

Episode #323 – Philemon 4: Not a Slave, But a Brother

I. In the book of Philemon, written shortly after Ephesians, Paul illustrates the great principle of Ephesians that God always deals graciously with us (Ephesians 4:32) in the way he acts towards Philemon and his runaway slave Onesimus. Paul in how he treats these two becomes an example of how God treats us in the dispensation of grace.

II. In Philemon 10-16, Paul sent back Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, who had met Paul in Rome and through his influence has become a believer in Christ. Paul urges Philemon to receive him as if he were receiving Paul's most tender feelings and a beloved brother. Now, Paul ups the stakes, urging Philemon to show to Onesimus the same grace God had shown to him.

III. Philemon 17-21. Paul and the Runaway.

A. Philemon 17. Paul stakes his own relationship with Philemon on this.

1. Paul makes it clear to Philemon. If Philemon counts him as a friend or partner or one with whom he has fellowship, then he should receive Onesimus as if he were receiving Paul himself.
 - a. We can well imagine how a believer would treat God's apostle when he came to him. Surely we would get the best room in the house ready, and would feed him the best food we could afford, and would use our best tableware and so forth.
 - b. This is how Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus: as himself!
2. Note that this is an example to us as well as to how we should view a person, no matter how bad he may have been before, once he comes to faith in Christ. We should deal graciously with each other, as God deals graciously with us! This is the truth of Ephesians 4:32.

B. Philemon 18. Onesimus had apparently embezzled some money from Philemon when he ran away from him. Paul now urges Philemon that, whatever wrong Onesimus had done him and whatever Onesimus owed him, he should now put that to Paul's account. (Paul appears to have come into some inheritance from his wealthy, Pharisee family at this time. Philippians 4:12.)

C. Philemon 19. Paul will repay any debt.

1. Paul writes this part with his own hand. Paul usually used an amanuensis, or a scribe who would write down his letters as he dictated them. To insure Philemon that he would do as he said, he wrote this part with his own hand.
2. Paul will repay any debt Onesimus owes Philemon. Paul comments that he will not remind Philemon that he owes him his own self besides, since Paul is the one who had proclaimed to Philemon the gospel. Note: when Paul says he will not say this to Philemon, he actually is saying it and reminding him of it!
3. In this, Paul becomes a picture of Jesus Christ.
 - a. All the wrong we did to God, all the great debt we owed him, Jesus Christ took upon Himself, and He repaid it on the cross.
 - b. In light of this, He calls upon us to forgive each other, pleading with us to do it as Paul pleads with Philemon for Onesimus.
 - c. The Lord too would remind us that we owe Him our very own selves, and so we should forgive, and count that whatever our brothers and sisters owe us, God will pay it back to us, though we too owe Him our own selves!

- D. Philemon 20. Paul calls upon Philemon as a brother to let him have joy of him in the Lord (when he sees that Philemon has accepted Onesimus back as he would accept Paul and has forgiven him). He calls on Philemon to grant him this joy by doing it. He calls upon him again to refresh his bowels (strong emotions, heart) in the Lord. Paul wants his strong emotions refreshed by Philemon's attitude towards Onesimus.
- E. Philemon 21. Paul is confident of Philemon's obedience as he writes. He believes that Philemon will not only do what he has said he should do, but will also do even more.
 - 1. We do not know the outcome of this, but no doubt Philemon did indeed act as Paul suggested.
 - 2. This matter of doing more than Paul says is interesting. It would be good if we could do more even than God tells us to do. We know surely that God will do even more for us than He has told us He will do. Even what He has told us, we probably grasp very little of it. Praise God, we can count on Him to do much more than we even imagine!

IV. Conclusion. Paul identifies himself with the runaway Onesimus, and stakes his own relationship with Philemon on this. He calls on Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were receiving Paul. He promises to pay back any debt Onesimus owes Philemon himself. In this, Paul becomes a picture of Jesus Christ and those who are "in Him." He identifies himself with us, and pays our debt of sin resulting in death Himself upon the cross. Now, He identifies us with His righteousness, and calls upon all to receive us as they would receive Him. It is a glorious thing to be in Christ! May we all understand it more, and may we all learn to treat each other as God has treated us in Christ.