

## **“Slaves” (1 Timothy 6:1–2)**

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Religion can be very controversial. I know that well, and I suppose there’s something within me that likes to address controversial topics, especially when they find their way into the public square. Well over five years ago, there was a controversy related to Barack Obama’s second inauguration, after he was reelected as president. Whoever organizes inaugurations had invited a rather mainstream evangelical pastor named Louis Giglio to give the benediction. Later, some people had discovered that Giglio actually believes what the Bible says about homosexuality, and that he once preached a message on Romans 1 and addressed that topic. So, Giglio was basically uninvited. A “liberal” pastor who doesn’t believe what the Bible says about homosexuality replaced him.

Now, I’m not going to preach on the issue of homosexuality this morning. That may or may not be a relief to you. But I remember watching something on TV when this controversy with Giglio emerged. One of MSNBC’s hosts, Lawrence O’Donnell, gave a commentary on this controversy. He noted that Giglio would be replaced with a pastor who doesn’t believe parts of the Bible, the same parts of the Bible that Obama doesn’t believe. And he suggested that we shouldn’t believe all of the Bible, and that no one really believes all that’s found in the Bible. I think O’Donnell would have been happy to ditch the Bible altogether.

But this is the part that really got me. Here he was, behind a desk with a closed Bible on it, one that he surely has not read in its entirety. And he said this:

This time, as it was last time for the first time in history, the book will be held by a First Lady who is a descendent of slaves. [He’s referring to Michelle Obama.] But the holy book she will be holding does not contain one word of God condemning slavery. Not one word. But that same book, which spends hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of pages condemning all sorts of things and couldn’t find one sentence to condemn slavery, does indeed find the space to repeatedly condemn gay people, as the now banished Louie Giglio said it does. And as the First Lady is holding that book for the President, sitting somewhere near them will be a pastor who the Inauguration Committee will make sure is much more adept at hiding what that book actually says than Louie Giglio was.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clare Kim, “Pastor Is under Fire for Views That Are in the Bible,” *NBCNews.com*, January 11, 2013, <http://www.nbcnews.com/id/50433217/t/pastor-under-fire-views-are-bible>; Billy Hallowell, “MSNBC’s Lawrence O’Donnell Mocks the Bible and Urges Obama to Exclude It from the Inauguration,” *The Blaze*, January 11, 2013,

As someone who has actually read the Bible several times and someone who has studied it, I had to stop and think. Does the Bible contain no words that condemn slavery? Is that true?

Whether you agree with O'Donnell or not, I think we should step back and think about some questions, ones that we might not have good answers for right at the moment. We all know that slavery is wrong, but why is that so? Why is slavery wrong? Where did that idea come from? What societies were the first ones to forbid slavery? And, since we're in a church, what does the Bible actually say about slavery?

Well, I hope to answer those questions, at least in part, today. And I'll do that as we continue our study of 1 Timothy, which is a book in the New Testament of the Bible. If you're joining us for the first time, we usually study a book of the Bible in its entirety, going passage by passage. Sometimes, a passage is a paragraph, or a whole chapter of the Bible. Today, I'm going to look at just two verses, 1 Timothy 6:1–2. And just to give us a little context, I'll tell you this much: The book of 1 Timothy was written by the apostle Paul, a messenger of Jesus Christ and a man who started some churches throughout the Roman Empire almost two thousand years ago. He wrote this letter to his younger associate, a man named Timothy. Paul had left Timothy to help a church in the city of Ephesus (in the western part of what is now known as Turkey). This church had its share of problems, and Paul wanted Timothy to know how “one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).<sup>2</sup>

In this part of the letter, Paul is telling Timothy how different groups of people should behave in the church. And, at the beginning of chapter 6, he talks about slaves. And this is what Paul says:

<sup>1</sup> Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants [slaves]<sup>3</sup> regard their own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. <sup>2</sup> 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 (1 Tim. 6:1–2).

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<https://www.theblaze.com/news/2013/01/11/msnbcs-lawrence-odonnell-mocks-the-bible-urges-obama-to-exclude-it-from-the-inauguration>. Both articles quote O'Donnell as saying “someone” instead of “somewhere”; surely, this is a mistake.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> The ESV formerly used “slaves” with “bondservants” appearing in a footnote. The actual Greek word, in the singular, is δούλος (doulos). Now, they have reversed this, probably so that we wouldn't think of chattel slavery in America instead of Roman slavery. As we'll see, the institutions were quite different.

It's a bit jarring to read about slaves and masters, because it seems so foreign to our experience. That, and we know slavery is wrong. And what Paul tells Timothy doesn't match our expectations. We might expect Paul to tell Timothy to contact his senators and representative, or start a petition at [change.org](http://change.org), to put an end to slavery. But Paul doesn't do that.

To understand why Paul says what he does, we have to understand slavery in context. Today, I'm going to give us three contexts in which we should understand slavery. The first is the context of the whole Bible.

“In the beginning, God made the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1), and he made human beings in his image and likeness, which means that we are unique in all of God's creation. We alone are made to reflect what God is like, to display his glory, to rule over his creation by coming under his rule, to worship him, and to love and obey him as his children. What God made was good, and there was no hint of division, greed, or exploitation. If you knew nothing other than the first two chapters of the Bible, you would never imagine that such a thing as slavery could ever exist. Everything was peace and harmony.

But something changed. The first human beings didn't trust God. They failed to obey him. They violated his commandment, deciding that they knew better than God. And the consequences have been horrific. Because human beings rebelled against a holy, perfect, righteous God, he could not allow that rebellion to go unchecked. So, he removed them from the sacred space of the garden of Eden, and he put a curse on all of creation. In a sense, he gave them over to their rebellion and let them go their own way. And when we reject God, who is the source of truth, beauty, goodness, and life, we find lies, ugliness, evil, and death. The reason why we're at war with each other is because we're first at war with God.

The first mention of slavery in the Bible comes in the context of a curse. In the story of Noah, after the flood has ended, his son Ham violates him. And Noah curses Ham's son, Canaan, saying, “Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers” (Gen. 9:25). The New International Version says, “The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers.”

I'll add this here: slavery was a universal institution in the ancient world. Every ancient society had slaves. From Egypt to Assyria to Babylon and far beyond, all ancient societies had slaves. While the Bible never commands people to enslave others, it does assume that the practice exists. The Israelites were slaves in Egypt, after all.

So, the Bible talks about creation and the entrance of sin into the world, which we call the fall. And the fall is the reason why anything bad, including slavery, exists. The next part of the story is called redemption, which I will come back to later. The final part of the Bible's story is restoration, when God makes everything right in the universe. And while we only get glimpses of what a renewed and restored world will be like, there is no hint of slavery there. That is because there will be no sin in that perfect world.

The second context in which we should understand slavery is slavery in the Roman Empire at the time of the New Testament. As I said, slavery was universal. It existed for a long time before the time of Jesus. It was found in ancient Greece and later in the Roman Empire.

There are several things to know about slavery in the Roman Empire. One, there were a lot of slaves. Exact figures are hard to come by in the ancient world. One estimate I read was, "Slaves accounted for something like 2 to 3 million of the 7.5 million inhabitants of Italy." That same author, James Jeffers, says, "Slaves were probably closer to 10 percent of the population elsewhere in the Empire."<sup>4</sup> That's a low estimate. Another author says, "Estimates are that 85–90 percent of the inhabitants of Rome and [the] peninsula [of] Italy were slaves or of slave origin in the first and second centuries A.D. Facts and figures about slavery in the provinces are sketchy by comparison with those in Italy, but the existing evidence suggests a comparable percentage."<sup>5</sup> Let's assume the truth is somewhere in between those figures. Perhaps 10 percent of the population of the Roman Empire were at any given time slaves and many more were freed.

Two, people could become slaves in a few different ways. Some people sold themselves into slavery to pay their debts. That may sound odd, but as recently as the mid-nineteenth century, people could go to prison for debts. When I was a doctoral student in music, I studied the life of Richard Wagner, the famous German composer, and I read that he spent time in debtor's prison. There was nothing like bankruptcy then. In the ancient world, you could work off your debts through slavery. People could also become slaves by being captured by slavers, or because they were children of slaves, or because they had been abandoned by their parents and raised to become slaves. More likely, people became slaves because they were conquered by the Roman Empire. As the Roman Empire expanded, prisoners of war became slaves.

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<sup>4</sup> James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1999), 221.

<sup>5</sup> Arthur A. Rupprecht, "Slave, Slavery," ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 881. He cites Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 105–131.

Three, slavery in the Roman Empire was much different than what we think of when we think of slavery. Slavery wasn't based on skin color. I don't like using the word "race" because there is only one human race, but slavery then wasn't based on race. Masters and slaves often had the same ethnicity. In fact, that's true of much of slavery in the world. In the Roman Empire, slaves could have certain rights. They could earn money and they could eventually buy their freedom. If they had rich masters, they might live better than the poor free people. They were often freed, usually at a relatively young age; we don't have evidence of people dying as slaves.

Four, the way slaves were treated could vary greatly. The slaves with arguably the worst lives were those who were used for sex. Many slaves worked in mines, which apparently was the most physically demanding and miserable job. There were hundreds of thousands of slaves who worked in the mines, and sometimes they were worked to death.<sup>6</sup> The largest group of slaves were farmers. Slaves could also be domestic servants, artisans, artists, and managers of their masters' businesses. I'm sure a slave's quality of life largely depended on his or her role.

All of that is to say that slavery was different than what we think of when we imagine slavery. No one would argue that slavery was a good thing, but slavery did not necessarily mean a person was worked to death or degraded. But the reality is that could happen, too. It's hard to make sweeping generalizations.

The final context I want us to see slavery in is the context of the New Testament. When we read Paul's words, it's hard for us to understand why he wouldn't speak out more against slavery. Well, we should realize one thing: O'Donnell was wrong. (Unless we read the Bible as fundamentalists, which is something that unbelievers, ironically, tend to do.) There are some words against slavery in the Bible. At the beginning of 1 Timothy, Paul says that the Old Testament law can be used to reveal those who are "lawless and disobedient," those who are "ungodly and sinners" (1 Tim. 1:8). He then gives a vice list, and he includes "enslavers" among the list of "sinners" (1 Tim. 1:10). So, Paul quite clearly says it's wrong to capture people and force them to be slaves.

Paul also wrote a short letter to a slave owner, a man named Philemon. Philemon was a Christian, and he had a slave named Onesimus. We don't know why, but Onesimus ended up with Paul. Many assume Onesimus ran away from his master, but we don't know the whole

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<sup>6</sup> Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 297.

backstory. At any rate, Paul writes to Philemon to encourage him to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ, not a slave. Paul could have used his apostolic authority to command Philemon to let Onesimus go. He had the ability to do that. He even says, “though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you” (Philem. 8–9). Instead of commanding Philemon, he appeals to theology. He reminds Philemon that he, Paul, is (quite literally) “a prisoner for Christ Jesus” (verse 9) and he says that he has become like a father to Onesimus. He tells Philemon that he is sending Onesimus, “my very heart,” back to him. He would have liked to keep Onesimus with him, because Onesimus served Paul while Paul was in prison. But Paul knows it is right to send Onesimus back, “in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord” (verse 14).

And here’s the main point: Paul says, “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant [slave] but more than a bondservant [slave], as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philem. 15–16). Instead of treating Onesimus as a slave, Philemon should treat him as a brother, because that’s what he is—a brother in Christ.

Paul concludes by telling Philemon that he should receive Onesimus “as you would receive me” (Philem. 17). He tells Philemon that if Onesimus owns anything, he should charge it to Paul’s account (Philem. 18), which sounds like Paul might be willing to pay the price to free Onesimus. Paul also casually mentions that Philemon owes him “even your own self” (Philem. 19). Paul means that Philemon became a Christian through his ministry. In that sense, Paul has given Philemon the gift of eternal life. Philemon owes Paul everything. The least he could do would be to free his own slave. Paul then comes to this conclusion: “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (Philem. 21).

This is a radical move by Paul. He is saying that Onesimus doesn’t have a lower status than Philemon. They are one in Christ Jesus. They have equal access to God, equal standing, an equal inheritance. That’s why Paul writes, in Galatians 3:28, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (See also Col. 3:11). When Paul writes to churches and tells slaves to act in a certain way, and masters to act in a certain way, we should imagine that slaves and their masters were worshipping together. If you look at Paul’s references to slaves and masters in Ephesians 6 (Eph. 6:5–9) and Colossians 3 (technically Col. 3:22–4:1), you see that he reminds slaves that they are really

servicing Jesus, so they should work hard and work honorably. And he tells masters that they should remember that they and their slaves both have the same Master, Jesus. Again, Paul puts slaves and masters on the same footing, telling them that they are both slaves of Jesus. They belong to the same Master, they are part of the same family, and this should change their relationship.

We might still wonder why Paul doesn't write more forcefully against the institution of slavery. I think there are two reasons why he doesn't. The first is that the early church had no political power or influence. None. And the Roman Empire wasn't a democratic republic. They couldn't send a lobbyist to Rome. If early Christians tried to put an end to slavery through force or by sending a prophet to Caesar, it wouldn't work, and it would likely backfire. The Roman Empire would crack down hard on Christians and put an end to the church. This is why we should study the Bible in its historical context. If we fail to understand and historical and cultural context of the Bible, we'll end up misunderstanding its meaning.

But we should also note that Paul does tell slaves that, if possible, they should buy their freedom. This is what he writes in 1 Corinthians 7:20–24:

<sup>20</sup> Each one should remain in the condition in which he was called. <sup>21</sup> Were you a bondservant [slave] when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant [slave] is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant [slave] of Christ. <sup>23</sup> You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants [slaves] of men. <sup>24</sup> So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

He tells slaves that if they can, they should buy their freedom. But as long as they are slaves, they should know that they are truly free in Christ. To those who are not slaves, Paul says that they should realize they are slaves of Christ. No matter what position they found themselves in, they should ultimately serve God. They can do that as slaves or as freedmen.

Another reason that Paul doesn't speak forcefully against slavery is that he knows some things are more important than politics and public policy. The reason he doesn't command Philemon to free his slave is because he wants Philemon to think about the gospel, the message of good news at the heart of Christianity. At the least, he wants Philemon to realize that his slave is now his brother. They belong to the same family. And that reminds me of something else, some words from that Christmas song, "O Holy Night." The words are "chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother." While Christianity has given hope to literal slaves the world over,

promising ultimate freedom in eternity, it also has something powerful to say to all of us: all of us are slaves.

Jesus once said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Elsewhere, Paul says that all people will either be slaves to sin or slaves of God (Rom. 6:16–22). The apostle Peter says, “whatever overcomes a person, to that he is enslaved” (2 Pet. 2:19). We like to think that we are free. One of the gods of our age is the idea that we can do whatever we want, that we are free agents with free wills that cannot be constrained. We can determine who we are and what we’ll do. But the Bible’s message is, “No, you’re not really free. You’re enslaved by your sinful desires. You often know the right thing to do but you don’t often do it because your selfishness, your greed, your pride, and your lust really are your masters. You’re in chains.” We’re not really as free as we think we are.

But the Bible’s message doesn’t end there. It says something quite amazing. It says that though we were enslaved, God came to free us. And he came to free us by becoming a slave. Consider this famous passage, from another one of Paul’s letters. This is Philippians 2:5–11:

<sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant [a slave], being born in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Though Jesus was and is the Son of God, which is to say he has always been God, he didn’t cling to that glorious status. He didn’t stand on his rights. He humbled himself by becoming a slave, by becoming a human being. And not only did he do that, but he put up with sinful human beings who doubted him, mocked him, rejected him, arrested him, tortured him, and killed him. He did this so that he could pay the penalty for our rebellion against God. Our sin must be punished, because God is a perfect judge and he can’t allow rebellion and evil to go unchecked. But if God punished us for our sins, we would be destroyed. Fortunately for us, God gave us a way to be reconciled to him. That way is Jesus, the perfect man who became a perfect slave. Everyone who trusts in him is credited with his perfect obedience. Everyone who trusts in him has their debt of sin removed. Their chains are broken. They are forgiven. They receive the Holy Spirit, the third

person of God who empowers us to trust God, to love God, and to obey God. Though our lives may be hard, we, like Jesus, will be exalted. Though we die, we will later be resurrected to live in a perfect world with God forever.

This part of the Bible's story is known as redemption. It has given many people great hope. Slaves have been comforted by this news. Though they might be powerless to change their status, they could hope in Jesus, the God who became a slave. Though they were in physical chains, they knew the chains of sin were broken, and one day they would have eternal freedom. The apostle Peter wrote to slaves who were suffering unjustly. And he wrote these words (1 Pet. 2:18–25):

<sup>18</sup> Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. <sup>19</sup> For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. <sup>20</sup> For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. <sup>21</sup> For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps. <sup>22</sup> He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. <sup>23</sup> When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. <sup>24</sup> He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. <sup>25</sup> For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

The message of Christianity is what brought about emancipation for slaves. Over a long period of time, slavery disappeared almost entirely from Europe. By the middle ages, there was almost no slavery in the Christian world. Sarah Ruden, a professor of the classics and hardly a Bible-thumping evangelical, says, “the early Christian church, without staging any actual campaign against slavery, in the course of the centuries weakened it until it all but disappeared from Europe. Slavery was doomed simply because it jarred with Christian feeling—the same basic circumstance that doomed it in the modern West.”<sup>7</sup>

It's true that slavery reemerged in Christianized nations sometime in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. That is a shameful thing. Yet Christians have always been the ones who pushed for the abolition of slavery. They realized that enslaving people was contrary to treating them like fellow image bearers of God. As many as two-thirds of abolition leaders in the United

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<sup>7</sup> Sarah Ruden, *Paul among the People: The Apostle Reinterpreted and Reimagined in His Own Time* (New York: Pantheon, 2010), 168.

States were Christian pastors.<sup>8</sup> Many of the celebrated figures who pushed for the abolition of slavery in America were Christians and they were led by Christian motivations.

Some people might think slavery was ended by the Enlightenment, by people who were motivated by secular reason. But this isn't true. Many famous figures of the Enlightenment, like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Voltaire, supported slavery. David Hume, a famous philosopher who was a skeptic (what we might call an agnostic), was not in favor of abolition.<sup>9</sup> Worldviews that don't believe all human beings are made in God's image don't give us good enough reason to free slaves. To free slaves, we have to go against self-interest. This would actually have us go against the survival instinct that we supposedly have. If we truly believed in any form of Darwinian evolution, we would believe that nature is "red in tooth and claw" and that we are engaged in a competition. It's a survival of the fittest, and if the weak become slaves to help the strong, well, so much the better for us.

But Christianity gives us a proper motivation for putting an end to slavery. In England, one of the leading figures in the abolition movement was William Wilberforce (1759–1833), a Member of Parliament and a Christian. Largely due to his work, the British Empire banned the slave trade (in 1807) and then slavery itself (in 1833). And they did this at great cost. Slavery only existed in the more remote colonies of the British Empire, places like the West Indies, islands in the Caribbean, where sugar was made by slaves. The British Empire knew that the cost of abolition would be huge for slave owners. So, the Emancipation Act of 1833 paid slave owners to compensate for their losses. The cost was "equal to half of the British annual budget."<sup>10</sup>

Freedom always comes at a cost. We see that most clearly with Jesus' sacrifice. And there are many ways for us to respond to that sacrifice today.

If you are not a Christian, I urge you to put your trust and your hope in Jesus. Right now, you are not truly free. You're not free to live out your God-given purpose in life, which is to know God, love him, and serve him. You're not free from the fear or death. But Jesus came to destroy the power of death (Heb. 2:14) and to "deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery" (Heb. 2:15). The only way to be right with God, to be forgiven of all wrongdoing, and to have eternal life in a perfect world is to trust in Jesus. I would love to talk to

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<sup>8</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 279.

<sup>9</sup> Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 359.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 351.

you more about what this looks like in your life. It first comes with the realization that you are enslaved and you can't deliver yourself.

There are many ways that Christians should respond to this message. One is that there are things that are more important than politics. We often get caught up in defending our first amendment freedoms. We get caught up in trying to fix the world through politics. But there is something more important. Paul told slaves that, more important than their freedom, they should make the gospel look good. He told slaves to honor their masters, "so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled" (1 Tim. 6:1). Paul told Titus that slaves "should be submissive to their own masters in everything . . . so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior" (Tit. 2:9–10). Making God look good is more important than our own personal vindications. We should be willing to suffer for God. Jesus, the truly righteous one, suffered unjustly, and so should we.

We can also learn to serve God in all circumstances, regardless of our position in society. If you are an employee, you should work as though your boss were God. Ultimately, he is. If you're an employer, treat your employees well, knowing that you have a greater boss to answer to. Regardless of our position in this world, we were called to serve the greatest Master there is. Any other master will ruin us and eventually destroy us. Jesus is the only Master who would become a slave to set us free, to die for us so that we could live forever.