INSTRUCTIONS FOR SLAVES

I Timothy 6:1&2(NASB) All who are under the yoke as slaves are to regard their 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 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.

Slavery in the First Century Roman Empire

Slaves were property and were specifically said to not be persons. They could not marry, own property, enter into a contract or testify unless first tortured. Their life expectancy was less than 20 years. They had no rights. In the First Century, 30-40% of the population of Italy were slaves, about 10-15% of the population in the rest of the empire.

You became a slave by being captured in war, by being born to a female slave, children were sometimes sold by their parents, you could sell yourself or be sold to pay a debt, you could be made a slave as punishment for a crime, and infants left out to die were sometimes raised by others to be sold as slaves.

Slaves usually had their owner’s names tattooed on their foreheads so they could be more easily caught and returned to the owner. It was a crime to harbor a runaway slave. Fugitive slaves who were caught could be whipped, burnt with an iron rod or be killed.

There were three major slave rebellions in the first and second century BC: The First servile War – 135-132; The Second Servile Ware – 104-100; The Third Servile War – 73-71. It is said that 6,000 slaves were crucified along the Appian Way at the end of the Third Servile War and left on their crosses long after they died as a warning to other slaves who might be thinking of rebelling.

How the Church Opposed Slavery

Opposing slavery per se would have been considered rebelling against Rome and would have been severely punished. Instead, the Church opposed slavery by teaching that all human beings are of equal value to God.

Deuteronomy 10:17 “For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes.”

Romans 2:11 For God does not show favoritism.

Acts 10:34&35 Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”

I Corinthians 12:13 For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all give the one Spirit to drink.

Galatians 3:26-28 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is their male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Philemon 15&16 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

What Scripture Says to Slave Owners

Ephesians 6:7-9 Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

Colossians 3:25-4:1 Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Instructions to Slaves

Ephesians 6:5-8 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

Colossians 3:22-25 Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism.

I Timothy 6:1&2 (NASB) 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.

Slavery and Freedom

I Corinthians 7:21&23 Were you a slave when called? Don’t let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so…You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.

Did Christianity Change Slavery in the Roman Empire?

Yes, but it took a long time. It was not until 313AD that Christianity became a legal religion. Until then, one of the reasons it was opposed was what it taught about the treatment of slaves. Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire by Theodosius in 380AD, and changes came about more rapidly after that.

How Does This Apply to Us

Most of us either work for someone or have people working for us. The admonitions to slaves and masters obviously apply to those relationships.

We should work for our employers in a way that pleases God. We should treat employees in a way that pleases God.

There are things going on in our country that deeply concern us. Christianity changed the treatment of slaves by leading people to faith in Christ and in the process changing how they felt about slavery. Significant change will not happen unless significant numbers of people come to faith and begin to see things from a biblical perspective.