

Mount Pisgah A.M.E. Church

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Bible Study, Wednesday, February 24, 2016

Survey of the Bible

Lesson 59: Philemon

The Book of Philemon

Philemon is a letter which, like First Timothy, Second Timothy and Titus is written to a Christian disciple who, although not a “mentee,” is more of a subordinate colleague of the author. Philemon is not considered one of the “Pastoral Epistles” because it primarily focuses on one issue and does not technically teach anything about doctrine (although it has an ethical tone). Philemon is considered to be an artistically crafted work of persuasion.

Author

The idea that Paul wrote Philemon has only been questioned on two fronts.

- (1) It is questioned by those who deny that Paul wrote Colossians because of the close connection between the two epistles (e.g., the same people are associated with Paul in both letters). However Paul’s authorship of Colossians can be supported. (See outline on Colossians)
- (2) Unlike many of Paul’s letters, there is no doctrinal material in Philemon. However the urgency of the subject may explain this.

The Times and context of Philemon

Philemon is a resident of Colosse and who is one of Paul’s converts, won to the faith during Paul’s Third Missionary journey. He evidently was married to Apphia and has a son named Archippus (v2). As many influential people were, Philemon was a slave owner.

It appears that years later, the subject of this letter Onesimus was a slave who robbed his master Philemon and escaped. He traveled from Colossae and found his way to Rome where he could hide and be safe. Somehow he was exposed to Paul’s teachings during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment and was led to Christ. At some point The Holy Spirit must have convicted Onesimus for what he had done, and he sought out Paul’s counsel. Paul and Onesimus agreed that as a Christian brother, Onesimus had a responsibility to return to Philemon. That day came when Paul wrote his epistle to the Colossian, sometime between 60 AD and 62 AD. (Scholars believe that Colossians and Philemon were written at approximately the same time because (a) Paul is in prison, and (b) the same list of people is named in the two letters). Paul sends one of his assistants named Tychicus to Colossae both to deliver the letter to the Colossian church and to accompany Onesimus as he faces up to Philemon.

This letter is Paul’s letter of recommendation for Onesimus to Philemon. According to Roman law, runaway slaves such as Onesimus could be severely punished or even condemned to death. It is doubtful that Onesimus would have returned to Philemon even with this letter if he had not become a believer in Christ.

Overview

This briefest of Paul’s epistles is a model of courtesy, discretion, and loving concern for the forgiveness of one who would otherwise face the death penalty. It is tactfully written and highly personal, utilizing Paul’s previous relationship with Philemon, his powers of persuasion, and his sense of Christian

responsibility. It can be divided into three components: (a) A Prayer of Thanksgiving for Philemon, Paul's Plea for Onesimus, and Paul's Persuasion of Philemon.

Outline

- I. **Greetings and Thanksgiving for Philemon (1-7)**
 - A. Greeting (1-3)
 - B. Thanksgiving – Setting up the request (4-7)
- II. **Paul's Plea for Onesimus (8-16)**
- III. **Paul's Persuasion of Philemon (17-25)**
 - A. Persuasion (17-22)
 - B. Final Greetings (23-25)

Keys to Understanding Philemon

- Philemon was clearly a person of means (owned slaves). He his family were evidently involved in home based ministry. This was common in the early church
- Philemon begs the question of whether Christian brotherly love really works even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty.
- It is assumed that since this letter was incorporated into the canon, that Paul's plea was successful.
- There is a parallel between the intercession that Paul makes for Onesimus and the intercession that Christ makes for us.
 - Onesimus is guilty of great offense, and Paul is motivated by love to intercede on his behalf. We are guilty of great offense, and Christ is motivated by love to intercede on our behalf.
 - Paul lays aside his rights and becomes Onesimus' substitute by assuming his debt. Christ laid down his glory in heaven and substituted for us on the cross.
 - By Philemon's gracious act, Onesimus is restored and placed in a new relationship. God's gracious forgiveness of us restores us to pre-Edenic condition and in a new relationship with God.
- The name Onesimus means *useful*. Onesimus has been made useful to God through redemption.

Some Lessons from Philemon

- God would rather love us into action than demand that we act. Paul was relying completely on the spiritual character of Philemon
- A person is more "useful" as a "brother" or "sister" than as someone who simply does things for you. The fellowship between believers is primary – not just relating to people because of what they can do for us.
- As can be seen in the movie "War Room," there are times when God not only calls us to repentance, but to restitution – to return, take responsibility for wrongs we have done, and restore what we have taken. This requires discernment, spiritual maturity and trust in the care of God, because we may not have a "persuasive Paul" to plead on our behalf.
- The conversion to Christ *should* make a difference in how we view people, regardless of the nature of the previous relationship. We ought to entertain the possibility of forgiveness and restoration. This may not mean it going back to the way it was (probably shouldn't), but it should make a difference. Galatians 6:10 says, "Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, *especially* to those who belong to the family of believers."
- The compassion that we show others is more of an indicator of spiritual maturity than positions that we hold or titles that we have. Philemon's was a "pastor," but his maturity was tested by his compassion and willingness to forgive.