

BROTHERS TOGETHER- OVERCOMING THE DIVIDE

Philemon 16-17

By Leo Douma

Last week we had a look at this letter of Paul's to Philemon. Many said to me afterwards how refreshed and encouraged they were looking at how Paul appealed to Philemon to be reconciled to Onesimus. It was so helpful to see Paul being humble, sharing his inner feelings, giving genuine compliments to his Christian friend Philemon, and seeing how Paul regularly prayed for him and thanked God for Philemon. It was insightful to see how Paul used tact to carefully put the case to Philemon, trusting him to make a good decision based on love, rather than Paul commanding or demanding. Paul's example in this letter is a real insight into how we can better relate with each other, especially with difficult issues.

Now, good as all that is, there is something about this letter than is disturbing, or, at least, it can seem that way. And that is that Paul seems to accept, as a given, the institution of slavery. If you were not here last week let me remind you of the background here. Philemon is a rich well-to-do Christian living in Colossi, who, as was common in those days, had slaves that he owned. One of them, Onesimus, ran off, presumably having stolen stuff from his master. Onesimus had fled to Rome, twelve hundred miles away, to lose himself and be free in that large city. But as God's providence would have it, he came across Paul who was in prison, under house arrest, and was eventually converted by Paul. Onesimus had become a good Christian man, who was a wonderful help for Paul. But Paul felt it was not right that he had helping him, the slave of a good mate, Philemon. So he felt it was important for Onesimus to go back to Colossi, to his master and be reconciled. Paul was hoping that Philemon would forgive him, and then let him back to assist Paul. Now this was a difficult situation. It was a crime for a slave to run away, even worse if he had stolen from his master. The usual punishment was a severe beating, even death. Slaves were regarded in those days as the property of the master. They had no rights. They were seen as the 'living dead'. That is, they were still alive, but dead in terms of freedom, rights, etc. A slave running off could also have broader ramifications for the local folk, especially if the slave was the steward of the house, the accountant who managed all the master's affairs. So Philemon was

well within his legal rights to deal very strongly with Onesimus, to have him severely beaten.

When you have a look at the main commentaries on this letter to Philemon, they have a major section dealing with slavery, especially as it was in those days. And all of them grapple with the question, why does Paul seem to accept slavery as a given? Why doesn't he write in this letter to Philemon that slavery is wrong, very wrong, a despicable, dehumanizing treatment of other human beings? How dare any one treat other human beings, those made in God's image, as if they were mere property, as non human, the living dead, those with no rights, those who can be sold or bought on whim, and those who can be put to death by the decision of the master? In our day, we would be marching in the streets against such treatment of other people. Why doesn't Paul keep Onesimus with him and tell Philemon he has him, but will not give him up because slavery is wrong?

Now the question is, does Paul accept slavery or does his appeal contain an approach that will eventually bring an end to slavery? Look with me at the verses 16 & 17. We start at verse 15 to get the start of the sentence: *"Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good- no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me."* Paul makes it clear that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is completely changed. He is getting Philemon to do a total rethink towards his slave, a complete mind shift. He does it in stages. He suggests, first off, that God has been at work, that in his providence the bad has been changed to good. So Philemon needs to see God in this. It's not just that Onesimus took action, but God has too through Onesimus' decisions, so that now, as Paul says you *"have him back for good"* The Greek means "forever". God is giving Onesimus back to Philemon for eternity. How does that work? Paul now takes Philemon through three stages. Note them in verse 16 *"No longer as a slave"* (first shift- your slave is such no longer) *"but even better than a slave"* (second shift- something far more useful to you than a worker in your home) *"as a dear brother"* (third shift - a beloved, deeply loved brother, namely a fellow Christian, a brother in Christ). 'Philemon, Onesimus is one with whom you will live and love and praise God for all eternity as fellow children of God!'. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus has totally changed. No longer is Onesimus just a slave,

property, some one to use or sell, some one who is a non entity. Nor is it that he now sees him as a fellow human being. It's even more than that. The relation has transcended even that. Onesimus is a "*beloved brother*" - some one who is also a brother in Christ. 'Philemon, have you experienced the amazing grace of God, have you been forgiven of everything because of Jesus' suffering on the cross? So has Onesimus. Philemon, have you been adopted as a child of God, a fellow heir with Christ? So has Onesimus. Philemon, is your hope that of eternal life, to enjoy the presence of God now and forever in utter joy with all sin and suffering gone for ever? So it is for Onesimus. Philemon, can you sit at the Lord's Supper and eat and drink and remember and believe that all is forgiven? Can you participate knowing the deep reassurance that is yours because of Jesus? So can Onesimus. He is your beloved brother!' The relationship between the two has totally transcended whatever they are or were. Were they master and slave? That has become meaningless in comparison to the richness of the relationship they now have together in Jesus. For one Christian to mistreat another Christian is not just a matter between the two of them. It is a slur on Jesus. As Jesus said "*What you have done to the least of these brothers of mine you have done to me.*" To mistreat another Christian is to touch some one for whom Christ suffered immensely in hell! How dare you? How could you do that to Jesus!

You can sense some of this depth, of what it really means to be Christian brothers (and sisters) in what Paul says in verse 17. "*He is very dear to me, but even dearer to you as a man and as a brother in the Lord*". Previously Paul wrote in verse 12 "*I am sending him- who is my very heart...*" I suspect that we might find what Paul says a bit awkward, we are not used to such intimacy amongst Christian men. We certainly have difficulty expressing it (well if you don't I do!). We are such rugged individualists in our culture that we find this intimacy, this dependence, this longing for the companionship of another embarrassing. But as difficult as we might find it, imagine how Philemon feels- he is being asked to see his useless slave, the one who ran off with his stuff, one who in that culture was only property, not really human, as his beloved brother, as his soul mate, as one together in Christ. As Paul goes on (verse 17) "*So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.*" Philemon was deeply involved in the church, in sharing the gospel. He saw himself as a partner with Paul. Paul was the one who had brought Philemon to conversion. Paul was his spiritual father, his mentor, the one he respected and looked up to. And now Paul says welcome Onesimus, as you would me, with open arms, with respect and admiration, with joy and enthusiasm.

So, has Paul given approval of slavery as an institution? Or has he totally undercut the basis for it by completely turning on its head the usual relationship between master and slave? The famous New Testament scholar, F.F. Bruce said “What this letter to Philemon does is to bring us into an atmosphere into which the institution of slavery will wilt and die”. Another commentator says “Certainly human slavery is incompatible with social justice, and yet Paul does not demand the abolition of slavery. Instead, he places the whole matter on a different basis by reminding both master and slave that they are brethren and that their relations, one with the other, must be on the basis of Christian love. Certainly, where this relationship actually exists, the institution of human slavery cannot continue, and it would seem that Paul’s approach in this case is the Christian solution for every form of injustice.” You see the wisdom and tact in Paul’s approach. Christianity in his day was a tiny sect in a vast, secular Roman empire. Neither he nor the tiny house churches were in a position to lobby the government or march the streets in protest against slavery. Such thinking comes from the context of being in a western culture where Christianity has been the dominant religion for centuries and we have the rights to express our views. But that was not Paul’s context. Paul sows the seed for radical social change, for justice, by emphasizing what Christians are in Christ, what they are together, what that relationship should look like.

And interestingly enough, his approach is still what is needed today. This week the State Government has released its ideas for a “State Plan” for the next ten years. Theme Two is about “Respect and Responsibility”. We want a society that is more caring for one another. But for that to truly occur it is not just about the government making tougher laws, or for us to march in the streets and demand it. It has to come from deep within each of us. It begins with us as Christians recognizing who and what we really are in Jesus. It’s about us truly loving each other and expressing it in how we care for each other. If Paul trusted that Philemon could do it with Onesimus, then it’s all that much easier for us to long to be together, to cherish each other and continually pray for each other. A deeply loving Christian community would be a model, an example to our suburbs of what life could be like. Isn’t that what Jesus asked of his people, to be the light shining on the hill, the light shining in the darkness, the hope in the midst of despair. The Lord’s Supper is also called Holy Communion. It’s a sign not only of our total forgiveness through the body and blood of Jesus. It’s a symbol of our communion, our being community, our unity in Jesus, our being brothers and sisters in the Lord,

those dearly loved by God, called to show that love by the way we love each other, by the way we share that love in the places around us. Do we long for the time Christ will return and there will be no more hatred, and violence, no more Middle East war and atrocities, a world in which true shalom has come? Then let's plead God for it in prayer and longing, let's prepare for it by sharing the gospel. And let's have an enticing entrée toward it, a foretaste for it in our marriages, in our homes, in our congregation by imitating Paul as he imitates Jesus, deeply loving each other.