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Freedom and its Discontents. 1 Timothy 6:1-2.

Somewhere inside most of us is the desire to be free. And this desire is always amplified whenever we feel we are being forced and constrained to do someone else's bidding. If the demands by those in authority are onerous enough, that longing for freedom will eventually become a mobilizing force.

Whole peoples have fought for it.

You and I know this, even if only in small ways. My brother, for instance, left the security of a large company – IBM, where you all wear white shirts and ties and dark suits, half expecting to be there for life – and left for the freedom to be found in running his own business. Yet many people discover that the road to freedom is a hard one. Freedom carries with it new constraints and responsibilities that are often *more* frustrating than anything you've previously endured.

This section of 1st Timothy deals with this dynamic. Freedom. Freedom to *live* how we want, freedom to *think* how we want, freedom to *spend our wealth* how we want.

Let's read 1 Timothy 6:1-2 p. 1265

¹ Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.

² Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these things. (ESV)

What we do each Sunday, when you stop to think about it, is quite remarkable. Sunday after Sunday we open this book up and don't just read it, but we study it. And that activity assumes that what we are reading is relevant and up-to-date. And it IS amazing how thoroughly contemporary this book, two millenia old, continues to be.

But that relevance, that sense of an eternal wisdom, sometimes leaves you when you get to a passage like this one – at least it did for me when I read it for the first time some years back. We can read the New Testament and become perplexed at why Jesus, or Paul, or the other New Testament writers, never called for the abolition of the institution of slavery. And that confusion has biblical warrant. Because slavery – and by that word we usually mean the buying, selling and owning of human beings, as if they were a toaster, an iPod or a dog – is completely incompatible with the biblical, and even Old Testament understanding of humanity as being made in the image of God.

And you would be right. So let's go with that.

Now, we can't spend a lot of time on this, because if we do, we won't see how truly relevant this passage still is! We'll get stuck in the past. But we must take a moment, I think for two reasons. If we don't look at this issue, some of us will be too distracted to hear the application, and also because we live in a morally confused time, where morality seems up for grabs. And the bible is NOT confused when it comes to the issue of slavery.

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So let's quickly look at the good, the bad and the ugly of Christianity and slavery.

First the good. The slavery in Paul's day WAS significantly different than in more recent times. Not only could most slaves be counted on to be set free, almost no slaves reached old age AS slaves. Slaves could own property, including, by the way, other slaves! Slaves completely controlled the property they owned, able to invest and save, and purchase their freedom if they wanted. In fact, in Paul's day, people complained about the excess of nouveau riche ex slaves who scandalized the "old money" Roman aristocracy. You also have to understand – this causes cognitive dissonance for us because of the American experience with slavery – but being a slave did NOT indicate one's social class. Slaves were regularly given the same social status as their owners and from outward appearances it was usually impossible to tell a slave from a free person.

Get this (this is very strange to American ears): a lot of people PREFERRED slavery over freedom because of the security it gave you. Slaves could be merchants, a slave could be a business owner or what we would call a CEO, slaves could get an education and slaves could even be government officials. Finally, if you were not Roman, selling yourself INTO slavery was often used as a way to *get* Roman citizenship and gaining entrance into society. And finally, slavery in ancient Rome almost never had a racial component, whereas here it was foundational.

So that's the good – or at least as good as it gets. A relative good. **What about the bad?** Well here is what scholars – many of them evangelicals – will say about slavery. They will say, the Roman Empire wasn't ready to abolish slavery. Slavery was so integral to the Roman Empire that to abolish it in one fell swoop would have been to cause the social structure of the empire to crumble. That any attempt at slave revolt – instigated by Christians or not – would have led to a bloodbath, and Christians never would have been able to evangelize the world as well as they did. It's estimated that 1/3 of the church in Ephesus were slaves.

Now here is why you might think this is bad. Very bad: Paul *knows* what some slaves do. They revolt, they rebel, and they run away. And Paul is clear here and elsewhere that he *doesn't* want slaves to do this – don't revolt, don't rebel, don't run away.

Now bear with me here, and let me take a few shots at the bad. The bad *may not* be as bad as it looks.

Thomas Oden – he's no evangelical, but rather a mainline, Methodist theologian – Oden says that it is the NT that sets forth the principles by which slavery would be abolished. Passages like Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek ... slave nor free, ... male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." What the apostle was trying to do, says Oden, was to "undermine the very essence of slavery by preaching the love of Christ to all," so that once Christian principles took hold, the people would figure out that slavery was contrary to the will of God.

Now there is a lot of merit to this. It IS Christianity – you see this is in the work of William Wilberforce and Dr Martin Luther King – that becomes the greatest single force in history for the eradication of slavery. As William Ramsey has said, "the more fully Christianity is realized in any society, the more thoroughly will slavery be destroyed," and the institution be made illegal.

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But that doesn't go far enough. The bible is not *pro*-slavery, the bible is not *for* slavery, the bible definitely does not *promote* slavery. One of the grand themes of the bible is that we have a God who brings his people OUT of slavery.

I want you to flip back just a couple of pages in this very same letter of 1st Timothy, and remind you of something we didn't take note of at the time... but now IS the time. Turn with me back to page 1262, to 1st Timothy chapter 1. Look with me at verse 9. Paul is giving a list of acts which the law calls vile, evil and sinful. The law, Paul says, "is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, *enslavers*, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted."

Slavery is not just socially wrong, Paul says, but enslaving people – in PARTICULAR people who do not want to be enslaved – is contrary to sound doctrine and goes against the gospel. Being a slave trader – and you see the footnote there in the ESV, someone steals someone, makes them property, and takes away their liberty, dignity and freedom – is right up there with adultery and assaulting or murdering your own mother. Paul also said that slaves should embrace freedom if they had the opportunity in 1st Corinthians 7.

Now you do need to know this – this may sound provocative: Enslaving yourself was not wrong. And here is how it would work.

Let's say I borrow some money from you. And that by a certain agreed date, I still had not paid you back. Well, there are no credit cards or banks back then. So I can't really borrow money to pay you back or file chapter 11 or sell crystal meth – it doesn't exist yet. No, I have to pay you back. Now slavery sounds crazy – but you know, to other people, THIS sounds crazy. *When you borrow money, you're supposed to pay it back.* For some of us, it would help to know this!

So, in those days, when you couldn't pay back your debt on the day you said you would, you said to the person, "I have to work this off. I need to go to work for you as a slave until my debt is paid." You enslaved... yourself. And just because you now "got Jesus" doesn't mean you don't have to pay your debts anymore. No, Paul says, "if this IS your situation, if you ARE under that yoke – the weight of that debt as a slave – work hard! Regard your creditor, your master, as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled."

See, here's what Paul saw: *Who* tend to become Christians? The meek, right? The poor, or the poor in spirit. It's *always* been that way. Doesn't Jesus say that it would be easier to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go into heaven? So a preponderance of people who are coming to know Jesus *are* the poor. Some of them owe money. Slaves were one group in the early church that had been *especially* drawn by the freedom that Paul's gospel promised: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free." Now if you are a slave and you receive this gospel that says "Your debt is forgiven. You are now one with God in Jesus Christ. That you have been lifted out of slavery to sin. You're a new creation." Well some of them – remember, they're still sinners even though they are *forgiven* sinners – some wanted to rebel, revolt and run away.

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Tasting spiritual – let's call it actual freedom – gives you a taste for even more of it. But if you run, Paul says, you set your creditor up to revile the faith. "He was fine! He was paying off his debt. He worked hard... and then he became a Christian, and he walked out on his debt." Those of you who know your bible – this may be some of the background to Philemon, right?

But also what about the masters? What about creditor-masters who are Christians? The masters were now to look at the slave as a brother – as an equal – even as he was probably tempted to think he was better than his debtor. And that's what is going on here. Sinners are working for sinners. Right? One sinner didn't pay his debt when he said he would. And another person – the creditor – he is tempted to squeeze more out of, or put down, the one who owes him.

And when you start talking in these categories, well now you're just talking about something that looks a lot like the workplace. We're going to come back to that in a minute. But we have to take a moment to look at the ugly.

And that is this: We can say as much as we want that the slavery that Paul speaks about is different in many ways from what we had and what we did in this country, but that only serves to implicate our brother and sister Christians who, until the end of the 19th century accepted the *American* brand of slavery – the man-stealing and oppressive ownership of people – in this country. Jonathan Edwards was critical of the slave trade, but he owned a slave. George Whitefield, one of my preacher-heros, opposed cruelty to slaves, but when he opened an orphanage, he also bought a nearby plantation and its 75 slaves to take care of them. Going even further than that, James Henly Thornwell, the great southern Presbyterian theologian concluded that "the scriptures not only fail to condemn slavery, they as distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man." These men were wrong. Very wrong.

The ugly is, that while we can say it is the worldview of Christianity and the message of the gospel more than anything else that has meant that slavery is to be abolished, we must also bear part of the guilt and shame for it as well. The guilt cannot be ignored. It has to be confessed and forgiven based on nothing else but the shed blood of Jesus Christ on the cross.

Now in the time we have left, how SHOULD we apply this to ourselves? Is this passage relevant?

In two ways: one simple and final, and the other more complicated and ongoing. The first is this. The practice of slavery that is man-stealing and oppressive is wrong. It is as immoral as murder and sexual immorality, and it is ruled out by scripture. Simple, and final.

The second, though, is this: When a Christian signs a note that says I owe this much money and I will pay it back by a certain date, then a Christian has to work to pay off those obligations. And if you think about it... which one of us doesn't? Some of you are students. Ever heard of a student loan? Some of you are home owners. Does the word mortgage mean anything to you? Some of us rent, and there is this contract called a lease. Many of us have credit cards... all of those say you can borrow this money... but that it must be paid back at a certain time. You need to work, you see, to pay those obligations. Freedom in Christ does not release the Christian from obligations to those in rightful authority.

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And how about this? How many of you here hate your job? (Hands up).

Consider this: That is why they pay you. If they could get someone to do it for free, they would! They know you won't do that job if they don't pay you. Now yes, every once in a while, someone has a job and says, "I'd pay THEM to do this." But you know if they said, "Okay," you'd go off and find someone who *would* pay you. And those of you who are at home, you're a stay-at-home mom, or you're a kid with chores and homework – you really DO feel like a slave, because no one seems to be paying you (even though there is a roof over your head and food to eat). You may even use the word, "I work like a slave," or "I slave away at this every day."

But God has given us these positions. This is all by his sovereign will. These work situations, some of them very difficult, with work you don't like or with people you don't like, must still be done.

Why? So that people "benefit by" your "good service," and *so that God's word and the teaching of the church will not be reviled.*

All of us know someone, as Mark Driscoll puts it, whose behavior on the job turns agnostics into atheists. The kind of people whose behavior is so out of accord with decency that those around them say, "if that is a Christian, then Christians are total hypocrites, and I don't want to be one." But sometimes it's because the Christian in the workplace over-spiritualizes everything. Every task is followed by "God willing!" Or they have the full line of "Precious moments" wisdom, cards, and figurines everywhere you look. Or they're handing out tracts or bible verses at every chance. And that stuff isn't evil. But guess what? It's not work! A boss who walks by your desk and sees you looking at the bible on your monitor feels about the same way as when he sees porn on someone else's computer. He or she is saying, "Not on my time! That's not work!" How you perform, how you deliver on expectations, reflects upon God.

And by the way, if that IS you, do you think someone agnostic or atheist wants to hang out, or even go to church with someone who can spiritualize whether the coffee machine works, or who says they'll make those photocopies because it honors God? No! They don't think you speak the same language they do.

I pastored a woman who some years ago, and over a 2 year period I became very concerned because she couldn't hold down a job. We were always praying for her because she disagreed with a boss, or didn't like the work situation. Then I sat down with her to ask why this kind of thing kept happening.

At one place she had a full-size 5x3 foot poster of Mel Gibson's *The Passion* over her desk. On another job, her boss asked her if she had finished something when what she was actually doing was talking to a co-worker about the existence of hell. He called her on this, and she felt he was being anti-Christian. And at the third place, she walked out because she saw the payroll and was angry that some employees were being shown favoritism – she quoted the bible – and were being paid more than others.

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Now listen carefully: I'm NOT saying people should NOT know that you are a Christian. Otherwise, your work could not reflect WELL on God and his teaching. No, people should know who you are. But you're there to work. They are not paying you to proselytize. Don't look at your job as an excuse to be an evangelist or missionary in your particular work place. It will come out anyway when you don't engage in gossip, and through your speech and your habits. No, you are there to do the work, and the work itself is done for the glory of God. Make the copies, write the memo, finish the project, lead the new corporate initiative, so that your boss says, "I like those Christians. They do a good job." Your job IS your witness. And people WILL go to church with someone whose work they admire or whose performance is exemplary.

Now, what if you have a boss who is a Christian? Paul says, "Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers." You know how this goes. You're 30 minutes late to work, and you tell your boss, "Oh man, I am so sorry. You know, I was doing my quiet time, and I was reading Zephaniah. Man that book is cool. When I read the prophets I get so down deep, I just lose myself." No! You don't take advantage of your Christian boss.

In fact, you need to work hard for the Christian boss because he or she has THEIR witness to give – their performance to be concerned about. And the better that Christians do professionally, the more that money goes to the poor, the church, the world, right?

Some of you are the only Christian you know where you work. We had a guy at the last church I pastored name Colin. He's a chemist who studies proteins – and he did this over at Princeton. He was the only Christian he knew in his lab. But he did it so well, that he had a boss who said "I need more people here like you." Can you imagine a company calling a church to say, "Have you got any more people of integrity over there who show up on time and wear normal clothes?"

We need to wrap up. But there is something I want to warn us all about. Some of us have what theologians call an "over-realized eschatology." Big words, right. Eschatology is just the study of last things – the way that things *will be*. So what is an over-realized eschatology? It's when you take your knowledge of the way things will be, and you say, "It should be like that right now." Now it is one thing to say, "I know that God's kingdom will be an honest kingdom, a fair kingdom, an equitable kingdom, and so I want to act fairly and with honesty now." It is another thing entirely to say to a boss – a boss who is paying you a wage to which you agreed to do work – that he, too, must act exactly like the how it will be in the new heavens and new earth! You can't walk into your boss's office – whether they are a Christian or not – and say, "You know, in heaven, we're completely equal, so I don't have to do what you just asked me to do."

I have a set of bookshelves in my office made by a Christian carpenter who had an over-realized eschatology. He clearly thought that these shelves would burn up and be used as firewood for the new heavens and new earth, because he obviously didn't care HOW they were made! Christians must respect the authority of their masters, whether they be superior officers, employers, managers or supervisors, whether they happen to be fellow believers or not. The reputation of the church is unavoidably at stake.

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Think about Jesus Christ. Fully equal with the Father. And by the way, not just in some future sense, but he already HAD been equal with God for eternity. And yet he is sent to do this job. Jesus prays in John 17 to his Father, "I glorified you on earth, *having accomplished the work that you gave me to do*. And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed." Do you hear that? The co-eternal son was sent down to do a job – to complete a job of work that the father gave him to do. In Mark 10, Jesus alludes to it with his disciples when he says to them, "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus Christ is that slave for all – he is that bondservant. The messianic rule of God is inaugurated by the greatest example of service ever seen: Jesus' death as a substitutionary atonement – a ransom paid for many, for what we owe.

You see, this is why we pray that we are debtors. We are! We owe God. But Jesus takes the form of a servant – a slave to our sin – and he pays it all off. The Lord Jesus indentured himself – a slave to our sin – so that we might be free,

Let's pray.