

What We Learn from New Testament Advice to Slaves

“Slaves, submit to your earthly masters.”

The injunction jars us. We know the evils of slavery. We wonder why the early church did not loudly and roundly condemn slavery. Why do the New Testament letters instead tell Christians how to live *within* the context of slavery? This raises large questions which I hope sometime to discuss at more length. What I want to do in this essay, though, is explore what we learn about our own work from the various slavery passages in the New Testament.

Slavery is a bad thing. The New Testament gives advice for dealing with slavery, but it does not call the arrangement good. Slavery may be more or less brutal. The material conditions of slaves vary. But there is one constant about slavery: the slave’s labors and living arrangements are under the control of the master. Another person holds the (legal) right to say where one goes and what one does. This level of control should not be held by another human.

Even while reassuring slaves that they can serve God as “a freedman of the Lord,” Paul warns not to “become slaves of men,” because Jesus has bought us with a price. And even when he tells slaves not to “be concerned about” their condition, he adds the parenthetical, “But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.” (1 Corinthians 7:21-23). The only fitting master is God. Paul is continuing an Old Testament theme. Israel was not to allow their fellow Israelites to be sold as slaves because they were God’s servants, whom he rescued from slavery in Egypt (Leviticus 25:39-55).

My point is not to make slavery look less bad, but to see what these texts teach us about our own work, whatever our economic situation.

New Testament advice to slaves reminds us that, whatever our economic situation,

- **God values and will reward all legitimate work, and**
- **Our work and economic lives should reflect Kingdom generosity and the way of the cross.**

The advice to slaves presupposes the goodness of work.

Christians value work as a way of producing good in the world. We are promised that God will reward us for doing good. Yes, this includes the work of cleaning houses, installing septic tanks, growing food, manufacturing computers, administering businesses, changing diapers, cooking, teaching and all other legitimate work.

Slaves, and all of us, are to work for Christ, “rendering service [to others] with good will as to the Lord.” Whether slave or free, and thus whether we are well or poorly paid by others, any good we do will be repaid by Jesus. (Ephesians 6:5-9 compare Colossians 3:22-4:1)

This reshapes our perspective on work. The fundamental goal is to accomplish something worthwhile. This encompasses both paid and unpaid work—the work we do for ourselves and our families, the work we volunteer, and the work by which we earn our living. Compensation for work is, logically speaking, secondary. It is right and good, and in general essential, that the worker shares the fruit of his labor (1 Corinthians 9). But when this reward or compensation is missing or inadequate because of slavery or because of other economic arrangements, it does not render our work futile.

This doesn’t mean we do not try to get out of situations where we are being taken advantage of economically. Paul told slaves to avail themselves of chances for freedom. Jesus told us to be shrewd as serpents as well as harmless as doves. But there will be situations where others get the drastically better end of the deal, for reasons varying from innocent to nefarious. If we are fairly paid, we work for the Lord and not just for money. If another party gets the better end of the deal, we still value the work for the sake of Jesus.

It is classic Christian counsel to avoid jobs and ventures that make money from physical or spiritual harm to others. If we are working for the Lord and seeking to do good, we will avoid jobs that harm others even if they are lucrative. This should be obvious, but every generation of Christians needs to be reminded.

What about work that provides luxuries for the rich? Many workers today provide services to the wealthy that they can ill afford themselves, whether workers in high-end restaurants, nannies for wealthy moms, construction workers on mansions, landscape workers on estates, etc. Are such services still good service to Christ? It seems so. Many slaves would similarly have provided conveniences to their more wealthy masters. But Paul instructs them to “*serve*

all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved.” (1 Timothy 6:2)

Kingdom Generosity and the Way of the Cross

So we shouldn't begrudge privileges that others enjoy. A construction worker, for example, need not begrudge the customer a nicer house than he can afford himself. Love is glad for the benefits that others derive from our work. Our work reflects the generosity of God's Kingdom in that we are glad for what it provides others.

The way of the cross is just as important as kingdom generosity (and tightly linked to it). Love accepts suffering rather than resorting to violence or hate. Love goes the second mile. We overcome evil with good. Ultimately, we wait for vindication by God rather than taking our own revenge. Whether we are enslaved, subjected to theft, extorted, or exploited in milder ways we turn the other cheek rather than resisting the evil person.

In 1 Peter 2:13-3:18, all relationships are held to the way of the cross. This means love and honor for all people for the Lord's sake. We submit to human institutions of government and empire. Slaves honor and submit to even harsh and violent masters without revenge or harsh language. Like Jesus, they commit themselves to the Father who judges justly, our Shepherd and Overseer. Peter makes clear that the advice to slaves is just one facet of a much broader approach to relationships. After drawing specific applications for both husbands and wives, he makes it fully general.

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, (1 Peter 3:8-9)

Workers should always be glad that others benefit from our work. That is part of kingdom generosity. When arrangements turn sour and we face evil, the way of the cross is needed as well.

But what about ...

Valuing work that doesn't pay us well and accepting suffering may strike us as a message that serves the oppressors. Does Christianity just tell the workers to work hard and contentedly so

their masters can continue in their ways? Where is the message of liberation, justice, and a new society? This deserves much fuller discussion than I can give it here. But two points must be made.

First, Christianity demands a lot of the rich in the present age. All are called to share possessions. Exploitation and oppression are denounced in the strongest of languages. Christian practice radically undercuts distinctions of social status.

Secondly, the advice to slaves comes right from the heart of the gospel. The evils so common among the rich are not overcome by violence, hatred, or grumbling, but by faithfully doing good, in all its forms, and committing ourselves to the one who judges justly.