

Slaves and masters

1 Timothy 6:1-2; Genesis 39:1-6a

A sermon by Peter Budd

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73 years BC: a slave named Spartacus, from the gladiatorial school in Capua, escapes with 70-80 gladiators, seizing the knives from the cook's shop and a wagonload of weapons. They camp on Mount Vesuvius, where other slaves join their revolt.

3,000 men – raw recruits, not seasoned soldiers – are sent against the rebel slaves and think they have them trapped on Vesuvius, but Spartacus leads the slaves down the far side of the mountain, using vines, and attacks the soldiers from the rear, routing them.

72 years BC: now Spartacus is leading an army of 70,000 slaves and the Roman authorities are truly alarmed.

Two consuls, each with two legions, are sent against the rebels, but are defeated.

By the autumn, Spartacus has 120,000 slaves following him.

A man named Marcus Licinius Crassus is now sent to deal with the rebellious slaves.

He comes with six additional legions.

71 years BC: The slave army is finally destroyed by Crassus' legions, in a major battle in southern Italy.

6,000 rebel slaves are taken prisoner by Crassus and are crucified, all along the Appian Way from Capua to Rome.

The name of Spartacus is well known, thanks to the Hollywood film, loosely based on his story, that regularly appears on our TV screens.

But that wasn't the only time slaves tried to throw off their oppression.

And it wasn't the only slave revolt to end in violent suppression.

Slavery was the basis of Rome's economic prosperity, just as it has been for many cultures, before and since.

Just as in the early 1800s, profits from the slave trade helped feed the commercial growth of cities like Manchester and Liverpool.

And when slavery is so integral to a society – when it's so tightly bound up with commercial success – any threat to the system will be met with vigorous reprisal.

More than a century after Spartacus led his slave revolt, slaves still formed a large proportion of the population across the Roman world.

In a large, wealthy and sophisticated city like Ephesus, where Timothy ministered, slaves would not only perform menial tasks within a household, but also worked in what we would now call professions.

So, if you're a doctor, or a teacher, then if you were carrying out your profession in Ephesus two thousand years ago, you would most likely be a slave.

And whilst some slaves lived in terrible conditions and were treated extremely badly, others enjoyed a relatively high degree of security within a household, and were able to accumulate enough money to buy their freedom, or to start a business when freed.

Nevertheless, the gulf between slave and master was enormous in that society.

When a new religious sect appeared, the followers of Jesus Christ, who welcomed all into their fellowship, regardless of background or social position – who welcomed slaves and masters alike – this was something truly revolutionary.

We see from 1 Tim. 6 that in the churches at Ephesus there were slaves who had believing masters – slaves and masters who were brothers together in Christ.

As Paul expressed it in Gal. 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

This is revolutionary teaching.

This overturned the comfortable hierarchy, the distinctions on which society was based.

Revolutionary – and dangerous.

Dangerous, because if that teaching were misapplied, outside the church context, it would bring a swift and violent response.

So what does Paul say to Timothy about slaves?

He can't afford to condemn slavery in that society;

however obnoxious it is for one person to own another.

Timothy was not to be a Spartacus;

leading an army of slaves to their ultimate destruction.

But what Paul does teach is truly revolutionary, nonetheless;

and in the end, far more likely to bring about a change in society than was the armed insurrection of Spartacus.

What is this revolutionary teaching of Paul?

that slaves should treat their masters with full respect;

that slaves should serve their masters well;

and if their masters are believers, then serve them even better.

What an effect this teaching will have, over time.

What an effect if people truly work for the best for those they serve.

The master-slave relationship was controlled by legal force; by threat; by fear.

How powerful, if that is replaced with respect and love.

How revolutionary.

Hundreds of years before Paul and Timothy's time, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt.

Now let's face it; Joseph was something of a spoilt brat.

But that wasn't really a good reason for him to be sold into slavery.

How did Joseph behave, as a slave?

Essentially, just as Paul teaches; by serving his master well.

And it was noticed: Joseph was put in charge of his master's household.

For a while, he enjoyed a position of great responsibility.

But sometimes, doing the best for those we serve can have negative consequences for ourselves.

If we read on in the story of Joseph, from Genesis 39:6,

we read how his master's wife made sexual advances towards him.

And when Joseph, quite properly, refused, his master's wife engineered his downfall.

Joseph found himself in prison.

But even there, Joseph's attitude earned respect.

And eventually, we find Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt (Gen. 41:41).

Let's take a closer look at the reasons Paul gives for treating masters with respect and for serving them well;

the motivation for our attitude to those we serve.

In 1 Tim. 6:1 we see that slaves "...should consider their masters worthy of full respect, so that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered."

Our attitude to those in authority, ...our working relationships, ...our conduct at work, ...our conduct in whatever situation we find ourselves...

Our attitude and conduct are determined by our desire that God will be honestly presented through us;

they are determined by our love for God.

Paul says something similar in Col. 3:23:

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men"

In 1 Tim. 6:2 we see that slaves who "have believing masters ... are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them."

Our attitude to others, and especially to other Christians, is determined by our love for them: because they are dear to us.

So what we have here is a practical example of a key lesson that runs right through the Bible. A lesson that's expressed in the Old Testament through the Ten Commandments.

A lesson that was supremely stated by Jesus as the Greatest Commandments.

In Matt. 22:36-40, when Jesus is asked "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

he replies "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment.

And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbour as yourself.'

All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Firstly, love God.

Secondly, love others as yourself.

This is what underlies how slaves should behave.

This is what underlies how we should behave.

It's not new teaching.

But it is revolutionary teaching.

Revolutionary, because it turns upside down what is normal in a self-obsessed world.

Revolutionary, because it has the power to change society.

Note that Jesus said "Love your neighbour as yourself."

Not "more than yourself" or "instead of yourself", but "as yourself."

We're not called to devalue ourselves, but to value others.

Slaves were regarded as sub-human, in society.

But in the church, in God's eyes, they are equal with others:

"there is neither ... slave nor free" (Gal. 3:28)

In the church, slaves were valued in a way they had never been valued before.

Valued as people, not as a commodity.

But in accepting their own value in God's eyes, they were also called to value others:

and to hold other believers as dear to them.

Whatever our walk of life, to love God first, and to love others as ourselves; these lie at the core of right behaviour.

Throughout 1 Timothy, a lot of the emphasis is on teaching sound doctrine and avoiding false teachers – if you look on to v. 3 of 1 Tim. 6, you'll see it again.

The false teaching that Timothy had to deal with led to controversy and division – that's back in 1 Tim. 1:3, and if you look ahead it's there again in 1 Tim. 6:4.

But sound doctrine – healthy doctrine – is activated and energised by genuine love.

Let's look at how this worked out amongst the Christians in Ephesus.

Look back at Ephesians 1:15-16.

Now, this may have been written to Christians in the region around Ephesus, rather than in the city itself, but it provides a clue to the sort of church that existed in that area.

Paul writes: "...ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you..."

The Christians there were known for their faith and their love.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, which may have been just 2 or 3 years later, there were big problems, as we've seen, with false teachers in the church.

So what happened after this? How did it all turn out?

We have a clue in the book of Revelation. Look at Rev. 2:1-7.

This is the first of the messages to the seven churches;

a message for the church in Ephesus.

This may have been written 25-30 years after 1 Timothy.

The Christians in Ephesus are praised for their hard work and perseverance (Rev. 2:2);

Praised because they'd tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and found them false (Rev. 2:3);

Praised because they hated practices that God hates (Rev. 2:6).

It seems they'd learnt the lesson of 1 Timothy.

They'd weeded out the false teachers.

But not all is well.

Indeed, the church was threatened with destruction (Rev. 2:5).

Look at Rev. 2:4: "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."

It seems they learnt one half of the lesson of 1 Timothy.

They'd learnt to hate falsehood.

But they'd lost their initial passion for God and their love for each other.

How sad, to know the truth, but lose the love that makes it real.

Doctrine without love becomes a hard and empty shell.

How do we express a healthy passion for God and a deep love for each other?

Firstly, it's expressed in the inclusive nature of the church.

In the church at Ephesus there were both slaves and masters.

A healthy church bridges the barriers that divide society.

A healthy church welcomes as equally loved by God, those who are despised by others.

Love is expressed through relationships within the church.

And love is expressed in the way we behave in the wider world.

In our work, whether its paid employment, or running a household, the way we work reflects our attitude to God.

We'll do a good job, because we're God's representative, and we want His name to be honoured.

We want people to see God in us.

But sometimes, we may be faced with situations in which to do the right thing can have negative consequences for ourselves.

Like Joseph, who resisted the advances of his master's wife, but ended up in prison nevertheless.

We may have to make an ethical stand.

We may have to stand by a colleague who's being treated unfairly.

We may have to say we'll not be party to a morally dubious transaction.

We may have to stand up and say something is wrong, even though we'll be ridiculed for it ... or worse.

None of us are actually slaves, however much it may feel like it when we're at work.

And we're not under the domination of a foreign power.

We have a measure of freedom.

And with freedom, comes responsibility.

For us, honouring God may mean working to change society.

Just as in the early 1800s, Christians like William Wilberforce fought to end our country's involvement in slavery.

For us, it may mean, for example, encouraging our leaders to keep their promises to cancel the unjust debts that effectively keep many people in third world countries in conditions that are worse than slavery.

Our love for God and our love for each other is reflected:

in relationships within the church,

in the way we conduct ourselves in our working lives,

in the way we act within our society.

But let's not forget that God loves us as individuals and wants the best for us.

Let's not forget: love others as ourselves.

These days, many of us face enormous pressures at work.

And in trying to do a good job, we need to maintain a healthy balance in our own lives.

A healthy balance of work, rest and worship.

If we're to be all that God wants us to be.

Let's thank God that we aren't slaves; thank God for the freedom and privileges we enjoy.

And seek, through every aspect of our lives:

Firstly, to love God.

Secondly, to love others as ourselves.

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