

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part VI: Paul's Focus On Each Believer's Equality Before God In Resolving The Sensitive Issue (Philemon 19b-21)

I. Introduction

- A. Sometimes we believers face very sensitive issues in relating to relatives, coworkers or even in relating to one another in the Lord, issues that if not properly handled can create unwanted and severe interpersonal conflicts.
- B. Paul's letter to Philemon dealt with the potentially explosive issue of what to do with a runaway slave who had accepted Christ as his Savior, especially when such slaves were often killed in punishment for having run away. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1727, "Introduction to the Letter of Paul to Philemon")
- C. Exemplifying how to face such an issue, Paul in Philemon 19b-21 focused on each believer's equality before God in solving the sensitive issue, an edifying focus that we should use toward resolving sensitive cases we face:

II. Paul's Focus On Each Believer's Equality Before God In Resolving The Sensitive Issue, Phm. 19b-21.

- A. Human slavery as an institution is itself evil since it violates God's creation of all humans as equal in value:
 1. The institution of human slavery treats the master as being of more value than the slave whom he owns.
 2. However, Scripture counters this viewpoint based on God's creative order of human beings:
 - a. Genesis 1:26-27 with Acts 17:24-26a teach that all of Adam's descendants, regardless of gender, race or ethnicity, were created in the image of God the Creator, the Supreme Being.
 - b. As such, if **any** human murders another human, Genesis 9:6 calls for the capital punishment of the murderer for having slain one who bore the image of the Supreme Being.
 - c. Thus, each human, regardless of his or her gender, race or ethnicity, is created of equal value with every other human in God's eyes since every human bears the image of the Supreme Being, the Creator God.
- B. For believers, this equality before God is enhanced, for in Christ, "(t)here 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," Galatians 3:28.
- C. Based on this equality before God as especially applied to believers, Paul sought to show Philemon his duty to receive his runaway slave and fellow believer Onesimus back as a brother in Christ, Philemon 19b-21:
 1. Paul had promised to repay Philemon whatever wrongful costs his runaway slave Onesimus had cost him in his running away to Rome, offering to do so in writing with Paul's own hand, Philemon 19a.
 2. However, Paul then noted that Philemon owed his own self to Paul in the sense that Paul had led him to faith in Christ so that Philemon would escape hell and be given eternal life, Philemon 19b. Since Paul had led Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus to faith in Christ (Philemon 10), both Onesimus and Philemon in the spiritual realm were **equal debtors** to **Paul** in terms of the value of his ministry to them!
 3. Building on this focus of equating Philemon's debt to Paul with Onesimus' debt to the apostle, Paul urged Philemon to let Paul have some "benefit" (ESV) from Philemon in the Lord, that Philemon might refresh Paul's "bowels," or "heart" (in our manner of speech), in the Lord, Philemon 20. This statement has a play on words that further suggests the equality of Philemon and Onesimus in Christ (as follows):
 - a. The KJV word "joy" or, better "benefit" (ESV, NIV) in v. 20 translates the Greek word **onaimen**, the optative [the mood expressing a wish] middle [the voice where the subject acts for its own benefit] form of the verb **oninemi**, "let me have some benefit" (The Analyt. Grk. Lex. (Zon.), 1972, p. 289; Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 573), and "Onesimus" in the Greek New Testament is the word **Onesimos**, which means "useful," Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich.
 - b. Paul in effect told Philemon, "'Let me find in you [Philemon], as I have found in him [Onesimus], a true Onesimus'" (Bible Know. Com., N. T., p. 774), making both men as being **equally** of **benefit** to Paul!
 4. Paul then added that he was confident that Philemon would obey his directive and do more than Paul said, a possible hint at Philemon's need to grant Onesimus his freedom from slavery, but certainly receiving him back into the household without punishing Onesimus for his having run away. (Philemon 21; Ibid.)

Lesson: *To resolve the sensitive issue of reuniting runaway slave Onesimus with his master Philemon, Paul taught how both men were actually spiritual equals in Christ: they equally owed their own selves to Paul in his having led each of them to faith in Christ, and Philemon owed Paul the benefit of treating Onesimus as a beloved brother as Onesimus had proved to be of benefit to Paul in his appreciation of Paul's evangelization of him.*

Application: *Toward resolving sensitive issues we face, may we like the Apostle Paul focus on and teach the equality we have before God as human beings as to value, especially among fellow believers in Jesus Christ.*