



INTO THE WORKPLACE

What does it take to be a Christian witness in your 9-5?

- You've got to know Jesus well.
- You've got to know scripture well.
- You've got to know your story well.
- You've got to know your contacts well.
- You've got to know your arguments well.
- You've got to know your mission field well.
- You've got to know your ministry / calling well.

All of the above! But vital as those things are, you can short-circuit any one of them if you fail to do this:

- You've got to do your job well.

That's the message of the passage we're going to look at today – the shortest one in this series (a mere 2 verses!).

But it's one that comes with a sack load of controversy, as we'll see:

1 Timothy 6:1-2

Let's be clear: slavery, no matter what form it takes, should never be seen as a positive. And in the vast majority of cases should be regarded as truly evil.

However, in ancient Israel (a nation delivered from slavery) the practice had a unique context. It provided a lifeline, a means of survival if you ended up in poverty and couldn't afford food, clothing, housing, etc. In the *Torah*, the Law of Moses, there were rules that meant an enslaved person could be bought out or redeemed at any time and could receive compensation if they were abused (Exodus 21:20-21, 26-27). And those rules even applied to those who were classed as outsiders – which makes the practice a little different to the trans-Atlantic slave trade of the 1500s-1800s, particularly regarding race.

But in the 1st century Roman society that Paul was living in, slaves or *douloi* had zero rights, and many were treated horrendously (though not all). And a lot of 1st century Christians were enslaved people. How were they supposed to view their situations? And their bosses?

Paul gives 4 answers – ones that apply to *all* of us:

1) Serve out of patience. “All who are under the yoke of slavery should consider their masters worthy of full respect ...” Paul is addressing all who are enslaved, but particularly those who are enslaved to non-Christians. While that may not be the best position to find yourself in, Paul is urging them to look for the best in their bosses and give it – the logic being, do that, and you're more likely to see results.

That doesn't mean we shouldn't speak up for ourselves, or for others. But it does mean showing authority figures what a commendable life looks like.

2) Serve out of reverence. “So that God's name and our teaching may not be slandered.” Titus 2:9-10 puts it in a more positive way, but they're effectively saying the same thing. The principle goes like this: if we claim to be Christians, how we behave reflects on the One we follow. So, if we want the people over us to appreciate Jesus, we need to make sure we're treating them in a way that encourages that rather than discouraging it.

It's as if Paul is saying, “Your attitude – even as enslaved people – has the potential to change the world. So don't waste it.”

3) Serve out of benevolence. “Those who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them ... instead, they are to serve them even better ... (as those) dear to them.” It seems that some had misunderstood their new position and felt they no longer had to serve their Christian bosses, when in fact the opposite was true: we're *all* called to serve! We are all to submit to one another, as members of God's family (Ephesians 5:21).

Which of course means not just servants serving masters (or wives their husbands!), but the other way round, too.

4) Serve out of obedience. Paul concludes with, “These are the things you are to teach and urge on them.” Paul is giving these instructions, not just as Paul, but as an apostle of Christ and vessel of the Holy Spirit. So, this is about more than just obedience to masters. This is about obedience to one master: Jesus, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, who became as human as us, made Himself a servant, and called us to follow (Philippians 2:5-11).

Not just believe in Him or trust in what He's done for us, essential though that is. But to follow.

That, in a nutshell, is the point that Paul is making here.

We'll consider why – and what we do with it – in a minute.

Where The Rubber Hits The Road

It can be easy to think of a passage like this as endorsing slavery (and there are plenty, both pro and anti, who claim that it does). In case you're tempted to think that way, here are some other verses that are relevant to the subject:

- 1 Corinthians 7:21-22 (if you can gain your freedom, do so. But understand that in Christ the slave is truly free. And the master is a slave to Christ).
- Ephesians 6:5,9 (slaves, obey your masters as if obeying Christ Himself. Masters, treat your slaves in the same way, knowing that *your* master is watching).
- Colossians 3:9-11 (we are all being renewed into the likeness of our Creator, and in Him there is neither slave or free, for Christ is our all, and in us all).
- 1 Timothy 1:9-10 / Exodus 21:16 (the *Torah* was given not to condemn the righteous but lawbreakers and rebels ... slave traders, liars and perjurers).

And let's not forget Paul's letter to Philemon!

Paul understood that true freedom would come only with a change in society, and that would come, not through a Spartacus-style revolt, but through the message of Jesus. And that's what happened. The gospel was like a depth-charge in history: it changed the way we think and paved the way for human rights as we understand them today, and the employment legislations we all benefit from.

But what do *we* do with a passage like this? We need to recognise its context, celebrate its impact, and champion its cause (and yes, it's needed. In a world where people-trafficking still exists, where people are still exploited, where communities are still affected by the legacy of injustice, it's needed).

But we also need to follow its instructions in our own 9-5 experience – which brings us back to where we started. Because while we may not live in the same context as Paul's original readers, we can still, even today, feel enslaved. By our circumstances. By the need to make ends meet. By the culture of our workplaces. By that boss who seems to have it in for us.

With that in mind, let's pray for each other, now.