

Day 171, Philemon

by David Servant

Paul's letter to Philemon is a powerful example of God's grace and mercy, and it teaches us the importance of extending kindness and mercy to others out of our own free will.

Scripture: Acts 28:30, Philemon 1:4-25

Topics: "Christian Forgiveness", "Godly Love"

Description

David Servant reflects on the significance of Paul's private letter to Philemon, highlighting the unexpected impact it has had throughout history. The letter reveals Paul's compassion and intercession for Onesimus, a runaway slave turned believer, urging Philemon to extend grace and forgiveness. It emphasizes the importance of genuine kindness motivated by free will rather than compulsion, drawing parallels to the concept of love within certain religious communities.

Transcript

It has always been a mystery to me why this tiny letter of Paul's, written to one person for a very specific reason, has made it into the Bible, while other letters that Paul wrote to entire churches, such as his letter to the Laodiceans (Col. 4:16) or his first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:9-11) have not been providentially preserved for us! Paul obviously did not realize that any of his letters would receive world-wide circulation for 2,000 years, but I am sure he would be particularly shocked to learn that his private letter to Philemon has been read by so many for so long!

Paul penned this letter during his house arrest in Rome as he waited to stand trial before Nero. It is obvious, as we already knew, that Paul had freedom to share the gospel then, and today we learn that he won a runaway slave named Onesimus to the Lord. It is often wrongly stated that Onesimus was in prison with Paul, but remember that Paul stayed "in his own rented quarters" while he was in Rome (Acts 28:30), and it is unlikely that he rented a jail cell! Paul enjoyed a steady stream of visitors to his place, and he ministered to all who came by (Acts. 28:30-31). Onesimus had been one of those visitors.

Onesimus' master, Philemon, apparently lived in Colossae, where there was a church in his house (v. 2). We don't know how Paul knew him, but he did. It is quite possible that Paul was the one who originally led Philemon to the Lord, as Paul mentions Philemon's "debt" to him (v. 19).

Onesimus, just recently converted to Christ, now faced a crisis of conscience. Should he return to his master, something that he was legally obligated to do? Remember, as I have previously mentioned, many

"slaves" within the Roman Empire could be better described as "contract employees." Onesimus was not a slave who had been captured by Philemon and forced to work against his will. His master, or better said, his former employer, was a Christian. If Onesimus was going to do the right thing, he would have to return. Yet he could face legal repercussions for running away, and not only for running away, but for perhaps stealing some of Philemon's money (v. 18). Thus the occasion of this letter, as Paul writes to tell Philemon what has happened to Onesimus, and to intercede on his behalf. This is a wonderful little letter about grace, and perhaps that is why it has been preserved for us in Scripture. God forgave Philemon. God forgave Onesimus. Now it was Philemon's chance to extend the mercy that he enjoyed.

Paul had grown to love Onesimus dearly, calling him "my child" and "my very heart" (vv. 10, 12). He writes that he would have preferred to keep Onesimus in Rome with him in order to benefit from his service on Philemon's behalf, but didn't want to presume upon Philemon's goodness:

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" (v. 14).

Kindness from compulsion, rather than from free will, is really not kindness at all. As I considered these particular words of Paul, my thoughts wandered to the Amish, whom I have always admired for the love they show to one another. But as I have gotten to know some of them, I've wondered how many are truly born again. It occurred to me that their love does not generally extend outside their own circles. For example, they do nothing to preach the gospel to anyone or to serve the poor around the world (unlike other Anabaptist groups). And if they don't completely conform to what is expected of them, they are shunned forever by their own families, which is certainly unloving and not something advocated by Scripture. Considering these things, I couldn't help but wonder how much of their goodness is motivated by compulsion rather than free will. It is, of course, more important that we judge ourselves, rather than the Amish, in these things.

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