.g., to pay debts, to climb socially (Roman citizenship was conventionally bestowed on a slave released by a Roman owner), to obtain special jobs, and above all to enter a life that was more secure and less strenuous than existence as a poor, freeborn person.

Slaves were used for "an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances," some of which when compared to New World slavery seem astonishingly responsible: "doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea-captains."

Since slaves represented a substantial investment by their owners . . . , they could at least expect to receive enough food to keep them alive and working. Manumission could mean the end of that security. Epictetus [a first-century philosopher], himself an ex-slave, took pleasure in pointing out that the slave who thinks only of gaining his freedom may be reduced, when he is manumitted, to "slavery much more severe than before."

For many, self-sale into slavery with anticipation of manumission was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. For many this was the quickest way to climb socially and financially. As such, in stark contrast to New World slavery, Greco-Roman slavery functioned as a process rather than a permanent condition, as a temporary phase of life by means of which an outsider obtained "a place within a society that has no natural obligations of kinship or guest-friendship towards him."

[b] Andrew Lincoln writes in his commentary (WBC)

on Ephesians (p. 418):

Many slaves in the Greco-Roman world enjoyed more favorable living conditions than many free laborers. Contrary to the supposition that everyone was trying to avoid slavery at all costs, it is clear that some people actually sold themselves into slavery in order to climb socially, to obtain particular employment open only to slaves, and to enjoy a better standard of

living than they had experienced as free persons. Being a slave had the benefit of providing a certain personal and social security.

[c] James D. G. Dunn states (*The Theology of Paul the Apostle*, 699):

[S]lavery was an established fact of life in the ancient world. As many as one-third of the inhabitants of most large urban centres were slaves. The economies of the ancient world could not have functioned without slavery. Consequently, a responsible challenge to the practice of slavery would have required a complete reworking of the economic system and a complete rethinking of social structures, which was scarcely thinkable at the time, except in idealistic or anarchic terms.

#### XVII. Final Indictment of False Teachers (6:2b-10)

6:2b Teach and urge these things.<sup>3</sup> If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the healthy words of our Lord Jesus Christ and with the teaching that is in accordance with godliness,<sup>4</sup> he has become conceited, understanding nothing, but having a sick craving for controversies and word battles. From these come envy, discord, abusive statements, evil suspicions,<sup>5</sup> and constant irritations between men who have been corrupted in mind and robbed of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain.

<sup>6</sup> But godliness with contentment is great gain,<sup>7</sup> for we have brought nothing into the world; [it is clear] that neither are we able to carry anything out.<sup>8</sup> But if we have means of subsistence and coverings, we will be content with these.<sup>9</sup> Those who want to be rich fall into temptation, into a trap, and into many foolish and harmful cravings that plunge men into ruin and destruction.<sup>10</sup> For love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some, by striving after money, wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

A. One final time, Paul exhorts Timothy "to teach and urge these things." At the very least, he means the things he said in 5:3 - 6:2a (dealing with the widows, the elders, and the slaves). He probably means all the prior teaching in the letter.

B. Those who teach a different doctrine, one that is contrary to the gospel given by the Lord Jesus, are conceited in that they consider themselves deep and wise when in fact they know nothing. They also have a sick craving for controversies and word battles.

C. This conceit and craving to engage in controversy and word battles generates envy, discord, abusive statements, evil suspicions, and constant irritations among the principals (and no doubt their adherents and sympathizers), whom he describes as men who have been corrupted in mind and robbed of the truth. They are so warped that they view

godliness as a means to financial gain! For them, piety or religion is a racket; a way to turn a buck. This leads to the comments in vv. 6-10.

D. The correct attitude toward wealth is given in vv. 6-8. Godliness that is accompanied by contentment with material necessities, with food and clothing, yields great gain in that it insulates one from the spiritual dangers inherent in longing for wealth.

1. The Enemy will exploit a person's love of money to lure that person away from the faith and ultimately to destruction. That is precisely what had happened to some in Ephesus.

2. It is foolish to base your contentment on material possessions, to grant them that power over your life, because, in the end, no one has any material possessions. As Paul says in v. 7, we came into this world with nothing, and we're going out with nothing. You know the line – I've never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul.

#### XVIII. Exhortation to Right Living (6:11-16)

<sup>11</sup> But you, man of God, flee from these things; pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. <sup>12</sup> Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life for which you were called and made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. <sup>13</sup> I charge you in the sight of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, <sup>14</sup> to keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>15</sup> which he will bring about at the right time - he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, <sup>16</sup> who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see; to him be honor and eternal dominion, amen.

A. As a man of God, Timothy is to flee from the things that characterize the false teachers: the conceit, the craving of controversies, the divisive attitudes and actions, the love of money, and the evils that flow from the love of money. Instead, he is to run after or pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness. He is to strive continually to become more and more the person Christ calls him to be.

B. He is to fight the good fight of the faith, in his personal life and his ministry. He is to take hold the eternal life to which he was called when he became a Christian, meaning he is to live out the implications of his salvation.

1. The "good confession" he made in the presence of many witnesses is almost certainly the confession that "Jesus is Lord" which one makes at baptism (see, Rom. 10:9-10). As Beasley-Murray notes in reference to Rom. 10:9-10, "It is universally acknowledged that 'Jesus is Lord' is the primitive confession of faith in Christ that was made at baptism."

2. Verse 13 says that Jesus testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate. That refers to his affirmative answer to the question "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Mat. 27:11; Mk. 15:2; Lk. 23:3; Jn. 18:33-37), which was rightly understood as a claim to be the Messiah.

C. Paul solemnly charges Timothy to "keep the commandment" without stain or reproach until Christ's return. Commentators offer a wide range of possibilities for the meaning of "the commandment." It makes the most sense to me that Paul is referring to what he just told him -- that he is to fight the good fight of the faith (and all that entails). Timothy is to faithfully live out this command, striving to be in everything what God has called him to be in Christ.

D. Note what Paul says here about God:

1. He gives life to all things.
2. He will bring about Christ's appearing in his own time.
3. He is the blessed and only Ruler (or Sovereign), the King of kings and Lord of lords.
4. He alone is immortal. Only he has and can confer life.
5. He lives in unapproachable light. The glory of God, which is often represented as light (see Ps. 104:2), is so intense that people cannot enter its presence.
6. No one has seen or can see him. The idea is that God is so holy, infinitely holy, that sinful humanity can never see him in his full glory and live.
7. To him be honor and eternal dominion.

#### XIX. What to Teach the Wealthy Believers (6:17-19)

<sup>17</sup> Command those who are rich in the present age not to be haughty or to have their hope set on the uncertainty of riches, but on God who richly provides us all things for enjoyment. <sup>18</sup> Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and sharing, <sup>19</sup> thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, that they may take hold of the real life.

A. Timothy is told to command those who are rich not to be haughty, not to create division by scorning those with less wealth. He is also to command them not to set their hope on riches, which are uncertain, but on God who richly provides us all things for enjoyment.

1. Earthly wealth belongs entirely to this world and therefore is no basis for security in the world to come. You cannot serve two masters. Either you trust in wealth or you trust in God. The sinfulness and foolishness of choosing wealth over God is shown graphically in the parable of the rich fool in Lk. 12:16-21.

2. This doesn't mean that having or enjoying material things is wrong. On the contrary, God provides us all things for our enjoyment. You can have things and enjoy them as gracious gifts of God without trusting in them. Remember Paul said in Phil. 4:12 that he had learned the secret of having plenty and having need. But you always have to be on guard against greed and self-indulgence.

B. That is why Timothy is to command the wealthy people to do good, to be rich in good deeds, to be generous and sharing. Those who have been blessed by God with wealth are to use it for the benefit of others. They are to be good stewards of what they have received from God.

C. To live faithfully to God, which in this context means sharing one's wealth, is to lay a good foundation for the future, to take hold of real life, the life that will culminate in heavenly glory.

#### XX. Final Charge (6:20-21)

<sup>20</sup>Timothy, guard the deposit, avoiding godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge; <sup>21</sup>by professing it, some missed the mark with regard to the faith. Grace be with you.

A. In these final words, Paul calls Timothy to guard the deposit that had been entrusted to his care. This is the gospel, the apostolic teaching that must be guarded from assault by its enemies.

B. As part of guarding the gospel, Timothy is to avoid the heretical teaching that is threatening it in Ephesus, what Paul labels "godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge."

C. By embracing the heresy masquerading as knowledge, some had wandered from the faith.

D. Paul ends with an expression of his desire that the grace of God be with him in all that lies ahead.