

Abiding Fruit

Informing the Mind & Inflaming the Heart

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From Slave to Beloved Brother Philemon 16

How difficult it must have been in the 1st century to accept slaves who had become Christians. The distinction between non-slaves and slaves was immense and the ramifications were also. Slaves had no rights over their own lives. Their lives and deaths ultimately rested in the hands of their masters, unless they died by natural causes. There were good masters and there were evil masters as there always are in every place. The New Testament does not say anything about doing away with slavery in the 1st century. Instead, the New Testament teaches that masters were to treat their slaves in a particular way, and the implication was that eventually slavery would not be necessary. From a Christian perspective this is ideal, but in a sinful world, it was unlikely that this transition would take place unless it became policy to outlaw slavery. In fact, Jesus and the apostles never taught that slavery was wrong or should be abolished. They obviously recognized the practice as part of their day and age. This does not imply however, that they approved of slavery or never said anything about it.

The book of Philemon is about a master and his slave. It is about a Christian master by the name of Philemon who had become a Christian through the Apostle Paul (see vv. 8, 19). It is also about a slave by the name of Onesimus who had fled the service of Philemon, gone to Rome to lose himself in the masses of humanity, and then had met the Apostle Paul and become a Christian (see vs. 10)

Paul's letter to Philemon is to tell him about Onesimus and how Paul was sending him back to be of service again in Philemon's house. This is one of the most dramatic accounts, I think, of what becoming a Christian meant in the 1st century. It is Paul's expectation that Philemon will welcome Onesimus back and forgive him for running away. This is also asking a great deal of Onesimus whose life was being placed again in the hand of a master who legitimately could demand his death due to his desertion.

Onesimus probably was guilty of theft (vs. 18), so he would have to give an account of what he did. Paul was willing to pay whatever was owed to Philemon. Onesimus' name means "useful". Paul developed a deep love for Onesimus and wanted to keep him with him in Rome as he was proving very profitable in the ministry (see vv. 11, 12, 13, 16).

Onesimus usefulness is dependent upon his return to Philemon since he had broken Roman law and defrauded Philemon. These needed to be dealt with so that the slate could be wiped clean and Onesimus could continue serving as Christian slave.

It was possible that Philemon might not have received Onesimus back in the way Paul desired him to, but Paul writes in such a way that he reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his very soul (as it were), since Paul was his father in Christ. The letter is brilliantly written in such a way to stimulate Philemon to do the right thing. The right thing would be to receive Onesimus and forgive his transgressions of theft and desertion, and renew him back into his place of service. Notice that because Onesimus has become a Christian, his slavery does not end as far as Rome was concerned or as far as Philemon was concerned. However, in Christ there were no distinctions. Any discrimination in the Church is something man has introduced into the body of Christ.

The New Testament stresses the spiritual equality that exists between slaves and masters (compare Gal. 3:8; Eph. 6:8, 9; Col. 4:1; & 1 Tim. 6:1, 2 – see also vs. 16). Paul tells the Corinthians that Christian slaves were the Lord's free men and that Christian free persons were the Lord's slaves (1 Cor. 7:21). This verse in 1 Corinthians 7:22 follows Paul's teaching concerning what a slave should do now that he or she had become a believer. In verse 21, Paul states that if a person was a slave when they became a Christian, they are not to be troubled by their slavery or go out of their way to be free. He tells them that if do get the opportunity to be set free or buy their freedom they should avail themselves of that opportunity. In verse 20, Paul urges all to remain in the same position or condition (free or slave) when they became Christians.

These then, are the principles by which Paul is operating when it comes to Philemon and Onesimus. Forgiveness is the driving force behind Paul's appeal to Philemon. Since he is a forgiven freeman, he ought to consider forgiving his slave. It is instructive that Paul says nothing about forgiveness in his letter to Philemon, yet it is what pervades the whole epistle.

Due to the dangers of the journey back to Philemon who lived in Colosse, Paul sent Onesimus back with his other close associate Tychicus, who also carried the letter to the Colossians from Paul (Col. 4:7 – 9). If Philemon receives Onesimus back as Paul desires, then Paul will have achieved what he set out to. He must have had great confidence in Philemon (see vs. 21). Paul also mentions the fact that he hoped to come and see Philemon again, so he asked that Philemon would prepare a room for his visit (vs. 22). Paul also indicated that he knew that Philemon and others were praying for him in Rome. These were all subtle hints aimed at preparing Philemon to receive Onesimus back.

The question is, in what way should Philemon receive Onesimus back? Paul's desire is for complete forgiveness and reconciliation to take place. In one sense this could happen without there being a change in relationship, but Paul desires that Philemon no longer regard Onesimus as a slave, but now as a beloved brother in the Lord (vs. 16). This is another way of saying to Philemon that both he and Onesimus were equal as far as Paul was concerned and as far as the Lord was concerned. Well, how do you escape such powerful logic? You cannot, except by rebelling against what Paul desires which would also be against the will of the Lord (in this case).

Paul maximizes the connection with Philemon by calling him "brother" and "beloved fellow-worker" (see vv. 1, 7, 20). He stresses the father-child relationship between Onesimus and himself (Paul – see vv. 10). It is clear that Paul enjoys close relationships with both men. He is appealing to the union that they have in Christ as the foundation for their future relationship. This relationship is between all three men and depending on what Philemon does, the outcome of that relationship in the future might be in jeopardy. However, such is the confidence of Paul in Philemon and in Onesimus as men who would respond as Paul expected them to, that he proceeds in his letter as if Philemon would do precisely what he suggests.

Now what lessons can we learn from this situation? Slavery is not the main issue at all in this letter. The condition of slavery is simply acknowledged by Paul and he expects Onesimus to respond to the requirements imposed on him by the law. The main lesson is about forgiveness. The difficulty of forgiving Onesimus would be experienced by Philemon simply because of their previous relationship (master and slave). This tells us that there are times when it is hard to forgive, but we must do so, no matter the difficulties associated with such action. We are to remember that there are no distinctions within the body as to gender, employment, race or positions within society. In Christ, we are all one, and the obligations to exist in harmony are laid upon all of us. Philemon simply had no choice really in the matter, for to choose to reject Paul's advice would have been in opposition to Christ and the spirit of being a Christian. It is this "no choice option" that the Christian must learn to appreciate for we are now under a Sovereign whose will must be our delight and not merely our duty. It is glorious to know that each of us has gone from slavery to freedom in Christ. We are beloved in the Lord.