

THE PRISON EPISTLES: NURTURE FOR OPPRESSED BELIEVERS

IV. Philemon: Nurture In Living Godly Lives Amid Evil World Systems

B. Encouraging One Another To Initiate Godly Action In Living Amid Evil World Systems (Philemon 8-17)

I. Introduction

- A. When Paul wrote the Epistle of Philemon, he and his Christian readers had to deal with the evil institution of slavery that was legally protected by the Roman Empire that God required them to obey, Romans 13:1-5.
- B. Thus, the Epistle of Philemon "is not an attack against slavery as such, but a suggestion as to how Christian masters and slaves could live their faith within that evil system," *Ryrie Study Bible, KJV*, 1978, p. 1727.
- C. Philemon 8-17 reveals how Paul exemplified how we believers can encourage one another to initiate godly action in living amid evil world systems, and we view the passage for our insight and edification (as follows):

II. Encouraging One Another To Initiate Godly Action In Living Amid Evil World Systems, Philemon 8-17.

- A. First, Paul avoided tempting Philemon to utilize his right under Roman law to kill runaway slave Onesimus (Ibid.) by Paul's not himself using his apostolic authority to direct Philemon to receive Onesimus. Rather, he humbly in love appealed to Philemon to encourage him to relate humbly in love to Onesimus, Philemon 8-9. "Pushing" another by use of one's authority can tempt the other himself to "push" at others, and in sensitive cases in evil systems, that can be ruinous, so Paul worked to diffuse an evil "push" temptation for Philemon!
- B. Second, Paul utilized the culturally weighty credential of his age and imprisonment to influence Philemon, Philemon 9. Older men in a patristic culture carried social influence, and for a respected, elderly man to be imprisoned was a culturally unsettling tension for his supporters, so for Paul to remind Philemon of his older and yet imprisoned status, one assigned of Christ, would have influenced him toward heeding Paul's petition!
- C. Third, Paul stated his petition clearly, appealing to Philemon to act in mercy toward Onesimus, Philemon 10. It is always wise to be open about even sensitive issues to avoid miscommunication that can only hurt!
- D. Fourth, Paul influenced Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother rather than executing him by telling of the personal advantages for Philemon to take such a merciful action, Philemon 11, 13, 15-16:
 1. Paul admitted that Onesimus had been unprofitable to Philemon in having run away from him, but now that he had trusted in Christ, he was profitable both to Philemon as his master and to Paul, Philemon 11. It was thus both in Philemon's personal interests plus in Philemon's interest of encouraging his spiritual father in the faith, Paul (Philemon 19b), to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother versus executing him.
 2. Onesimus had proved to be profitable in ministering to Paul as a new believer (Philemon 13), so it was in Philemon's interest in seeking to edify Paul for him not to execute Onesimus, but to receive him in love.
 3. Paul added that God's plan in allowing for Onesimus to run away from Philemon only to be converted to Christ under Paul's ministry might have been an opening for a far greater relationship between Philemon and Onesimus than would otherwise have been possible: Onesimus would end up not only as a servant, but much more than that -- a beloved brother in Christ, both in terms of the relationship between master and slave in the evil institution of slavery as well as in their fellowship in Christ in the Church, Philemon 16.
- E. Fifth, Paul expressed his personal feelings to motivate Philemon to receive Onesimus in love, Phm. 12. It is always wise to express the true, sensitive feelings we have in encouraging others to have the same feelings.
- F. Sixth, Paul respected the legal jurisdiction Philemon had over Onesimus his slave, choosing not to keep the latter with him to minister to him in Philemon's stead without Philemon's permission, Phm. 14. This respect of Philemon's legal authority over Onesimus would have served further to diffuse the temptation for Philemon to use his authority to feed his own ego at Onesimus' expense in the evil act of having Onesimus executed.
- G. Seventh, Paul appealed to his rapport with Philemon to receive Onesimus in love, Philemon 17. Keeping good relationships with others is so important in influencing them to live above the evil in evil world systems.

Lesson: Paul encouraged Philemon to take godly action in lovingly receiving back his runaway slave Onesimus versus executing him in the evil system of slavery. Paul did so by appealing in humble love versus using his apostolic authority, by appealing to positive culturally influential factors in the relationship, by speaking clearly with Philemon, by telling of the personal advantages involved for Philemon in acting in love, by expressing his feelings openly, by respecting Philemon's rightful authority and by appealing to his rapport with Philemon.

Application: May we rely on the Lord for the wisdom to follow Paul's example in encouraging others to initiate godly action in living righteously amid evil world systems.