

THE BOOK OF PHILEMON: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE INTERSECTIONALITY OF LEADERSHIP, LOVE, AND LIFE

Abstract

This article explores the tension that Paul creates when he urges Philemon to confront his moral obligation coupled with societal expectations. The intersection of public pressure and private practice is a difficult place to navigate. The importance of Christians having space to grapple with the tension that self-interests, social norms, and obedience to the Savior creates are examined. The book of Philemon provides a glimpse into the challenge that develops. The objective of this article is to explore how the Great Commandment to love our neighbor is applicable in contemporary settings. An analysis of the biblical text depicts the necessity of leadership, love, and the eradication of racial and social structures that impede the gospel message.

Keywords: Paul, gospel, love, leadership, Philemon, Onesimus

Introduction

The command to show love and brotherly kindness to our neighbor are repeated throughout the biblical canon (Lev. 19:18; Phil. 2:1-4; Col. 3:14; 1 Thess. 3:11-13; 1 Jn. 2:10). As strangers and pilgrims in this world, Christians are not above nor exempt from submitting to authority (cf. Rom. 13:1-10). The Pauline epistle of Philemon provides a glimpse into the challenge of how to live out one's faith within the dominant socio-political context of the Greco-Roman empire. After reading the text, the reader must grapple with the following questions: Did Paul expect Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly as a slave? How do Christians integrate a Christian worldview in their work-life? Did Paul desire for Philemon to release Onesimus completely from slavery? If the latter is true, Christianity becomes a scapegoat from social obligations. The following article will examine why Paul expected Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly as a slave, the importance of embodying love and kindness in our professional and spiritual life, and how the text can be applied today as

believers contend with political structures and social norms that endeavor to extinguish Christian virtues.

The Contextual Tension

Differences of opinion are common within theological circles. In literary studies, debates arise over the authorship, provenance, date, and historical context of biblical passages. Rather than allow differences to lead to division, sometimes it is best to agree to disagree. According to Root (as cited in Scalise, 1998), "...if agreement can be reached...without violating one's understanding of the identity of the church, then the differences that remain, however significant, cannot be church-dividing.¹ Differences may exist, but the consensus should be that the Bible is still the infallible, inerrant word of God.

The book of Philemon has led to varying interpretations. One interpretation argues that Onesimus, though a slave, was not, in fact, a runaway.² The members of the church that met in Philemon's home knew that Onesimus was with Paul. Consequently, Paul is not writing to request that Onesimus returns to Philemon. He is writing to request that Onesimus no longer be considered a slave and that he be allowed to stay with him in service to the gospel.³

Another interpretation depicts the book of Philemon as a story of estrangement between two Christian brothers – Philemon and Onesimus.⁴ In turn, Paul wrote the letter as a model for Christian reconciliation, the challenges of Christian living, and the importance of Christian justice. The letter is then viewed as a plea for feuding family members to be reconciled in Christian love.

¹ Scalise, Charles. Agreeing on where we disagree: Lindbeck's postliberalism and pastoral theology, *Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 8(1), 1998. p. 43-51.

² Winter, Sara. Paul's letter to philemon, *New Testament Studies*, 33(1), 1987. p. 1-15.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Callahan, Allen. *Embassy of onesimus: The letter of paul to philemon*. Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997.

Other scholars suggest that the letter was written within the context of a patron-client relationship. Philemon is attempting to act as a patron to Paul by sending Onesimus to serve him. In turn, Paul refuses the gift and tactfully cautions Philemon against acting presumptuously.⁵

A final interpretation holds that Onesimus was not a runaway slave but that he had offended Philemon by misappropriating or mismanaging some money.⁶ Rather than running away, Onesimus had gone to Paul, with Philemon's approval, hoping that he would serve as his advocate to his displeased master. In the course of his visit with Paul, he was converted. Paul then sends Onesimus back to Philemon. From this perspective, Paul was not trying to protect Onesimus from the punishment due to a runaway slave but serving as Onesimus' advocate to reconcile master and slave.⁷

In contrast to the above interpretations, this author holds to the traditional proposition that this Pauline epistle was written as a request for Onesimus to be treated kindly as a slave. The kindness expected should be considered based on Onesimus' spiritual position, as a brother, rather than his social position, as a slave.

⁵ American Bible Society, "Bible Study Guide: Philemon," <http://bibleresources.americanbible.org/resource/bible-study-guide-philemon>, (accessed October 15, 2019).

⁶ Jeal, R. R. *Exploring Philemon: Freedom, Brotherhood, and Partnership in the New Society*. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2015.; Jordaan, P. J., & Nolte, S. P. (2010). Reading Philemon as therapeutic narrative. *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 66(1). Kea, Perry. Paul's letter to philemon: A short analysis of its values, *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 23(2), 1996. p. 223-232.; Rapske, B. M. The prisoner paul in the eyes of onesimus. *New Testament Studies*, 37(2), 1991. p. 187-203; Tolmie, D. F. How onesimus was heard-eventually. Some insights from the history of interpretation of paul's letter to philemon, *Acta Theologica*, 39, 2019. p. 101-117.

⁷ Ibid.

The Leadership of Paul

The book of Philemon was written by the apostle Paul during his Roman imprisonment.⁸ He writes to his friend, Philemon, concerning Onesimus, a runaway slave. While on the run, Onesimus met Paul, hears the gospel, and accepts Christ. Although Onesimus was converted, his responsibility to his master, Philemon was not eliminated.

The words “slave” or “slavery” often evoke negative emotions, especially to those of African descent. American slavery of the 1800s is not the same form of slavery noted in scripture. In America, blacks were enslaved based on the color of their skin. In contrast to American slavery, Roman slavery was often voluntary in nature. Individuals or families could commit themselves to years of servitude to pay down their debts (Matt. 18). Some became slaves by way of birth or war. In the Greco-Roman world, slavery was a means of social improvement. Once freed, slaves could increase their wealth and gain Roman citizenship. Consequently, for some, slavery became a method for economic advancement. S. Scott Bartchy (1992) identified multiple differences between American slavery and slavery during the Greco-Roman world.

Central features that distinguish 1st century slavery from that later practiced in the New World are the following: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and enhanced a slaves value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves!); their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the free born; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and (perhaps above all) the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age of 30.⁹

⁸ Still, T. D. (2011). *Philippians & Philemon*. Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys Publishing, 2011.

⁹ Bartchy, Scott. Slavery (Greco-Roman),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman. New York, NY: Doubleday, 6, 1992. p. 65-73.

In the opening verses of the letter, Paul and Timothy send greetings to Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus (vv. 1-2). Philemon was a wealthy Christian from Colossae that Paul had converted. His ability to accommodate a church in his home was a sign of his wealth. Historians estimate that most house churches could fit up to 100 people.¹⁰ Although Paul had never been to Colossae, he met Philemon at some point during his ministry. Some scholars believe that Apphia was likely Philemon's wife and Archippus their son.¹¹

After his initial greetings, Paul expressed his prayerful gratitude for the Christian example that Philemon modelled. Paul continued his model of prayer that often reflected his epistles (cf. Rm. 1:9; 1 Cor. 1:4; Eph. 1:16; Phil. 1:4-5; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:3). Prayer was an integral part of Paul's ministry. He began with thanksgiving before making a specific petition. He rejoiced in hearing the spiritual growth of Philemon and its impact on the saints – the people of God. Paul models a leadership of discipleship that rejoices in the spiritual growth of others. Paul addresses Philemon by celebrating his positive reputation (v. 5). Love and faith are integral to the Christian witness. Paul desires that Philemon's life will continue to impact other people and help further the gospel. In turn, Paul joyfully reflected on the blessing Philemon has been to him and other saints. His graciousness and kind words are genuine. It is likely that Philemon supported Paul's ministry through prayer and financial assistance.¹²

After commending Philemon, the tone of the letter shifts as he reveals the purpose of his letter. First, due to apostolic authority, Paul could have been

¹⁰ Loubser, J. A. Wealth, house churches and rome: Luke's ideological perspective, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, 89, 1994. p. 59–69.

¹¹ Gorday, Peter. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Colossians, 1–2 Thessalonians, 1–2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000. 311.; Kraemer, Ross. "Apphia," in *women in scripture: A dictionary of named and unnamed women in the hebrew bible, the apocryphal/deuterocanonical books, and the new testament*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 2000, 52.

¹² Willmington, H. L. *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1981. 479.

bold in his request by giving Philemon a command, but he chose to address him in love – v. 8 – “Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient.” Paul exemplified *legacy leadership* which is a self-perpetuating model of leadership that had a widespread influence on multiple followers.¹³ This is not the first time Paul chose not to usurp his authority in scripture (1 Cor. 9; 2 Cor. 10). He chose his words carefully when addressing Philemon. Paul knew that Philemon was probably angry that Onesimus had run away. In the ancient world, some slaves were given special privileges depending on their masters. At times, slaves were used to running the farms of absent landowners and to manage the owner’s shipping or trading business.¹⁴ As a wealthy man, Philemon may have sent Onesimus on an assignment and while traveling he met Paul. Paul’s approach mirrors that of Solomon, “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Prov. 15:1, KJV).

Second, Paul makes his request concerning Onesimus. The cause of Onesimus going to prison is not disclosed. But his interaction with Paul was a divine connection because he hears the gospel. The gospel makes a profound change in his life. Onesimus then returns to Philemon and becomes useful not only economically but spiritually. Our usefulness is not limited to our professions but our ability to share the gospel with others (1 Cor. 3:9).

Paul frequently referred to Timothy as his *teknon* “son” (cf. 1 Tim. 1:2, 18; 2 Tim. 1:2; 2:1) and Onesimus, like Timothy, has now become his son in the gospel. Although formerly unprofitable, Onesimus becomes profitable. Onesimus was once unprofitable because he ran away. It is important to note that a runaway slave in the first century should not be compared to the runaway slaves from the American Underground Railroad. Onesimus was likely escaping from a contractual obligation that

¹³ Whittington, J. L., Pitts, T. M., Kageler, W. V., & Goodwin, V. L. Legacy leadership: The leadership wisdom of the apostle Paul. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 16(5), 2005. 749-770.

¹⁴ Jeffers, James. *The greco-roman world of the new testament era: Exploring the background of early christianity*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999, p. 224.

he had initiated as Philemon's slave.¹⁵ Paul uses a play on words by calling Onesimus profitable since his name means "useful" and "profitable." His profitability was now two-fold, as a slave and as a brother. He could now profit his master while helping Paul further the gospel. Despite Onesimus' social standing, he was still fit to not only receive the gospel but become a bearer of the gospel message as well. According to Charles Spurgeon, "Never lose heart in the power of the gospel. Do not believe that there exists any man, much less any race of men, for whom the gospel is not fitted."¹⁶

Dramatic intrigue is a rhetorical device Paul employed to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus.¹⁷ His whole approach to Philemon is voluntaristic, allowing him to settle the matter by an appeal to Philemon's conscience.¹⁸ Paul expressed his desire that Philemon receive Onesimus kindly. He desired for Onesimus to stay with him during his imprisonment, but he did not usurp authority over Philemon since Onesimus was lawfully his slave. Paul's understanding of the Roman culture allowed him to send Onesimus back to Philemon. He was aware of the legal rights of slave owners. To do anything about Onesimus without Philemon's permission would have been illegal.¹⁹ To avoid any legal ramifications, Paul submitted to the law which gave the slave owner pre-eminence over the slave. Paul never condones nor objects to slavery in his letter or any other epistles because it was a social norm of the time. S. Scott Bartchy reflects this normalcy by stating,

¹⁵ Frilingos, C. "For my child, Onesimus": Paul and domestic power in Philemon. *Journal of Biblical Literature*. 119(1). 2000: p. 91-104.

¹⁶ Duncan, Ligon. "Spurgeon Quotes on the Gospel," <http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/articles/onsite/spurgeonquotes.html>, (accessed November 6, 2019).

¹⁷ Barth, M. & Blanke, H. *The letter to philemon: A new translation with notes and commentary*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000.

¹⁸ Martin, D.B. *Slavery as salvation: The metaphor of slavery in pauline christianity*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990.

¹⁹ Robbins, Vernon. Rhetoric and culture: Exploring types of cultural rhetoric in a text. *Rhetoric and the New Testament: Essays from the 1992 Heidelberg Conference*. Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993, p. 447-67.

Owning and using men and women as slaves were such normal parts of daily life in the ancient Mediterranean world that the institution of slavery, as a social, legal and economic phenomenon, seldom became an object of reflection.²⁰

Paul speaks of predestination by inferring that Onesimus may have left Philemon for a short time because it was destiny for him to return as a slave and brother (v. 15). Based on their Christian partnership, Paul desires that Philemon receive Onesimus as himself. To augment his statement, Paul agrees to reimburse Philemon for the lost wages that Onesimus may have cost him. Slave owners would often grant slaves freedom because it was cheaper to use their services as a freedman rather than as a slave. The slave owner could then bind the freedman by a contract and continue benefiting from the services.²¹ Consequently, the slave owner would not have to provide food and lodging for the slave.²² Although Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him, requesting his freedom would result in an economic loss to Philemon. Thus, his offer to repay reflects his understanding of the cultural values of the time.

The Road to Loving Kindness

Paul understood the Greco-Roman culture which makes it clear that he expected Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly as a slave. Kindness reflects the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal. 5:22; Eph. 4:32). According to Stowers (1986), “Kindness involves a recognition of our common humanity and frailty that leads us to care about each person’s particular well-being and to treat him or her as deserving of generous response and respect.”²³ In

²⁰ Bartchy, Scott. *Mallon Chresai: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21*. Dissertation Series, Number 11 (Missoula, Mt. The Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), p. 116-17.

²¹ Nordling, J. G. Luther’s Contributions to Commentary Writing: Philemon as a Test Case. *Concordia Theological Quarterly*. 81(1–2). 2017: p. 19–36.

²² Stowers, Stanley, *Letter writing in greco-roman antiquity*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1986, p. 155.

²³ Pohl, C. D. Recovering kindness: an urgent virtue in a ruthless world. *The Christian Century*, 129(22), 2012. p. 10–11.

turn, Paul states the importance of receiving Onesimus as a brother – v. 13 – “Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved.”

Love is what Christ said would identify his disciples (Jn. 13:35). The Greek word for God’s love is *agape*. Consequently, love is the distinguishing characteristic that should govern every Christian’s life. Since kindness, love, and forgiveness are Christian virtues, Paul appeals to each as he writes Philemon. Paul had confidence that Philemon would do the right thing. He expected him to understand the new relationship that he now shared with Onesimus as a Christian brother beyond that as a slave master. Now that Onesimus is his brother in Christ, Philemon should respect and treat his brother in the Lord as such. Regardless of a person’s social position, kindness and love should be shown to everyone without partiality (Jam. 2:1-10; 1 Jn. 3:16-18).

The primary concern of Paul is that Philemon will treat Onesimus with kindness and love. He knew that Roman law allowed slave owners to punish recaptured slaves harshly.²⁴ Philemon could have lawfully had Onesimus tortured, flogged, or crucified for running away. However, Paul appealed to Christ in Philemon so he would do the right thing. To do so would require that Philemon disobey the Roman Empire’s fugitive slave laws and treat Onesimus as an equal. Paul appeals from a Roman prison that Onesimus is received. He has come to faith in Christ through Paul’s preaching while he is in prison. This reveals that despite his physical location, the gospel that Paul preached was not constrained. Therefore, Paul faithfully preached the gospel and understood his assignment. His imprisonment became a blessing to him and others.

Paul does not question Philemon’s right to own slaves. He accepts slavery as a part of the society of his day (1 Cor. 7:20-22). Rather than use the letter as a condemnation against slavery, he addresses the behavior that Christians should personify regardless of their social standing, race, and gender. It should be a behavior of love based on the Christian faith. In his

²⁴ De Vos, C. S. Once a slave, always a slave? Slavery, manumission and relational patterns in Paul's letter to Philemon. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*. 23(82). 2001: p. 89-105.

New Testament letters, Paul urged slaves to obey their masters and for masters to be kind to their slaves (Col. 3:22-4:1). In Galatians, Paul says that slaves and free persons who have faith in Christ are equal in God's family (Gal. 3:26-28).

Dr. H.L. Willmington believes that Philemon was asked to forgive and restore Onesimus for the sake of three individuals: Onesimus, Philemon, and Paul.²⁵ Onesimus now had a spiritual responsibility to return to his master. If he did not do so, he would restrict God's blessing in his life. Philemon had every right to be upset but by virtue of his character, he should allow Onesimus an opportunity to live out the credence of his name – profitable. Onesimus' name has not changed but his character has because the gospel brings change. Paul exemplified Christ by his willingness to repay on Onesimus' account. This embodies the substitution Christ has made for humanity. The letter closes as Paul states his confidence that Philemon will do more than he expects and his plans to return to him once he is released from prison.

Implications for Contemporary Application

The book of Philemon has significant applications for today. After examining the letter, Onesimus' conversion is a testament that no one is beyond God's reach. The gospel is always for everyone and extends beyond geographical and physical barriers. Although a slave, God still had a purpose and plan for Onesimus. Just as individuals such as Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Paul had their names changed; Onesimus experienced the same. Through Paul, he becomes a new creation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17) and was able to live out the purpose of his name – “useful.”

Paul is in prison, yet the word was not bound (2 Tim. 2:9). If we are willing, God will present opportunities to share our faith with others.²⁶ We can be fruitful in every season of our life. Hardship does not provide a

²⁵ Willmington, H. L. *Willmington's Guide to the Bible*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc, 1981, p. 479-480.

²⁶ Shore, M. H. The freedom of three Christians: Paul's letter to Philemon and the beginning of a new age. *Word & World*, 38(4). 2018: p. 390–397.

premise to retreat from our ministerial call to preach the gospel. The power is in the gospel and not the person who communicates the message.

The book of Philemon exemplifies how the gospel destroys class distinctions, in fact, social stigmas. Based on culture and law, Onesimus was in an inferior position. Galatians 3:28 records, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” By way of his conversion, Philemon and Onesimus could now enjoy the liberty of a relationship as brothers in the Lord. In response to Christian unity, John L. Kachelman, Jr. states,

We are “blood brothers” today but in a far different sense than was practiced by the African savages. All who are in Christ are united with blood. We share that blood and whatever happens to one happens to the others. Let us be thankful for this fellowship. Let us adhere to the Scripture’s teachings to protect this fellowship!²⁷

Despite difficult circumstances, we must remain connected to the community of faith (Heb. 10:23-25). When faced with suffering or hardship, the desire to disconnect from the community will occur. However, we must remember that we gain strength by staying connected to Christ (Jn. 15:1-5) and the household of faith (Ps. 92:12-15). According to Killingray (2007), “Within the fellowship, believers together model and demonstrate their theology.”²⁸ Paul remained connected to the saints and reiterated the rudiments of Christian theology through his letters. Similarly, we should document the narratives of our lives to share our faith with future generations.

Paul’s life has spoken for itself. He has matured in age and grown spiritually. His position in the text suggests that spiritual authority is commanded by fruit, not by force. Godly leaders should appeal to the heart (emotive) and the head (cognitive). Paul’s leadership style or emotional intelligence is revealed by the way he wisely approaches the situation

²⁷ Kachelman, John Jr., “Brotherly Fellowship Features,” http://www.christianlibrary.org/authors/John_L_Kachelman_Jr/philem11.htm, (accessed October 20, 2009).

²⁸ Killingray, Margaret. *The Bible, Slavery and Onesimus*, *Anvil*, 24(2), 2007. p. 94.

between Philemon and Onesimus. Leaders should seek to command respect and not demand submission through manipulation and force. Leaders can also glean from Paul a model for conflict resolution. Before confronting a difficult situation, leaders should begin with a compliment, confront the issue, and conclude the conversation with something positive.

We are called to a ministry of reconciliation and restoration (2 Cor. 5:18-19). Love, forgiveness, and freedom from offense should characterize the life of every believer (cf. Jn. 13:35; Eph. 4:32). We should remember where we come from and remain humble. The grace that has been extended to us should be freely extended to others. As the racial climate and political tension in our society increases, the Christian believer should remain focused on being peacemakers (Matt. 5:9). Christians have a great opportunity to help restore unity in a chaotic world.

Paul expressed that he heard of the love and faith of Onesimus (v. 5). His statement reveals that our reputation will speak for itself. What is the fruit of our life saying to others? It is imperative that we are mindful of not only what we do, but how we treat others, particularly those of the household of faith (Gal. 6:10). We don't have to promote ourselves, but people will hear of our service (cf. Neh. 4:1).

Our spirituality should not be forfeited in the marketplace. Paul encouraged Philemon to do what is right despite the potential financial impact. This reveals the motive of our ministry. Are we focused more on money or ministering to people? Our stewardship to be fiscally responsible should not negate our commitment to live out the Great Commandment to love God and our neighbor.

Conclusion

This article has examined why Paul expected Philemon to treat Onesimus kindly as a slave. The understanding Paul had of Roman culture and law aided in his confident appeal to Philemon. Although he does not condone nor object to slavery, Paul highlights the attitude that masters and slaves should exemplify. Everyone deserves kindness and love, regardless of their social position. In God's view, everyone is equal. The book of

Philemon challenges every Christian to examine and confront the struggle between the flesh and the spirit that occurs daily. The application of biblical principles will empower us to be exemplary leaders in every area of our lives. As social and political factors seek to divide, Christians must remain committed to the gospel and not allow the message of God's redemptive love to be stifled by our personal desire for money, fame, or social acceptance.

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