

Examining of the book of philemon religion essay



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-The book of Philemon is about a personal appeal to a prosperous Christian slave owner to receive his slave back as a brother in Christ.

The first clear example of slavery is in Exodus 1: 13 where the Israelites were made to work ruthlessly as slaves and their cry for rescue came up to God in Exodus 2: 23-24. The kind of slavery the Israelites were subjected to in Egypt was clearly unacceptable to God, judging by their rescue and the regulations regarding slavery in the Mosaic Law. Meager (2006)

The Mosaic Law was very clear on slavery. An Israelite could not enslave another Israelite. Also anyone who became a slave by making a pact or entering into an arrangement with another Israelite was to be treated without harshness and freed in the year of Jubilee. However, a foreigner may be held as a permanent, non-Israelite slave and may be treated harshly. (Leviticus 25: 25-55)

Philemon was written during one of Paul's imprisonments around A. D. 60-61 during a time when slavery was acceptable from a financial and community standpoint in the Roman world. Slaves were seen as their master's property and they had no rights. However, the experience of slaves varied depending on their master and the work assigned to them. Some slaves were made to work hard and could be disciplined ruthlessly for minor mistakes, while others placed in large villas could have little work to do and were well looked after. Meager (2006)

The Bible does not condemn slavery, nor did Paul. The Christian church simply views the relationship between master and slave in a different light. They saw them as both equal before God and both accountable for their

behavior. The master was no longer over the slave but in a place of equality within the church. God sees us without status and His grace transforms us into a worthy individual in society. This does not mean a slave was to go free either, but to honor Christ in the service that he was doing for his master.

Paul addresses Philemon as a friend and one who does the work of Christ. Paul lifts up Philemon about the work he has been doing with the church. He takes a bold approach because he knows Philemon's character. Paul asks for Philemon to receive Onesimus back as he would Paul into his home. He asks this of Philemon based on Paul's love for Onesimus and Philemon's love for Paul. Love is the motivation. Paul has taken on the role of father, just as God desires to take on that same father-child relationship with us.

The status of the slave as a Christian based on the information so far gives us an identity crisis to a certain extent. Who are we once we accept Jesus into our lives? Are we still a "slave"? The word "slaves" is the rendering of a Greek word meaning "bodies". The Hebrew and Greek words for slave are usually rendered simply "servant", "bondman", and "bondservant".

(Dictionary. com)

If we point out a relationship between "slave" and "servant" we can say that we are the first of those in the flesh and the other in Christ. The slave is the old status and the servant is the new place within the body of Christ. Philemon has already experienced this transformation due to Paul's leading him into salvation. The fact that Paul also led Onesimus to this place is why he can come to Philemon in this manner.

It is Paul's desire for there to be reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus; the slave owner and the slave. Paul is assured that through this letter he will be able to convince Philemon to do what is right. He believes that Philemon's faith and love in Christ will help him re-establish a new found relationship with Onesimus. This is where the identity crisis for the slave owner comes in. How does he treat others, or the slave, in order to be effective in his faith? God has done so much for Philemon to bring him to place of status within the church. Because Philemon has shared the gospel with others he has been effective in his ministry.

Now that Paul has converted Onesimus he desires to keep the relationship with him. But he wants Philemon's consent to utilize this new brother in Christ for the ministry. Onesimus became profitable to Paul at the time of his conversion; living up to the meaning of his name. Paul appeals to Philemon based on the service he himself has done within the ministry. Paul does not force the deed, but is hopeful that he will agree to the service of his own volition. To truly be a follower of Jesus you are to be humble; offering yourself in the spirit of submission, trusting and teachable; willing to learn. In Luke 22: 25-27 Jesus shares with His disciples that the greatest is the servant of all. Service is to be done without expecting reward.

There seems to be a deliberate outside influence in the slave's departure from Rome. God used the situation for His purpose. Onesimus' wrong doing towards Philemon lead him to Paul and his salvation. The slave is forgiven and brought into the family of Christ. We all fall short in our daily lives and it is our " sin" that brings us to a place with Christ that allows us to be saved.

Paul lays a foundation for the elimination of slavery. He is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not as a slave but as a beloved brother. If a slave owner and slave come together as brothers in Christ then their relationship would be a true transformation. Paul promises restitution towards Philemon. Anything that Onesimus might have stolen from Philemon will be given back to him. He suggests to Philemon to charge the debt “ to my account”. Paul will pay the price for his “ child”. God gave His son, a man without sin, to pay the price. When we become a Christian Jesus takes on that debt. We charge everything to His account. His death and resurrection are how He showed us that He loved us. The ultimate price was paid for our freedom.

This letter is a demonstration of the power of Christ to bring healing to those that are broken. It is also a personal reunion between Philemon and Onesimus arranged by Paul. Comparable to their reunion is that of Christ and the runaway sinner. It portrays a restoration of two followers who were earlier separated. It is only with Christ’s example of forgiveness that we are able to overcome mistakes and be reconciled to our brothers and sisters.

Paul’s character is that of love, wisdom, gentleness, and above all Christian and human maturity. Guzik (2007) He starts his plea to Philemon by having a letter delivered by Onesimus himself. And in that letter he asks Philemon to change his heart towards the man who was once a slave and is now a brother in Christ. Philemon reads this document from Paul as the runaway slave stands in his presence. Paul indicates his confidence in verse 21 that Philemon will not only obey but go beyond simple obedience.