

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part III: Paul's Self Restraint Toward Settling A Sensitive Issue

(Philemon 8-14)

I. Introduction

- A. Sometimes we believers face very sensitive issues in relating to relatives, coworkers or even in relating to one another in the Lord, issues that if not properly handled can create unwanted and severe interpersonal conflicts.
- B. Paul's letter to Philemon dealt with the potentially explosive issue of what to do with a runaway slave who had accepted Christ as his Savior, especially when such slaves were often killed in punishment for having run away. (Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, p. 1727, "Introduction to the Letter of Paul to Philemon")
- C. The Apostle Paul in his Epistle to Philemon exemplified how to handle such an issue, and in Philemon 8-14, he exemplified dramatic self restraint toward settling a sensitive issue, what we do well to imitate (as follows):

II. Paul's Self Restraint Toward Settling A Sensitive Issue, Philemon 8-14.

- A. Paul exercised self restraint relative to the use of his apostolic authority, Philemon 8-10a:
 1. The apostle wrote that he could have exercised boldness to "command" (*epitasso*, Arndt & Gingrich, A Grk.-Eng. Lex. of the N. T., 1967, p. 302) Philemon to do what was his "duty" (*aneko*, Ibid., p. 65) in the Lord, that duty before God of accepting Onesimus back as a beloved brother in Christ without executing him for running away as a slave, Philemon 8 with Philemon 15-16.
 2. Paul's apostolic authority was colossal in the Early Church:
 - a. The apostles had physical life-and-death authority over other believers as seen in Acts 5:1-11.
 - b. Paul had the authority also to hold a trial in the Church toward punishing errant believers, 2 Cor. 13:1; Ryrie Study Bible, KJV, 1978, ftn. to 2 Corinthians 13:1 (in light of Deuteronomy 19:15).
 - c. The apostles could perform many miraculous works, 2 Corinthians 12:12-13.
 - d. They also had authority to write Scripture that was binding for all people, Romans 2:16; 2 Peter 3:15-16.
 3. Nevertheless, Paul laid aside the use of his great apostolic authority to beseech Philemon as an elderly prisoner of the Lord to receive Onesimus back as a beloved brother in Christ, Philemon 9-10a.
- B. Paul exercised self restraint relative to the physical welfare of his spiritual child Onesimus, Philemon 10b, 12:
 1. The apostle had led Onesimus to faith in Christ, what caused him to view Onesimus as his spiritual child whom he would naturally desire to protect from harm, Philemon 10b.
 2. Paul was thus also emotionally attached to Onesimus, referring to him as his own "bowels" (Philemon 12), his own *splanchna*, or his "seat of emotions; heart" (Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 770).
 3. Nevertheless, to settle the great tension involved in Onesimus' pre-salvation wrong against Philemon, Paul risked the physical welfare of his beloved child in the faith to grant Philemon the opportunity to act of his own initiation to receive him back as a beloved brother in Christ, Philemon 15-16.
- C. Paul exercised self restraint relative to his use of Onesimus in his ministry, Philemon 11, 13:
 1. In both Philemon 11 and Philemon 13, Paul mentioned how Onesimus useful was to him in his ministry as an imprisoned apostle, the he might have kept Onesimus ministering to his needs as a prisoner in Rome in Philemon's behalf.
 2. However, regardless of his intense needs as a prisoner, Paul chose not to keep Onesimus with him, but to return him to his former master Philemon.
- D. Paul exercised self restraint to guard Philemon's freedom of choice, Philemon 14:
 1. The apostle wrote to Philemon that he had decided not to keep Onesimus with him to minister to his needs as doing so would not have involved Philemon's decision as the master of Onesimus to grant his runaway slave permission to use his services in that way, Philemon 14a.
 2. Paul had thus sent Onesimus back to Philemon so that Philemon might of his own "free will" (*ekousios*, Ibid., p. 242) make the choice as to how and where Onesimus was to serve, Philemon 14b.

Lesson: *Toward settling the sensitive issue of restoring runaway slave Onesimus to his master Philemon, Paul exercised extensive self restraint: he exercised restraint in his use of his apostolic authority, in regards to the welfare of his spiritual child Onesimus, in his use of Onesimus in his difficult state as a prisoner and in regards to guarding the freedom of choice of Philemon had relative to his oversight of Onesimus' service.*

Application: *In settling sensitive issues, may we exercise self restraint in whatever ways are Biblically sanctioned and necessary toward better removing the roadblocks that hinder our resolving the sensitive issues.*