



Sunday June 27, 2021

Lakeland Hills Leader

"Our Relationship" Philemon

By Chuck Richardson

Our relationship in Christ transcends all human relations. Our subjugation to involuntary or voluntary service in our temporal pursuits are forevermore changed in Christ (Colossians 3:22). We have Onesimus as the example. We are not privileged to know the exchange and interaction of Philemon and Onesimus, but we are confident of a new affinity between them because of Paul's passionate plea in the letter to Philemon.

Paul expresses his prayerful thoughts and concerns for Philemon (verse 3). This is common practice for Paul (Rom. 1:8; 1 Cor. 1:4; Phil. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Thess. 1:3; 2 Tim. 1:3), and beside the second letter to Timothy, one might argue the letter to Philemon was the more intimate. Where did Paul meet Philemon? We do not know! Possibly during his lengthy stay in Ephesus (Acts 19), as some scholars suggest, or maybe in Colossae. Nonetheless, Philemon was a dearly beloved brother and fellow worker (soldier) in the cause of Christ (Philemon 2).

Paul invoked rights to the possessions of Philemon (verse 22). Paul would appeal to him in love (verse 8) while reminding him of his authority as the one who helped his (Philemon's), salvation (verse 19), and authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ (verse 8; Col. 1:1). Paul had received reports of Philemon's love and faith, not only in the Lord Jesus but for all the saints (verse 5). Philemon was to be commended, Paul did not flatter, he was speaking as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, and thus praised devotion where he found it (Col. 1:3-4). Therefore, the plea for Onesimus's very life is the heart of this letter and presents for us the dynamic life of a Christian relationship, so let us explore "Our Relationship in Christ" as it relates to this tender plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.

Relationships between people change in Christ, this is the purpose of this letter. When we push the boundaries of what is culturally accepted, we are challenged to show our true devotion to Jesus Christ (Rom. 12:2). James speaks of the obvious deference we show as opposed to the transformed life not subject to the conformity of the world order of the day (James 2:1-4). James says: *have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives?* (verse 4) How much greater is the work in regard to the master/servant relation?

The tone of the letter to Philemon is wrought with great care to the sensibilities of Philemon, who has been noted as a fellow laborer and beloved. Regardless of our opposition to slavery we must accept that Onesimus, while a brother in Christ now, is to remain as a slave of Philemon (verses 11-14). The scriptures do not call for an end to slavery as such, as problematic as that may be while living in western civilization in the 21st century, it is a truth with which I must deal. I must embrace the relationship I have with others in respect to God's design. I cannot have fellowship with Christ if I do not have fellowship with those, he has fellowship with. Therefore, I am governed by God's design for fellowship. (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25, 4:1).

Therefore Paul, even as an Apostle of Jesus Christ, respects the right(s) of Philemon as a slave owner. Slavery, in many respects, has been the cause of great cruelty inflicted upon a vulnerable people

throughout man's history, however, there could be love, affection, an unyielding devotion between slave and master, if governed by the love of and in God. (Mat. 8:5-13), in this way we see man's compassion and love despite socio-economic differences.

Even if freedom is preferred, and I believe it is the original design of God (Gen. 1:26,27), it is to be used as a slave in Christ (1 Cor. 7:22-23). Paul does not discount profitability as a slave when he admonishes us to remain in our station in life (1Cor. 7:20-24). Onesimus may have remained a slave of Philemon, but Onesimus as a Christian, was a profitable slave, and a beloved fellow worker in Christ (verses 15-16).

What we are discovering is that the temporal station itself does not matter, but our social and spiritual relations improve and manifest blessings that stretch out to eternity (John 12:23-26). Paul would repay any wrong to Philemon (verses 17-18), even though Philemon owed Paul (verse 19), because of the transformation of Onesimus (Rom. 12:1,2). Paul wanted Philemon to forget whatever material loss he may have incurred, because now his return is richer than any loss he experienced. Paul is appealing tenderly, yet confidently, in expecting obedience to his request (verses 20-21).

While this is a personal letter, it is to the church of Colossae -"the church in your house" (verse 2). Others would be encouraged to discover not only the middle wall of separation (Eph. 2:14), but the barriers that divide all men (Galatians 3:28) been torn down. Freedom from slavery is the likely outcome of becoming a Christian, I don't endorse slavery, and God has not called us to defend social relations, I am glad I am free, but let us remember that no social, economic, political, ethnical division is found in the kingdom of Christ (Romans 8:26-39), no matter our station. God is for us!