

1 Timothy 6:1-2, Is God OK with Slavery?

Having addressed how to deal with widows and the pastors of the church, God next addresses those who are slaves. He basically tells slaves to respect their masters in every way, whether or not their master is a Christian, but especially if their master is a Christian. To behave otherwise would be unchristian and it would give people reason to slander God's name and the Christian faith. With statements such as this, does it mean that God condones slavery?

6:1, “[count their own masters worthy of all honor](#)” Christian slaves are supposed to see their masters as individuals who are worthy of their every respect. When people read such comments about slavery in the Bible, they reject it outright. They say things like, “I can't believe in a Bible or God who would condone a barbaric practice like slavery.” Why does God tell Christian slaves to behave this way, why not tell them to band together and refuse to serve their masters in order to end slavery? First, it has to do with what happens to you as an individual once you become a Christian. To become a Christian means that you begin to look at everything differently, even if you're a slave and often, God calls us to behave the opposite of the way the world does. The specific reason God gives for this admonition about respecting masters is so that the watching world won't use the slave's disrespect as an opportunity to badmouth God or His doctrine, i.e., the Christian faith. Why would a Christian slave's disrespectful behavior towards their master give God or Christianity a bad name? Because God told slaves to respect their masters so to do otherwise is to be a Christian hypocrite. Perhaps you know of bad Christians; how do they make God and Christianity look when they behave badly? It repels people from Christianity instead of attracting them. Our behavior as Christians is supposed to be God's calling card to the world; it is through our Christ-like behavior that God wins souls. So for a Christian slave to show their master every respect would make people wonder, “What kind of God and religion is this that it can take a slave's hate and disdain for their master and turn it into respect?” It reveals God's power to transform an individual no matter what state they're in. Second, the slavery of the ancient world is not the slavery that we're familiar with which was solely based on race. God did end slavery, but His method of ending it was not by force; it was from within, see below.

6:2, “[those who have believing masters, let them not despise *them* because they are brethren](#)” since God speaks of Christian masters in this verse, it means that in 6:1 He's focused on non-Christian masters. Therefore, God wants Christian slaves to show every respect to their masters even though they're not Christian. And now He addresses proper behavior towards masters who are Christian. Notice the problems that can arise when we have a Christian slave and Christian master: the slave can come to despise him/her. Why? Perhaps because the Christian slave thinks that they should be given their freedom, or not worked so hard, or because they and the master are now equals before God, since in Christ there are not masters or slaves (Galatians 3:28). But instead of taking this attitude, God wants Christian slaves to show every respect to their masters, especially because they are Christian. So instead of their master's Christian status being a reason to despise them, God wants them to respect them even more precisely because the one benefitting from the slave's labor is a beloved brother/sister in the Lord. And this goes back to how God changes the way we look at life: the Christian slave, instead of focusing on their slavery and looking for a way out of it, sees their service to their master as a way of honoring them because they are someone who is worthy of all their honor.

“[Teach and exhort these things](#)” this phrase could refer to 6:1-2, but it's more likely referring to everything Paul has said thus far in the letter: the letter began by telling Timothy that there's some very bad teaching going on in Ephesus which must be corrected by properly teaching them God's truth and showing them how to apply it, 1:3-7; 4:1-16. And this is exactly the message Paul repeatedly tells Timothy in one way or another, 3:14-15; 4:6-7, 11, 13-15; 5:7. Thus, Timothy must not only teach correct Bible truth, he must show them how to live it. God is not a subject to be studied, but a Father who longs for us to do what He says (Joshua 1:8).

Is God OK with slavery? Slavery was common in the Roman Empire. There were approximately 50 million slaves throughout the Empire and about one third of the population in Rome were slaves. It was a mixed bag; many slaves were treated like valued family members but many others were abused in every way imaginable. The institution of slavery was not one of Rome's proudest achievements, but it wasn't the race-based, lifetime slavery of the Caribbean and the New World in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the ancient world, you could end up a slave through criminal activity, war, or debt. Slavery was not monolithic so for God to call slaves to unite and seek their freedom would've fallen on many deaf ears. That is, those who were treated horribly would've wanted their freedom, but those treated like family would not have. And those in slavery through debt or criminal activity would know that they had no case for freedom until their debt to society or financial debt was paid.

Slavery in the Old Testament, the slavery of the Roman Empire was much different than the slavery of the Old Testament Scriptures. Roman masters had power over life and death and could abuse or take advantage of their slaves at will. But the slavery of the Old Testament came with rules and protections. If the person was a debt slave, they had to be freed on the Sabbath Year (Exodus 21:2, which could be after 7 years or one week, depending on when the Sabbath Year fell). They also had to be freed with enough assets to start life over (Deuteronomy 15:1-18). If a slave liked their master's treatment, a slave could choose to remain a slave for life (Exodus 21:1-6). In our modern culture of consumer debt, many are enslaved to debt for life. In Israel you were freed every seven years—all slaves released, all debts forgiven (Deuteronomy 15:1, 12). Slaves were not to be treated harshly (Leviticus 25:43). Masters didn't have power over life and death. Those from the surrounding nations could become slaves under indentured servitude, but not by kidnapping or force (Exodus 21:16). And if a foreigner became a slave through sale or war, since Israel was an open/inclusive nation, their laws permitted foreigners to become part of the nation by becoming a proselyte. And if they then became part of Israel, then they would presumably come under the protection of the Sabbath-debt-release laws. Thus, slavery in the Old Testament was not like that in the American South; it had certain protections.

Slavery in the New Testament, but doesn't God condone slavery in the New Testament? Not exactly. Yes, He tells slaves to serve their masters wholeheartedly, to care deeply about them and the work they do for them, even harsh masters (Ephesians 6:5-8; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Peter 2:18). But God was never OK with slavery. This is evident from every comment He makes about slavery which regulates it and provides protections for slaves. What God does in the New Testament is set off a fuse that would eventually blow up slavery, not only in the Roman Empire but in America and Europe. The first thing to note is how God makes masters and slaves equal: the moment one believes in Christ, there are no more social classes, no more masters, no more slaves (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). This is ingenious because it targets the attitude of slavery not the topic of slavery. When you as a master realize that God doesn't want you looking at your slaves like property but brothers/sisters in Christ, it will change the way you look at slavery altogether. Likewise slaves, i.e., when slaves realize that they're not to look at their masters with despise, but respect, it will change their view of slavery. We see exactly God's viewpoint on slavery in the letter of Philemon. In this short letter, God tells Philemon, a master, not only to free his slave Onesimus, but to treat him as a brother (Philemon 10-21). The whole time God is talking to Philemon, He's appealing to his heart not his intellectual view of slavery. He wants him to realize that Onesimus is not just his slave but a child of God dear to Paul and God. And if Onesimus has wronged Philemon, if he owes him anything, then God will make Philemon whole, not to mention that Philemon owes God his life. Therefore, when God tackles slavery, He doesn't abolish it by force, but from within. He changes people's hearts, which in turn changes their minds. The result: the Christian West became the only culture in the history of the world to voluntarily give up slavery on the grounds of the golden rule.