

3.13.11

Philemon...A question of rights

vv 8-9

The Big Idea: It is not about my rights, it is about God's glory.

Paul's Letter to Philemon—The Context

This little letter Paul writes to Philemon is a very personal letter. While it can be argued that Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus were personal, it is clear that there was included instruction to the local churches in those letters. Philemon—and 3 John—are different. The letter to Philemon is a letter from one man to another in which the writer, Paul, asks Philemon to do the right thing.

We are ignorant of so many of the details behind this letter, but here is some of what we can know. Paul writes the letter while in prison; however, commentators are divided over exactly where Paul is in prison. Some argue for the obvious choice of Paul's imprisonment in Rome in the early 60's. Others, however, argue for an earlier date, around 56, with Paul imprisoned in Ephesus, perhaps after the riot by Artemis-followers caused by the gospel (Acts 19:1-20:1).

Setting aside for now where Paul was, he has somehow crossed paths with a man named Onesimus. It is unclear from the text whether Onesimus was a runaway slave or was sent on a business trip by Philemon and stayed too long. Verse 18 may give a clue: Paul says: *But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account...*(Philemon 18, NAS). In those days, it was common for a slave to escape by stealing from his master and then joining a band of thieves to survive until perhaps being able to disappear in another city or country. Perhaps this is what Onesimus had done.

It is also unclear how Onesimus and Paul crossed paths. What we do know is that they were together long enough for Onesimus to have become "useful"—which is what the name Onesimus means—to Paul and for Paul to come to affectionately refer to Onesimus as "my child."

As for Onesimus, in addition to knowing him as a slave, we also know that he has become a Christian.

And what about Philemon? Well, he was a slave owner who lived near Colossae and was also a Christian. So, this letter is a letter from one Christian to another on behalf of a third.

What Was Paul Asking?

Paul was really helpless in this situation because he was in prison. Under normal circumstances, Paul could have legally taken custody of Onesimus by promising local authorities to return him to Philemon. Once there, he could have acted on behalf of Onesimus. But Paul was in prison. Paul could have chosen to draw upon his authority as an Apostle and order Philemon to be lenient, but Paul chose not to. He was left only with an appeal from one Christian to another based on Christ.

Philemon

What was he asking of Philemon? Look at vv 15-18—

For perhaps he [Onesimus] was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account...(Philemon 15–18, NAS)

We know this from history: slaves captured after escape were often subjected to severe beatings and harsh, life-shortening labor. So, we might have expected Paul to simply ask for mercy for poor Onesimus. Paul wanted more. Paul wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a slave, but as a person. And not just a person, but as a brother! And not just a brother, but as a partner!! To receive him as a partner *and* to forgive his debts. Paul was asking Philemon to give up his legal rights over Onesimus as property and his legal claim for restitution from someone who has cost him. Paul was asking Philemon to see the world differently, through the eyes of Christ.

Onesimus

And, he was asking something of Onesimus. Look at v12. You have to give credit to Onesimus for going back. He was free, and Paul was asking him to risk that freedom, and perhaps his very life, by returning to the master from whom he had run away. That request seems entirely foreign to us today.

Practical Outworking of Paul's Theology

But for Paul, this entire episode is a practical outworking theology; we see it in his letter to the Colossians:

- Colossians 3:22-4:1

Extraordinary! Paul did not take this opportunity to condemn the institution of slavery, as one might expect. Rather, he risked sending Onesimus back into slavery. And, Paul was not alone in this thinking. Hear Peter:

- 1 Peter 2:18

Peter is exhorting a slave to be obedient to even a master who may be crooked, dishonest, unjust, or harsh (depending on your translation).

A Question of Rights—Some Events in History

I thought it might be fun to take a look at a couple events in the history of our country to try and gain some perspective on the radical nature of what Paul is asking of Philemon and Onesimus. Now, before we begin, let me say clearly that I am not judging the actions of the men and women from our history, I'm only taking a quick look at a few historical events to help us think about the radical nature of Paul's thinking in this letter to Philemon.

Civil War

We recall our own Civil War, either the war to end slavery or the war over states rights, depending on which side you were on. Let's take it down to a very personal level. Imagine yourself in the North and a runaway slave comes to you. You and he are Christians. Would you send him back, as Paul

did with Onesimus, or protect him? I think it is safe to say that most of us would harbor the slave out of compassion. But, what of Paul's letter to Philemon and his encouragement to Onesimus to return? What if *you* were the slave? How would you react to being asked to return?

This is a tough issue, but the real question is: Does the Bible inform your view of this at all?

Declaration of Independence

Our Declaration of Independence says, in part:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Paul did not appeal to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” when writing to Philemon. In fact, by sending the letter back with Onesimus he was asking Onesimus to risk giving up those very rights. And, by freeing Onesimus, perhaps Philemon was giving up some ability to pursue his own happiness. So, how would Paul have responded to this Declaration? We can't be sure, but listen to his words as he writes to the Roman church under the authority of the Emperor of Rome—not exactly a benevolent government:

- Romans 13:1-7

Now Paul is not saying to obey a government no matter what they decree. The Church of Rome in Paul's time did not worship Caesar, for example; that is why they were persecuted. And Jesus did not obey the religious authorities in all things. Yet, the standard for submission is pretty high for us. Did you hear that part about paying our taxes...what do you think God would say to us taking money “under the table” for work we perform?

Read the rest of the Declaration of Independence and you will find the list of grievances against King George. Then read Romans 13 in the context from which it was written. I challenge you to think about how Scripture speaks to those lists of grievances. Even more importantly, I challenge you to examine what you think about our government today. This is another tough issue, but the real question is: Does the Bible inform your view of our current debate about government at all?

Our Rights—According to God

Today, we talk about human rights, civil rights, animal rights, parental rights, legal rights, abortion rights, consumer rights, employer rights, employee rights...all good things unless the underlying motive is *my* rights. Do we, as Christian, stop to ask what the Bible says about these rights?

Here is the challenge for us regarding our “rights”: too often what we consider as our “right” began simply as a “want.” Then, over time, the “want” morphs into a “need” and then the need becomes our “right.” Today in this country, as never before, we are consumed by our individual rights. Do we allow the Bible to critique our wants, needs, and rights?

In 1978, Russian dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn gave the commencement address at Harvard. Coming out of the prison system of the old Soviet Union, he made this piercing observation of the Western world:

The West has finally achieved the rights of man, and even excess, but man’s sense of responsibility to God and society has grown dimmer and dimmer...The defense of individual rights has reached such extremes as to make society as a whole defenseless against certain individuals. It is time, in the West, to defend not so much human rights as human obligations.¹

In the 33 years since, we have become even more obsessed with our individual rights increasingly at the expense of our individual obligations.

Christianity and the American Dream

I worry for us that our Christianity is wrapped up in our pursuit of the American Dream. We may turn our nose at the so-called prosperity gospel, and rightly so; yet, how often does our expectation of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness pervade our expectations and our speech at the expense of the biblical mandate?

If we are truly trying to follow Christ, then shouldn’t we let His life inform how we live ours? Let’s look at only two examples from Jesus’ life. The first comes from Paul:

- Philippians 2:6—Jesus gave up His right to be God and took human form because He so loved His Father, He did not claim His Godly right to stay in Heaven.

The second example comes from Jesus Himself:

- John 15:13—Jesus gave up His life for us; again the picture is not one of Jesus pleading His innocence before Pilate, but giving up His right as an innocent man.

When I look at the life of Jesus and the character of God revealed to us in the entirety of the Bible, I see that God is concerned about two things: 1) that I love Him, and 2) that I love my neighbor. I’m not saying that God does not want me to be concerned about rights. In fact, loving my neighbor *requires* that I be concerned about rights, *their* rights. Nowhere do I see that God wants me to be too concerned about my own rights.

The Message of Christ

In fact, Scripture is quite clear about me setting aside my rights for my sake. Let’s look quickly at the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by taking on perhaps the two “deepest roots of human evil” (Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 137.

¹ Solzhenitsyn, Alexander I. “A World Split Apart.” Commencement address delivered at Harvard University, June 8, 1978

- Burning Anger & Contempt (“you fool”)—Matthew 5:21-26
 - Okay in some cases; Jesus got angry
 - Wrong for anger is rooted in ego
 - Often my response against those in my way
 - Positive examples (other centered)
 - Reconcile with brother
 - Approach our court adversary in love and try to reconcile
- Obsessive Desire (Adultery)—Matthew 5:27-30
 - Wrong to objectify another person for my pleasure
- Divorce—Matthew 5:31-32
 - Against divorce “for any reason” (e.g., irreconcilable differences)
 - Permittable in cases of “hardness of heart”—usually rooted in one’s anger and desire
- Swearing Oaths—Matthew 5:33-37
 - Wrong if for the purpose of false sincerity and deception
- Examples of Personal Injury—Matthew 5:38-48
 - Turn the other cheek
 - Doesn’t mean total passivity; it goes back to our heart attitude
 - Are we responding out of anger/contempt or out of love?
 - Turn *my* other cheek (my rights); however, I may need to act to protect rights of another
 - Give more if someone defrauds you
 - Go the extra mile
 - Give to someone who may have no right to ask of you
- Love Your Enemies—Matthew 5:43-47

In each case, Jesus is telling us to give up our rights that are rooted in our self-centeredness and to be more concerned about the rights of others, even those acting against us. It is not our specific action that Jesus is preaching about; rather, it is our underlying motive, the attitude of our heart in the action that concerns Him.

In perhaps the most profound act of giving up one’s rights, Jesus—fully man *and* fully God—washes the feet of His disciples. As He finishes, He says this:

“You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” (John 13:13–17, ESV)

Jesus was speaking explicitly about the foot washing: the God of the universe was washing the dirty feet of His friends. Jesus would have been within His rights to demand the Apostles wash His feet! He did not. And, surely He was also alluding to what was to come: His willingness to give up His

ultimate right to life for us. Therefore, how can we hold on tightly to our individual rights, even to death, if Jesus was willing to give up His rights?

Perhaps you will think about that the next time you want to yell at someone for merely inconveniencing you.

New Sight

Paul did not specifically address slavery in his letter to Philemon because the issue was not slavery. The issue was for Philemon and Onesimus to see the world differently.

When Jesus began His ministry, one of the first things He did was to read from a Scripture telling us why He had come.

- Luke 4:18-19, which is taken from...
- Isaiah 61:1-2, but more...read vv 1-3

Jesus came to release us from captivity, to enable us to see, and to free us from slavery...*in order* that we may become oaks of righteousness *planted by God for His glory*. Nothing in that is about *my rights!* It is about God's work and my obedience so that I might glorify God through my love for Him and my neighbor. The captivity, slavery, and blindness that I'm freed from are to the old way of living. Jesus came to free me to live unconcerned for my own rights, because God will take care of those for me as He sees fit.

I am now God's child. I am no longer my own.

- 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

So, this is Paul's message to Philemon and Onesimus: you are freed to live differently; to live concerned only for God's glory. Onesimus, go back to slavery; your life is not your own, it has been bought with a price. This is not about you. Philemon, free Onesimus. This is not about you. You cannot own another human. Let him see Christ through you.

Jesus summarizes this message well: "*Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*" (Matthew 6:33, ESV)

The Rest of the Story

Historians have reason to believe Onesimus became the Bishop of Ephesus in 110AD.