

## THE PHILEMON PRINCIPLE

**I. Text from – Philemon 8-21:** Ryrie explains, "Onesimus, one of the millions of slaves in the Roman Empire, had stolen from his master, Philemon, and had run away. Eventually, he made his way to Rome, where he crossed the path of the apostle Paul, who led him to faith in Christ (v. 10)... Since death would normally have been his punishment, Paul wrote this wonderful letter of intercession on Onesimus' behalf... It has also been suggested that Onesimus became a minister and later bishop of the church at Ephesus (Ignatius, To the Ephesians, 1)." [*Ryrie Study Bible*, p.1834]

"Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* that which is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to *you*—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, Onesimus, who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason parted *from* you for a while, 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. If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. But if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (lest I should mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Heaving confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say."

Note that Paul is here holding to the New Testament *ideal*, that in Christ all people are equal, whether male, female, slave, free, Jew, Greek, black, or white, and that this ideal is to be considered true not just in principle, but in our present, practical day-to-day Christian lives.

**II. Meditation taken from *The Boy Child is Dying: A South African Experience*, by Judy Boppell Peace (InterVarsity Press, 1978, pp 11-15):**

She stopped speaking, looked at me and said, "Yes, I'll work for you."

Startled, I realized who had been interviewing whom. She had been introduced to me as Esther. "What is your last name?" I asked.

"Why do you want to know?" she responded.

"Simply because I am twenty-five years old, you are at least fifty and I would feel very uncomfortable having you call me Mrs. Peace while I called you Esther."

"I am Mrs. Esther Ntonsheni." She paused. "Mrs. Peace, I worked for a woman for ten years and she never knew I had any other name than Esther."

We had been in the apartment for a month. Having someone help me with my housework was not easy. I had always done my own work. I felt guilty watching someone else do it. Dick and I had decided that, for us, not having help was irresponsible. South Africa has something called "job reservation." Though this is breaking down slowly, for the majority of the black population it means finding a job is very difficult. And working as a house servant is still one of the easiest jobs to find. Since so many people need work, we reasoned, the least we could do was hire someone to help us.

We knew the "normal" working conditions. We had been told twelve rand (around seventeen dollars) a month was a good starting salary. Most people expected their servants to arrive around 7:30 A.M. and leave by 6:00 P.M., if they didn't live in. Servants considered themselves lucky to get an afternoon off a week. Many people felt they were being generous to give this, as it meant "managing on their own" that afternoon. We decided to ask Mrs. Ntonsheni to work a five-day week, from nine to five, with a salary above the norm. Perhaps this was one way of showing people around us new working possibilities.

Mrs. Ntonsheni entered the room. "Mrs. Peace, are you unhappy with my work?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you are always doing it for me!"

"I had not been sure how much to expect you to do, and I didn't want to overwork you," I replied, feeling slightly defensive.

"You are paying me a fair wage, giving me good hours and I want to feel I am earning my salary!"

Mrs. Ntonsheni took over the housework.

It wasn't more than three weeks later that Mrs. Ntonsheni said, "Mrs. Peace." I had come to recognize the tone. She had something to say. It was going to be difficult for her. She sounded defensive. "What have I done now?" I thought.

"Mrs. Peace, I have worked for white women many years -- more than twenty. I was taught as a girl how to be in a white house. All the madams, they tell me I am a good servant. I do all I was taught for you. I think you don't like it. Why?"

I took a deep breath. I am not known for hiding my feelings and I too had been frustrated by our relationship. She was right. She had played the role of perfect servant, always "happy," constantly ready to please us. We could not have asked for more from a servant, and I assured her of this. "You do your job wonderfully well, Mrs. Ntonsheni. I couldn't ask for a better servant. Every morning, you are here punctually. 'I am fine', you answer in response to my greeting. Your life is always fine. Yet I see traces of worry in your eyes. I see signs of suffering. I know your life cannot always be fine. You work hard, too hard. It is impossible to get you to rest. You feel guilty just sitting and relaxing for a few minutes. When I enter the room you seem tense and I feel it is kinder to keep out of your way. Mrs. Ntonsheni, I didn't hire you to be a servant under me. I hired another human being to help me with my work. I don't feel comfortable in the master/servant role. I'd like us to work at relating as two women -- equals. I'm beginning to understand a little how hard that will be for you, but I'd like to try."

A few days later Mrs. Ntonsheni shouted from the kitchen. "Mrs. Peace, are you busy?"

"Not very. Why?"

"Well, I'm ironing and it is starting to rain and there are clothes on the line." A long pause.

"I'll get them," I said, as I left my letters and went out the back door, grabbing the clothes basket from the kitchen corner on the way.

"Whew, that rain is really coming down." I stamped my feet, shook my hair and plopped down the basket. Mrs. Ntonsheni gave me a long, searching look. It was no light thing she had done. I appreciated the risk she had taken and the beginning of trust it showed.

"Thank you," I said. She nodded and I left the room.

**III. Some thoughts:** "Do what's right in God's eyes—even being ignorant of socially *accepted conventions*." Create new things, new culture, amongst one another.

Picture to yourself the events surrounding Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon, as well as what might have occurred following Onesimus' return to Philemon. Assuming Philemon followed Paul's requests, what changes may likely have taken place in Philemon's household? What sorts of changes may have accrued between Philemon and his Roman friends, neighbors, and possibly the local authorities?

By living out the model of life and action set forth in the ethical imperatives of Scripture, the great commission and (that upon which the great commission rests) the two great commandments of Jesus Christ, and as exemplified by the very life of Christ himself, we'll be living *as if* the kingdom of God *was* at hand.

Commenting on *Philemon*, Mr. F. Foulkes concludes, "when masters were told to love their slaves, the principle was provided which inevitably would lead to the abolition of slavery" (*The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, M. C. Tenney, gen. ed., v. 4, Zondervan Publishing House, 1978, p. 537). Clearly, St. Paul was *concretizing* an ideal concerning the way Christians *ought* to treat one another and their neighbors. Surely, he did this understanding the consequences of such challenges to the *mores* and *conventions* of Roman society.

Why must we Christians so often judge one another's actions, as we seek to live out the gospel of Christ, by the fickle standards of present political ideologies or cultural frameworks, "left" or "right" socio-political agendas, or culture-bound "conservative" or "liberal" biases? If we care for an El Salvadorean refugee or support anti-Apartheid activism, we're branded communist dupes. If we show concern for the rights of pre-natal human life, we're accused of being right-wing reactionaries or labeled paternalistic oppressors of women; of course, these accusations may at times be true, but very often they're just ways of condemning each other for going against various presently accepted *conventions*.

St. Paul presents one strategy for confronting the complexity and confusion of one's age with simple *existential* Christian living. Treat all human beings as created in God's image and of infinite worth. Do so, whatever happens to be the "accepted conventions" or required expectations of one's culture/age. See only Christ and his sacrificial love for all. See all people through Christ's eyes (Bonhoeffer's notion of "Christocentricity"). Treat all people with dignity and compassion, neither because of their "potential or contributive worth to society" nor because of their "social status" but because of their infinite worth in the eyes of the King of heaven.

We can confront the sins and evils of our age by living as if the demands of such evils meant less than nothing, by living counter-culturally, humbly, and according to the demands of a Holy God. Whether it means treating slaves like one's own family in the days of the Roman Empire, treating black people like fellow human beings in South Africa, treating Jews as equals in Nazi Germany, treating women as equals in the workplace, or treating Central American refugees as sojourners in the land to be supported and cared for—such behavior, done in humility, love, and a heart full of joy, will surely have, and has had, a profound and destabilizing and revolutionary effect on the structures of evil, on the principalities and powers of this and any age.

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