

Displays of Doctrine

What Our Attitude at Work Says About What We Believe

1 Timothy 6:1-5

By Kevin W. Bounds

Our actions show what we genuinely believe. Jesus taught that people would know the tree by the fruit it bears (Matt. 7:16-20). In 1 Timothy 6:1-5, Paul puts this teaching to the test when he instructs Timothy to teach those “under the yoke as slaves” to “honor” (Gk. *times*, ‘to respect or reverence highly’) their masters, especially if their masters were fellow believers (1 Tim. 6:1-2). (This passage raises questions, and rightfully so, in the minds of modern readers about how the Bible views the institution of slavery, and I will address those questions later.) Then Paul writes that “if anyone advocates a different doctrine” that “he is conceited and understands nothing” (1 Tim. 6:4). That is a bold statement!

How do these instructions to an ancient culture on honoring authority figures relate to us today? Although our cultural context differs greatly from that of First-Century Rome, this passage’s theological truths remain highly relevant today. In this sermon, we will explore how our attitudes, actions, and behavior at work, especially toward those in authority over us, are displays of our doctrine.

Honor Your Masters (6:1-2)

All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their own masters as worthy of all honor so that the name of God and our doctrine will not be spoken against. Those who have believers as their masters must not be disrespectful to them because they are brethren, but must serve them all the more, because those who partake of the benefit are believers and beloved. Teach and preach these principles. (vv. 1-2)

Explanation of the Text

In 1 Timothy 6:1–2, Paul instructed Timothy to “teach” (Gk. *didaskein*, ‘to impart skills or knowledge’) and “preach” (Gk. *parakalein*, ‘to urge or implore an action’) that believing slaves are to honor their masters, especially those who have Christian masters. As I mentioned earlier, Paul’s commands are controversial to modern readers, and I will address whether Paul—or the Bible as a whole—supports slavery as some critics claim.

First, in America, people view slavery through the lens of the Antebellum South, where slavery was based on ethnicity. However, in the Roman Empire, slavery was not based on race or ethnicity. Most of the estimated 50-60 million slaves in the Roman Empire were prisoners of war. Anyone could become a slave, and nearly any slave could become free.¹ In fact, all people in the Roman Empire fit into one of these two social classes—they were slaves or freemen.²

Paul’s use of the first-century colloquial expression “under the yoke” (Gk. *zygon*, ‘stable-gear that joined two draft animals, so they could work as a team’) expresses the burden of slavery.³ A slave (Gk. *doulos*, ‘a person legally owned by another’) depended utterly on his master (Gk. *deposes*, ‘owner and authority’)⁴ for their livelihood and their life’s purpose was determined by them too. Although some argue being a slave was often better than being a free day laborer because masters were to provide food, clothing, and shelter, it could still be a cruel institution, depending on the master’s demeanor.

The idea of one person owning another is atrocious to modern ears, and rightfully so. In Genesis 1:26-27, before the Fall, God states that man should have dominion over fish, birds, cattle, and every creeping thing on the earth, but another man is not in that list! Slavery is a product of the Fall. It is a product of sinful man, not of God!

The Gospel declares all humanity is equal in Christ. In fact, Paul writes, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). So, why didn’t Paul denounce slavery altogether when instructing Timothy about how to conduct himself in the household of God (1Tim. 3:14-15)? Slaves built Rome, and

¹ John D. Barry et al, *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016).

² John D. Barry et al, *Faithlife Study Bible*.

³ Jesus uses this phrase in Matt. 11:28-30, but He emphasizes that His yoke is easy and burden light.

⁴ We derive our English word, “despot” from this word. However, this Greek ‘*despotes*’ doesn’t necessarily have the connotation of a tyrant.

attempting to overthrow the institution of slavery would have been met with fierce societal and governmental opposition. As one commentator writes, “This is not to deny that the system itself should not have been challenged, but in those days, it was not immediately practical to overturn it.”⁵ Therefore, by instructing slaves to honor their masters, Paul is implementing the basic Christian principle of overcoming evil with good (Rom. 12:21). Love conquers all! Love is patient, it is kind, it hopes, it endures, and love never fails (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Although Paul, Timothy, and we live in the time between Christ’s First Coming and His Second Coming, we can rest in the hope that the Consummation of the Ages will make all wrongs right. Acknowledging that Paul, and ultimately God, does not endorse slavery, let us examine the two principles Paul outlines.

First, Paul instructs Timothy to teach that slaves are to respect and revere their masters highly (v.1). John MacArthur explains, “‘All honor’ translates into diligent and faithful labor for one’s employer.”⁶ These believers were to display the doctrine (what they believed) by their attitude, actions, and behavior toward those in authority over them. They were to perform this service sincerely, as if serving the Lord (see Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25).

Paul gives two reasons for these believers to act this way toward their masters: 1) “so that the name of God...will not be spoken against” (v. 1a) and 2) “so that...our doctrine will not be spoken against” (v. 1b.). The phrase “spoken against” (Gk. *blasphēmētai*, ‘to be or become slandered’) is where we get the word blasphemy. First, Paul doesn’t want God’s name to be slandered. If a believing slave was disrespectful or rebelled against their unbelieving master, what kind of message would that send? For an unbelieving master in the first century, it would have most assuredly caused them to view the Christian God in a negative light. Believers are God’s representatives bearing His name, so they were to represent Him well. Second, Paul doesn’t want the Christian doctrine (Gr. *didaskalia*, ‘content of what is taught’) to be slandered. MacArthur explains, “‘Our doctrine’ [is] the revelation of God summed up in the gospel. How believers act while under the authority of another affects how people view the message of salvation Christians proclaim.”⁷ Therefore, these Christian believers were to be displays of their doctrine and God. They were to exhibit the godliness befitting a follower of Christ and shine as lights before an unbelieving world. Next, we turn to Paul’s instructions to slaves with believing masters.

The second principle Paul instructs Timothy is that slaves who have believing masters are to not be “disrespectful” (Gr. *kataphroneitōsan*, ‘to look down on with contempt’) but they “must serve” (Gr. *doulenō*) them “all the more” (Gr. *mallon*) (v. 2a). MacArthur explains, “The tendency might be to assume one’s equality in Christ with a Christian master and disdain the authority related to work roles. On the contrary, working for a Christian should produce more loyal and diligent service out of love for the brethren.”⁸

⁵ D.A. Carson et al, *The New Bible Commentary: 21st Century Edition*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2010), 1303.

⁶ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2020), 1616.

⁷ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1616.

⁸ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1616.

Paul gives two reasons. First, the believing slaves are to not be insolent because their masters are “brethren” (Gr. *adelphos*, ‘understood as one’s own sibling in God’s family’). As explained earlier, the gospel has made all equal at the cross (Gal. 3:28), believers are to honor authority figures. Paul goes on to say that their masters were “beloved” (Gr. *agapētoi*, ‘beloved, cherished, sometime preferred above all’) of God. Both slaves and masters were to treat each other with dignity and respect (Eph. 6:5-6). This mutual respect and love display their doctrines for others to see.

With his second reason, Paul explains the slaves were to serve diligently because their masters “partake of the benefit.” This phrase is made of two words. 1) “partake of” (Gr. *antilambanomenoi*, ‘to profit’) 2) “benefit” (Gr. *energeias*, ‘an act of kindness’). When put together, Paul is saying believing slaves should serve their masters diligently, knowing that other believers are profiting by their acts of kindness and obedience—which would lead to the furtherance of the kingdom message. With this explanation in our mind, let us draw out (or exegete) the truth for us today, understanding that slavery and the workplace are not the same context, but the principles behind the instructions are the same.

Application of the Text

Believers ought to respect and serve those in authority over them in the workplace. Imagine two employees working for the same hard-to-please manager, who is short-tempered and takes all the credit for other people’s work. The first employee complains in the break room and does the bare minimum. Nobody blinks. That’s how people respond to a bad boss.

On the other hand, the second employee shows up on time, does excellent work even when unnoticed, and treats the boss with respect. Coworkers start to notice and ask why. “He doesn’t even appreciate it. Why do you still try?”

That’s the difference. The first employee’s attitude and actions need no explanation. That’s how the world responds. The second employee’s attitude *does* need an explanation. It points somewhere. In other words, it displays their doctrine and God.

This is Paul’s logic in 1 Timothy 6:1-2. Paul doesn’t say that masters deserve honor. He says honor them anyway, that God and the Gospel is not slandered. The point isn’t the boss’s character. It’s what our response reveals about the message we claim to believe. Anyone can be bitter toward unfair authority. It takes the gospel to produce a something else.

Most Christians do not view their daily work as holy. However, Martin Luther argued that a milkmaid can milk cows to the glory of God as surely as a monk can pray. Christian excellence in work is not “worldly,” it’s worship. **Believers ought to respect and serve those in authority over them in the workplace, so God is glorified!**

Questions for Discussion:

1. Think of someone in authority over you right now (a boss, teacher, coach, or parent). Is your attitude toward them “honor,” or something closer to grudging compliance? What would change if you served them “as if serving the Lord” (Eph. 6:5-9)?
2. Paul says believers’ conduct at work either protects or slanders “the name of God” and “our doctrine.” Has anyone ever drawn a conclusion about God or the Christian faith based on how they saw you behave at school, work, or home? What did they conclude?
3. Paul says slaves with believing masters should serve “all the more” rather than presume on equality. Where in your life are you tempted to slack off or disrespect authority because you assume, “they’re a Christian too, so it’s fine”? What would it look like to work harder there, not less?

A Different Doctrine (6:3-5)

If anyone advocates a different doctrine and does not agree with sound words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and with the doctrine conforming to godliness, he is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions, and constant friction between men of depraved mind and deprived of the truth, who suppose that godliness is a means of gain. (vv.3-5)

Explanation of the Text

In 1 Tim. 6:3, the Bible describes those teaching a contrary message than what Paul asks Timothy to “teach and preach” in the previous verses. In describing these false teachers, Paul reveals that their false doctrine is displayed by their attitudes, actions, and behavior. Paul gives three characteristics of these false teachers: 1) they promote a contradictory message 2) they do not accept biblical teaching, and 3) they reject teaching that leads to godliness. We will turn our attention to the further explanation of these characteristics of those false teachers, to safeguard ourselves from error.

First, these false teachers “advocate a different doctrine” (Gk. *heterodidaskalei*, ‘to teach divergently’) than what Paul was instructing Timothy. They actively oppose Paul’s teaching. Secondly, a false teacher does not accept “sound (Gk. *hygiainousi*, ‘correct or healthy’) “words” (Gk. *logois*, “message”). These “sound words” are none other than “those of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3). Finally, they reject Christ’s teaching, which leads to “godliness” (Gk. *eusebeia*, ‘piety’), and this leads to an unholy life – which proceeds to describe in the next verses.

In Tim. 6:4-5, Paul reveals the deeds of these false teachers and their motivation. In v. 4, Paul writes, “he is conceited” (Gk. *tetyphōtai*, ‘puffed up’). This word means to be deceived about the reality of oneself, especially one’s own intelligence or superiority. It’s conceived as being covered in a haze, a cloud of self-importance. However, Paul states this type of person “understands nothing” (v. 4). Paul continues describing this individual, writing, “he has morbid interests” (Gk. *nosōn*, ‘languishing

from unfulfilled desires; being physically ill from lack of fulfillment). This pining sickness comes from “controversial questions” (Gk. *zētēseis*, “arguments; disagreements”) and “disputes over words” (Gk. *logomachia*, ‘argument about words or their meanings’). These arguments lead to “envy” (Gk. *phthonos*, ‘spite and resentment toward the success of others’), “strife” (Gk. *épis*, ‘bitter conflict’), “abusive language” (Gk. *blasphēmai*, ‘slander’), “suspensions” (Gk. *hyponoia*, ‘conjecture; conclusions with incomplete evidence’), and “constant friction” (Gk. *diaparatribai*, ‘constant irritating; often heated arguing’). A quick comparison of these deeds, and it’s easy to see they are not works of the Spirit but of the flesh (See Gal. 5:19-21). These false teachers are operating under the power of the flesh. Paul called them “depraved” (Gk. *diephtharmenōn*, ‘lacking in integrity or uprightness’).

They are “deprived of” (Gk. *aposteros*, ‘to be or become without’) the “truth” (v. 5). MacArthur explains, “False teachers are in a state of apostasy; that is, although they once knew and seemed to embrace the truth, they turned to openly reject it.”⁹ If they are operating under the flesh, then they are motivated by the flesh. They assume that “godliness” (Gk. *eusebeian*, ‘piety’) is “a means of gain” (Gk. *porismon*, ‘a means to an end; especially a financial one’). The false teachers’ ultimate motive was to call attention to themselves and advance their own personal cause and material gain through their influence over people in the church.¹⁰ ¹¹However, the text does not provide specific clues about the exact way in which some people in the community were attempting to profit financially from the Christian faith.¹²

Picture a substitute teacher who walks into class, sets the assigned textbook aside, and says, “That’s fine, but I’ve got something far more interesting to teach you.” For weeks the class buzzes with energy: clever questions, heated debates over definitions, students taking sides and growing suspicious of each other. It feels like learning, because there’s so much noise. But by semester’s end, no one can answer a single question from the real curriculum. They’ve mastered nothing but arguing. Later, someone notices the substitute has been charging “tutoring fees” the whole time. The confusion wasn’t accidental, it was profitable.

This is Paul’s picture in 1 Timothy 6:3–5. A true teacher stays under the text, “the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 3), aiming students toward real godliness. A false teacher sets the text aside because it would expose that he has nothing true to add, so he manufactures controversy instead. It feels like substance, but it’s smoke, and profitable smoke at that, since Paul says this kind of person treats “godliness [as] a means of gain” (v. 5). The test of a teacher was never “Is this engaging?” “Does this open the book?” Anything else, however passionate, is noise dressed as instruction.

⁹ John MacArthur, *The MacArthur Study Bible*, 1616.

¹⁰ W. Stanley Outlaw, “[Commentary on the Books of 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy & Titus](#),” in *1 Thessalonians through Philemon*, ed. Robert E. Picirilli, The Randall House Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Randall House Publications, 1990), [278](#)

¹¹ Douglas Mangum and E. Tod Twist, *1 Timothy*, ed. Douglas Mangum and Derek R. Brown, Logos Research Commentaries (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2026). [See [here](#).]

¹² Mitchell G. Reddish, “[Exegetical Perspective](#),” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), [111](#).

Before moving to the application of this section, I want to address the differences between the KJV and modern translations. The KJV includes the phrase “withdraw yourself from such.” This phrase is omitted from the earliest and best Greek manuscripts but included in the Textus Receptus (TR). Scholars debate whether this originally belonged or was it possibly added by a Greek scribe or Latin translator that made its way into the TR, from which the KJV was translated. Scholars are divided but this textual variant doesn’t change the meaning of what is trying to be communicated. However, the phrase “withdraw yourself from such” captures the application.

Application of the Text

We have established how believers ought to respect and serve those in authority over them in the workplace, so that God is glorified! Here we see the opposite of the display of Christian doctrine. **Believers should mark and remove themselves from such divisive people.**

Returning to the illustration of the two employees from earlier, the employee who is trying to glorify God must remember Paul’s warning in 1 Cor. 15:33. He writes, “Do not be deceived: Bad company ruins good morals. Also, the Bible warns against befriending a hot-tempered person, “lest you learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare” (Prov. 22:24-25). If a scribe added the “withdraw yourself from such” 1 Tim.6:5, we can understand why now.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Paul describes false teachers as having “a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words,” arguing that feels like learning but produces no godliness. Where do you see this today (social media debates, online forums, even church small groups)? How can you tell the difference between a genuine pursuit of truth and an argument that’s really just noise dressed as instruction?
2. The false teachers treated “godliness as a means of gain.” What are subtler, modern versions of using faith for personal advantage, things like reputation, likes, business connections, or social standing, that might tempt someone without them even noticing?
3. Paul tells Timothy to “teach and preach” sound doctrine as the antidote to error. Who are the voices you let “teach” you day to day: YouTubers, influencers, friends, algorithms? How do you weigh what they say against “the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ”?

Conclusion

Displays of doctrine aren't limited to what we say we believe. They show up in a timecard, a tone of voice, a response to a hard boss, and a willingness (or refusal) to argue over nothing. Paul's point in this passage is simple but searching: the gospel doesn't just save us from something, it shapes how we live in front of everyone watching, especially the people who have authority over us and the people trying to lead us astray.

But here's the deeper issue underneath both sections: none of us honors authority perfectly, and none of us is immune to pride, envy, or the pull of "controversial questions." Paul isn't handing Timothy a behavior checklist so people can earn God's favor by working hard enough or arguing little enough. The call to honor and to guard sound doctrine only makes sense in light of the gospel Paul already assumes, that Jesus Christ, God's Son, lived the perfectly honoring, perfectly humble life none of us has lived, died on the cross to pay for the dishonor, envy, and strife we've displayed instead, and rose again to give new life to those who trust Him.

If you've never turned to Christ, the invitation this morning is simple: you don't need to clean up your attitude first, at work or anywhere else. Come to Jesus as you are, confess that your life, like every life, has displayed things you're not proud of, and ask Him to forgive you and make you new. He promises that "whoever believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). And if you already belong to Him, let this passage do its work: let your attitude at your job, in your classroom, or in your home this week be one more true display of the doctrine of grace that saved you.

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