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Permit #361

Forward thinking from Philemon ...

More Than a Slave

The human race as a whole always seems to have some sort of a "caste system." Because the inhabitants of earth as a whole really lack confidence and a sense of self worth, they tend to fill that void by putting others down as a twisted means of attempting to elevate themselves. Sometimes this false elevation is through the use of destructive verbiage, but when people have political or economic power, they generally use that power to drive others into a position of subjection or slavery. "What do you mean by crushing My people," was the illustrative query

of the Almighty to the nobility of Israel, "and grinding the face of the poor?" (Isaiah 3:15). The Lord, by contrast, has always put equal value on each person, whether it be Pharaoh or the slave girl who has to sleep behind the millstones, recognizing the intrinsic value of each eternal soul.

▲ **A beloved brother** — Paul is sending Onesimus, the now converted runaway, back to his Christian slave master, Philemon. He wants Philemon also to recognize the intrinsic value of each person, and he wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back. "For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for awhile," is Paul's comment, "that you should 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" (Philemon 1:15,16). Through Christ, God destroyed the spiritual barrier between Gentile and Jew, and elevated the status of women

to that of equal heirs of the grace of life (1 Peter 3:7). *But He also destroyed the caste system of the difference between slave and free, which is the major blockbuster contribution of the book of Philemon.* "You have him back," is Paul's emphasis, "as a beloved brother!" In Christ Jesus, said Paul, "we recognize no man according to the flesh" (2 Corinthians 5:16). Inside the church of the living God, it does not matter whether one is rich or poor, slave or free, male or female; all have equal standing (not necessarily equal roles) before the Lord. Hence it is that a slave might be the teacher, and the slave master the student in a class connected with the assembly of the saints.

▲ **Personal relationships** — The apostle emphasizes that Philemon has Onesimus back "no longer as a slave." Onesimus is still going to live in slave quarters, and Philemon in the big house. Onesimus is still going to do as he is told, work according to his ability, and receive according to his need, as the man in the big house decides what his need is. In the material realm, Onesimus is still a slave. But the picture is that Onesimus is a brother in Christ to Philemon, and Philemon from this point on is to greet Onesimus accordingly. The overall panorama is that Philemon has the role of the master on the team of brothers, and Onesimus has the role of worker on the team of brothers. Paul no doubt bossed Onesimus around when Onesimus was in Rome, but obviously still loved him as a brother and treated him as a brother; his words are that Onesimus was a brother "especially to me." But the apostle adds, "how much more" to Philemon, since Onesimus is going to be physically present in Colossae. What a picture!

Part of Paul's communication to Philemon was that Philemon would have Onesimus back "forever." *Forever* puts everything else into focus; the slave/free relationship is only for an earthly life's duration, and is therefore comparatively insignificant. Saints, of course, are to have an eternal perspective. Since Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ's family, with Jesus being the older brother, it is imperative that those saints be in the process of building those relationships which last for eternity. Philemon was going to have Onesimus back, "no longer as slave, but more than a slave, a *beloved* brother." The lesson is clear!!

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