

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 1/31/93 PM
Philemon 12-16 "The Difference Christ Makes in Our Relationships"

Intro: If you had lived 1900 years ago, there's a good chance you'd have been a slave. Slavery. Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. When Christianity spread in those early days to places like Ephesus, Colossae, Thessalonica, and Philippi, its message impacted a society in which slavery had been culturally accepted for hundreds of years.

A familiar proverb was "So many slaves, just so many enemies!" (Wiersbe)

The average slave sold for 500 denarii (one denarius was a day's wage for a common laborer). Educated and skilled slaves were priced as high as 50,000 denarii. If a master chose, he could set his slave free. Or if he had the means, a slave could buy his freedom (Acts 22:28).

A man named Philemon had a slave named Onesimus. He caused him a great deal of heartache. One day, Onesimus robbed his master, and ran away. God led the slave's steps to Rome, where Onesimus ran into the apostle Paul who was under house arrest as a Christian. You know the story. Paul led Onesimus to Christ. Then he sent the slave back to his master with a cover letter.

Let's look again at that letter tonight--Philemon.

Something is striking about the book of Philemon. There's one shocking fact that has caused commentators to wrestle with this letter. It's something that Paul did NOT say. When Paul sent the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon (who by the way was a good friend of Paul's), Paul did not tell Philemon to set Onesimus free.

Q: Why not? Did Paul endorse slavery? Of course not.

Q: Why then didn't he condemn slavery in a letter like this?

Q: For that matter, what should be our response today towards social injustices?

Abraham Lincoln resolved the slavery issue in our country 130 years ago, with the Emancipation Proclamation. But slavery remains a social ill today. In China for instance, the average Chinese person lives in perpetual serfdom, with few rights (that's over one billion people). And what about other state approved social blights, like abortion, and various types of pornography? What responsibility does the church have when it comes to social problems?

The responses of Christians are varied...

Eg--Some bomb abortion clinics. Some write letters to congressmen. Others picket. Others join rallies. Others do nothing. Which is right?

Paul's letter to Philemon gives us helpful guidance in sifting through this issue. You may be surprised at what the apostle has to say, and doesn't have to say!

Before we look at Philemon, let's scan the NT to see what Paul had to say elsewhere about the issue of slavery.

What the NT says about Slavery:

Paul never condemned slavery in his letters. Lightfoot remarks about Paul, "The word 'emancipation' seems to tremble on his lips, but he never utters it." (Barclay, 271). Why didn't Paul condemn slavery? Why didn't he start a campaign against it?

1. Slavery was an integral part of the ancient world. The whole society was built on it. Why didn't Paul protest against it? A crusade against slavery would have only made things worse for slaves. Powerful masters would have clamped down and made conditions even more harsh.

But there's another more important reason.

2. A campaign against slavery would have branded the new movement of Christianity as dangerous and revolutionary (Lucas). The Romans would have ruthlessly crushed the church if they perceived it to be a political movement.

But Christianity is not a political movement, is it? Our mission is not political, though we have social responsibilities. Our primary mission is evangelism--the proclamation of the gospel of Christ.

Key: The early Christians did not attack slavery. The results would have been disastrous. Instead, they showed the world an alternative. They modeled a new type of relationships, in Jesus Christ.

Gal 3:28 "There is neither...bond nor free...for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

I Cor 12:13 "For by one Spirit were we all baptized...whether bond or free..."

Jesus Christ makes a difference in the way people relate to each other. In Christ there are no classes of people. Though there may be in the world, we are all one in Christ. Social status doesn't matter in Christ. One person may be a master, another a slave. But both are equal in Christ.

In fact, the NT is very blunt about the subject. Paul gave very practical and pointed instructions to Christian masters and slaves...

Eph 6:5-9

Col 3:22-4:1

Observation: When did Paul write Ephesians and Colossians? When he was in prison in Rome. Who else was with Paul while there in prison? Onesimus. Barclay says it's not difficult to think that Paul's long talks with the runaway slave Onesimus contributed to his teaching about slaves and masters in Eph and Col.

Sum: Paul didn't campaign against slavery. He just instructed Christians to show the world an alternative. Jesus Christ designs for the local church to be an oasis in a barren society. Don't compromise with society. Change society by living out an alternative lifestyle.

Illust:

Key: Jesus Christ can and should make a difference in our relationships.

Proposition: I want you to see the difference Christ made in the relationships between people described in Philemon 12-16.

I. What Paul Thought of Onesimus (12-13)

II. What Philemon Should Think of Onesimus (14-16)

I. What Paul Thought of Onesimus (12-13)

When we left off last week, we heard Paul telling Philemon how Christ made a useless person into a useful person (vv 8-11).

V 11 "Who in time past...unprofitable, but now profitable..."

So Paul sent Onesimus back to his master. With a letter.

Q: What did Paul think about Onesimus?

V 12 "Whom I have sent again...my own heart."

Do you remember how Paul complimented Philemon in v 7?

v 7 "the HEARTS of the saints are refreshed by thee brother"

Remember what we said about that word? It's not the normal word for "heart" (kardia), but the word "splanchna." The KJV translates "bowels." It refers to a person's inner parts (liver, bowels, etc). It represents a person's deep, inner, personal needs. Paul told Philemon, "You refresh people where they hurt the most, down deep."

Now watch what Paul has to say about Onesimus in v 12...

"mine own heart"--Paul thought the world of Onesimus, because of what Christ had done in and through him. "He's my own heart, Philemon. Make sure you treat him properly, because the way you treat him is the way you treat me." He's dear to me. Paul certainly knew the art of friendly persuasion, didn't he?

Notice the specific compliment Paul gave to Onesimus...

V 13 "Whom I would have retained (=to hold back)..."

"ministered"--Gromacki points out that the verb (diakonei) does not refer to the technical service of a church deacon, but to general ministry. Onesimus had been involved in, and would continue to be useful in ministering to Paul in prison.

Q: What types of things did Onesimus do to minister to Paul?

A: Remember Paul was under house arrest (Acts 28:30). Perhaps Onesimus brought food to Paul. Maybe he helped with domestic needs. Possibly he served as Paul's messenger, ran errands, and was Paul's link with the outside world. He could have assisted Paul in praying for and assisting the Roman church. And no doubt, he helped break up the pain of loneliness in the apostle's lengthy prison stay.

note: There is a tradition, stemming from an ancient letter written by Ignatius to the Ephesians, that Onesimus later became a minister. In fact, that tradition says he eventually became the bishop of the Ephesian church (Gromacki).

Whatever he did, Onesimus was highly regarded by Paul. Yes, highly regarded. To the point that Paul hated to see him go. But he had to go. The past had to be cleared up.

So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon.

Q: What exactly did Paul want Philemon to do with Onesimus?

A: Look at v 12. Receive him (not in Greek text of v 12, but in v 17).

The verb "sent again" (12) can have a technical, judicial meaning, "to refer a case." The reason Paul sent Onesimus to Philemon was because he wanted the master to see for himself whether his runaway slave had changed.

That's interesting.

Application: Does everything automatically change when a person becomes a Christian? Do all your past problems go away?

No. Take Onesimus for instance. Christ made him a new person on the inside. But he still had scars in his past. He had a criminal record. He had committed a serious crime against Philemon. So what did Paul instruct Onesimus to do? "Go back to your master. Ask for his forgiveness. Make restitution. Let him see the change Christ has made in your life."

Illust: Just like the prodigal son... Lk 15:18 "I have sinned against heaven and before thee."

Key: As Christians we must always welcome back the brother who has blown it. That's not easy, is it?

Illust:

Tran: First, Paul told us what he thought of Onesimus. Next, in vv 14-16...

II. What Philemon Should Think of Onesimus (14-16)

Paul had a great respect for Philemon. Paul valued Philemon's friendship. As his spiritual son, his opinion and feelings mattered to him.

So Paul sent Onesimus back. Why did he say he did that?

V 14 "But without thy mind would I do nothing."

Think about that. Onesimus was doing a great job in the ministry. But Paul sent him back. He put the ministry on hold. Why?

Key: There's something more important to our Lord than ministry.

Q: What is it?

A: Look at John 17:21, "that they may be ONE..."

What's more important than ministry? Unity is. Unity between 2 brothers in Christ takes precedence over ministry. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus had to be resolved before successful ministry could continue.

We get it turned around sometimes.

Illust: Active in ministry, yet life full of broken relationships...

Paul did not bulldoze Philemon around. Granted Onesimus was a great asset to him. And granted he had earned the right (if you want to put it that way) to borrow the services of Philemon's slave. But sometimes what we have a right to do may not be the best thing to do.

Such was the case here. Listen again to Paul's appeal.

V 14 "...that thy benefit should not be...of necessity, but willingly."

Paul wanted Philemon to make the decision on his own. He sent Onesimus back. He sent a letter explaining the circumstances. But he didn't want Philemon to be motivated by fear, by motivated by love.

Next, the apostle proposes a reason for what had happened.

Vv 15-16 "For perhaps..."

Q: Why did Onesimus run away?

A: You say, "Because he chose to."

That's right. What Onesimus did was wrong. He committed a crime against his master. He stole from him. He skipped the country. What he did was wrong.

But listen. God can overrule wrong and use it to accomplish His purpose.

Ps 76:10 "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain."

Paul said to Philemon, "Friend, did you ever stop to think that perhaps God allowed your slave to hurt you by running away? He allowed you to suffer a temporary hurt so that you might enjoy an eternal reward! In fact, what Onesimus did was wrong, but God used his separation to bring him to Christ. You lost a slave for awhile so that you might gain a brother forever!"

Key: The sovereignty of God is one of the most encouraging and comforting doctrines taught in the Bible. God is in absolute control. There is no such thing as chance, or bad luck.

Illust: Joseph in Gen 50:20 "But as for you, ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good, to bring to pass as it is this day, to save many people..."

God can turn our pain into blessing. He can use great tragedy to bring us great reward. In Philemon's case, if there had been no separation, there would have been no reception. Notice the contrast:

v 15 "departed for a season" (lit. "for an hour")

v 15 "receive him forever"

I like the way commentator Robert Gromacki put it, "What is an hour compared to eternity?" (198) Yes, the loss of a slave brought pain into Philemon's life. But the pain was temporary. And the gain was permanent!

This is one of those truths that's easy to talk about in church, and hard to remember when the heat is on! God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life.

Illust:

Challenge:

Jesus Christ can and should make a difference in our relationships. He did in the case of a converted slave named Onesimus.

The world needs to see Jesus Christ making a difference in our relationships. Because we are Christians, we are to treat people differently.

Q: Can people tell you are a Christian by looking at the way you treat people?

Illust: