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HOW TO BE A GOOD CHRISTIAN VICTIM

1 Timothy 6:1-2

By

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Lesson 19

How To Be A Good Christian Victim 1 Timothy 6:1-2

We live in a society where almost everyone can claim victim status. A humorous T-shirt pokes fun at this. It pictures a huge auditorium with a convention banner welcoming "Adult Children of Normal Parents." Two people are in the audience.

It's not far off the mark. Recovery movement guru John Bradshaw has said that 96 percent of us come from dysfunctional families. Americans are flocking to a variety of specialized self-help groups where they focus on how the traumas from their pasts have impaired their lives. Every sort of problem and even criminal behavior is being excused because the person was a helpless victim of something or other.

A jury acquitted Mrs. Bobbitt from emasculating her husband because she was a victim of his abusive and selfish behavior. Another jury can't decide to convict two brothers who admit to blowing their parents into oblivion with a shotgun, because they were abused as children. The guy who shot the abortion doctor is claiming that the pro-life propaganda made him do it. A robber in New York was beating a 71-year-old man senseless when two police officers heard the screams and responded. In the ensuing scuffle, the mugger was shot and the bullet cut his spinal cord, leaving him paralyzed. He sued the city of New York and a jury awarded him \$4.3 million in damages (in *Reader's Digest* [6/90], p. 196)!

Thankfully the world is waking up to the stupidity of this nonsense. Atlanta psychiatrist Frank Pittman observed that "the adult child movement, by declaring practically everyone to be a victim of imperfect parenting and therefore eligible for lifelong, self-absorbed irresponsibility, has trivialized real suffering and made psychic invalids of those who once had a bad day" (cited in *The Los Angeles Times* [11/4/92], p. E10).

But let's suppose you truly are a victim. Maybe a parent or a spouse abuses you verbally and emotionally. Perhaps you suffer racial discrimination. Or, on a lesser scale, maybe you're being

treated unfairly at work. Maybe you're a victim of reverse discrimination, where you get passed over for a promotion because you're not classified as a minority. How should a Christian respond when he or she is truly a victim of abusive or unfair treatment?

(Let me clarify from the start that if you are being abused sexually or physically, you should immediately seek outside help so that the situation can be stopped. While you still need to apply the things I'm going to talk about today to your attitude, I do not want you mistakenly to think that God wants you to endure such abuse passively. A sexual offender or a violent person needs to be brought under the law. If your attitude is right before God, there is a proper place for confrontation, as we saw in 1 Tim. 5:1-2.)

How should you deal with it if you are the victim? How should you counsel a victimized person who comes to you for help? Do we have a right to get angry at God for letting this happen? Should we rail at God and get all our rage out? Should we vent our rage toward the ones who abused us by hitting a pillow or yelling, "I hate you"? Or, perhaps we should take a positive approach and build our self-esteem. What a downtrodden person needs is self-respect! So we tell ourselves over and over how wonderful we are.

The world offers all sorts of solutions for those who are victims. Some sound reasonable. Some even sound biblical and are espoused by Christian counselors who quote verses to support their points; but they often mix biblical truth with subtle error. We need to rely on God's Word alone to learn how Christians who are mistreated should respond in their difficult situations.

In the history of the sinful human race, slaves rank among the most victimized people of all. Slaves were literally the property of their owners, who could use them and dispose of them as they saw fit. They were viewed and often treated as animals. This is brought out in Paul's descriptive phrase, "under the yoke." Slaves, like oxen, were under the yoke of their masters, used for the profit and benefit of their owners, with no personal rights. Estimates vary, but anywhere from one-third to over one-half of the Roman population in Paul's day were slaves. Many of them were becoming Christians. How should these victimized people respond to the unjust situations they found themselves in? Should they lead protest

marches? Should they revolt? Should they express their rage at God, at society, at their owners? Should they focus on building their self-esteem?

In 1 Timothy 6:1-2 Paul gives an answer. It's easy for us to sit in church and say, "Preach it to those slaves, Paul!" But Paul isn't just preaching to slaves in a far away culture that no longer exists. His words apply to every believer today who is a victim of abusive, unfair treatment. He shows us all how to be a good Christian victim. I offer five observations:

1. Life isn't fair.

You didn't want to hear that, did you? But it's true! Most of the slaves in the Roman world of Paul's day were born that way. It wasn't that they committed a crime or got into debt and ended up as slaves by consequence of their own foolishness. They were born as slaves.

That isn't fair, is it? It isn't fair that some people are born into comfortable homes in America, with plenty to eat and good medical care, while others are born in poverty in countries like Somalia or Afghanistan, where they can barely eke out enough to survive, assuming they don't get shot or step on a land mine. It isn't fair that some people have parents who love them and treat them kindly, while others are neglected and abused by their drug-using mother and her latest boyfriend. Let's face it, life is grossly unfair and the Bible never pretends any differently. Sin and its devastating effects make this evil world a most unfair place.

But may I point out that you don't solve the problem by eliminating God. The Communists thought they could solve the problem of unfairness by creating a classless society where everyone has equal status and opportunity. But it didn't work because they didn't deal with the intractable problem of the selfish, greedy human heart. So those in power abused their position for their own advancement. The haves still clung to what they had, while the have-nots greedily scrambled to take it away from them.

By taking God out of the equation, you extinguish the only true source of hope in an unfair world. If there is no God, then this is just a dog-eat-dog world where the toughest, meanest dogs manage to survive a few more years than the weaker dogs. If you hap-

pen to be born as a caged, diseased dog with a cruel master who beats you every day, "Sorry about that!" Determinism, the view that victims are at the mercy of outside forces, offers no hope except to try to get into better circumstances. But even if you succeed, you'll soon die, so what have you accomplished? Taking God out of the picture doesn't solve the problem of unfairness.

The Bible is clear that if we got what was fair, we all would go straight to hell, because we've all rebelled against a holy God. Every one of us has cast off God's rightful rulership over us and has sought to live for self and for pleasure, to the disregard of God and others. When we say, "I don't deserve to be treated as I've been treated," we only reveal our pride that lifts ourselves up against a holy God, as if we have some claim on Him. We all deserve His wrath because of our rebellious, self-willed ways. Any earthly comforts we enjoy are not because we deserve them or have a right to them. They only come from His undeserved kindness.

2. Life can have hope, no matter how unfairly you've been treated.

The good news of the gospel brings hope to those who despair. The gospel can shine into the most rat-infested, foulest prison cell and give instant hope of eternal life to a condemned prisoner. In Paul's day, the good news that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners," even the worst of them (1 Tim. 1:15), meant that these people who were treated as human work animals could become gifted members of the body of Christ, with equal status with their masters before God. They became heirs of the hope of eternal life with God in heaven. Slaves were becoming saved through faith in Jesus Christ!

Political or economic solutions offer only superficial hope to the oppressed. Paul could have organized opposition to the institution of slavery. He could have called for a campaign for everyone to write their senator in Rome and protest this awful injustice. Maybe he even could have led an armed slave revolt. It certainly would have been a just cause. Or he could have organized the slaves into trade unions, to give them power to fight for better working conditions, higher wages, health care, and paid vacations.

But even if he had succeeded, what would he have accomplished? Slaves would have lived better and easier lives. But they'd still die and go to hell if they did not repent of their sins and trust in Christ. While I'm not suggesting that Christians should not work for social causes, it is true that comfortable people are the most difficult to reach with the gospel, because they don't sense their need to be right with God before they die.

So Paul preached the gospel to slaves and to slave owners, because it alone is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes (Rom. 1:16). It alone can transform the self-centered, greedy human heart into a new creation who loves God and others. It alone can loosen our grasp on the things of this world and put our focus on the life to come. It alone meets the most basic need of every human heart, to be reconciled to the holy, eternal God. If you're a mistreated victim, God offers the same hope to you today, of having your sins forgiven and knowing the living and true God through His Son Jesus, who died to pay the penalty for all your sins.

But there's a third thing you need to know. Life isn't fair; but, life can have hope, no matter how unfairly you've been treated, if you will believe in the gospel.

3. Becoming a Christian doesn't solve all your problems.

These slaves weren't instantly liberated from their slavery the minute they believed in Jesus. Many died as slaves. The next morning they still had to get up and meet the demands of their master. They still had to do difficult, distasteful chores. They still had to work long hours with little time off. Abusive masters weren't suddenly transformed into nice men just because their slaves were now Christians. Circumstances weren't much different for these slaves who had become Christians.

In fact, the demands on them probably increased because of their new faith. Their owners now taunted them with, "If you're such a good Christian, why are you complaining about your work load?" As Christian slaves, they could no longer steal from their masters as they used to do and as all the pagan slaves still did. And then Paul has the nerve to tell them that they need to honor these

brutes and work even harder! No griping allowed! Life didn't get easier; it got harder as Christian slaves.

We have to be careful that we don't misrepresent the gospel when we tell people that God has a "wonderful plan" for their lives or that He offers them "abundant life." God's wonderful plan may be that you suffer from a debilitating disease or that you get tortured or martyred for your testimony. It may be that you suffer rejection and slander because you stand for God's truth.

Read Hebrews 11. God's abundant life for some was that they "conquered kingdoms, ... obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, ... put foreign armies to flight, ... received back their dead by resurrection" (vv. 33-35a). We read that and say, "Amen!" Keep reading: "Others were tortured, ... and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, ... they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ..., wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (vv. 35-38). Make sure you include all that in your concept of the "abundant life"!

Someone may be wondering, "If becoming a Christian doesn't promise me the good life and the solution to all my problems, then why do it?"

4. Becoming a Christian does deal with your root problem.

Your root problem is your selfish rebellion against God that alienates you from His holy presence. If that problem isn't dealt with through the cross of Jesus Christ before you die, you will spend eternity away from God's presence, suffering eternal punishment. Becoming a Christian through faith in Christ takes care of that most basic need.

It also continues to deal with your root problem, which is living to please self rather than living to love God and others. Put yourself in the place of a slave in Ephesus. You're a new Christian and you're suffering under a cruel, insensitive master who treats you like a work animal. Or, perhaps you're blessed to have a Christian master, and you assume that Paul will tell him to treat you decently. But along comes this letter and Paul confronts your attitude

and performance as a slave, and he doesn't say anything to slave owners!

To all slaves, but especially to those with pagan masters, Paul says, "Regard them as worthy of all honor" "But Paul, don't you realize what abusive tyrants these guys are? They don't care about anyone but themselves! When I'm exhausted, when I've already put in a long day, and they have a need, they don't give any thought about me or my needs. They just say, 'Do this,' and I'm expected to hop to it. What about my needs, Paul?" Paul says, "Your need is to honor these men."

But why, Paul? "So that the name of our God and our doctrine may not be spoken against." There is something higher than our happiness and our rights, namely, God's glory. How we act toward an abusive person bears witness of the God we serve and of the kind of selfless love He calls us to model. We're the only Bible a lot of pagans will ever read. Can they tell by your attitude, by your hard work on the job, by your refusal to retaliate when you're wronged, by your returning a blessing in word or deed when you're insulted, what it means to follow Jesus? By honoring that abusive authority figure (boss, parent, husband, government leader), by serving him all the more because we are Christians, we honor God and the teaching of His Word. And if the authority is a Christian, then rather than slacking off, we owe even better service with proper respect, since they are believers and beloved.

John Calvin, always an astute observer of human nature, comments (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker reprint], on 1 Timothy, p. 151):

Owing to the false opinion of his own excellence which every person entertains, there is no one who patiently endures that others should rule over him. They who cannot avoid the necessity do, indeed, reluctantly obey those who are above them; but inwardly they fret and rage, because they think that they suffer wrong. The Apostle cuts off, by a single word, all disputes of this kind, by demanding that all who live "under the yoke" shall submit to it willingly.

In other words, our sinful flesh is always quick to defend self, justify self, excuse self, and exalt self by blaming others. "Sure, I

did wrong, but I was a victim! I was mistreated! What about the other guy and what he did to me? If he would just treat me decently, I'd treat him decently. You can't expect anybody to put up with the crud I've had to put up with!" But God does expect us who have been redeemed to confront our selfish attitudes so that we honor God and love others, even our enemies, by our attitudes and actions toward them. It is *especially* when they wrong us that we have the greatest opportunity for testimony.

Becoming a Christian means beginning a life of radical self-denial. Jesus described it as taking up your cross daily to follow Him (Luke 9:23). The cross wasn't a slight irritation a person had to learn to live with; it was a slow, tortuous means of death. Because of the fall, we all come at life with a "me first, I deserve fair treatment, I have my rights" attitude. Even the non-Christian philosopher Allan Bloom saw this when he observed that "everyone loves himself most but wants others to love him more than they love themselves" (*The Closing of the American Mind* [Simon and Schuster], p. 118).

God confronts us by saying, "No, love Me first; honor My name by your life. And, love others as you do in fact love yourself. Think of them more highly than you do of yourself, even if you're a slave and your owner isn't a nice person. And don't just do it with a self-pitying, martyr complex. You must actually love those who mistreat you and show it by serving them all the more!"

Good grief! That's tough stuff! There's a fifth point:

5. Dealing with the root problem of self is a lifelong process, not a once-and-for-all deliverance.

"Teach and exhort these things" (6:2b). They are present imperatives, implying an ongoing process. This isn't a decision you make once and it's settled forever. It's something we all need to learn and practice every day for the rest of our lives. So we need constant teaching and exhortation to hang in there. Teaching is necessary to counter the false teaching that appeals to the flesh that tells us, "You have a right to be treated fairly! You don't have to take this! Assert yourself!" Exhortation is necessary because we all get weary and are tempted to take the easy way out of tough situations.

Jesus taught that this is a lifelong process for those who follow Him when He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23). To sum up Paul's word on how to be a good Christian victim:

Christian victims must continually confront their selfish attitude and replace it with love for God and for others.

Conclusion

Let me repeat: If you are being abused sexually or physically, this Scripture does not mean that you should silently endure it. A person who violates you sexually or physically is not only breaking God's law, but also the laws of this country. He needs to be confronted and punished for his crimes. Neither does this Scripture mean that we should never confront an abusive authority figure. Love means seeking the highest good of the one loved, which sometimes requires proper confrontation. If you're being sexually or physically abused, seek the help you need to get it stopped now.

But this Scripture does confront our selfish, "I've got my rights," "I don't have to take any mistreatment," "I'm a victim, so I'm not responsible" attitudes. It confronts our disregard for God's honor above all else through the way we conduct ourselves in our homes and in the world. It confronts our love for self over our love for others, including our enemies. It calls us to the radical following of the One who laid aside His rights in order to save us from the judgment of a holy God. Brothers and sisters, let's not be overcome by evil, but let's overcome evil with good (Rom. 12:21)!

Discussion Questions

1. When (if ever) is it right to stand up for our rights? (Consider Acts 16:35-40; 22:24-29; 23:1-5; 25:10-11.)
2. Does denying self mean becoming “a Christian doormat”? What does it mean?
3. How far should Christians go in seeking political or economic solutions to social problems?
4. Don't true victims need some self-respect rather than self-denial?
5. When should we confront an abusive person? How far should we go in enduring mistreatment?

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