

Shayla: Should believers boycott products of forced labor?

Response:

The International Labor Office (ILO) estimates that there are over 12 million people trapped in forced labor around the world, one fifth (2.5 million) of them are victims of human trafficking. This illicit industry generates as much as \$32 billion in revenue each year.

Over the past decade, trafficking in human beings has reached epidemic proportions. No country is immune. The search for work abroad has been fuelled by economic disparity, high unemployment and the disruption of traditional livelihoods. Traffickers face few risks and can earn huge profits by taking advantage of large numbers of potential immigrants.

Trafficking in human beings is not confined to the sex industry. Children are trafficked to work in sweatshops as bonded labor and men work illegally in the "three D-jobs" – dirty, difficult and dangerous.

A recent CIA report estimated that between 45,000 to 50,000 women and children are brought to the United States every year under false pretenses and are forced to work as prostitutes, abused laborers or servants.

UNICEF estimates that more than 200,000 children are enslaved by cross-border smuggling in West and Central Africa. The children are often placed in indentured servitude by unsuspecting parents who believe their children are going to be looked after, learn a trade or be educated.

Both the Old and the New Covenants condemn the practice of kidnapping. In fact, it's a capital offense in the Old not only to steal a human but to even be in the possession of a kidnapped person.

- Exodus 21:16 HCSB "Whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession.

The New Covenant continues this view stating that this wickedness is lawless, rebellious and against sound teaching.

- 1 Timothy 1:9-11 HCSB We know that the law is not meant for a righteous person, but for the lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinful, for the unholy and irreverent, for those who kill their fathers and mothers, for murderers, 10 for the sexually immoral and homosexuals, for kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and for whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching 11 based on the glorious gospel of the blessed God that was entrusted to me.

It would be easy for us to say that "business is business." However, it has been historically very clear that the rich have often yielded to their yetzer hara¹ and abused those under their power.

- James 2:6 HCSB Yet you dishonored that poor man. Don't the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?

It would be a facile solution to simply shrug our shoulders and assuage our consciences by pointing to the cheaper cost of living in other countries or to say "they get the salary they contracted for." We could even try to twist the meaning of the parable of the householder² into supporting our view. Yet contract can at times lead to terrible oppression. Sometimes, the poor will agree to a contract that does not even give them enough to live on simply because the alternative is no income at all! Consider the situation in Nehemiah's day.

- Nehemiah 5:1-5 HCSB There was a widespread outcry from the people and their wives against their Jewish countrymen. 2 Some were saying, "We, our sons, and our daughters are numerous. Let us get grain so that we can eat and live." 3 Others were saying, "We are mortgaging our fields, vineyards, and homes to get grain during the famine." 4 Still others were saying, "We have borrowed money to pay the king's tax on our fields and

¹ the negative impulse; inherent sin

² Matthew 20:1-16

vineyards. 5 We and our children are just like our countrymen and their children, yet we are subjecting our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters are already enslaved, but we are powerless because our fields and vineyards belong to others."

Nehemiah's response was immediate and passionate.

- Nehemiah 5:6, 9 HCSB I became extremely angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints... Then I said, "What you are doing isn't right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God and not invite the reproach of our foreign enemies?"

We want more, more, more but don't want to pay a fair price for well made goods. We would rather buy a cheap, inferior, ill-gotten, product of slave labor, and replace it over and over again, rather than pay a bit more for higher quality product manufactured by workers making a fair wage. But Yahweh commands us to not oppress poor workers or deny justice to foreign residents.

- Deuteronomy 24:14 HCSB "Do not oppress a hired hand who is poor and needy, whether one of your brothers or one of the foreigners residing within a town in your land.
- Deuteronomy 24:17 HCSB Do not deny justice to a foreign resident or fatherless child, and do not take a widow's garment as security.

The practice of human trafficking is directly against the purpose and vision of our Master.

- Luke 4:18 HCSB The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to proclaim freedom to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed,

Traffickers in human lives will face severe punishment upon the Lord's return.

- Matthew 18:6-7 HCSB "But whoever causes the downfall of one of these little ones who believe in Me--it would be better for him if a heavy millstone were hung around his neck and he were drowned in the depths of the sea! 7 Woe to the world because of offenses. For offenses must come, but woe to that man by whom the offense comes.

We cannot afford to be simple minded in our approach to slavery and sweat shops however. On several occasions in the 1990s well meaning people who opposed sweatshops unintentionally increased child prostitution because there was no other work for the children to do. In some cases the children starved to death.

So our answer cannot be to simply boycott every product from 3rd world nations but to make sure that our activism actually promotes a living wage. Pushing for fair trade is a better alternative to simple boycotting. Our activism must be intelligent and well thought out.

Some may ask, "How do we choose? Sometimes the only products available are those made by countries that use forced labor to bring down prices!" I believe a couple of principles apply here.

First, we must ask ourselves, "Is this something I really need?"

- Philippians 4:11-12 HCSB I don't say this out of need, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. 12 I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content--whether well-fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need.
- 1 Timothy 6:6-8 HCSB But godliness with contentment is a great gain. 7 For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out. 8 But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these.

The vast majority of the products of slavery are cheap, low quality extras. For instance, oppressed Christians in China have been arrested and while in prison, forced to make Christmas lights for American consumption. Imprisoned Chinese pastors often have to make cigarette lighters, mine coal, make bricks, or assemble textiles while subject to electric shocks, beatings and sleep deprivation. So if we know that this product is made this way; that it is not in fact raising the level of living conditions of the workers or that it is made under forced conditions, we must ask "Do I really need this?"

Second, we must deal with the issue of information. In today's global society where multinational corporations and their shell companies buy and sell each other at dizzying rates, it's difficult to know the origin of the products we buy. In this case, I believe Paul's instructions on the consumption of meat sacrificed to idols have bearing. He said,

- 1 Corinthians 10:25-28 HCSB Eat everything that is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake, for 26 the earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it. 27 If one of the unbelievers invites you over and you want to go, eat everything that is set before you, without raising questions of conscience. 28 But if someone says to you, "This is food offered to an idol," do not eat it, out of consideration for the one who told you, and for conscience' sake.

I believe we should advance cautiously into the market, researching carefully what we buy; not only for its caloric value but for its contribution toward justice. Many prefer to not really look, but the Scriptures are clear that ignorance is NOT bliss.

- Proverbs 24:11-12 HCSB Rescue those being taken off to death, and save those stumbling toward slaughter. 12 If you say, "But we didn't know about this," won't He who weighs hearts consider it? Won't He who protects your life know? Won't He repay a person according to his work?

If we don't know specifically that a certain product has the taint of slavery, then we are free to purchase it. However, once it becomes known to us that a particular product is enriching abusive people at the expense of the poor and oppressed, then we are obligated to not only boycott that product but do what we can to change those conditions.

- Isaiah 58:6-8 HCSB Isn't the fast I choose: To break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free, and to tear off every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him, and to not ignore your own flesh and blood? 8 Then your light will appear like the dawn, and your recovery will come quickly. Your righteousness will go before you, and the LORD's glory will be your rear guard.