



A STUDY IN *The Epistle to Philemon*

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With my whole heart have I sought thee; O let me not wander from thy commandments. Thy word have I hid in my heart, that I might not sin against thee. Ps.119:10,11

The apostle Paul, wrote this epistle (*letter*) which bares the name of the person to whom it was written, at the same time and under the same circumstances (*he was in a Roman prison*) as Ephesians and Colossians. Philemon, it is believed, if not “affluent” (*rich*), was a “very well off” jewish business man of Colosse; who had a slave named Onesimus that took off with some of his masters property to lose himself in the great city population of Rome. Paul doesn't share how he meets Onesimus; only that after they meet; Onesimus become a believer in Christ (*Phi. v. 10*). Paul is criticized by some for not condemning *slavery*. I'd like to share a perspective from which Paul (*by the wisdom of Holy Spirit*) would not speak against slavery. It must be understood that slavery was an integral part of the ancient world, and Paul being *uniquely* prepared by God (*though Paul was Jewish, he was a “Roman” citizen*) with Hebrew and Roman Law expertise; he knew that any direct attack on the institution would have caused the then young Christian movement to be branded as treasonous and subversive to the Roman Government.

Though an outright attack on slavery is not apparent. Paul does indeed attack slavery, not from the legal relationship between Philemon and Onesimus; but Paul explains that their *new spiritual kinship* (*v. 16*) completely transforms their previous relationship. How does a “Master” treat a “Slave” that has *become* his “Beloved Brother?” Realizing the necessity to (*as much as possible*), make right the wrong Onesimus done. Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter, requesting that he be received and forgiven. Paul also agreed to personally pay for any financial loss incurred caused by Onesimus. Although this epistle is intensely personal, rather than theological, it contains one of the greatest pictures of forgiveness to be found in the New Testament. In this letter are found all the elements of forgiveness: the offense (*vss. 11,18*) compassion (*v. 10*) intercession (*vss. 10, 18-19*) substitution (*vss. 18-19*) restoration to favor (*v. 15*) elevation to a new relationship (*v. 16*)

It's a practical lesson in the request of the prayer

“Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us”

Outline

Introduction: vss. 1-3

Paul's praise for Philemon: vss. 4-7

Paul's plea for Onesimus: vss. 8-17

Paul's pledge and assurance: vss. 18-22

Conclusion: vss. 23-25