

20.1 Philemon

The Story

Providentially, Paul (while in prison) met a slave (Onesimus) who became a Christian by Paul's witness to him (cf. my child...whose father I became, v. 10). Thus, the core of the letter is an appeal to the slave's owner, a Christian by the name of Philemon (I appeal to you for...Onesimus, v. 10). Paul sends Onesimus home to his owner requesting that Philemon receive him as a brother (v. 15), in order that he may send him back to Paul to help Paul in gospel ministry (for benefit, v. 20; for service, v. 14: **that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel**).

The ground of Paul's appeal

Notably, Paul does not command Philemon based on apostolic authority (v. 8: **though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you**). Rather, he seeks the consent of Philemon (v. 14: **but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will**). To get his consent, Paul appeals to the heart and conscience of Philemon **for love's sake** (v. 9) by the following constraints (at least):

Do this if you consider me your partner and consider my heart in this

Do this because I will pay what he owes you

You will lose nothing and you have already gained a brother

Do this because you owe me your very self (I am your father in the faith too)

Do this to refresh my heart not only as your father but also as a brother

You give refreshment to others; why not give the same to me?

Besides, I am your father and brother!

Do this in keeping with your faithful obedience (serving others, praying for me)

Note the unusual translation: "free will" (v. 14)

The language here calls for action from a Christian. If there is "free will", it is that of a Christian who has a "freed will." Unbelievers do not have the free will or freedom to do good or evil (because they cannot do _____), and they do not have the ability to do the good of turning to Christ in submission to His authority (Jn. 6.44; Rom. 8.7).

There is a better translation, "willingly" (as KJV) because there is nothing in the language indicating the ideas of free or freedom. A willing action is one that is not due to force.

Lesson about slavery as a social institution

Paul does not seek to overturn the culture as a social revolutionary.

What he does do is show that slavery (ownership of one human being by another) contradicts the equality of brothers in the Christian family. Where Christianity takes hold in this way, the institution of slavery will only "wilt and die" (FF Bruce). Sadly, growth in Christian love is often a slow and messy process.

Lesson about mutual Christian love

If there is love then there will be the sacrifice of our own interests while respecting others:

Onesimus must return to his master to face the music waiting on Philemon's decision

Paul speaks to the conscience of Philemon, but must defer to Philemon's decision

Philemon must receive a slave as a brother and give him up to the gospel

Discussion Qs

- 1) What is the story that drives this very personal letter?
- 2) What is the ground of Paul's appeal to Philemon (cf. not...but)?
- 3) A willing action is one that is not due to force, but why is this fact not sufficient to fulfill the biblical meaning of "free" and "freedom"?
- 4) How can we get this lesson: love is not demanding, instead it appeals to the conscience and rests all in the work of the Spirit?