

Onesimus, Slave of the Lord Philemon

Introduction:

1. Slavery was a deeply rooted part of the economic and social structure of the Roman Empire.
2. Early Christianity accepted it as a part of their civilization.
 - a. In His parables Jesus presupposed the natural relations of master and slave (Ex. Matt. 18:23ff; 25:14ff, etc.).
 - b. Christianity sought not to condemn it as a principle, nor to abolish it, but to establish Christ-like relationships between masters and slaves (cf. Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-20).
3. Paul's epistle to Philemon is a priceless example of this Christian objective.
4. In this epistle three slaves of Christ negotiate their relationships with one another. The attitudes, the respect, the love, the humility, the submission that are exemplified are nothing short of phenomenal. They set the standard for how we should relate to one another.
5. Reading.

Discussion:

- I. Men became slaves in a number of ways.
 - A. The sparing of the conquered enemy.
 1. During the third to first centuries B.C. slaves were introduced into Roman society by the hundreds of thousands.
 2. To enslave an enemy rather than to slay him (as humanitarian as this may seem) was a device used to reap his labor and to enjoy perpetual triumph over him.
 3. Under Augustus, conditions changed. While there were still wars of conquest and many thousands enslaved, large-scale wars were rare, causing slaves to be scarcer.
 - B. Kidnapping was also a major source of slaves.
 1. Pirates seized people and sold them to slave traders.
 2. Brigands found enslaving to be profitable.
 3. Piracy and brigandage were suppressed under Augustus and this major source of slaves was limited.
 4. As a result, some slave traders seem to have engaged in breeding and selling slaves.
 - C. Abandonment by parents. When new-born children were found they were often brought up as slaves or passed on to traders.
 - D. Poverty and crime provided sources for slaves.
 1. Poor parents sometimes sold their children.
 2. New-borns were sometimes sold.
 3. Roman law allowed men to sell themselves into slavery.
 4. Civil crimes were sometimes punished by being sold to work in state mines and quarries.
 - E. If your mother was a slave, you were a slave.

F. How Onesimus came to be a slave we do not know, only that he was (16).

II. The status of slaves.

- A. Since military conquest was one way of becoming a slave, many slaves were men of great ability, men of high culture, frequently superior to their masters.
- B. Some describes slaves as having “no rights at all” (Tucker, *Life in the Roman World of Nero and St. Paul*, p. 69).
 - 1. Legally they were considered as property.
 - 2. Others say that by the first century the slave had most of the legal rights granted the free man (Rupprecht, *ZPEB*, p. 459).
 - 3. While considered property, the first century Romans seem to have regarded slaves as human and granted them certain rights.
 - a. Rights to property, wife and family.
 - b. Criminals tried in the same way as freed men.
- C. The occupational status of slaves was about equal to the average free laborer at Rome. Free laborers often competed with slave labor.
 - 1. Most probably worked as domestic servants, but their services were widespread.
 - 2. They worked the land, under contractors, in shops and factories.
 - 3. They were bankers, secretaries, accountants, musicians, actors.
 - 4. Not considered citizens and therefore could not hold public office.
 - 5. Masters provided essentials and money besides. Freed men had to furnish their own essentials. Often they (freed men) slept in the streets or in cheap rooms.

III. Philemon, Paul and Onesimus were all slaves of Christ.

- A. The instruction to slaves and masters in Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-20).
 - 1. Slaves were to serve “as to Christ,” “as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.”
 - 2. 1 Tim. 6 even considers the relationship between those who are Christians.
 - 3. And 1 Pet. 2 considers those masters who are unreasonable.
 - 4. Both slave and master are slaves of the Lord.
- B. Paul describes all Christians as “slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6).
 - 1. But in Philemon he never uses this image of himself, rather he describes himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus (1, 9).
 - 2. Paul never reasons with Philemon, “We are all slaves of Christ.”
- C. Reading and observations re. the text.
 - 1. Philemon, a beloved brother and fellow worker.
 - 2. A leader (v. 2).
 - 3. Thanksgiving. Philemon is a refreshing Christian.
 - a. Love and faith toward the Lord and all the saints.
 - b. Paul finds comfort and joy in him.
 - 4. Paul could order Philemon, but he does not.

- a. Paul's authority could rest in his apostleship. But he does not appeal to apostolic authority here. He doesn't identify himself as an apostle.
 - b. Real authority occurs when people love and respect you so much that they follow your leadership (note v. 9).
 - c. That seems to be what Paul is relying on here.
 - d. Too often I fear we try to use power to make people conform to our expectations. Christians influence each other in more powerful ways.
 - e. Masters must "give up threatening" (Eph. 6:9).
 - f. Note the powerfulness of humility (v. 9).
5. Evidently Paul has taught Onesimus Christianity.
 - a. It has changed him from uselessness to usefulness.
 - b. Christianity has affected Onesimus' relationship with Philemon.
 6. Paul has sent him back, although he would have liked to have kept him.
 - a. Puts Philemon's interests above his own.
 - b. No letter asking to keep Onesimus. He is sent back in Philemon's power.
 - c. "I don't want your goodness to be under my compulsion," says Paul.
 - d. Note how he gives up control and yet there is an expected gain of influence. We are often busy about "taking control." Paul could have taken control here, but he did not. By not "taking it" he was gaining control, winning Philemon.
 7. Paul accepts responsibility for Onesimus (17).
 - a. Gives up power and in turn gains power.
 - b. Confident in Philemon's response (19-21).
 8. Note the graciousness expressed and offered by Paul and the graciousness he expects from Philemon.
 9. Note the humility of Onesimus who returned to Philemon. Note the giving up of power (independence and freedom) to gain a new relationship with Philemon. No demands for apology. No demands for a change of circumstance. No demands for freedom. No demands.

Conclusion:

1. We are all slaves to Christ.
2. This epistle defines something of how we should relate to one another.
3. Grace is the underlying principle.