

PHILEMON: EFFECTIVE MINISTRY AMID SENSITIVE ISSUES

Part V: Paul's Edifying Selfless Contribution Toward Solving The Sensitive Issue (Philemon 17-19a)

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. Exemplifying for us how to handle such an issue, Paul in Philemon 17-19a offered to make selfless contributions toward solving the sensitive issue, edifying acts that we do well to imitate in similar cases we face today:

II. Paul's Edifying Selfless Contribution Toward Solving The Sensitive Issue, Philemon 17-19a.

- A. The conditional clauses introducing Philemon 17 and 18 indicate Paul assumed that Philemon considered himself Paul's partner in the Gospel, and that Onesimus had cost Philemon material loss in his running away:
 1. In both Philemon 17 and 18, the "if" clause or the "protasis" is introduced by the conditional particle *ei*, and the verb tenses of the "then" clause or the "apodosis" are both in the indicative mood (as follows):
 - a. In Philemon 17 ESV, the particle *ei* is followed by the verb *echeis* "[you] consider" that is written in the present tense of the indicative mood. (U. B. S. Greek N. T., 1966, p. 745; The Analytical Greek Lexicon (Zon.), 1972, p. 179; Arndt & Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the N. T., 1967, p. 333.)
 - b. Then, in Philemon 18 ESV, the particle *ei* is followed by the verb *edikesen* rendered "has wronged," or better, "caused [you] loss" that is written in the first aorist tense of the indicative mood. (Ibid., U. B. S. Greek N. T.; Ibid., The Analytical Greek Lexicon, p. 185; Ibid., Arndt & Gingrich, p. 17)
 2. As in these two cases, when the *protasis* is introduced by *ei* and **any tense** is used in the **indicative mood** of the verb in the *apodosis*, the conditional clause is a **first class condition** where the writer assumes the **reality** of the **condition**. (Dana & Mantey, A Man. Grammar of the Grk. N. T., 1955, p. 289)
 3. In other words, both "if" clauses in Philemon 17 and 18 can essentially be translated "since:" in Philemon 17 ESV, Paul was **assuming** that his epistle's recipient and slave master Philemon considered himself a "partner" with Paul in the fellowship and work of the Gospel of Christ, and in Philemon 18 ESV, Paul was **assuming** that Onesimus had cost Philemon some loss in running away in his possibly having taken some livelihood provisions to run away and causing Philemon loss in labor by Onesimus's absence.
- B. In assuming that Philemon considered himself Paul's partner in the Gospel of Christ, in Philemon 17, Paul put his partnership and relationship with Philemon at risk for the sake of Onesimus' welfare:
 1. The apostle knew that he was asking Philemon to go far beyond what slave-owners usually did in calling him not to punish Onesimus with death, but rather to receive him back as a beloved brother, Philemon 16.
 2. Accordingly, Paul put his partnership with Philemon at risk, urging him to receive Onesimus back without punishing him as evidence that Philemon was indeed Paul's partner in the Gospel.
- C. In assuming that Onesimus had caused Philemon to suffer loss in his running away, so Paul offered to put his financial welfare at risk to repay Philemon the total cost, Philemon 18-19a:
 1. Since Onesimus was a runaway slave, he may not have possessed the skills that equipped him to gain adequate employment so as to repay what he had taken from Philemon in terms of livelihood provisions for his flight nor did he have the means to repay the labor lost to Philemon in his having run away.
 2. In addition, Paul was a prisoner of Rome (Philemon 9; Ibid., Ryrie, p. 1727, "Introduction To The Letter Of Paul To Philemon"), unable to pay Philemon anything since his money may well have been confiscated by the Roman guards, and all he could do was later repay Philemon out of tent making moneys he would earn using his tent making trade skills following his release from prison, cf. Acts 18:1-3.
 3. Thus, Paul put his financial welfare at risk, not knowing what costs were involved nor having the money then to repay Philemon, but even offering to do so in writing with his own hand, Philemon 19a.

Lesson: To help solve the sensitive issue of getting Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ versus executing him, Paul put his partnership in the Gospel with Philemon and his financial welfare at risk.

Application: If we face a highly sensitive issue in our relationships, may we seek to make whatever edifying, selfless contributions we can Biblically make toward helping to resolve the sensitive issue.