

1 Timothy 6: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 1 Timothy chapter 6 Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their own masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled.

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.

Teach and urge these things. If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing.

He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain.

But godliness with contentment is great gain, for we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of the world. But if we have food and clothing, with these we will be content.

[1 : 05] But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.

It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. But as for you, O man of God, flee these things. Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, gentleness.

Fight the good fight of the faith. Take hold of the eternal life to which you were called and about which you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses. I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession, to keep the commandment unstained and free from reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, which he will display at the proper time.

He who is the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see.

To him be honour and eternal dominion. Amen. As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy.

[2 : 29] They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life.

O Timothy, guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge, for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

Grace be with you. 1 Timothy chapter 5 mentioned two groups of persons who needed to be accorded honour, the widows and the elders.

Chapter 6 begins with a third group. Masters need to be honoured by their bond servants. The teaching of verses 1 and 2 here could be related to the household codes that we find in places like Ephesians chapter 5 and 6, Colossians 3 and 4, and 1 Peter 2 and 3.

In contrast to those other places, this is not a more comprehensive teaching about masters and servants, husbands and wives, children and parents, but only deals with how slaves need to treat their masters.

[3 : 33] Presumably the Christians in Corinth already were familiar with household codes, and the teaching here is more occasional in character, addressing a particular problem that had arisen in the congregation. Unruly servants would have been a cause of disrepute for Christians within the society if slaves, presumably emboldened by the dignifying teaching of Paul's gospel, a message that presented them as standing on the same level ground before God as their masters, started to shrug off their responsibilities of service.

Non-Christians in the society might see the church as fundamentally opposed to social order, a destructive and revolutionary force undermining its social institutions. Paul's concern in verse 1 is quite manifest.

He does not want the name of God and the teaching of the gospel to be reviled. Elsewhere in scripture, prophets challenged the people of God, telling them that the nations blaspheme on account of them.

Their openly sinful and rebellious behavior causes people outside of the people of God to despise the truth that they stand for. To address this concern and to avoid the gospel coming into social disrepute, Paul instructs the bond servants to treat their masters as worthy of honor, recognizing the social institution of slavery.

However, in the way that he treats the duties of servants, there are elements to be seen that might surprise us. Paul especially addresses the relationship between believing servants and those masters who are also believing.

[4 : 58] In such situations, there will be an especially keen temptation to treat the masters as social equals on account of the gospel, rather than truly as masters. Paul's understanding of unity and a sort of equality in Christ do not, however, depend upon the equalization of social structures, even though they may have some implications for them.

Paul's reasoning in verse 2 is a surprising one. He speaks of the slaves' relationship to their believing masters in language of benefaction, language that was typically applied in a person of higher status' relationship to someone who was of lower status.

Philip Towner observes some of the parallels between Paul's teaching here and that of Seneca, his contemporary. He quotes from Seneca, There are certain acts which the law neither enjoins nor forbids.

It is in these that a slave finds opportunity to perform a benefit. So long as that which he supplies is only that which is ordinarily required of a slave, it is a service.

When he supplies more than a slave need do, it is a benefit. It ceases to be called a service when it passes over into the domain of friendly affection. And just as a hireling gives a benefit if he supplies more than he contracted to do, so a slave, when he exceeds the bounds of his station in goodwill towards his master by daring some lofty deed that would be an honour even to those more happily born, a benefit is found to exist inside the household.

[6 : 23] Jesus employs a similar sort of logic in the Sermon on the Mount when he instructs those who have an item taken to give even more to those who would take from them. Rather than being a passive victim or a person imposed upon by another, in going over and above expectations in such a manner, the Christian becomes the benefactor and the person of greater agency within the situation.

The person who would try to take from them, or in this case, the person to whom they owed service, is now placed in the position of being the recipient of their benefaction. The Christian slave can thereby enjoy agency and dignity within his situation.

There is a parallel that can be drawn between the opening verses of the letter in chapter 1 verses 3 to 20 and the closing section of the letter, which Towner points out. Chapter 1 verse 3 contains a command to Timothy to instruct, which corresponds to the second half of chapter 6 verse 2.

Chapter 1 verses 4 to 7, there is a description of the false teachers and the theme of love. And here in verses 3 to 6, again we have the false teachers and the theme now of godliness.

In chapter 1 verses 7 to 10, the misunderstanding of the law is addressed. And then in this chapter, verses 5 and 6, the misunderstanding of wealth is addressed, with the following critique of an ordinate desire for it.

[7 : 43] In verses 11 to 16 of chapter 1, there is the contrasting model of Paul that is provided, along with the work of Christ in his life. And then here, there is the model of Timothy in verses 11 to 15, again with the example of Christ brought in as part of it.

Both chapters have a concluding doxology in verse 17 of chapter 1 and in verse 16 of this chapter. After both doxologies, there is a repetition of Timothy's commission.

The end of verse 2 should be taken with the verses that follow. Paul charges Timothy to perform his task of teaching. In performing this task, he will have to deal with the false teachers. The false teachers here are defined by those who teach different doctrines apart from the one that has been taught in Christ.

The true doctrine agrees with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and is a teaching that accords with godliness. The true teaching will produce a certain character of life, which we might call godliness.

The reference to the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ might perhaps be a reference to our Lord's own words, or maybe it's a reference to the words concerning him. Implied here is a doctrinal and a moral test.

[8 : 53] The doctrinal test is conformity with the teaching of the tradition, and the moral test is the fruit of godliness. Paul goes on to explain something of the psychology of the false teachers who will fail these tests.

Such teachers are driven by pride, but are fundamentally ignorant. They seem to have a deep-seated need for controversy, and want to argue about minor matters. While the person who is not a perceptive reader of other people's emotions might imagine that the false teachers are genuinely concerned about the issues that they are ostensibly arguing about, Paul wants Timothy to be aware that this is not the case.

They argue because they need to argue, not because they genuinely care about the issues. For them, it is more likely a game of status. Finding things to argue about is a way to avoid submitting to others, or showing any sort of humility.

It's a way to vaunt their own authority and importance over those to whom they should be listening. It is essential that a leader recognise the character of such people within a community, and deal with them shrewdly.

By their very nature, such persons are fractious, and will cause all sorts of problems in a community where they are allowed free reign. Because they are ultimately driven by pride and conceit, they treat the truth as something to be used for their own advantage and advancement.

[10 : 07] They teach in such a way to increase their income, flattering and pandering to the wealthy, and fleecing the flock. We might also see a connection between their divisiveness, their pride, and the way in which they are driven by a desire for gain.

They want to form their own following, and to do that, they need to drive people away from others. They sow divisions, suspicions, slanders, and other things that consolidate their own support and turn their followers against faithful teachers of the gospel.

To the behaviour of such false teachers, Paul contrasts the faithful teacher of the word of God. For such a person, godliness with contentment, or self-sufficiency, is great gain.

The faithful teacher is not using godliness. He sees godliness as an end in itself. It is a great gain to be conformed to the character of Christ, and to know contentment with that, the self-sufficiency that allows you to enjoy peace of mind and satisfaction in all sorts of material conditions, is a considerable blessing.

Paul already spoke of the surpassing value of godliness in the preceding chapter, in verses 7 and 8. One of the things that Paul is revealing here is the connection between a commitment to the truth and one's management of one's fundamental loves and passions.

[11 : 35] The person who is driven by pride will always have a tendency towards division and a desire for wealth and status that makes him a source of conflict. These fundamental disorders of the heart will lead such persons in the direction of false teaching.

If the faithful teacher wants to avoid being led astray in such a manner, he needs to master his own heart. He needs to deal with the pride and conceit that makes him resist learning the truth, or that leads him to want to be the centre of the stage, the head of the movement.

Paul reminds Timothy that we will bring nothing out of the world just as we brought nothing into it, and consequently, the contentment with the little things that we need for our continued life with godliness is a great thing to enjoy.

The extreme desire for more, those desires that tether us to this present age, are a source of all sorts of temptations, evils, traps, and have been the cause of the downfall of many.

Job expresses some of the contentment that can come with godliness in chapter 1, verse 21 of his book. And he said, Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return.

[12 : 41] The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Jesus also teaches on this matter in the Sermon on the Mount, teaching his disciples that the more they invest their hearts and their energies and their resources in earthly treasures, the more that they will find their hearts trapped by those things.

Matthew chapter 6, verses 19 to 21. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where Martha and Russ destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither Martha nor Russ destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal.

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Having signposted all of these dangers, Paul charges Timothy to flee from them. The statement here, to flee from something and to pursue something else, can also be found in another form in 2 Timothy chapter 2, verse 22.

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Paul addresses Timothy as a man of God.

A man who is committed to the things of God ought to be a godly man, a man characterized by the way of godliness. Paul depicts the way of godliness using a number of different terms.

[13 : 56] Righteousness, godliness, faith, love, steadfastness, and gentleness. Righteousness is moral uprightness. Godliness refers to a form of life and character that conforms to the God that has called us.

Faith, love, and steadfastness might be related to the three theological virtues of faith, love, and hope. To these must be added gentleness. Whereas Timothy's opponents are characterized by a love of quarrels and conflict and division, Timothy must be gentle in the way that he treats people.

A peacemaker, a reconciler, a man whose humility leads him to put other people's interests ahead of his own. This gentleness does not entail a lack of strength. He is to fight the good fight of faith.

This may be a more military metaphor or it may be working with the athletic metaphors that we've had in preceding chapters. He has been charged with a mission and he must lay hold of eternal life just as he once confessed the name of Christ before many witnesses, presumably at the time of his baptism.

He needs to carry through with this commitment, standing firm and contending till the end. Once again, Paul charges Timothy in front of the whole heavenly assembly before God and of Christ Jesus and he gives the example of Christ Jesus as one who stood firm to the end.

[15 : 11] His faithful and unwavering commitment to his mission before Pontius Pilate is an example that the Christian should follow. In a similar manner, facing the time of greatest testing, the Christian like Timothy should stand firm, holding firmly and without compromise the commission that he has been given and to do this until the time of the appearing of Jesus Christ.

Paul concludes this section with a doxology in which he expresses the incomparability of God. The language here perhaps underlines the way that the Lord has claimed to Timothy's loyalties over all others and that pursuit of godliness in relationship to such an incomparable God is to be valued over everything else.

Before signing off the letter, Paul gives Timothy some instruction concerning the rich of this age. We find various forms of such teaching elsewhere in scripture, not least in the Sermon on the Mount as already mentioned.

In James chapter 1 verses 9 to 11 for instance, let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation and the rich in his humiliation because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits.

[16 : 25] Recognising the limited and fleeting character of earthly riches, the rich Christian is advised to invest his resources well, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share.

By investing his riches in the service of the poor, he is storing up treasures for himself in heaven. By such investment of his riches, he is laying hold of that which is truly life, not just the apparent life of earthly wealth.

Paul concludes by drawing Timothy's attention to the many people who have wrecked their faith by turning aside and abandoning the charge that he has been given. He is not to be ensnared by the so-called knowledge that so easily entices those who are proud and puffed up.

Rather, in humility, he must remain faithful in his calling, guarding what has been committed to him and faithfully discharging his commission to teach it to others. The concluding greeting, Grace be with you all, addresses a plural you, not just Timothy.

Perhaps Paul also has the Ephesian believers in view here. A question to consider. Within this chapter, Paul says rather a lot concerning riches.

[17 : 32] In verse 10, he makes the famous statement, For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. What are some ways in which the love of money can serve as a root of various kinds of evil?

