

*So if you [Philemon]
regard me as a partner,
welcome [Onesimus]
as you would me.*

PHILEMON 1:17



PIKES / SHUTTERSTOCK

No Longer a Slave

Paul urges Philemon to treat a runaway slave, Onesimus, as a brother in Christ, not a slave. He didn't ask Philemon to free the man. Nor did he encourage him to work for the eradication of slavery. Why not? The letter doesn't tell us. Yet if we look deeply at this issue, we might discover that Paul was asking for something much more profound than a change in law.

The United States outlawed slavery more than 150 years ago. But that change did nothing to erase the political, economic, and social biases of many citizens. Some people still consider African Americans and other people of color as inferior, untrustworthy and dangerous. Laws cannot change thinking or prejudices.

Had Philemon simply freed Onesimus, would the slave's situation have been improved? In the ancient world, slaves were often branded, thus alerting

everyone to their servile position in society. Might this have prevented him from living a full life as a free man? Even if the law had changed, would ancient Rome have provided for former slaves any better than contemporary America has?

Paul pressed Philemon to go deeper into his heart, to change his perception of Onesimus' status in his household. Paul is probably not talking about a blood bond, but the bond that joins Christians to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. If we really treat each other in this way, discriminatory customs will crumble and there will no longer be any kind of slavery.

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FOR Reflection

- ★ *How do you regard people of different races? As sisters and brothers, or as dangerous?*
- ★ *How are nonwhites disadvantaged in your community? What might you do about this?*

