

Jon Hauerwas – September 4, 2016 – “Letter of Recommendation”
Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Philemon 1-21

Today, we are exploring a passage from the New Testament that I imagine may not be very familiar to many of you. How many times, I wonder, have you heard a sermon on Paul’s letter to Philemon? Probably not very many, if ever, right? And if I am correct in this assumption, then it seems fitting that I provide you with a bit of background information here.

First, you already know that scholars spend a great deal of time studying the spirit, theology, moral tone, language, and style of biblical passages. That is the nature of their work. And from these explorations, these scholars have concluded that seven letters in the New Testament which are attributed to Paul, or said to have been written by Paul, are authentically Pauline, and not merely written in Paul’s name. Six of these are all addressed to churches. They include 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans, and Philippians.

Philemon is unique among Paul’s letters, for it is written to an individual rather than to a church. It is the seventh undisputed Pauline epistle in the New Testament. And comprising only 25 verses in its English rendering from the original Greek, Philemon also holds the distinction as the shortest of the Pauline letters.

Well, in this letter, to whom it is addressed, Paul is writing to his personal friend. Philemon, we learn from the text, was a head of household, a leader of a church group that met within his properties, and a business person whose profession supported his status in the community. ¹ Paul's friend was known as a generous man and as someone who cared deeply for the welfare of those who met in the church at his home. ²

In the context of this letter, we also learn that Philemon was a slave owner. It is this bit of information which may encourage all kinds of negative judgments from us. But, I invite you to withhold those for a moment. For unlike slavery in the United States, at no time did the Roman Empire have a race-based policy for the institution of slavery. ³ Instead, one most commonly became a slave through military expansion or debt bondage. And in the first century, as much as 40 percent of the Italian population may have been enslaved. ⁴

¹ Cain Hope Felder, *Philemon, The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary Volume XI*, ed. Leander Keck (Abingdon Press, 2000), 891.

² *Ibid.*, 892.

³ *Ibid.*, 885.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slavery_in_ancient_Rome

Cain Hope Felder notes that “while Paul’s letter to Philemon does not focus on the issue of slavery, it certainly offers clues that help to clarify the apostle’s moral stance on the issue.” For “Paul was aware of the provisions in the Hebrew Bible that sanctioned some forms of slavery despite the abhorrence of the Hebrews for the long period of their own bondage in Egypt. And, as a Roman citizen, he certainly knew the legal warrants for the system as practiced across the empire.”⁵

Paul was also “astute enough to recognize that the role of a pronounced abolitionist would not only have” sealed his own fate, “but it would have also been disastrous to the nascent Christian missionary movement.” Such factors make all the more surprising “texts like Galatians 5:1, ‘For freedom in Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery’; or 2 Corinthians 11:20-21, which calls out those who let others enslave them. These statements, rightly viewed, are hardly words of someone who approves the institution of slavery.”⁶

And yet, there is a difficult issue presented in the passage before us today because this letter specifically refers to Onesimus, who was one of Philemon’s

⁵ *Ibid.*, 887.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 887.

slaves. Paul himself was writing from prison, though we do not know from which city. Hence, his repeated use of the term “prisoner of Christ.” And at some point during his imprisonment, Paul meets Onesimus, which means “useful or profitable” in Greek, and becomes for him the catalyst for his conversion to Christianity.

Over time, many interpreters have tried to understand why Onesimus escaped from Philemon. Some have suggested that he stole from his master and then, in an effort to avoid punishment, escaped from Philemon’s properties. Others have suggested that Onesimus was fleeing Philemon’s harsh treatment. The truth is that we have no details to confirm what led to Onesimus’ eventual escape, so all of this is speculation. We only know that Philemon probably wants him back; that when Onesimus returns, a severe punishment is likely waiting for him; that he is currently with Paul; and that he is now a Christian.

It is possible that this runaway slave approached Paul, a respected person in society and a personal friend of Philemon’s, to intervene on his behalf and to serve as a kind of character reference or mediator. Just think about how important these character witnesses are today. I have needed them in order to receive admittance at institutions of higher education and to secure internships and employment.

Meanwhile, I have also written these kinds of letters for others. One of my good friends from high school is now in seminary. As a part of this process, he asked me if I would serve as his mentor in ministry. To this end, I am now meeting with him regularly by phone and then sending my observations to his seminary, as requested.

In addition, church and staff members from the congregations that I have served have asked me to serve as employment references. This has often involved phone calls with present or potential employers. And at my previous two churches, I provided letters of reference and attended court proceedings on behalf of young male congregants who found themselves in legal trouble.

Life requires all kinds of character witnesses. Letters of reference are often needed to obtain housing. And what, I wonder, is a credit score – if not an accounting of one's financial trustworthiness in light of previous commitments? It is, in other words, a financial letter of reference.

But, if letters of reference are important today, they were paramount in the ancient world. Before accredited universities, formalized trade schools, and standardized credit scores, decisions about one's professional competency or ability

to assume a debt were completely contingent upon word of mouth. This means that if an honorable person was willing to vouch for you, then your chances of success greatly increased.

And I believe that Paul's letter to Philemon serves a similar purpose. Paul and Philemon were friends and co-workers in Christ. And Paul was determined to reconcile these two individuals, even if we are personally disturbed by the nature of master and slave relationships of that day. We want Paul to do more. Yes. We want him to take a stand against this kind of oppression. This is understandable and admirable.

But, I also ask you not to assume the worst of Paul and to rightly credit him for the integrity that he does display in light of his own time and cultural context. For in ancient society, slaves had no personhood. They were purely property. And Paul is pushing back at that.

First, he calls Onesimus his brother. This goes beyond a recognition that the slave is a human being. Paul is now associating him with members of his own family. Next, he says, "So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would

welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account... I will repay it.”

This is a clear call for forgiveness and reconciliation. In fact, “Paul wanted Philemon to honor their new tie as Christians above and beyond any legal demands. Their relationship was to be conditioned by love, not Roman law, now that they were linked by faith,” and not by their respective status in society.

As I draw to a close this morning, I would like to mention this one, final passage from the Pauline epistles. In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This is a radical message of inclusion, acceptance, hope, and love. May it be so. Amen.