

Paul's Letter to Philemon

(Part Three -- Onesimus)

After praising Philemon for his love and faith for all the saints, Paul gets to the real issue at hand:

Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion, but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (8-16).

Philemon was a slave owner. At some point in the past, Onesimus had run away from Philemon's household and—perhaps on purpose, or perhaps by chance—had encountered the apostle Paul, who preached to him the gospel. Onesimus believed and was baptized into Christ, and began working closely with Paul.

But, there was a matter that Onesimus needed to address. Onesimus was a runaway slave, a fugitive! According to the laws of Rome, he had stolen from his master Philemon, defrauding him of his person and his work. He had to repent of his sin and return to Colossae to make things right with Philemon.

A Word About Slavery in Ancient Rome

It remains a point of outrage to many Christians that the New Testament permits slavery. "Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord" (Col. 3:22; cf. Eph. 6:5-8, 1 Tim. 6:1-2). We Americans, who are about to enshrine Harriet Tubman on our currency, who made *Django Unchained!* a box office success, cheer the escape of Onesimus as a blow struck against oppression. It seems ridiculous that Paul would not celebrate Onesimus' freedom, but rather insist that he return to his master. How do we square the Bible's teaching

on slavery with our understanding of righteousness?

The gospel message is not designed to bring social justice to societies at large, and certainly not through armed revolution, but rather to bring salvation to individuals. The gospel bids people look past the dissatisfaction of life and look to the eternal kingdom of God. In the context of Rome, the New Testament viewed slavery as an earthly circumstance that had to be tolerated rather than violently opposed.

Our American experience with antebellum slavery was somewhat different from Roman slavery. About one of three people in Rome were slaves. There was no racial component. People became slaves when they were conquered in war, or when they had run out of options for supporting their families. In some instances, slaves were in better situations than free landowners. Many slaves were well-educated and served their masters as musicians, doctors, accountants, cooks, secretaries, or pedagogues. (If you'd like to read more, see: *Civilization of the Ancient Mediterranean*, Vol. 1, p. 584 or *Cambridge Ancient History*, Vol. 10, p. 756, and 807.)

I am by no means suggesting it was a good thing to be owned by another person. Most slaves worked in heavy labor in fields and mines. Under Roman law, slaves could be beaten, abused, and even killed. They had no freedom to set their own schedules, keep their families whole and raise their children, save up for their future. For this reason, Paul says in 1 Cor. 7:20, "Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that."

While the gospel did not encourage its followers to stand up and fight against the injustice of slavery, but rather to focus on heaven, it recognized that slavery was not the best situation for living out a Christian life. Among other things, slaves would have to finish their work before being permitted to assemble with the saints in the evening on the Lord's Day, if at all. It was not a good idea to willingly choose a situation that would make it difficult to serve Jesus fully.

But if they found themselves in that situation, living for Christ was the priority. At least, the gospel required Christian slave owners to behave righteously. "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven" (Col. 4:1, cf. Gal. 3:28).

I would point out that even if the New Testament didn't come right out and say, "slavery is sinful," the gospel sowed the seeds of conscience that, in due time, would cause every Western society to eliminate slavery.

Onesimus' Responsibility

Thus, Onesimus had sinned against Philemon, and needed to return. His conversion to Christ

was not an excuse to remain a fugitive, but gave him a greater responsibility to return to Philemon in humility.

This carries a meaningful application today. Baptism, while it changes the nature of the sinner, does not change the nature of sin. Onesimus was now a saint. But he had still stolen something that needed to be returned. His new life as a Christian didn't absolve him of that duty, but rather put him in the frame of mind to address it willingly and bravely.

Not every sin can be made up for. Few of them can. If I could remember every person I insulted, gossiped about, lied to, and defrauded, maybe I'd have a chance to make some apologies! I am thankful that God washes away sin and allows me to forgive myself and forget my guilt. But, that doesn't give me license to continue in sin.

Let me give an example: if I robbed a bank and buried the money in my backyard, and then heard the gospel and genuinely believed and was baptized into Christ, what is my next step? Do I have the liberty to spend the money, since I committed the sin before I was baptized? Is the money now "sanctified"? Of course not. To hang on to that stolen money would be to continue in sin. I must confess my crime, return the money, and face the consequences, asking God to help me endure.

It reminds me of the tax-collector Zaccheus, who said, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" (Luke 19:8). Jesus said, "today, salvation has come to this house."

This is one of the reasons why I continue to teach that a marriage that Jesus defines as adultery before baptism (Matthew 19:3-9), is still a marriage that Jesus defines as adultery after baptism. The nature of the sinner has changed, but not the sin. It must be repented of, and the relationship must be abandoned to become right in the sight of God. It's an insanely, horribly difficult situation to face, especially if the couple comes to that knowledge late in the game, but God's people will help the penitent through it (Ezra 10:1-4). —John Guzzetta