

## Philemon: A Slave-Holding Christian

In our modern era, one of the most embarrassing facts about the Bible is Philemon owned a slave, Onesimus (**Philemon 16**). Yet, Paul, by modern standards, just let it slide. Critics tell us this means the Bible didn't come from God because we now know slavery is barbaric, cruel, inhuman, and surely a God of love would never want it to be part of a godly society. Sadly, the focus of debates on this issue have missed the truly profound points we need to grasp.

Jesus didn't die to stop slavery to people; He died to end slavery to Satan.

Jesus didn't die to free people from oppression, affliction, poverty, bondage, hunger; He died to free folks from sin.

Jesus didn't die to liberate the world from systemic evils; He died to liberate individuals from personal evil.

Jesus didn't die to improve earthly life; He died to provide eternal life.

Jesus didn't die to change social contracts; He died to empower godly behavior.

Jesus didn't die to motivate us to overthrow unfair treatment; He died to motivate us to bear up like Himself under it.

Jesus didn't die to propagate social justice; He died to provide individual grace.

Jesus didn't die to establish national policy; He died to establish personal policy.

Jesus didn't die to save society; He died to save sinners.

The arguments about the kind of slavery in the ancient world versus the modern, the different ways people became slaves, and many others are red herrings. We need to grasp the real reasons Paul didn't preach the end of slavery: the end of slavery is not the purpose of the gospel.

Paul did not want to teach something that would misguide these Christians regarding the purpose of the gospel. He didn't want to teach something that would send us on a gospel-mission distracting wild-goose chase.

Paul didn't teach Philemon and Onesimus to dissolve this social contract. However, he did teach them to let the gospel change how they acted within it. Philemon was not to treat Onesimus like chattel, cattle, or personal property, but like a beloved brother, the way he would treat Paul. This treatment, of course, would mean treating him much like a free man. Though most miss it, Paul actually included backhanded argumentation against slavery as he expressly refused to treat Philemon like a slave by compelling him to obey Paul's instruction, but wanted to let him act of his own accord, showing him by example how to treat Onesimus.

Was the end of legalized slavery a good thing? Certainly. Is it a biblical thing? I am convinced it is. Though many used the slavery of Onesimus to support American slavery, many others more successfully used the Bible's instructions to Christians regarding how to treat others to overthrow slavery. Whether the critics of the Bible like it or not, it was its message of love that caused Westerners to end legalized slavery.

As more individuals are converted by the gospel, or at the very least impacted by it and its symbiotic teachings, society will change. But let us never think societal improvement is the purpose of the gospel. The gospel goal is not to make abortion, homosexual marriage, or even slavery illegal. The gospel goal is to set people free from sin, empowering them to overcome temptation and live godly whether they are in a democracy or a monarchy, under capitalism or communism, slave or free.

The message of Philemon is to keep the main thing the main thing. Our job is not to get distracted with social justice activism, but to spread the soul-saving gospel of Jesus Christ's death. Always remember that.