

BaptistWay Bible Series for August 27: The gospel transforms human relationships

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The gospel transforms human relationships

- Philemon

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Looking back over history, we can see the institution of slavery clearly was wrong. And even though the institution in the ancient world could not compare with that of the last few centuries, it still was a system that treated some classes of people as property. Unfortunately, in the past, the Bible had been used in support of slavery; while others read the same Bible and concluded slavery was wrong. The reality is that the Bible does not overtly condemn slavery.

One might think Onesimus' conversion and this letter to Philemon would afford Paul the perfect opportunity to speak out against the institution. But Paul does no such thing.

The New Testament offers hints that people should no longer be regarded

as slaves. Among Paul's own writings are statements declaring that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (1 Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Also, in 1 Corinthians 7:17, 20-24, Paul says everyone should stay in the state they were before they came to Christ. This applies to slaves as well. However, he follows it up with a brief comment that if they can gain their freedom, they should do so. Then in both Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1, Paul instructs believing slaves regarding their conduct.

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Incidentally, these passages also set the standards for how believing slave owners should treat their slaves. So, while the institution was not condemned entirely, Paul could see changes needed to be made.

In the letter to Philemon, though Paul does not overtly condemn slavery, we get a clue as to what Paul truly desired in this regard and the means by which he sought to accomplish it.

Greetings to and commendation of Philemon (vv. 1-7)

The letter to Philemon opens in much the same fashion as Paul's other letters. Paul identifies himself as the sender, Philemon (and others associated with him) as the recipient, and a word of salutation and greeting (vv. 1-3).

He then offers encouraging words to Philemon, acknowledging he is thankful to God for Philemon's faith in Christ and his love for others, and spurring Philemon on to continued fellowship of faith. Philemon's ministry had the effect of "refreshing the hearts of the saints" (vv. 4-7).

Paul's appeal to Philemon (vv. 8-25)

After his commendation of Philemon, Paul turns his attention to the matter at hand. He has a request of Philemon. Paul informs Philemon he could impose upon Philemon his request, instead he appeals to Philemon "on the basis of love" (vv. 8-9).

What was Paul's request? He was sending Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, back to him. The circumstances surrounding Onesimus' conversion are unknown. The only reference to this event comes from Paul's words in this letter.

Using language found in the pastoral letters with respect to Timothy and Titus, Paul reveals to Philemon that Onesimus has become his "son" while Paul has been in chains. Though Paul would like for Onesimus to stay with him, he is sending Onesimus back to Philemon.

Perhaps Paul sought to reverse Philemon's low view of Onesimus, because he played on the meaning of Onesimus' name to assure Philemon Onesimus is not the same person he was. Onesimus (which means useful) at one time was considered useless; but now he became useful. Paul certainly saw this trait in Onesimus and wanted Philemon to know it as well (vv. 10-11).

Again, it appears Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him, even in some way to take Philemon's place in helping Paul while he remained in prison for the gospel. But he did not want to force this decision on Philemon. Rather, Paul wanted Philemon to respond out of the character that he had exhibited.

Furthermore, Paul suggested Onesimus' departure may have been in the will of God, so that Philemon could have Onesimus back in a new relationship—no longer a slave, but a beloved brother in Christ (vv. 12-16).

In a further display of confidence, Paul offered to repay any loss Philemon incurred because of Onesimus. With that gesture, Paul demonstrated he did not condone Onesimus' actions (whatever they may have been) but did want to communicate to Philemon his confidence in Onesimus' change.

Just as Philemon had “refreshed the hearts of the saints” (v. 7), so Paul requests that he “refresh (his) heart in Christ” (v. 20). By this did Paul mean himself or Onesimus (whom Paul calls his “very heart,” v. 12)? Regardless, Paul remained confident of Philemon’s positive response (v. 21).

The letter ends with Paul’s instructions to Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, trusting he would be released in answer to their prayers. Then Paul extends greetings to Philemon from other fellow workers with him (vv. 22-25).

Though Paul did not use this letter as a forum by which to condemn slavery, this letter to Philemon indicates he saw a higher standard in play—the new relationships that result from a shared faith in Christ. Such a relationship transcends institutions.

Conclusion

All of us can relate to Onesimus in one way or another. We may not have been slaves in the same sense as he was, but both Jesus and Paul state that apart from salvation we remain slaves of sin (John 8:31-36; Romans 6:15-17). At some point, all Christians need someone to intercede on their behalf.

Discussion questions

- Paul mentions Mark in the closing verses of this letter. This is the same Mark who had deserted Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. On the second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas divided over the decision to take Mark. Barnabas supported Mark; Paul rejected him. Now Mark was restored even in Paul's eyes. Could Barnabas' support of Mark (and Mark's demonstration of his trustworthiness) in some way have influenced Paul in his letter to Philemon?
- How might Barnabas' support of Paul after his own conversion influenced him?
- Why do we accept some new believers more easily than we do others? Why do we differentiate some people's past from that of others?
- Do you know of any new believers who could benefit from someone's (possibly your) intercession?
- Are you an Onesimus in need of acceptance, or are you a Philemon who needs to accept someone else into a new relationship?



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