



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

How to Change the Capitol (and the World)

TIM PAULEY

PHILEMON

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Our state faces many serious and difficult problems with which our legislature seeks to deal during every legislative session. Education, poverty, drug abuse, and prison overcrowding are just a few that have been on the agenda this year. I am sure every legislature and elected official would like to find the answers to how we might solve these pressing issues.

There were many difficult issues facing believers in Paul's day as well. One of those issues was slavery. Some who would criticize Christianity take Paul and other biblical writers to task for failing to condemn the institution of slavery. Yet I believe that history shows that Christianity did make a difference in the issue of slavery in the Roman Empire. So if the Bible does not condemn and prohibit slavery, how did the gospel make a difference on this issue? Paul's little letter to Philemon shows us how the gospel brought great change in the issue of slavery. It was as believers boldly proclaimed the good news of the gospel; consistently taught the Word of God; and faithfully lived out the truths and implications of the gospel in their daily lives, that changes took place in the society around them.

BOLDLY PROCLAIMED THE GOSPEL

Paul boldly preached the gospel and started up a church in Ephesus on his third missionary journey (Acts 19). It is likely that travelers from Colossae, 120 miles away, heard the gospel there and shared the good news back home. Enough people trusted Christ that a church was established there. Paul ended up in prison but continued to boldly proclaim the gospel and it was there that Onesimus came to Christ. We can see even in the little letter of Philemon how the gospel spread because believers boldly proclaimed the message of forgiveness of sin through the work of Christ. As the gospel spread and changed hearts and lives, it began to make a difference in the issues such as slavery. If we want to make a difference in the West Virginia capitol, in our state, and in our nation, we must follow their example and seek to find ways to boldly proclaim the gospel that changes hearts and changes lives.

CONSISTENTLY TAUGHT THE WORD OF GOD

Paul consistently taught the Word of God. As he appointed and trained leaders for the churches he started, he encouraged them to

do the same. We do not see any great depth of teaching in his letter to Philemon, but in His letter to the church at Colossae, written to the same church, we find tremendous teaching on the person and work of Christ. As people began to genuinely understand the teaching of the scriptures and its implications for their lives, things began to change regarding their attitudes and actions regarding issues such as slavery. Again, we should follow their example in seeking to read, study, and understand God's Word and its implications for our lives. We should also make a firm commitment to the inspiration and authority of scripture and seek to effectively share what the Bible has to say about the various issues that are dealt with in the capitol.

FAITHFULLY LIVED OUT THE TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL

The letter of Philemon is Paul's challenge to both Onesimus and Philemon to faithfully live out the implications of the gospel in their daily lives. For Onesimus this meant returning to Colossae in order to make things right with his master. For Philemon this meant forgiving Onesimus and accepting him as a brother. Their practical demonstration of how gospel had changed their lives would have been a great testimony to all in the church and in the community. Yes we must be willing to boldly proclaim the good news of forgiveness of sin through Christ. Certainly we must seek to know God's Word and teach what it says to others. But we must also make sure we are faithfully living out the truths of the gospel and the Bible before others in the capitol, in our families, and in our communities.

CONCLUSION

- **AS A BELIEVER, ARE YOU SEEKING TO SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH THOSE WHO DO NOT KNOW CHRIST?**
- **ARE YOU CONSISTENTLY READING AND STUDYING GOD'S WORD SO THAT YOU MIGHT APPLY IT AND SHARE WHAT IT TEACHES WITH OTHERS?**
- **IS YOUR DAILY LIFE A GOOD TESTIMONY AS YOU SEEK TO FAITHFULLY LIVE OUT THE TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL?**

Please see the attached article by John Piper regarding how Paul's teaching worked to overcome slavery.

BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

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How Paul Worked to Overcome Slavery

by [John Piper](#) | Scripture: [Philemon](#)

The historic and contemporary reality of slavery is never far away from how we think about the Bible. Instead of a frontal attack on the culturally pervasive institution of slavery in his day, Paul took another approach, for example, in his letter to Philemon.

Onesimus was a slave. His master Philemon was a Christian. Onesimus had evidently run away from Colossae (Colossians 4:9) to Rome where Paul, in prison, had led him to faith in Jesus. Now he was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. This letter tells Philemon how to receive Onesimus.

In the process, Paul does at least 11 things that work together to undermine slavery.

1. Paul draws attention to Philemon's *love* for all the saints. "I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints" (1:5). This puts Philemon's relation with Onesimus (now one of the saints) under the banner of love, not just commerce.

2. Paul models for Philemon the superiority of *appeals* over commands when it comes to relationships governed by love. "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you" (1:8-9). This points Philemon to the new dynamics that will hold sway between him and Onesimus. Acting out of freedom from a heart of love is the goal in the relationship.

3. Paul heightens the sense of Onesimus being in the family of God by calling him his *child*. "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment" (1:10). Remember, Philemon, however you deal with him, you are dealing with my child.

4. Paul raises the stakes again by saying that Onesimus has become entwined around his own deep affections. "I am sending him back to you, sending my very *heart*" (1:12). The word for "heart" is "bowels." This means, "I am deeply bound emotionally to this man." Treat him that way.

5. Paul again emphasizes that he wants to avoid force or coercion in his relationship with Philemon. "I would have been glad to keep him with me...but I preferred to do nothing without your *consent* in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord" (1:13-14). This is pointing Philemon how to deal with Onesimus so that he too will act "of his own accord."

6. Paul raises the intensity of the relationship again with the word *forever*. "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever" (1:15). In other words, Onesimus is not coming back into any ordinary, secular relationship. It is forever.

7. Paul says that Philemon's relationship can no longer be the usual master-slave relationship. "[You have him back] *no longer as a slave* but more than a slave, as a beloved brother" (1:16). Whether he lets Onesimus go back free to serve Paul, or keeps him in his service, things cannot remain as they were. "No longer as a slave" does not lose its force when Paul adds, "more than a slave."

8. In that same verse (1:16), Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon's *beloved brother*. This is the relationship that takes the place of slave. "No longer as a slave...but as a beloved brother." Onesimus now gets the "holy kiss" (1 Thessalonians 5:26) from Philemon and eats at his side at the Lord's Table.

9. Paul makes clear that Onesimus is with Philemon *in the Lord*. "[He is] a beloved brother...in the Lord" (1:16). Onesimus' identity is now the same as Philemon's. He is "in the Lord."

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10. Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus *the way he would receive Paul*. “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me” (1:17). This is perhaps as strong as anything he has said: Philemon, how would you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? Treat your former slave and new brother that way.

11. Paul says to Philemon that he will *cover all Onesimus’s debts*. “If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account” (1:18). Philemon would no doubt be shamed by this, if he had any thoughts of demanding repayment from his new brother, because Paul is in prison! He lives off the gifts of others. Philemon is the one who is to prepare a guest room for Paul! (1:22).

The upshot of all this is that, without explicitly prohibiting slavery, Paul has pointed the church away from slavery because it is an institution which is incompatible with the way the gospel works in people’s

lives. Whether the slavery is economic, racial, sexual, mild, or brutal, Paul’s way of dealing with Philemon works to undermine the institution across its various manifestations. To walk “in step with the truth of the gospel” (Galatians 2:14) is to walk away from slavery.

Walking with you toward Jesus,

Pastor John Piper

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FINAL NOTE

Our challenge to prayerfully study and seek God’s wisdom as to how we might apply these truths to others issues we might face. This is not to say that we do not seek to make changes through political and other means. Paul used his privileges as a Roman citizen to protect his own life (Acts 25:11). But we must remember even as we serve in the capitol that real change will never take place merely through political means.