

Philemon: From Slave Owner to Christian Brother

Philemon

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Slavery was both rampant and ruthless in Roman times. According to Professor John Madden of University College, Dublin, there were around two million slaves among the six million people in first century Italy. Household slaves—cooks, servants, artisans—were often treated well, but miners, road builders, and factory workers were whipped, beaten, and killed without giving a second thought. In this letter to a slave owner named Philemon, Paul lit a fuse that would one day shatter once and for all the chains that bind one person to another. It might take church and society eighteen hundred years to get the message, but this letter is one of the first manifestoes on the long road to emancipation.

Here's the story. Paul's good friend, Philemon, is both a Christian disciple and a slave owner. Onesimus, one of his slaves, has run away. But Onesimus somehow comes in contact with Paul, and under Paul's influence he becomes a Christian. And therein lies Paul's challenge: how can he persuade Philemon to take his truant slave back without flogging him? And how can he convince Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ and no longer as a slave? Because he was an apostle of Jesus Christ Paul could have taken a hard line on this issue. Apostles had immense authority in New Testament times, so Paul might have insisted that Philemon set Onesimus free. Instead, he makes a loving appeal: "Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love...for my child, Onesimus." (8-10) It won't surprise you to learn that he got this notion from God. God doesn't coerce the world; "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." And the Son, Paul writes in Philippians 2:6ff, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross." In Jesus Christ, God stepped down from the heights of heavenly authority to engage us personally, humbly, sacrificially; to engage us lovingly! And if that approach was good enough for God, it is good enough for Paul, and it ought to be good enough for us.

Here in America, of course, slavery is no longer a burning issue. But the dynamics of slavery—domination, intimidation, the threat of punishment—still keep people chained emotionally and psychologically. I think, for example, of parents who monitor every detail of their children's lives and who dictate what their children will be and do when they grow up. That happened to my friend Bill. I first met Bill at Fuller Seminary where, like me, he was training for pastoral ministry. When I accepted a call to a church in Spokane, Washington, ten years later, I found Bill at the college next door serving as their interim chaplain. Then, when a new chaplain arrived, Bill accepted a call to a small rural church nearby. A few years later Bill left church ministry entirely to go into counseling. He told me, "Tom, I went into pastoral ministry because of my mother. She wanted to tell her friends that she had a son in the ministry, and I did what she told me to do. But eventually I realized that I was fulfilling my mother's dream, not mine, that I really wasn't fitted for pastoral ministry. Now, I'm doing what I am gifted to do, and I'm loving every minute of it." Parents, you do not own your children; they are on loan to you from God for eighteen years, plus or minus. And your duty is to discover, not to dictate, who they are. Your task and your joy will be to help them discern their unique gifts, so they can choose their own way in the world.

I think of husbands who act like monarchs in their homes. They claim undisputed authority and insist that every ounce of their wives' time and energy be poured into their pursuits. Many will quote the Apostle Paul in Ephesians 5:22—"Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord." But what they conveniently overlook is the preceding verse, Ephesians 5:21, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." "Be subject to one another:" that's the fundamental paradigm for marriage. Marriage is not hierarchical; marriage is egalitarian. Husbands are not superior, and wives are not subordinate. We couples are commanded to "be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." But how does that work? How can two persons be subject to one another without getting all tangled up? Carol and I tackle mutual subjection by honoring each other's gifts. She is far more gifted than I am in some spheres, so in those spheres she sits in the driver's seat. And I have my gifts, so I take leadership where I am gifted. And in areas where we both have interests, we simply take turns. For example, we used to spend my day off wrangling over what to do. "So, what do you want to do today?" "I don't know, what do you want to do?" "Well, you decide!" So she would decide, and I would spend the rest of the day in a blue funk because it wasn't really what I wanted to do! Now we take turns planning my day off, and if I don't get my way this week, I know I will next week. Husbands and wives, be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Identify each other's gifts, and then support each other's interests and honor each other's goals.

I think of executives who run their companies like dictators. Their employees are little more than cogs in their own wheel of fortune. Love is never mentioned in their personnel manuals because love is thought to be too lenient, too wishy-washy. But on the contrary, love is demanding, far more demanding than rules in a personnel manual. The rules say, "You're just a number in our computer, so if you're late to work, or if you don't make your numbers this quarter, we'll delete you and upload someone else in your place." But that's the easy way. Love, on the other hand, is hard. Love understands that every employee is a person with a history and with hopes. Love remembers that persons are sometimes shackled by circumstances beyond their control, and, with a bit of help, they can overcome those circumstances and regain their effectiveness. Love is even willing to admit that there may be something wrong with me, the boss, or that there may be something about the company that needs changing. Sound unrealistic? Impractical? Un-businesslike? Then let me tell you that IBM (a major corporation if there ever was one) gauges its success not only by four financial numbers—revenue growth, profit, return on assets, and cash flow—but also by three measurements: customer satisfaction, quality, and employee morale. And how do you boost employee morale? You keep your door open, the door to your office and the door to your mind. You admit you don't have all the answers, so you listen to suggestions from even the lowest-paid employees. You not only expect others to know who you are; you try to know who they are. You not only earn an MBA; you employ MBWA—Management By Walking Around. You build morale by knowing your employees' names, by caring for their needs, and by helping them to fulfill their dreams. And that kind of caring is just another name for love.

One of the most famous, more poignant, photographs of the twentieth century showed a lone student standing in front of a massive tank in Tiananmen Square. Chinese students were demonstrating for greater freedom, and the tanks were sent to crush them. But the driver of that tank saw something more than a demonstrator; he saw a human being, someone who might have been his own brother. So he stopped his tank. He refused to run him over.

Who stands before you today? It may be a student in your classroom, acting out because he didn't get any breakfast that morning. It may be a customer in your shop, complaining about your service, but the real reason is that she is going through a messy divorce. It may be an employee in your building, not living up to your expectations, or your spouse at home wanting to spread her wings, or a child testing your parental authority. Don't run them over. Set them free. Set them free to be all that they can be.