

Letters of Paul – Session Five

Dear Philemon: Slavery Reimagined

Philemon 1:1-25

Paul's letter to Philemon is the shortest epistle/letter in the New Testament (actually Philemon and Jude are exactly the same length, so it's a tie). Philemon is concise and very personal, but let's stress the concision: 335 Greek words, less than 500 English words. It's personal and reads like a note written between friends, which is essentially what this correspondence is.

Paul is in prison when he writes this letter to an old friend in Colossae with a huge request: accept back his runaway slave Onesimus with no consequences. It may be difficult for us to grasp how large this request was but, in that day, a runaway slave could be beaten severely (made an example of), shipped off to a hard labor site or killed. It would have been rare for an escaped slave to return with few to any consequences. The precedent that would set would not have been in the owner's favor. Of course, the average runaway slave would not have designs on returning either, so this situation/circumstance was quite unique.

The Issue of Slavery

Before we break down Paul's letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus let's deal with the focal issue of slavery. Let me say that this letter is not about slavery. Paul did not speak to the institution, practice or non-illustrious history of people owing people. That said, you simply cannot read these twenty-five verses without that term and a dozen questions germinating, especially with the long view we enjoy after approximately 1970 years.

Slavery has been practiced for most of the recorded history of our world. It's hard to imagine but slavery is still active even in this advanced time in which we live. It may be called by other names, like sex trafficking of underage boys and girls, but by definition slavery is when one person literally owns another human being. The venue might change but the reality doesn't.

The Greco-Roman world was built upon the practice of slavery. Christian Eberhart writes that between 35%-40% of the total population was enslaved. Slavery was so engrained and part of the social fabric that inequality in power, freedom and the control of resources was simply the accepted way of life. K. Bradley nails it with, "Freedom was not a general right but a select privilege."

It's hard to imagine how Rome and Greece could grow a slave population as large as it did and its harder to imagine how they sustained it. The story of Spartacus illustrates how volatile Rome considered the slave class to the overall stability of the Empire. If say, 35% of the 5 million citizens of the Roman Empire in the first century were slaves, that total would represent 1.75 million persons. To put this into a modern-day perspective the total population of the United States is 328 million. Several of our states have populations almost identical to the total number of slaves in the Empire. Nebraska, Idaho and West Virginia match up closely, and Hawaii, New Hampshire, and Maine have a couple of hundred thousand fewer residents than the Roman Empire had slaves. British theologian Phil Moore writes that it's possible that Ephesus had more slaves than free citizens during the mid-first century. All of this makes it more puzzling that Paul wrote to a slave owner about a runaway slave, one of 1.75 million slaves, but chose to not deal with the institution or practice of slavery.

So, what about the other New Testament writers? John? Peter? Matthew-Mark-Luke? James? Nos all the way across the board. Surely Jesus spoke to this inhumane issue, right? No. Why? Wasn't this truly low hanging fruit? Easy-peasy? *Slavery, gotta get rid of that social and human injustice!* There are many views, but no one knows the exact reasons that the New Testament writers did not seek to eradicate slavery. One widely held rationale is that to attack such a large institution would have led to war with Rome. The economic and social stability factors were incalculable, and Rome would not have allowed for any teachers or movements to work against the Empire.

Onesimus and Paul

So Onesimus leaves Colossae and makes it to Rome where he finds Paul. Paul leads him to a life changing decision to follow Christ and then the decision must

be made as to what comes next. Between them they decide that it is best for Onesimus to go back to Colossae and Philemon. This is a gutsy call as runaway slaves fared best when they remained “runaway.” Returning could lead to all levels of punishment, even death. Before we get to the rest of the story let’s delve into how amazing it is that Onesimus managed to find his way to Rome and find Paul.

It’s a long way from Colossae to Rome. Most commentators believe Onesimus lived in Colossae with Philemon, who also supported a church that met in his home. S. M. Baugh writes about how fantastic this journey sounds: “A runaway slave making it halfway across the Mediterranean is a problem. Tack on getting into the prison for extended audience with Paul adds to the questions.” Baugh believes that despite Onesimus not yet being a follower of Jesus he was familiar with Christianity and the church supported by Philemon. He also believes Onesimus was not running away from Philemon as much as he was running to Paul. We do not know why any of this happened as we do not know what Philemon might have done to Onesimus or vice-versa. Obviously, some level of restitution and restoration was needed. We do know Philemon held all the cards. Owners had total power over slaves.

Paul to Philemon

Onesimus did something to Philemon, but we don’t know what his act was. It’s possible he stole from him. What we do know is that Onesimus traveled approximately 1000 miles to find Paul after he fled Colossae. Paul led him to a relationship with Christ and began the process of discipling him. At the appropriate time Paul instructed Onesimus to return to Colossae to make amends with Philemon, thus the formal correspondence to Philemon from Paul.

Paul, being Paul, could have commanded Philemon to openly accept Onesimus back with no ramifications or punishment. Paul chose another approach.

Even though I have enough boldness in Christ I could command you to do what is proper, I’d rather make an appeal because of our friendship. So here I am, an old man, a prisoner for Christ, making my loving appeal to you (vv.8-10).

Legislating morality doesn't work. Morality emanates from the heart, mind and soul. In Christ the societal and cultural norms had been turned upside down, become inverted and were now counter intuitive. Slave owners did not openly accept back runaway slaves. That wouldn't be good for business or for the other slaves to see. Slaves would be pulling a runner left and right if that became the norm. No worries, it wouldn't and didn't. Money and order trumped a Gospel lifestyle.

Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him, possibly as an assistant while he was in prison, but told Philemon it was right for him to return home.

I would have preferred to keep him at my side so that he could take your place as my helper during my imprisonment for the sake of the gospel. However, I did not want to make this decision without your consent, so that your act of kindness would not be a matter of obligation but out of willingness (vv. 13-14).

Philemon might have asked why? Why am I recreating the social order for the Roman Empire?

Perhaps you could think of it this way: he was separated from you for a short time so that you could have him back forever. So welcome him no longer as a slave, but more than that, as a dearly loved brother. He is that to me especially, and how much more so to you, both humanly speaking and in the Lord. So if you consider me your friend and partner, accept him the same way you would accept me. And if he has stolen anything from you or owes you anything, just place it on my account (vv. 15-16).

Philemon's Response

Well, that would be good to have, but we don't have it. Theological lore holds that Philemon fully restored Onesimus, which allowed him to serve the church in several offices. An Onesimus is mentioned in Colossians and one historian lists an Onesimus who served as Bishop in Ephesus. Same guy? That would be a pretty big jump from slave, to runaway slave, to returning runaway slave, to the Bishop gig, but hey, it's Paul and it's the first century Gospel. It could happen. It's also

possible Philemon took advantage of the friendly Roman laws that allowed for the summary execution of runaway slaves.

My take is that Onesimus was received well by Philemon and that he returned to a more equitable life, one that included being part of the house church. Did he remain a slave? Possibly, but a slave who was considered equal in the faith. That itself would have been great progress.

Takeaway

1. This letter is not about slavery. I personally wish scripture had addressed this blight on humanity, but it doesn't. This letter is about restoration and forgiveness, actually extreme restoration and forgiveness. Hey, let's toss in reconciliation while we're at it.

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4: 1-3).

Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3: 13-14).

2. There's no downside to this decision. Sure, Philemon would have to endure the ire of many other slave owners, but he would be doing several other counter-norm things in his pursuit of the holy. He would stand out for many reasons. Why not something as radical as forgiving a runaway slave who had become a follower of Jesus?
3. This is a big deal for Paul, Philemon and for practical theology. Orthodoxy, or right belief, informs orthopraxis, or right living. Paul was shaping

practical theology for Philemon and for his church. And by the way, for us as well. Forgiveness, restoration and reconciliation must be verb-acts we base our lives upon.

Wow, there is a lot of heavy stuff in these 25 verses. It takes time but this is *change the world stuff!*

Amen and Amen

Dr. Michael McCullar
Formations Pastor
Johns Creek Baptist Church