

Philemon
Dig Deeper, October 11, 2006

Philemon is one of the four epistles Paul wrote to individuals. John wrote two others. Philemon is unique because it was sent along with an epistle written to an Assembly at Colosse of which he was part. Some names mentioned in Colossians are also mentioned in that to Philemon. Paul writes to him to urge him to receive back a runaway slave, Onesimus, whom Paul is sending to him. Onesimus was an unbeliever when he stole some of Philemon's belongings and fled. He had been caught and imprisoned in Rome where he met Paul and was converted. When he was being returned to his rightful master Philemon, Paul wrote to urge him to receive him back, not only as a now willing and subject slave but a brother in Christ. Paul commends Onesimus to the assembly at Colosse which met in Philemon's house, for fellowship at the Lord's Table and their care as a member of the body of Christ. In his letter to the Colossian believers Paul emphasizes that man-made distinctions that cause differences in secular society are not in effect in the assembly itself. In fact the assemblies apparently adjusted their meeting times so slaves could attend during their slack times. Slaves and their masters were brethren in Christ in the assembly.

*Colossians 3:10 And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him: 11 Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, **bond nor free:** but Christ is all, and in all.*

In fact in his letter to Titus Paul urges slaves not to take advantage of their masters who are believers (2:10).

While many believers think the institution and practice of slavery is wrong I have not found any passage where Paul or any other inspired author of the bible outright condemns it. Paul does not launch into the expected tirade about the evils and degradation of slavery. The degradation of sin in every person far exceeds that of being a slave. All unbelievers are slaves to sin and Satan. On the other hand Paul does encourage those who are given the opportunity to become free to use it, 1Corinthians 7:21-23. Apparently there were at least two different ways people became slaves or bondmen. One was involuntary, to pay a debt owed or as a captive from an invasion. Another was a voluntary step taken by a person for a limited time, desiring to get room and board while learning a trade or some skills that would be useful in gainful employment once free. Joseph's enslavement in Egypt was involuntary, as was that of the children of Israel later. His example as a faithful and diligent servant lives on to inspire us in our employment or slavery as the

case may be. When the Lord commenced His work to redeem man and the earth his second step down was to become a servant, even before becoming a man, Philippians 2:7. A number of passages in the New Testament give instructions to believers who are bond servants and to believers who are masters, Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1Timothy 6:1,2; Titus 2:9,10; 1Peter 2:18-21. These command faithful, trustworthy service which adorns the doctrine of Christ. Therefore a believer who chafes under his employment or workplace conditions is really out of step with the mind of Christ who is the perfect servant. Furthermore workplace pilfering, which is only outright thievery, is roundly condemned in scripture. Slacking off and wasting the employer's time and the time of others is also theft. May we each attempt to work faithfully, thoroughly and competently for our earthly masters, as if for Christ Himself.

Another lesson we can learn from this epistle is that trespasses and sins against us can and should be forgiven, whether we are victimized by an unsaved person or, God forbid, one whom we think is a believer. The Lord Himself instructs us as to this situation in Matthew 18. Restitution is normally expected as Paul acknowledges, but he pleads with Philemon to charge his losses to his own (Paul's) account rather than extract it from Onesimus. But then he reminds Philemon of the gift he had received of eternal life through Paul's evangelism.

This letter is a warm, gentle, intimate, respectful personal note that appeals to the love and mutual trust and confidence these two brethren in Christ shared. What an example for each of us in our interrelations with one another. Though Paul could have enjoined Philemon, exercising the authority he assuredly had as a apostle, he instead chooses a personal brother to brother appeal to the heart. He took this course more than once as did John and others as well. Personal appeals in Christ are the preferred means to resolve difficulties or achieve changes in attitude or behavior amongst believers. Use of power is a last resort and only rests in the assembly nowadays since there are no apostles.

Questions: Do you think Paul intended that Philemon release Onesimus? Do you think Philemon released Onesimus? Does God condone slavery or simply tolerate it as part of the sad condition of fallen man?

By Ron Canner, October 11, 2006