

Philemon: Doing the Right Thing

Lesson 30 - A Bold Request

Warm up -

1. Jesus didn't have much in this world - no house, car, stocks, savings accounts, high-power job. How do you suppose he lived?
2. What are the reasons we find it hard to ask people to do stuff for us?
 - pride
 - independence
 - fear of rejection
 - other:
3. When you approach your parents to make a huge request, what's your style?

Lesson -

Betrayal, escape, crimes worthy of death, and what to do about such stuff are the subjects of Paul's postcard-size letter to Philemon. It all begins like this: Philemon is a Christian who has a slave, Onesimus.

Maybe you're already thinking "Whoa! There's something wrong here. How could Philemon be a Christian *and* a slave owner? And why doesn't Paul let him have it with both barrels?"

Well, it's like this: Slavery was an accepted practice in the Roman Empire. Unlike American slavery, it was not based on race, nor was it always permanent; slaves could buy their way to freedom. Paul doesn't command slave owners like Philemon to set their slaves free because he knew there was no way slavery could end at that time - the Romans simply wouldn't allow it. So Paul writes to Philemon within this context.

Anyway, Onesimus escapes and comes into contact with the gospel. His world unravels. He meets Paul. They both agree that he needs to return to Philemon. So Paul writes this letter. And so begins the adventure.

Paul knew that, legally, Philemon could severely punish Onesimus for running away; in fact, he could even have Onesimus killed. So Paul crafts his letter carefully. He praises Philemon for his outstanding service to Christ and to others. Then Paul makes a bold request: take Onesimus back, he says. And then he goes one step further. Take him back as a brother in Christ!

Today we'll take a look at the first part of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Read Philemon 1 - 12

1. As you read, watch for the good things Paul says about Philemon.
2. What topics does Paul focus on in this letter?
3. What is Paul basing his appeal to Philemon on, since he's not going to order him to do the right thing?
4. Could Paul be accused of "buttering up" Philemon so he'll feel guilty if he doesn't take Onesimus back?
5. "Formerly he (Onesimus) was useless to you," says Paul, "but now he has become both useful both to you and me." What does Paul mean? What caused the change?
6. Do you relate more to Onesimus, Philemon, or Paul? What lessons for your own life will you take from this letter?
7. Do we need to send and receive more letters of encouragement to walk in the Christian faith? What difference might such letters make in our everyday ability to do the right thing?
8. Do you usually respond better if someone makes you do something or if they ask you to do it of your own free will?
9. Paul assumes that Philemon will do the right thing and receive Onesimus with open arms as a brother in Christ. What might happen to Onesimus's faith if Philemon treats him harshly? How does the way we treat others reflect on our walk with Christ?