

PHILEMON

Philemon is the only purely personal letter by Paul we have in the New Testament. It is just a letter from one friend to another friend about a third person. I believe Paul was in Ephesus when he met and converted run-away slave, Onesimus (The location is debated by theologians but Ephesus is more likely in my mind). Onesimus has accepted Christ as his lord and savior. Paul has been teaching Onesimus for some time and Onesimus has been very helpful in service to Paul. But now it is time for the run-away slave to return to where he belongs, by law. Paul knows Philemon, the legal master of the slave, very well. Philemon owes the debt of his salvation to Paul, they both know it. Paul reminds him of this but does not demand repayment. The letter is clear in purpose and intent and really needs no interpretation or clarification. However some clarification of the culture of the time may add to the nuance of the letter. There are some sociological issues involved.

Paul and slavery:

Many theologians and biblical historians have rebuked Paul for not taking a stand against slavery. These people were not and are not using their heads. Paul had a mission on earth, given him personally by Christ. If Paul was known as an antislavery activist it would have made his mission impossible. As soon as he entered a town or village, he would have faced opposition by all the asset holders of the area. Philemon was an asset holder. Philemon accepted Christ and hosted the fellowship church in Colossae. So in order to accomplish the task given him by Jesus the Christ, he had to remain neutral on the majority of the cultural issues of the times. Paul's job was not to order society, his job was to spread the Gospel of Grace.

Slavery in the first century:

In the first century there were two major types of slavery. One was the purchased human that was treated like a commodity, to be used as the owner saw fit.

The second was a contract slavery. A person for whatever reason would sell themselves for a contracted period of time. The contracted time could be days or years. The latitude of the owner and rights of the slave would be stipulated in the contract.

The Jews practiced slavery among Jews. A Jew could sell him or herself into slavery to settle some kind of debt. There was however within the Law a stipulation that each jubilee year, all Jewish slaves owned by Jews were relieved of their debt and were again free. Think about that a bit. You would be worth more the first year after jubilee than you would be the year before jubilee.

Clear your heart and mind. Try to relate to the customs of the time and carefully explore this personal and compassionate letter between friends.