

# Route Sixty-Six

*Part Fifty-Seven*

*Philemon*

*A Spontaneous Kindness*

*(John 5:39; Philemon 14)*

*With Study Questions*

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*(John 5:39; Philemon 14)*

**You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39)**

**...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).**

## **Introduction**

Showing me how to fix my minibike, my father's friend slapped my hand away as I sought to touch part of the mechanism. He preferred I kept my hands to myself. At about fourteen years of age, I didn't particularly like having my hand slapped. I recall thinking I wasn't going to break anything, nor hurt myself. He just didn't want me to touch it and the slapping of my hand seemed like acceptable behavior to him.

I had shared that story with a friend who, years later, watched me in an interaction I had with a student. I hadn't slapped the student, nor was I particularly harsh (I can't recall what I was even trying to teach them). At the same time, I was fervidly restrictive in terms of allowing them interaction in the task. I didn't immediately understand why my student seemed put off. My friend took the opportunity to remind me of how I felt having my hand slapped away.

Respecting caution in terms of ruining the project or injuring oneself, sometimes it helps to allow a student to touch whatever it is you might be working on. Even if it involves failure. It is often through this that the student begins to own the undertaking. A transfer begins to take place from coercion or manipulation to ownership and responsibility. The student/disciple is not merely engaging in the activity by compulsion. They are beginning to recognize the inherent value of doing the right thing the right way.

And if we may bring it to a loftier level, they/we, upon examination of our ethics and motives, can thoughtfully begin to determine if our behavior is a reflection of true godliness and done in love for God and others to His glory. God may slap our hands away<sup>1</sup>. Other times He may simply allow us to engage, even if there is a possibility of failure. These are common steps toward Christian maturity.

## Survey of Philemon

This morning we dedicate our thoughts and prayers to this briefest of epistles from the aged and imprisoned Apostle Paul to Philemon and the church in his house. A drama had unfolded leading to the writing of this letter. Philemon, who by all accounts was a fine Christian man (verses 4-7), had been (likely) robbed by his slave, Onesimus (whose name means *useful* or *profitable*). Onesimus also fled from his owner.

In time, Onesimus came to meet the imprisoned Apostle Paul and became a Christian. Paul then writes this letter and has Onesimus (it would appear-Colossians 4:9) deliver it to his former master from whom he had committed theft and desertion. In summary, the letter is Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a brother, useful to the ministry. This is the long and short of the letter. Nonetheless, it is rife with difficulties, especially to the so-called modern mind.

For example, why does Paul not use this opportunity to decry slavery altogether? It was not uncommon during the antebellum period of western slavery for masters and even pastors to use Philemon as a justification for the slavery in play at the time.

Is the Apostle Paul simply ignoring one of the more heinous behaviors which prevailed in human history? It has been projected that slavery has been the most financially lucrative businesses since the genesis of business. Paul does not seem to take much of a shot at it here. If anything, Paul's willingness to make things right with Philemon by sending Onesimus back and paying for Onesimus' (Philemon 18, 19) theft almost appears to grant legitimacy to Philemon's ownership of another person. Why?

Secondly, what is often ignored in the commentaries on Philemon is what an uncomfortable journey this must have been for Onesimus. If we read this letter in the environment of current western sensitivities, we will fail

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<sup>1</sup> Through providence

to appreciate the courage and faithfulness of this new convert. Onesimus had the potential of the infliction of the death penalty for stealing and fleeing. One thinks of Uriah the Hittite who carried a letter from King David to Joab without realizing the design of the letter being the blueprints of his own murder (2 Samuel 11:14, 15).

Add to this Onesimus' lack of protest regarding his own slavery. Were Paul and Onesimus (not to mention the faithful Philemon) all complicit in the ignoring of this violation of human rights? Should there not have simply been unanimous agreement that slavery is wrong? Should not this have been contained in Paul's message? Should it not have been obvious to Philemon and liberating to Onesimus?

Herein lies one of the great errors in reading the Scriptures anachronistically (reading something while ignorant of the time, context or meaning of the words or events). This is a great error, not merely in reading the Bible, but history in general. We are very quick to vilify individuals of other eras when hearing of their behavior or language. I am not terribly bothered by this, since our only true hero and example is Christ alone, against whom no accusation can stand.

At the same we should be cognizant of what utter failures we will be when evaluated by the generations which will follow us. We grow to be quite cozy in our own system of ethics, but will our lethargy toward the needy, confusion regarding sexuality, willingness to euthanize old and young etc. mark us out as barbaric in the ages to come?

But back to the matter at hand, slavery. You may be shocked to find that the word *slave* is only found twice in all of Scripture in the King James Version. In the New King James Version, it is found 72 times. In the English Standard Version, it is found 118 times and in the New American Standard Version it is found 187 times! The alternative translation being *servant*.

I highlight this since, for most us, the moment we read the word *slave*, our minds inescapably leap to our most common and recent understanding of the word, western antebellum (pre-Civil War) slavery. This provides naysayers of Christianity ample, albeit ignorant, ammunition against the Scriptures. For the type of slavery we are most common with, which involves man-stealing is, according to Scripture, a capital crime.

**And he who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death (Exodus 21:16).**

Paul reiterates the heinous nature of man-stealing/slavery in his letter to Timothy as he emphasized the value of God's law. In the category of the "ungodly" and "sinners" Paul uses the example of "enslavers"<sup>2</sup> (1 Timothy 1:10). All this to say we must be aware of the fallacy of equivocation<sup>3</sup> when seeking to make an argument or understand literature.

In order for us to appreciate this epistle, we must seek a bit more accuracy in terms of what kind of slave/servant *doulos* Onesimus actually was. There may have been any number of reasons a person might find themselves in this condition, but the most common came to be known as indentured servitude<sup>4</sup>. This could be a result of debt or theft. Regarding a thief, we read in Exodus,

**He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft (Exodus 21:3).**

The Old Testament provides a great deal of protection when it comes to a person in this condition, as well as a way out. Since the indentured servant would pay their debt, likely learn a skill and then be released. It has been convincingly argued<sup>5</sup> that this is superior to the penal methodology of the current west where the thief does not pay off the debt to the victim but rather to the state. The victim both loses their merchandise and must pay for the incarcerated perpetrator. If the victim seeks restitution, they must sue in a separate civil trial where, even if they win, recompense is seldom made.

With these clarifications behind us, let us seek to appreciate the events of this epistle.

Beginning with Onesimus, he was willing, at great risk, to make things right. He did not view his coming to faith in Christ as an excuse to ignore the failings of his past. It might be said that when a person in prison comes to faith (as often happens whether in truth or pretense) they should all the more

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<sup>2</sup> KJV translates this "menstealers" *andrapodistais* "man-trappers".

<sup>3</sup> When the conclusion of an argument depends on the fact that a word or phrase is used, either explicitly or implicitly, in two different senses in the argument. Hurley, Logic p 164.

<sup>4</sup> The selling of oneself for a certain amount of time for a loan, debt or theft.

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/pdf/tools\\_of\\_dominion.pdf](https://www.garynorth.com/freebooks/docs/pdf/tools_of_dominion.pdf)

recognize the just nature of their incarceration.<sup>6</sup> The forgiveness which comes from God through Christ does not exonerate us or dismiss us from the consequences of our behavior in our relationships with other people.

Although we are not informed in this letter how Philemon did respond, Paul seems to be under the impression that he is **“Confident in [his] obedience” (Philemon 21)**.

What I would like to conclude with is Paul’s approach to the difficulty. Clearly, Paul is a common friend to both parties and desires the best for them, especially as it relates to ministry. Paul had to conciliate a man (Philemon) who had good reason to be offended. He was stolen from and abandoned. Yet Paul had great affection for Onesimus. Let us appreciate the language of Paul.

**I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment...<sup>12</sup> I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart (Philemon 10, 12).**

How could Paul commend the offender without denying or aggravating the fault? This bring me back to hand-slapping.

Paul does not shrink back from informing Philemon that his old age, his willingness to be imprisoned for Christ, and his own ministerial efforts in Philemon’s conversion (Philemon 19) would be sufficient for Paul to **“command” (Philemon 8)** obedience. There are other times when Paul does just that (1 Corinthians 5:13; 14:37). But here Paul goes down a different track.

**...yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you (Philemon 9).**

Paul continues,

**...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).**

Again, Paul did not always allow the maturity of the disciple to be the driving force in the task. There was an assumed maturity in Philemon that

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<sup>6</sup> Operating within our current system.

Paul was counting on. Herein lies the great and necessary precondition to the ills of humanity.

There is a great deal of talk today (although it is true in most self-governing cultures and societies) of systemic evil and ungodly laws. And whether it is racism, abortion, gender issues, etc., the Christian should always stand on the side of just and godly laws. But there are two errors of which we must be aware:

First, godly laws follow godly citizens. It is a foolish outlook to assume that the mere pursuit of godly laws will happen apart from changed hearts. And since the Gospel is the means by which hearts are changed (Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 10:17; 1 Corinthians 1:21) the church must ever prioritize the preaching of Christ crucified. Jesus gives the order in His Great Commission. We are to make disciples, then teach them to obey His commands (Matthew 28:18-20).

Second, it is an error to think that the mere changing of laws will genuinely solve the problem. Whether it's the willful blindness or narcissism which leads to concluding the acceptability to taking the lives of the innocent, old or young or the disposition which dehumanizes those whose ethnicity differs from our own, the mere changing of a law (however appropriate that might be) is a little help. It's just the slapping of the hand. Social evils are changed by transformed lives.

This is what Paul was counting on in his letter to Philemon. It's been said,

**Christianity puts the slave into a brother and spiritual equal in Christ. It was this thinking which eventually abolished slavery, emancipated women and claimed true social justice.**

Also,

**One only needs to know the helpless abjection of slaves under Roman law to realize the height which Paul scales when he asks the slave-owner to receive back the runaway thief-slave as a "brother beloved" (verse 16).**

Prior to Paul expressing his confidence in the obedience of Philemon, he makes a statement that many believe must have ringed in Philemon's ear as a testimony to the heart of his own redemption.

**But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account (Philemon 18).**

As a homeowner and slaveowner, Philemon was likely pretty well off. Very few who read this epistle conclude that Philemon would actually require the aged and imprisoned Paul pay this debt, especially since Paul immediately reminds Philemon of his own debt to Paul. But there is an even greater debt.

If we live ever mindful of this debt, it will produce the redemption of souls and the transformation of this fallen world. It was in the context of God's gift of faith which opened Paul's eyes to God's gift of Christ that Paul wrote of his own debt.

**I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise (Romans 1:14).**

Why would Paul view himself as debtor? Truly there is a debt we can never pay. Paul labors this point just a few chapters later.

**Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. <sup>5</sup> But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness (Romans 4:4, 5).**

But we should not read this as if the debt was not paid. The Scriptures will often refer to this payment as a "**ransom**" *lytron* (**Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45; 1 Timothy 2:6**).

The debt of our sin and its attending wrath has been charged to Christ and His righteousness and its attending riches of heaven have been credited to our account. The recognition of this ever flavored the heart of Paul. It was this blessed payment and the imputations (our sin to Christ and His righteousness to us) thereof that Paul was counting on to for Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother of "**his own accord**" rather than by compulsion.

We live in a world where both perpetrator and victim are governed by a sense of entitlement rather than a sense of debt to God and debt to each other. It is through an act of God's grace in Christ that souls are healed and



subsequently comes the healing of the nations (Revelation 22:2). Let our hearts be propelled in such a direction as we come to the Lord's Table this morning.

## Questions for Study

1. Have you had your hand, in one way or another, slapped away from a task? How did it make you feel? Have you done this to others? Is it ever appropriate? When is it the poorer option? When is it preferable (pages 2, 3)?
2. Review the course of events which led to the writing of Philemon? Why do you suppose so little is said of the evils of slavery in this letter (page 3)?
3. Why would this have been a difficult letter for Onesimus to deliver (pages 3, 4)?
4. What does it mean to read literature anachronistically? What is the fallacy of equivocation and how can it be misleading? By what definition was Onesimus a slave (pages 4, 5)?
5. Discuss how Paul approaches the difficulty between Philemon and Onesimus. To what does he appeal? Why does he not merely command Philemon to do the right thing (pages 5, 6)?
6. What are some common errors when it comes to true social justice and cultural transformation? What must happen in order for these things to actually transpire (pages 6, 7)?
7. What is Paul counting on when it comes to the maturity and obedience of Philemon? In what respect should we view ourselves as debtors (page 8)?

