

## UNDERSTANDING DIRECTIVE AUTHORITY

By Dr. Stephen Phinney

We live in a culture of permissive rebellion against authority.

**Servants, be submissive to your masters.** 1 Peter 2:18 tells us, “*Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable*” (NASB). The Greek word for *servant* used here (οικέται οικetai) properly means “domestics” - those under the authority of a domestic master or living in the same house (from οἶκος oikos, “house.”) These persons may have been slaves, wives, or children. This word applies whether these individuals were hired, owned as slaves, or were blood relatives.

The exhortation here was, and still is, strictly applicable to any person subservient as a domestic, even if voluntarily hiring oneself out as such. While remaining under a master’s authority, we would be wise (in Christian meekness) to perform our duties with faithfulness, loyalty, and reliability and endure all the wrongs we may suffer from those in authority.

Those who need to “go out to serve” for a living are not always free from being mistreated. There are trials within this condition of life that cannot always be avoided. In many cases, it may be preferable to accept the “master’s” conditions of service instead of attempting a change of situation, even though the servant would be entirely at liberty to do so. The dynamic can apply to marriages, employment, citizenship, and personal discipleship.

### Strong Authorities

The Greek word here rendered “*masters*” (δεσπότης despota) does not necessarily imply that those under them were slaves. This term applies to the head of a family, corporate function, church administration, and individuals the authority figure serves. **Note of interest:** this word is frequently applied to a Christian’s relationship with God and Christ. Peter was addressing not only Christians but also people in general who were under authority. It is implied that they were pursuing a course that was inconsistent with real Godliness. In addition, these “*heads of families*” were disobedient to the Word (1 Peter 3:1). Peter was speaking directly to those under these “*masters*” who were suffering because of the grievous wrongs of their master’s grievous wrongs.

*“Let as many bondservants as are under the yoke count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and His doctrine may not be blasphemed”* (1 Tim. 6:1, NKJV).

**Count their own masters worthy of all honors** – We are called by the Father to treat unreasonable authority figures with all proper respect and to manifest the right Spirit in serving them. Despite what our masters have done, we are *not* to do anything that would dishonor the representation as children of the Father. The injunction here would seem to have particular

reference to those whose masters were not Christians. The meaning here is that the slave (us) should show the Christian Spirit toward our master(s) so that our walk with Christ will not be dishonored. We ought not to give our masters occasion to say that the only effect of our Christian beliefs has been to make us restless, disappointed, dissatisfied, and disobedient. In a humble, trying situation and by being under the yoke of bondage, we ought to exhibit patience, kindness, and respect for our master(s). As long as the relationship continues, we must obey unless asked to violate the Word of God. This command, however, was by no means inconsistent with our desiring freedom and securing it if the opportunity presented itself.

**So that the name of God and his doctrine may not be blasphemed** – The power behind this statement is almost overwhelming. Our goal here should be that Christ not be dishonored or blamed, and there may be no occasion to say that Christianity tends to produce discontentment, leading to an uprising. Suppose the effect of Christianity had been to teach all servants that they should no longer obey their masters. In that case, they should resist them and assert their freedom by violence or resistance, or if their masters were to be treated with humiliation on account of their usurped rights over others, the effect would have been obvious – war. There would have been a loud and united outcry against the newfound “religion” (Christianity), which may not have made progress worldwide.

**Instead, Christianity taught** the necessity of patience, meekness, and forbearance in the endurance of all wrong - whether from private individuals (Matt. 5:39-41; 1 Cor. 6:7), the oppressions and exactions of government (Rom. 13:1-7) or amid hardships and cruelties of slavery. Please keep in mind that these peaceful injunctions, however, did not demonstrate that Christ approved the act of strong masters or that Paul regarded the government of Nero as a good government, but they do demonstrate the power of submission.

*“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart”* (Eph. 6:5-6, KJV).

**Be obedient to your masters** - This is the uniform direction throughout the New Testament. In our relationships with strong authority, we are to show the excellence of Christianity we profess. If we could be free, we should prefer that condition to a state of bondage (1 Cor. 7:21). But while the relationship remains, as Christians, we are to be kind, gentle, and obedient. The parallel passage, Colossians 3:22, says that slaves were to obey their masters “in all things.” However, evidently, this is to be understood with the limitations implied in the case of wives and children. For example, a master or husband/father has no right to command that which is morally or illegally wrong.

**According to the flesh**, the Father gave us this design to limit the obligation to obedience. The meaning is that authority figures control “the body, the flesh.” They have the power to command the service, which the body can render, but they are not lords of the Spirit. This is a critical point for us to embrace, as it will assist us in maintaining the balance of submission to strong authority. Our soul acknowledges God as Lord. And to the Lord, we are subject in a higher sense than our masters.

**With fear and trembling** – The Greek definition here is “to do this with a dread of offending them.” Masters have authority and power over us, and we should be afraid to incur their

displeasure. Whatever might be true about the correctness of slavery, and whatever might be the duty of the master, it would be *more* to honor our beliefs in Christ for us to perform our tasks with a willing mind than to be disrespectful and rebellious. We could do more for the honor of Christ by patiently submitting, even with what we felt to be wrong, than by being punished for what would be regarded as rebellion. These directions were addressed to us as servants, not to our masters.

**In singleness of your heart** - With a simple, sincere desire to do what is right, as unto Christ, we render proper service to our masters. In fact, we are serving the Lord and are doing that which will be pleasing to Christ (1 Cor. 7:22). Loyalty, in whatever situation we may be in life, is acceptable service to the Lord. A Christian may serve the Lord Jesus in the condition of a servant as if a minister of the Gospel or a king on a throne. Besides, it will miraculously lighten the burdens of such a situation and make the toils and sufferings of a humble/strong condition easy if we remember we are then “serving the Lord.”

**Not with eyeservice** – This term means “*not with service rendered only under the eye of the master, or when his eye is fixed on you.*” When we, as slaves, are walking after the flesh, we will usually only obey when the eye of the master is upon us. In other words, people-pleasing. This is impossible to avoid when we are “driven” by a master who tends to be excessively strong- except where true Christianity prevails. Christians who agree to labor for stipulated wages may be trusted when the master is out of sight, but this is not the case for a slave. In this, we find no acts of Christ service; it is obligatory for financial gain or job security. As children of the Father, we are at liberty to serve with the heart of Christ. This commandment is of great importance to all under the service of a master. A servant is bound to perform their duties with as much faithfulness as if the eye of their master was *always* upon them. Remember, man's eye may be turned away, but that of God never is. Obedience shown in privacy is obedience revealed in the Kingdom of God.

**Christianity is filled with “men-pleasers.”** - It is sad to see that most children of the Father purpose to please people instead of pleasing and honoring God. When a person focuses on pleasing a master instead of the Master directly, he places himself in the position of idol worship - their master becomes the God of their life. What, or to whom, we give our pleasure to the one we are saying is our God. As you and I serve our strong masters, we need to do it unto Christ (1 Cor. 7:22). If we do, we will be doing the will of God with a pure heart. When we render acceptable service to God from a pure heart, we can perform the services demanded of us, however humble or strong.

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