



MESSAGE – August 30 – Unlikely Heroes

A message of unlikely heroes from an unlikely book, Philemon. Why is it included in the canon of Scripture? There is no written theology, though implied in the text as we shall see. It just seems to be a deeply personal letter, probably one of many Paul wrote to friends in ministry. So, what's the story here...

THE STORY

- Paul is under house arrest for a 1st time in Rome sometime around 61 A.D. (he will be acquitted by trial in the Spring of 63 A.D.). During these two years he wrote; 4 books in the canon called the “prison epistles” – Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon.
- While there he meets a man named Onesimus, whom he leads to the Lord (total transformation; Paul knew what that looked like) and then enlists him in personal service. Onesimus serves him very well.
- At some point, Paul finds that Onesimus is a run-away slave and that his master was a man in Colossae named Philemon, a well-to-do man who hosts the Colossian church in his home. Philemon, also a convert of Paul, was a godly man, a loving man, and committed to the small church in Colossae, a church founded by Epaphras (who was converted & trained by Paul at Ephesus; 3rd missionary journey Paul spent 2-3 years there). [Ephesus to Colossae = Cleveland County (Norman) to Washita County (Corn)]
- Onesimus has stolen something of value from Philemon, no doubt, to finance his escape to Rome, some 1,200 miles from Colossae. Rome would have been a good place to get lost because of the many slaves and former slaves in the city. In God's providence, he comes into contact with Paul.
- Though Onesimus (“useful”) has ministered greatly to Paul, he will send him back (very dangerous for Onesimus) to Philemon, now as more than a slave, but a brother. Paul's appeal to Philemon, made out of love rather than apostolic authority, is that he would forgive Onesimus by receiving him back into his service; Paul makes restitution for Onesimus.
- Onesimus is accompanied by Tychicus who is also carrying Paul's letter to the Colossians.

READ **PHILEMON (NASB)** [After this 1st arrest Paul would go to Ephesus with Timothy; he asks him to stay (1Timothy 1:3)]

Two important yet difficult points need to be made from the story.

The first: 1. We have a Master! We are His slave.

This requires a huge paradigm change in the way we think.

Example: Heavenly Father vs. earthly fathers.

Jesus refers to God as Father over 150X; He teaches us to pray, “Our Father in Heaven...” [seminary professor who prays to “heavenly Father” because it’s the most intimate]; the Bible contrasts the similarities/differences:

Matt 7:9-11 (Luke 11:11-13) – vs 11, “If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him?”

John Piper on Matt 7:11 – “Don’t ever limit your understanding of the fatherhood of God to the experience of your own father – no matter how good he was or how bad he was. Rather, take heart that God has none of the sins of your father – none. God has none of the limitations of your father. God has none of the weaknesses of your father, and He has none of the hang-ups of your father – none of them. Jesus says, ‘If your father – sinner though he be, though you’re all evil – if he knows how to do anything good for his kid, just think of how much more your perfect heavenly Father is eager to do good things for His children.’”

Heb 12:5-11 – vs 9, “Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits and live?”

Luke 15:11-32 – there is no greater picture of God the Father than in the story of the prodigal son. You remember when his son came home broken, the father joyously received him!

2 Cor 6:18 – “And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me’ says the Lord Almighty.”

1 John 3:1 – “See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him [as Father!]”

Psalms 103:13-18 – vs 13, “Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him.” And who are those that fear Him? Vs 18, “to those who keep His covenant and remember His precepts to do them.” [confirms Brandon’s message]

“Instead of looking at my dad and then back at God, I learned to look at God first...If I didn’t start with God, then He would always be the replica rather than the original.”

That is a paradigm change!

We need to do the same on the issue of slavery. We do a great disservice to the handling of the truth in the Bible (and to ourselves) if we disregard its context. God’s truth always strikes out at the world system. Our modern sensibilities are violated by the term, “slavery,” partially

because we exalt personal freedom and freedom of choice, and partially because of the European/American slave model in which we are so aware.

So what is the problem?

Some of the problem lies in our English translations. The OT word for slave is “ebed” which is used 799 times in noun form and 290 times in verb form, yet the KJV never translates it “slave” but “servant.” [servant was a deacon] When the Greeks translated the OT (the Septuagint) before Christ in 3rd Century B.C., they used “doulos” in place of “ebed” over 400 times (based on their understanding of the context). Because of the heavy dependence on the Latin translations (Vulgate), the KJV translates “doulos” to servant because the Latin Vulgate translated “doulos” to “servus.”

Also, the English translators’ understanding of “slave” conjured up images of the slave trade in the English empire and Colonial America, rather than an understanding of the Greco-Roman world. This led to a gross violation of the Bible as it was used to justify the ungodly system of slavery encompassing our modern era. The book of Philemon was one of those so used.

Is there a difference between the two slave systems?

Slavery was a vibrant Israelite institution controlled by the Covenant (Exodus 21-22), the Holiness Code (Leviticus 25), and the Deuteronomic Code (Deuteronomy 15). The Israelites were constantly reminded of their bondage in Egypt and how this was not the proper way to treat those in their care.

It was also entrenched in Roman social structure: roughly 1/5 of the empire’s population (12 million by the 1st Century) were slaves. It is estimated that as much as 60% of the population was or had been slaves.

Though slaves were owned with little to no rights except granted by their masters, many ancient laws controlled aspects of the institution in Rome.

- Often a slave’s life was better than a freeman; they were often part of a family, taught children, provided with health care, able to earn money, own some property, with the goal to become financially stable and ultimately, independent
- Historically, at one point, so many were freed it became a burden on society (unemployed with no one to take care of) so laws were established to limit those freed
- Could participate in any religion
- Gained rights of free men and were educated in all fields in all levels of society
- In 20 A.D. they were given the same rights in court as free men
- When masters died, slaves were freed

The **four reasons you could become a slave:**

1. **Prisoner of war** – normally to higher status households, not the average citizen [we are a prisoner to sin]
2. **Debt-slave** (voluntary servitude) usually for a certain duration; could be purchased (“redeemed”) by another creditor. Destitution, famine, or without an inheritance (as a care-giver till the master dies). Since debt-slaves were able to buy back their freedom they were permitted to earn and own some types of property. [ours was a debt we could not pay]
3. **Born into slavery** – possibly from the union of a master with a slave; could not inherit over the freeborn children but would be freed at the master’s death. [born slave to sin]
4. **Lawbreakers** – free farmer’s negligence flooded the lands of fellow farmers, they could sell him into slavery and split the proceeds; a wife and children of a murderer sentenced to death might be made slaves. [we were lawbreakers; at enmity with God]

Differences with European/American slavery [though vestiges of the biblical version existed (white debt-slaves; apprentices)]:

- For the 1st time in history there was no distinction between citizen/foreign slaves BUT based on race solely, particularly the African slave trade (which was admitted to being “barbaric and immoral” even by its supporters) [began with Arab nations from 900 A.D.; prior to 1500s the bulk of the slave trade (mostly females) was the East African coast to the Arab Peninsula; by 1500s most slave trade (mostly males) was to Europe]
- There was a loss of humanity which promoted the mistreatment (in Israel’s system there was mistreatment at times but the understanding that all were created in God’s image, and that God was their ultimate Master limited its scope; also the fact that at some time a slave would become free and then the need to relate as citizen to citizen was expected). This method of dehumanizing is a strategy utilized today (Nazi Germany and the Jews, Hutus and the Tutsis in Rwanda, the medical community and the unborn, the modern political world)

Jesus never advocated nor denounced slavery as it existed in His day but He used it often as an analogy to illustrate certain truths of the gospel and His Kingdom. See Col 3:22; 4:1

Early Christians, many of which had become or were slaves, understood they were slaves to Christ (having been slaves to sin): “bought with a price,” “belong to Christ,” “His own possession,” “Lord,” “Master,” “Redeemer,” “purchased by His blood,” “I Surrender.”

Titus 2:9-10, “Urge bondslaves (doulos) to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.” This was the kind of slavery that became the pattern for our relationship to our Lord.

Understand this: Our Master, when we served at our worst, indeed, were more a saboteur than a servant slave, the Master gave His life to redeem us from a debt we could not pay. Master’s too, Col 3:11 says that in Christ there is no distinction between slave and freeman. Read Col 3:22-24 the inheritance is of the Lord as is our service. The Master took full responsibility for our condition.

So, in our independent, freedom-centered minds, can we accept the biblical analogy which the Scriptures paint for us? Yes children, yes co-heirs (Rom 8:14-17), but within the context of our enslavement.

1. He owns us exclusively; we’ve received a new name. – “became obedient from the heart to that form of teaching to which you were committed;” “slaves of righteousness”
2. We are in complete submission; unquestioning obedience (Col 3:22-24; Phil 1:22; 1 Cor 6:19-20). “Consecration is complete moral submission to Christ’s absolute claim and ownership.”
3. Singular devotion (Heb 13:21). “Slaves had only one primary concern: to carry out the will of the master. In areas where they were given direct commands, they were required to obey. In areas where no direct command was given, they were to find ways to please the master as best they could.”
4. Total dependence – Slaves were completely dependent on the master for basic necessities, food, shelter, etc. (Matt 6:31-33)
5. Personal accountability – slaves would always have to give an account to their masters (we will too: Rom 14:12; 2 Cor 5:10)

Point One: **1. We have a Master.** We are His slave! Do we understand that more clearly?

Point Two: **2. We are commanded by the Master to forgive!**

We live in a world that totally disdains forgiveness. We see the most angry, antagonistic, retaliatory, vengeful, unforgiving people today. They see everyone else as criminals toward them. Books are written to help you find these culprits responsible for your

lousy lot in life. You know, even in the “old” days of my youth, bad people knew there were consequences for their behavior. Today everyone is a victim and someone or something else is to blame for the consequences they experience for wrong choices.

However, for Christians, the failure to forgive is unthinkable. Unforgiveness is a deliberate act of defiance toward God, no matter the offense. There are some 75 word pictures of forgiveness in the Bible, one whole book devoted to it, Philemon, which doesn't even use the word, forgiveness!!

How does unforgiveness affect us?

- We are imprisoned in our past and completely controlled by the offender, even after they die
- We become bitter; it stains our whole character (like any sin allowed to grow)
- We give Satan an open door (Eph 4:26-27)
- It affects the fellowship with our Master; if we don't forgive we will not be forgiven (Matt)
- It causes us to live as victims (we live in a society of victims)

So, we must forgive.

Forgiveness defined – a promise to never take revenge; a love statement that says, “I hold no anger, I hold no hatred, I hold no bitterness against you.” And even though the offense is recalled, “I won't ever bring it up to you, to anybody else, or to myself.”

It's the most Christ-like (God-like) thing a Christian can do. See Jesus, Stephen, early martyrs. For Jesus, they weren't even seeking it but He had already made forgiveness available. [Jerry's sermon of the past on putting on forgiveness]

Paul doesn't make an appeal to Philemon from theology (like he does in the other epistles) because of Philemon's maturity; but maybe some of us need it:

A theology of forgiveness:

- It is commanded (see 6th Commandment clarified in Matt – “everyone who is angry with his brother”) – Eph 4:32 – “...as God in Christ also has forgiven you.” Matt 18:21-22 – Peter asked how many times, seven times? “Seventy times seven.”
- Whoever offends you, offends God more...and He forgives them.
- We cannot experience God's forgiveness if we don't forgive (Matt 6:14-15)
- Unforgiveness affects our fellowship and communion with other believers (Matt 18)
- Vengeance is the Lord's. We assume His authority, in essence saying, “God, You are unjust” (slow, indifferent, ignorant, etc.).
- Unforgiveness affects our worship (Matt 5) – “leave your gift at the altar”

- Offenses are trials to help us overcome our natural response toward anger, in order to love and pray for those who offend/hurt us

Apparently, Philemon already knew the theology. Paul knew the character of the man (through personal contact, and by way of testimony from Onesimus and Epaphras, as well as others) and appealed to it. He was a man, according to Paul, who:

- Loved and trusted the Lord – vs 5
- Love toward believers and the fellowship there in house – vs 6
- His faith, his maturity, his experiential knowledge is for Christ's glory – vs 6
- He has been a blessing, refreshment to the saints – vs 7

So, Paul makes his appeal out of love; love he has for Onesimus and love he has for Philemon.

Paul's 3 essentials in his appeal for forgiveness:

- Receive Onesimus back – his repentance is evident; let him back in your life; close the gap and heal the wounds; he is not the same man that left but has become a brother
- Restore Onesimus back to service – he is still a slave, let him back in service; it will be a blessing to Paul, “let me benefit from you in the Lord, refresh my heart in Christ” (vs 20)
- Restitution is required – Paul took it upon himself because Onesimus incurred a debt he could not repay. Paul was doing what Christ did for him.

What persuades us to forgive? (In Philemon)

- I owe a debt I cannot pay; I'm in debt to so many people (just like Onesimus)
- I can become a blessing to others (Paul will be refreshed)
- I am called to be obedient to the Lord (Matt 6) [as a slave better to obey out of love]
- I am accountable to godly leaders (Paul is coming!)
- I am not alone but part of a fellowship (Paul identifies men that Philemon knows)
- I can only do this by the grace of God in His power

Did Philemon forgive Onesimus?

The book made it into the canon of Scripture!

What happened to Onesimus?

He follows Timothy as the (unlikely) 2nd bishop of the church at Ephesus!!