

About a Slave - Paul's Letter to Philemon

Study 4 - A Fair Request

Introduction

It is remarkable how often we can be inconsistent when it comes to matters of right and wrong. When others wrong us we are quick to stand upon our rights and to demand some kind of redress, or at least an apology. When we do wrong, we expect others to turn a blind eye or at least the other cheek. Thus we are quick to play down the seriousness of our sins and the sins of those whom we love and to justify ourselves with a raft of excuses. "It's not really my / his / her fault", we say, "it's just that ..." and we add whatever excuse sound the most plausible. When it comes to us or those with whom we sympathise we are all for thigs being swept under the carpet and left there.

There is no doubt that Paul was very committed to Onesimus and wanted the best for him. But there is also no doubt that Paul would not let Onesimus dodge responsibility for his actions. As we saw in our previous study, Paul insisted that Onesimus return to Philemon to face him (vs12) even though Philemon would much rather have remained in Rome with Paul. And though he appeals to Philemon to welcome Onesimus back with the same kindness and grace that he would have welcomed Paul (vs17), he also is clear that what is owed to Philemon as a result of Onesimus' actions must be repaid. In this he is true to the basic principle of restitution for loss that was laid down in the Mosaic Law and which the early Christians certainly would have upheld. Given that Onesimus as a runaway slave would not have had the resources to make good Philemon's material loss, Paul himself offers to settle the bill with Philemon (vs18).

Paul's request to Philemon to give Onesimus a fresh start in life is not looking for grace at the expense of justice but is based on a sacrificial decision to ensure that grace and justice might both be met. In this Paul of course imitates Christ Himself who personally paid the price for our freedom so that the justice and mercy of God might be satisfied. But Paul does go one step further, and that is to ask Philemon to respond to him in the same way that Paul has responded to Onesimus. Paul will make good what Onesimus owes to Philemon, but Philemon has the opportunity to wave the debt, not for the sake of Onesimus, but for the sake of Paul to whom, under God, he owes his one salvation (vs19). Two things are thus involved in Paul's 'fair request' to Philemon. First Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not only as a fellow human being but as a brother in the Lord. This will mean Onesimus' freedom – perhaps to be able to serve alongside of Paul on any further missionary activity. Second, Paul asks Philemon to think with grace about Onesimus' debt – and either to allow Paul to settle it or to suffer the loss himself in imitation of Christ who gave up everything so that we can go free.

Read Philemon 17-25



Investigate and Think



1. What kind of welcome did Paul ask Philemon to give to Onesimus?
2. Philemon's treatment of Onesimus would have been radically counter-cultural. What do you think others might have said against his behaviour?
3. What offer did Paul make to ensure that the justice was upheld in his request?
4. In what way did Paul's offer actually imitate what Christ did for His people?
5. What did Philemon owe Paul?

6. In what way was Paul's request that Philemon "refresh his heart" (vs20) not in fact self-centred?

7. What was Paul confident of with respect to Philemon? Why was this the case?

8. On the basis of this paragraph how would you describe the relationship between Paul and Philemon?

9. What light does this throw on the request that Paul makes concerning Onesimus?

10. In what way do verses 23-25 reinforce the idea that the Christian community is a gospel partnership?

11. What is Paul ultimately depending on as far as Philemon's response is concerned?

