

Study 16

GODLINESS IN THE WORKPLACE

First Peter 2:18-20

Perhaps the majority of the first Gentile Christians were slaves. This is deduced from the fact that all of Paul's epistles, except Second Corinthians and Philippians, indicate there was the existence of slavery. The New Testament does not endorse slavery, it merely gives principles to both slaves and masters for living a God-glorifying life. The issue of a slave living a Christ-like life was probably made a lot easier when their master was kind and benevolent. Hopefully the kindest and most benevolent masters were the Christian slave owners! Surely a slave could expect justice and fairness from a Christian master. But what if their master was not a Christian? How were they to respond to an owner who made unfair demands upon them? And what about the Christian slave? How were they to respond to a cruel non-Christian owner? Today the issue is not slavery. But the principles of employer and employee relations are the same.

CHRIST AND SLAVERY

Imagine how Christ must have felt when He walked among people who were perhaps ignorantly doing things that deeply hurt His Father's heart. One of the most curious things about Christ was that He didn't say more than He did! He could have addressed nearly every area of life. He could have shown people all that was wrong, why it was wrong and the eternal consequences for doing this wrong. Maybe we don't appreciate the cultural setting of the New Testament enough to realise the significance of Christ not saying much about slavery. The danger is that we interpret Christ's *silence* as His *endorsement*.

1. Christ referred to His limited amount of statements and assured His followers that He would reveal more to them than what He had been able to communicate in His three and a half years with them. How was He going to do this? (Jn. 16:13-14)

2. Christ did not endorse the concept of slavery. But it seems He did extol it as a desirable attitude for what type of people? (Matt. 20:27)

The same is true today. We can confuse Christ's silence for His endorsement. Or, even more common, we confuse His blessing for His endorsement (Matt. 5:45). Let us not become conceited when we allow compromise into our lives and God's blessing still seems to be with us.

CHRIST IS OUR EXAMPLE

The goal of every believer is to live like Christ. We can imitate Christ's character no matter what role we play in society. One of the essential aspects of Christ's character was how He handled suffering. His suffering was totally undeserved. It was not His fault. Peter uses this aspect of Christ's character to illustrate to slaves how they should display the character of Christ in the work-place.

3. According to the principle that Peter is employing (*imitate Christ*), how does he say slaves should conduct themselves towards their masters? (1Peter 2:18)

The first apostles viewed it as an honour to suffer for Christ (Acts 5:41). Being a Christian in the first century almost always guaranteed a believer that there would be some suffering involved. But the New Testament distinguishes between two types of suffering. The first kind is suffering that is warranted (or justifiable) as a form of punishment.

4. Note Romans 13:1-5. What does Paul have to say about those who suffer at the hands of authorities?

Fred has been a Christian since his early youth. He went to a Christian school. After finishing his final year at secondary school he got a job. At first he was keen and motivated to be able to have a job where he could be a witness to all the non-Christian employees. The bosses were very impressed with Fred. He arrived early, stayed back late, and put in extra effort to make the job that much better. Fred was also challenging the other employees about Jesus. "Unless you give your heart to Christ", Fred was often heard saying, "you can not go to heaven when you die."

Then Fred's incredible enthusiasm for the job began to wane. Occasionally he would arrive late because he had had such a late night at the mid-week Bible study the night before. Then his Christian friends began regularly dropping into Fred's work-place and talking to him for up to half an hour at a time. Because Fred's church was holding a daytime Bible school and he began taking "sickies" so he could attend some of these special classes. Eventually Fred's employer called him into the office. He loudly told Fred that his work performance was terrible and that he was close to being sacked. Fred left the boss' office feeling miserable. That night at the mid-week Bible-study he asked for prayer. "The persecution at work is becoming unbearable", he shared, "They're threatening me with the sack now because I'm a Christian!"

5. Imagine Fred was at this Bible Study. How would you counsel Fred using First Peter 2:20?

The comforting thought about verse 20 is that God will use employers to sharpen our character. When we grow slack, as all employees tend to do, our supervisors are there to spur us back to peak performance. Sometimes this is achieved by a harsh rebuke. Sometimes this is achieved by a gentle word. In either case it is a necessary part of a manager's duties. The other aspect of work-place friction is that God is fully aware of those situations where the treatment of His people is unjustified. When we are being given a hard time at work for simply being a Christian, and we are sure that our work performance is more than acceptable, we can rest in the knowledge that we are not working for our employer, but for someone else.

6. Whom do we work for? (Col. 3:22-23)

We may even feel that our careers are being hampered because of our Christianity. But this need not be the case. Remember Joseph, Daniel and others all the reached the top of their "industry" and served God whole-heartedly. Being successful in a career or job is not sinful. We need more successful Christians in business, industry, politics, and management.

7. Ultimately where does job promotion come from? (Psalm 75:6-7)

Amen.