

Human Trafficking Awareness Month

WEEK 3 – SHOP WISELY

God's Word

Read James 5:1-5

The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields (*or sewed your clothes, made your chocolate or picked your fruit*) are crying out against you....You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence.... (*italics added*)

In today's world of globalization and multi-national corporations, it is often difficult to trace where the products we buy and consume originated. It is also a challenge assessing whether any given company is involved in or exploiting slave labor in some way. But as Christians, we should do our best to try to ensure that we are not unintentionally supporting the business of global slavery by the products we buy or the companies we buy them from. (See the Evangelical Covenant Church's website on Corporate and Consumer Responsibility.)

A Story

Basavaraj's family cultivated ragi and flat beans when he was a child. Then, one day, the dry land simply could not provide for the family any longer. The family needed money for basic necessities and to ensure that Basavaraj's younger brother could stay in school, so Basavaraj went to look for work, which he found in a brick kiln.

The owner of the kiln offered Basavaraj a small advance payment, which he could use to provide for his family's pressing needs. Basavaraj was glad for the opportunity to support his family, and began what he assumed would be a temporary position. But once inside the kiln, the owner told Basavaraj that he could not leave until he repaid the advance in a lump sum. The owner then ensured that this would be impossible by applying exorbitant interest rates to the advance and paying Basavaraj wages so miniscule that he could barely afford to eat, much less repay the ever-growing debt.

Basavaraj and the other laborers were forced to remain within the kiln's borders at all times, including to eat, sleep and work. They were beaten if the owner's thugs did not think their pace was fast enough. Basavaraj had become a slave. He dreamed of escaping, but he knew that the owner would track him down and force him to return to labor in the kiln.

Basavaraj labored for two years, trying to forget about the family he had left behind. He had given up hope of ever leaving the kiln – until one day, everything changed. IJM investigators had discovered the many slaves being held at the kiln, documented the abuse and asked the local government to intervene to protect its citizens. The local government responded, arriving at the kiln along with IJM staff to bring freedom to Basavaraj and 38 other forced laborers who had been tricked into slavery there. (From the International Justice Mission)

To Ponder

- In 2007, a case of crucifixes purchased by St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York were traced back to a factory in China where girls as young as 15 were forced to work up to 19-hour days, seven days a week to manufacture the religious items. Today, Christian items from Bible covers to t-shirts are being made in factories which abuse and traffic workers.
- Slavery in the strawberry harvesting industry happens around the world. In one case in the U.S. last year, thirty Mexican workers were enslaved harvesting strawberries in Louisiana.
- In Malawi, 78,000 children, some as young as five, work 12-hour days to produce cigarettes.
- Those Christmas decorations from Walmart? Ten year olds working 15 hour shifts in China for less than half of even their paltry minimum wage.
- That shimmer in your eye shadow? It is a mineral called mica. Much of the world's mica comes from India, where children as young as six labor long and hard for a single meal of rice. Their labor is what fuels the Western cosmetic industry.
- A 7-year-old boy works all day, every day, in a balloon factory in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. He and 19 other children work 12-hour days, 7 days a week, for about \$2.14 per week.

- In the Americas, a large number of migrants work for housing and construction companies. Compared to their local counterparts, migrant workers are generally willing to accept lower wages while working longer hours. This enables construction companies to sell and rent apartments and family homes at competitive prices. Trafficked labor from Eastern Europe, South Asia as well as South East Asia, in particular, is being used to build the homes, offices, sports and entertainment arenas that have been behind much of the construction boom of recent years. You may be getting a deal on your house, but who is really paying for it?
- Maria is 27 years old and is from Perm, Russia. In 2005, she saw an advertisement in a local newspaper. A recruitment agency was looking for waitresses to work in restaurants in Spain. The salary offered was €1,200 per month. Maria called the recruitment agency to apply. The agency was quick to hire her, and booked her a plane ticket to Madrid. She was told she would need to pay back the money for the ticket once she started working. When she arrived in Spain, Maria was picked up by a person from the recruitment agency who took her passport and forced her to work on a farm picking tomatoes and lettuce for a salary of €100 a month. She would like to leave but cannot escape. The farm is surrounded by barbed wire, and is guarded by security personnel. Maria may have picked the tomatoes in the salad you're having for lunch.

A Prayer

Help, Lord, for the godly are no more; the faithful have vanished from among men. Everyone lies to his neighbor; their flattering lips speak with deception. May the Lord cut off all flattering lips and every boastful tongue that says, "We will triumph with our tongues; we own our lips – who is our master?" "Because of the oppression of the weak and the groaning of the needy, I will now arise," says the LORD. "I will protect them from those who malign them." And the words of the LORD are flawless, like silver refined in a furnace of clay, purified seven times. O LORD, you will keep us safe and protect us from such people forever. The wicked freely strut about when what is vile is honored among men. (Psalm 121, NIV)

Action Steps

Consumers in the UK can now find Fair Trade chocolate with ease since three of the largest manufacturers provide Fair Trade options. But in the U.S., we're stuck scouring specialty stores or trolling online for our Fair Trade bars. What's gives? There are a lot of little reasons the Brits get better options in chocolate and one big one. The little reasons involve a lot of confusing and boring economic terminology about tariffs and the import standards for the EU and NAFTA. But none of that matters in the face of the biggest reason: us. American chocolate companies don't think Americans want Fair Trade chocolate. Or, they at least don't think we want it enough to pay a few pennies more for an ethically-sourced candy bar. (Endhumantrafficking.org, Amanda Kloer, "Break Me off a Piece of that Slave-Free Bar.")

Are you not willing to spend a few cents more to make sure your products are slave-free?

- Think about every product you buy over the next month and the people that make that product. Is that product worth the cost of how it was made?
- Is there one area where you can make a difference? Chocolate? Clothing? Electronics? Construction?
- Check out your favorite stores and brands:

www.business-humanrights.org
www.corpwatch.org
www.buyresponsibly.org
www.corp-ethics.com

www.somo.nl
www.laborrights.org
www.crocodyl.org
www.laborrights.org

- Send emails and letters to the brands you use and ask them to use slave-free products. humantrafficking.change.org/actions (pre-made letter just waiting for your signature!)
- Ask hard questions about the companies you've invested in. Stay only in hotels where there is a "code of conduct". (There are only five US hotels who agreed to the code that protects children from sex tourism.) www.thecode.org
- Find out where to buy fair trade items near you! www.transfairusa.org
- Visit the Covenant Website for additional Action Items - www.covchurch.org/humantrafficking/engaging-for-transformation/corporate--consumer-responsibility