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Charles Spurgeon's study



Let's start with this:

The Bible is made up of...what?

- A collection of documents and a bunch of different types of literature. Can you name them?

What do you think: Why do you suppose it has so many types of literature? Why not just write out everything using only one kind of literature?

All of those different types of literature...do we approach them in the same way?

- Is prophecy different than narrative? If so, do we approach/read them differently?
- Is all of this really that big of a deal?

So...Paul's letter to Philemon is, well, a letter, or more specifically an *epistle*. What is that?

It was something we've kind of lost in our day—

- An epistle was a letter, but a very carefully crafted letter.
- In fact, we could say that it was at least to some degree an art form.
- Epistles (the Gk word means *letter, message, or dispatch*) typically written on sheets of papyrus with a reed pen and ink, then rolled or folded, tied, and often sealed for privacy and authentication. Some were written on wax tablets with a stylus and could be reused—a much cheaper option.

How do we understand and read the epistles?

A few things that might help –

Ancient epistles—including most (but not all) in the NT had a fairly standard form:

- An opening or greeting including the writer, the recipient, and some type of salutation or greeting.
- A thanksgiving or prayer wish, often including remembrance of the recipient, and/or a prayer for spiritual welfare.
- The body of the letter, that typically included some kind of moral exhortation or argument.
- The final greeting and farewell, to close the letter and serve as a benediction.

How do we understand and read the epistles?

What's the best way to read an epistle?

- Read the whole thing in one sitting. Why is that?
- Because the flow of a letter is going to be arranged by topics and will have a logical flow to it; poetry and prophecy, for example, don't necessarily have either.

Ok—this is a key thing: the epistles are not essays. The writer didn't sit down to write theology—they are letters addressed to specific people or groups, and they deal with things that concerned that person or group. There is theology in them, but writing theology was not the main point.

How do we understand and read the epistles?

Which brings us to another key thing: The epistles are kind of like hearing one side of a phone conversation...you don't always know what the other person is talking about.

- For example: most of 1 Cor. is Paul's answers to questions the Corinthians had asked him. What were their questions? Well...we have to guess from the answers he gave.
- So they're called *occasional documents*, because they were intended to address some specific circumstance or question or problem.
- So any theology is meant to address a point.

How do we understand and read the epistles?

Four things:

1. If you have a good study Bible, read the book introduction before you start.
- Find out as much about the historical setting as you can—writer, recipient, issues, etc.
2. Like we mentioned earlier, try to develop the habit of reading the whole letter through in one sitting. That's how we read other letters.
- You can dig deeper later, but try to *get the big picture first*. Why did the author write the letter?

How do we understand and read the epistles?

Four things:

3. It might help you to jot down a few notes after reading the letter through. Like what?
 - What do you notice about the recipients? I.e., Jews or Greeks? Wealthy or not? Their problems, attitudes, questions, etc.? Location.
 - Paul's general attitude (i.e., 1 Corinthians has a much different tone than, say, Ephesians).
 - Note specific things mentioned about the reason the letter was written.
 - And note the letter's natural, logical divisions. This is why I like to print my own copy, so I'm not influenced by the divisions in my study Bible.

How do we understand and read the epistles?

Four things:

4. When you read the epistles, think paragraphs.

What do I mean by that?

- They are units of thought. So when you look back over the paragraphs, ask the question again: What's the point?
- Can you summarize the main thought of the paragraph in one sentence?
- And then you can go one step further—ask this question: Why did the writer say this here? How does it contribute to his overall main theme or argument?

Ok—big time shifting gears here. We have to hit this head-on and deal with it:

Paul doesn't condemn slavery in his letter to Philemon the slave owner (and see Eph. 6:5-8). In fact, the NT as a whole does not condemn slavery; Jesus didn't say anything about it.

- Is that a problem? What do we do with that?

Slavery was—and is—a horrific and appalling evil, still far too accepted and practiced in parts of our world today. But let's go back and take a look at slavery in the Roman Empire, and the situation Onesimus and his owner, Philemon, faced in the 1st century as Christians.

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity: In the Roman Empire...

- Estimates of the number of slaves range from a third up to a half of the entire population—it was a massive number, to the point where Rome feared a largescale slave uprising.
- A slave was not a person—he was a living tool.
- A master had the right of life and death over his slaves. An account by Pliny says that a slave was carrying a tray of goblets into a courtyard when one fell and broke. His master ordered the slave to be thrown into the pond where lampreys tore him to pieces.

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:

In the Roman Empire...

- Runaway slaves were frequently branded on the forehead with a red-hot iron with the letter *F*, standing for *fugitivus*, or runaway. Some were tortured or crucified.
- Slavery was a normal part of life in the Empire; one writer notes that “Slavery grew with the growth of the Roman state until it changed the economic basis of society, doing away with free labor, and transferring nearly all industries to the hands of slaves.”

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:

In the Roman Empire...

- Slavery in the Roman Empire was not a racial issue; slaves were often captives of various wars, or, as was more common by NT times, many were simply born into slavery since there were so many slaves in the Empire.
- Cilician pirates found a lucrative source of money in the Roman slave trade—they would capture vast numbers of people and bring them to the island of Delos in the Aegean Sea, the center of the international slave trade. At its peak, over 10,000 people per day were shipped out of Delos to slavery in Italy.

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity: In the Roman Empire...

- To address the problem of runaway slaves, a new occupation arose: the *fugitivarii* were professional slave-catchers who would track down, capture, and return runaway slaves.
- Some owners placed permanent collars on their slaves, especially those they considered prone to running away. One collar that was found had this inscription: "I am Asellus, slave of Praeiectus, who is an official in the Department of the Grain Supply. I have escaped from my post. Detain me, for I have run away. Take me back to the barber's shops near the temple of Flora."

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:
In the Roman Empire...

Okay—that's a quick overview of slavery in Rome.
Here's what we have to deal with:

The NT nowhere attacks or condemns slavery.
What would have happened if Jesus or the apostles
had done so?

- Had there been a slave uprising, it would have been brutally crushed, and the slaves massacred.
- Christianity could have morphed into a social reform movement—the “gospel” would have been liberation from oppression rather than salvation from sin and the wrath of God.

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:
In the Roman Empire...

So what about Paul's letter to Philemon—

- Is Paul condoning and trying to perpetuate slavery in this letter inspired by God? (2 Tim. 3:16)
- If the NT does not attack and condemn slavery, can we find any justification in it for abolition?

This is bringing us to the key point here—the reason why this little letter, which seems rather irrelevant at first glance, is crucial.

- Let's look at it this way...

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:

Look at v. 16 & 17—they are the critical point:

- “no longer as a slave, but...as a beloved brother.”
- “...receive him as you would receive me.”

What did God set in motion with those verses?

John MacArthur: “Christianity...sowed the seeds of the destruction of slavery. It would be destroyed not by social upheaval, but by changed hearts.”

J. Howard Marshall: “the fuller implication of Paul’s teaching here is that the Christian faith is incompatible with the ownership of slaves.” The letter brings us “into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die.”

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:

Donald Guthrie: "It is clearly incongruous for a Christian master to 'own' a brother in Christ...and although the existing order of society could not be immediately changed by Christianity without a political revolution (which was clearly contrary to Christian principles), the Christian master-slave relationship was so transformed from within that it was bound to lead ultimately to the abolition of the system."

Here's the thing: Does the gospel work? Can Christ really transform hearts? Are 1 Cor. 12:13, Gal. 3:28 and Col. 3:11 real life?

Slavery in the Rome, and the impact of Christianity:

If so...

- The titles “master” and “slave” become irrelevant.
- Those human classifications of relationships are not the most significant ones anymore—they are both in Christ, both redeemed sinners, both brothers in Christ and fellow-workers and fellow-heirs in Christ.
- It is interesting to note that both Eph. 6:5-9 and Col. 3:22-24 were written at the same time as Philemon—while Paul was in prison in Rome. I wonder if Paul had some long discussions with Onesimus, the converted slave—maybe those discussions led to his request to Philemon.

From the *Nashville Patriot*, March 15, 1860, prior to a proposed visit of Spurgeon to the southern states:

Spurgeon is in danger of an auto-de-fé. The 'Montgomery Mail' (Alabama) says: "A gentleman of this city requests us to invite, and we do hereby invite all persons in Montgomery who possess copies of the sermons of the notorious English abolitionist, Spurgeon, to send them to the jail yard to be burned on next Friday, this day week. A subscription is also on foot to buy of our booksellers all copies of said sermons now in their stores, to be burned on the same occasion. Does anybody say nay?"

Spurgeon on slavery:

He exchanged correspondences with Frederick Douglas, received former slaves into his Pastors' College and pulpit, and condemned slavery in his sermons and media articles: "I do from my inmost soul detest slavery, and although I commune at the Lord's table with men of all creeds, yet with a slaveholder I have no fellowship of any sort or kind. Whenever one has called upon me, I have considered it my duty to express my detestation of his wickedness, and I would as soon think of receiving a murderer into my church as a man stealer."