

OVERCOMING THE DIVIDE

Philemon 16-17

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5th May 2019



Last week we had a look at this letter of Paul's to Philemon. It was good to see how to deal with a tense issue with wisdom and tact. I trust you found it encouraging. It was so helpful to see Paul being humble, sharing his inner feelings, giving genuine compliments to his Christian friend Philemon. And seeing how Paul regularly prayed for him and thanked God for Philemon. It was insightful to see how Paul used tact to carefully put the case to Philemon, trusting him to make a good decision based on love, rather than Paul commanding or demanding. Paul's example in this letter is a real insight into how we can better relate with each other, especially with difficult issues.

Now, good as all that is, there is something about this letter that is disturbing, or, at least, it can seem that way. And that is that Paul seems to accept, as a given, the institution of slavery. If you were not here last week let me quickly remind you of the background here. Philemon was a rich well-to-do Christian living in Colossae, who, as was common in those days, had slaves. One of them, Onesimus, ran off, presumably having stolen stuff from his master. Onesimus had fled to Rome, 2000 kilometres away, to lose himself and be free in that large city. But as God's providence would have it, he came across Paul who was under house arrest, and was eventually converted by Paul. Onesimus had become a good Christian man, who was a wonderful help for Paul. But Paul felt it was not right that he had helping him, the slave of his good mate Philemon. So, he felt it was important for Onesimus to go back to Colossae, to his master and be reconciled. Paul was hoping that Philemon would forgive Onesimus, and then let him go back to assist Paul. Now this was a difficult situation. It was a crime for a slave to run away, even worse if he had stolen from his master. The usual punishment was a severe beating, even death. Slaves were regarded in those days as the property of the master. They had no rights. They were seen as the 'living dead'. That is, they were still alive, but dead in terms of freedom, rights, etc. A slave running off could also have broader ramifications for the local folk, especially if the slave was the steward of the house, the accountant who managed all the master's affairs. So, Philemon was well within his legal rights to deal very strongly with Onesimus, to have him severely beaten.

When you have a look at the main commentaries on this letter to Philemon, they have a major section dealing with slavery, especially as it was in those days. And all of them grapple with the question, why does Paul seem to accept slavery as a given? Why doesn't he write in this letter to Philemon that slavery is wrong, very wrong, a despicable, dehumanizing treatment of other human beings? How dare any one treat other human beings, those made in God's image, as if they were mere property, as non human, the living dead, those with no rights, those who could be sold or bought on whim; those who could be put to death by the decision of the master? In our day, we would be marching in the streets against such treatment of other people. Why doesn't Paul keep Onesimus with him and tell Philemon he has him, but will not give him up because slavery is wrong?

Now the question is, does Paul accept slavery or does his appeal contain an approach that will eventually bring an end to slavery? Look with me at the verses 16 & 17. We start at verse 15 to get the start of the sentence: *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So, if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."* Paul makes it clear that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is completely changed. He is getting Philemon to do a total rethink towards his slave, a complete mind shift. He does it in stages. He suggests, first off, that God has been at work, that in his providence the bad has been changed to good. So, Philemon needs to see God in this. It's not just that Onesimus took action, but God has too through Onesimus' decisions, so that now, as Paul says you *"have him back for good"*. The Greek means 'forever'. God is giving Onesimus back to Philemon 'for eternity'. Can you see where that is going?

Let's see what Paul says. Paul takes Philemon through three stages. Note them in verse 16 *"No longer as a slave"* (first shift- your slave is such no longer) *"but even better than a slave"* (second shift- something far more useful to you than a worker in your home) *"as a dear brother"* (third shift – a beloved, deeply loved brother, namely a fellow Christian, a brother in Christ). 'Philemon, Onesimus is one with whom you will live and love and praise God for all eternity as fellow children of God!' The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus has totally changed. No longer is Onesimus just a slave, property, someone to use or sell, someone who is a non-entity. Nor is it that he now sees him as a fellow human being. It's even more than that. The relation has transcended even that. Onesimus is a "beloved brother" – someone who is also a brother in Christ. 'Philemon, have you experienced the amazing grace of God? Have you been forgiven of everything because of Jesus' suffering on the cross? So has

Onesimus. Philemon, have you been adopted as a child of God, as a fellow heir with Christ? So has Onesimus. Philemon, is your hope that of eternal life, to enjoy the presence of God now and forever in utter joy with all sin and suffering gone forever? So, it is for Onesimus. He is your beloved brother!' The relationship between the two has totally transcended whatever they were. Were they master and slave? That has become meaningless in comparison to the richness of the relationship they now have together in Jesus. For one Christian to mistreat another Christian is not just a matter between the two of them. It is a slur on Jesus. It is an attack on Jesus. As Jesus said, "What you have done to the least of these brothers and sister of mine you have done to me." To mistreat another Christian is to touch someone for whom Christ suffered immensely in hell! How dare you? How could you do that to Jesus!

You can sense some of this depth, of what it really means to be Christian brothers and sisters in what Paul says in verse 17. *"He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you as a man and as a brother in the Lord"*. Do you hear that? What is the depth of the relationship: *"He is very dear to me..."* Previously Paul wrote in verse 12 *"I am sending him- who is my very heart..."* I suspect that we might find what Paul says a bit awkward. We are not used to such intimacy amongst Christian men. We certainly have difficulty expressing it, don't we? We are such rugged individualists in our culture that we find this intimacy, this dependence, this longing for the companionship of another embarrassing. But as difficult as we might find it, imagine how Philemon feels. He is being asked to see his useless slave, the one who ran off with his money, one who in that culture was only property, not really human, as his beloved brother, as his soul mate, as one together in Christ. As Paul goes on (verse 17) *"So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."* Philemon was deeply involved in the church, in sharing the gospel. He saw himself as a partner with Paul. Paul was the one who had brought Philemon to conversion. Paul was his spiritual father, his mentor, the one he respected and looked up to. And now Paul says welcome Onesimus, as you would me, with open arms, with respect and admiration, with joy and enthusiasm.

So, has Paul given approval of slavery as an institution? Or has he totally undercut the basis for it by completely turning on its head the usual relationship between master and slave? The famous New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce said, 'What this letter to Philemon does is to bring us into an atmosphere into which the institution of slavery will wilt and die'. Another commentator says 'Certainly human slavery is incompatible with social justice, and yet Paul does not demand the abolition of slavery. Instead, he places the whole matter on a different basis by reminding both master and slave that they are brethren and that their relations, one with the other, must be on the basis of Christian love. Certainly, where this relationship actually exists, the institution of

human slavery cannot continue, and it would seem that Paul's approach in this case is the Christian solution for every form of injustice.' You see the wisdom and tact in Paul's approach.

To prove this point we see a similar approach in the letter to the Colossians, which was the house church that met in Philemon's home. In chapter 3 of Colossians in verse 22 he says "*Slaves, obey your masters in everything; and do it not only when their eye is on you and to win their favour, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.*" Then he says to the masters "*provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know you also have a Master in heaven.*" In other words, both the master and the slave recognize they both serve Jesus as Lord. Whatever they do, they do it for Jesus. And it is this recognition of Christ in each other and serving Christ together that will change everything. Don't forget what Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26 "*You are all children of God through faith in Jesus...there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male or female...*" When Paul wrote that he was stating something totally radical for his day. Women and slaves were seen as property, chattel that could be disposed of. Jews and Greeks couldn't stand each other. There was a standard prayer by certain rabbis that said, 'I praise you Lord...that I am not a heathen or slave or a woman.' You can see how Paul's statement in Galatians reflects that prayer. For Paul to say that men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Greeks were all equal was to stun the people of his time. It was a revolutionary concept that would have rocked the Roman world to its foundations. You can imagine the new Christians rejoicing in their freedom, wanting to revolt against the unjust system. But they would have been very quickly and brutally crushed. The women, the slaves, the tiny house churches of Christians would have been destroyed. Paul saw that true change was not gained by rebellion and the sword, but from a change of heart. So, he urged the wives and slaves not to use their new freedom in the wrong way. He says in Galatians "*You were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature. Rather serve one another in love.*" In a sense Paul is saying: 'In Jesus you are forgiven and set free. Now you are free to go back and serve, not because you must, but because you chose to, as a service to Jesus. You do not have to cringe under tyranny any more. You chose to do it to show your love for Jesus. Let everyone see the effect of Jesus in your life, by the way you love and care and serve.'

Now what Paul says cuts both ways. It is not just the women who serve, or the slaves. He writes in Colossians 3:19 "*Husbands love your wives and do not be harsh with them...masters provide for your slaves what is right and fair...*" I want you to understand that while these commands seem right and fair to us, they would have been staggering to the husbands and masters of Paul's day. The word 'love' Paul uses here is agape, which meant to be willing to sacrifice for the wellbeing of the wife. To serve the wife as

Jesus served the church by giving his life for her. Masters were to consider their slaves as actual people; people with feelings and aspirations, people who should be treated fairly and with justice. These commands, this approach Paul asks of the men and masters was unheard of in those days. But he says do it for the Lord's sake. Do it for Jesus. The result of all this is that as the slaves seek to serve Jesus and the masters do the same, they are drawn to each other. The relationship completely changes.

Paul's approach is still what is needed today. We want a society that is more caring for one another. But for that to truly occur it is not just about the government making tougher laws, or for us to march in the streets and demand it. It has to come from deep within each of us. It begins with us as Christians recognizing who and what we really are in Jesus. It's about us truly loving each other and expressing it in how we care for each other. If Paul trusted that Philemon could do it with Onesimus, then it's all that much easier for us to long to be together, to cherish each other and continually pray for each other. A deeply loving Christian community would be a model, an example in the hills of what life could be like. Isn't that what Jesus asked of his people, to be the light shining on the hill, the light shining in the darkness, the hope in the midst of despair. Christian community is supposed to be an entrée, a foretaste of heaven, of spending an eternity together in praise of God.