

## INTRODUCTION.

- A. Scripture text: **Philemon v1-25.**
- B. Philemon was a wealthy householder in Colossae who had been brought to X by the influence of Paul and had begun to use his wealth for the advancement of the Xian cause (Eerdman, 127).
- C. Paul had been taken as prisoner to Rome. By some kind of providence Onesimus, a fugitive slave, who had robbed his master, Philemon, and had drifted to Rome, met with Paul and became a Xian.
- D. Paul now pleads with Philemon to accept Onesimus back.
- E. The book of Philemon, "contains no statement of Xian doctrine, no exhortation to the Xian life. Its value consists in the fact that **it offers an objective lesson in applied Christianity.**
- F. Two important things about this letter:
  - 1. A model of Xian courtesy. No letter could be more courteous, tactful, or delicate in expression.
  - 2. A manifestation of Xian love. The epistle abounds in expressions of tender affection.

## I. THE DILEMMA.

- A. Now what? Perhaps Onesimus should remain with Paul, who needed all the assistance he could get. But what about the slave's responsibilities to his master back in Colossae? The law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave, but Philemon was a Xian. If he forgave Onesimus, what would the other masters (and slaves) think? If he punished him, how would this affect his Xian walk and creditability?
- B. Paul answers this dilemma in the letter to Philemon about Onesimus.

## II. PAUL, THE BELOVED FRIEND.

- A. Scripture text: Philemon v1-7.
- B. Paul had not founded the church in Colossae, nor had he visited it (Col. 1:1-8; 2:1). It is likely that the church started as a result of his ministry in Ephesus (Ac. 19:10, 20, 26) and that Epaphras was the founding preacher (v23). Archippus was the current preacher (v2).  
(v23) Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,  
(v2) ...and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:
- C. In his greeting, Paul expressed his deep love for his Xian friends, and he reminded them that he was a prisoner for JC (v9-10, 13, 23).  
(v9-10) ...yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you-- since I am such a person as Paul, the aged. and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- **10** I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus,  
(v13) whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;  
(v23) Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,
- D. Paul had won Philemon to Christ (v19), and Philemon became a blessing to other Xians (v7).  
(v19) I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).  
(v7) For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

## III. PAUL, THE BESEECHING INTERCESSOR.

- A. Scripture text: Philemon v8-16.
- B. Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman empire, men and women who were treated like pieces of merchandise to buy and sell.
- C. If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the "wanted list." Any free citizen who found a runaway slave could assume custody and even intercede with the owner.

- D. As Paul intercedes for Onesimus, he makes five strong appeals:
  1. He began with Philemon's reputation as man who brought blessings to others (v7b).
  2. Paul might have used apostolic authority and ordered his friend to obey, but he preferred to appeal to Xian love (v9).
  3. The third appeal was the conversion of Onesimus (v10).
  4. Onesimus was valuable to Paul's ministry in Rome (v1-14). The name "Onesimus" means "profitable" so there is a play on words here.
  5. The providence of God is working in this situation (v15-16).
- E. As you review these five appeals, you can see how tenderly Paul convinced his friend Philemon that he should receive his disobedient slave and forgive him. But it would not be easy for Philemon to do this. If he was too easy on Onesimus, it might influence other slaves to "become Xians" and want to influence their masters. However, if he was too hard on the man, it might affect Philemon's ministry in Colossae.

#### IV. PAUL, THE BURDENED PARTNER.

- A. Scripture text: Philemon v17-25.
- B. To solve this dilemma Paul says two things:
  1. "...receive him as myself..."
  2. "Put that [whatever he stole from you] on my account."

As Philemon's new "partner," Paul could not leave Rome and go to Colossae, but he could send Onesimus as his personal representative. "The way you treat Onesimus is the way you treat me," said the apostle. "He is to me as my own heart" (v12).
- C. Paul did not suggest that Philemon ignore the slave's crimes and forget about the debt Onesimus owed. Rather, Paul offered to pay the debt himself. "Put it on my account--I will repay it."
  1. This is an illustration of what Jesus does for believers (2Cor. 5:21). It takes more than love to solve the problem; love must pay a price.  
[He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf. that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.](#)
  2. God does not save us by His love alone; for although He loves the whole world, the whole world is not saved. God saves sinners by His grace (Eph. 2:8-9), and grace is love that pays a price.
  3. God in His holiness could not ignore the debt that we owe, for God must be faithful to His own Law. So He paid the price for us! This is imputed righteousness. To impute means to put on account.

#### V. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS.

- A. Paul did not "condemn" slavery in this letter or in any of his letters. He does have words of admonition for slaves and their masters (see Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1Tim. 6:1-2; Ti. 2:9-10). He does, however, encourage slaves to obtain their freedom if possible (1Cor. 7:21-24).
- B. Paul gave instructions to regulate slavery, but he did not condemn it.
- C. John Mark was with Paul (Col. 4:10), the young man who failed Paul on his first missionary journey (Ac. 12:12, 25; 15:36-41). Paul had forgiven Mark and was grateful for his faithful ministry (2Tim. 4:11).
- D. Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Ac. 19:29; 27:2). Demas is mentioned three times in Paul's letters:
  1. "Demas... my fellow worker" (v24).
  2. "Demas" (Col. 4:14).
  3. "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2Tim. 4:10).
- E. Luke, of course, was the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) who accompanied Paul, ministered to him, and eventually wrote the gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

F. In summary:

1. All Xians, regardless of riches, power, or social station are on absolute equality. The slave is a “son of an apostle” and a “brother” of every Xian on earth.
2. Xianity does not alter one’s civil status or obligations. A slave does not become free (from his master) by baptism.
3. Restitution is a principle involved in repentance. Where possible, restitution must be made, unless freely forgiven.
4. We should forgive those who have sinned against us, especially those who repent, return and request it. This applies to actual injury and loss sustained through another’s sin.
5. Even an apostle, on occasion, consented to make his appeal, not upon the basis of authority, but upon the basis of love, trust and friendship.

**CONCLUSION AND INVITATION.**

- A. Not every problem can be answered by a “thus says the Lord.” Paul uses Biblical principles of the Xian system to solve his dilemma with Philemon over Onesimus.
- B. There is great value in the spiritual application of imputed righteousness in Paul’s attitude toward Onesimus for Philemon’s benefit.
- C. May we see that X has taken our sins “on His account” (2Cor. 5:21).
- D. Plan of salvation for non-Xians; erring Xians.