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### Sunday School Lesson

#### PHILEMON: A LETTER ON CHRISTIAN BROTHERHOOD

by Rev. R. C. Todd  
LESSON: Philemon.

In this letter, Paul writes to Philemon, a Christian citizen of Colossae, on behalf of Onesimus, a slave who has apparently run away after stealing from his master. Coming in contact with the Christians at Rome where Paul is a prisoner he comes under the influence of Paul and is converted. Paul persuades him to return and make amends to his master, while he, Paul, writes a letter appealing to Philemon to forgive him. Appealing to Philemon's reputation for Christian love, Paul pleads that the slave be not only forgiven, but received as a brother. In ver. 6-9 he says that while he might be bold enough in Christ to command this, yet for love's sake he rather appeals to his affections. The word repeatedly translated "bowels" in the King James version, should be rendered "heart," for in those days the bowels were regarded as the seat of the affections. Paul goes on to guarantee full payment of whatever loss has been occasioned by Onesimus. He will himself repay — though he might remind Philemon that he owes his very existence as a Christian to Paul. (vs. 18, 19). The issue is a very delicate one of course. Slavery was an old established custom, and Paul has to handle this matter wisely. We see that while he is prepared to exert his authority in the Church, he prefers that Philemon show Christian grace towards Onesimus voluntarily, in the same way that the grace of God was shown towards both of them. Not merely out of obedience to a command that has the force of law, or through a sense of obligation to Paul, but as a Christian man, Philemon ought to show Christian love to his runaway slave, who is himself a member of the Christian Church.

In v. 21, Paul seems to hint that he hopes Philemon will give Onesimus his freedom. ("Knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.") But he does not specifically command this, nor does he say anything against slavery as such. Paul seems to countenance the institution of slavery. Here is a member of the Christian Church, one whose faith and manner of life won the commendation of the Apostle, openly continuing the practice of slavery, and yet Paul says nothing against it.

We are not justified, however, in assuming a holler-than-thou attitude towards Paul and the Christian Church of his day. For it is not true to say that the Church bore no witness against slavery. And while Paul does not speak against it in this letter he implies by his teaching that slavery cannot well be practised by members of the Church. Without making a direct frontal attack upon the institution, Christianity was already effectively undermining the thing. We can see it reflected in the Epistle to Philemon. For Paul is here

setting Philemon that although he possesses certain legal rights over Onesimus, he has no moral right, because as fellow-Christians, they stand on an equal footing before the throne of God. Philemon is not merely to forgive Onesimus his offences; he is to accept him as a brother. It hardly needs to be pointed out what the consequences, social, economic and political, for Onesimus, would be. The relation of Christian to Christian is such that an institution like slavery is bound to dissolve.

Christianity was able to make inroads upon slavery just because it did not regard the freeing of slaves as the most urgent issue at stake. Paul and his contemporaries in the Christian faith were primarily concerned that master and slave alike should come in faith in Christ. The slave was made free already if he believed the gospel. Just as Paul in prison could write as a free man, so the slave in bondage could find in Christ such liberty as the world could not give. It was not particularly the concern of the early Church to urge slaves to revolt against their masters; for the Church preached a greater deliverance, a deliverance from sin. Slavery was indeed a social issue and a live one, but it could be solved only when slaves and masters alike discovered their unity and equality in Jesus Christ. Then the institution could be attacked and destroyed.

Just so, in our day there are many social issues crying out to be solved. They can never be solved in a Christian way, and so far as we are concerned in a satisfactory way, until we have laid the basis in Christian faith and fellowship. It is nonsense to talk about a Christian social order so long as living Christian faith lies dormant in the Church. We cannot hope for world brotherhood without knowing what it means, in the Church to be members one of another. World unity can be achieved only in Christ and in unity in Christ can be only on the basis of a common confession of Him as Lord.

It is well to remember also that liberty is not an external thing primarily; not a matter of law. A man can be free though a slave or in prison. Who was freer than those of the various resistance movements in Europe, though their countries were crushed under the iron heel of Hitler? Freedom is essentially a matter of the soul of a man; and the man who has to die for his faith in the man who has really asserted his freedom.

Christianity has always asserted, and always will assert, that freedom is a matter of the soul of a man. And where men's souls are held in bondage to sin, then deliverance from sin is the ultimate victory for which to strive. Today we cannot put off the problem of delivering men's souls, as though that were a secondary matter to be considered. The better world so many have dreamed of, and regarding which so many are so utterly disillusioned (and who more so than the veterans who were promised so much and have received so little?) will never be attained until attention is given first of all to the redemption through Christ from the power of sin. Whatever else the Church may do regarding liberty and other social issues, it cannot evade its fundamental responsibility; that of preaching Jesus Christ. But if it attends to that, there will come social consequences which will surprise and disturb the radical and conservative alike. The present situation with regard to industrial unrest, is a complex one. It is not disposed of by saying one party is right and another is wrong, that one ought to be fined and imprisoned, while the other wears a halo. It is far too complex for that, and those who would so dispose of it are only instigating civil rebellion. While it is clear that responsibility for the present struggle between economic and social classes lies to a very great extent at the door of the more fortunate in society who have clung to their privileges too long and greedily seek for more; and while the history books of the next century will show labour to have been absolutely in the right; the problem is not going to be solved by either side fighting for rights. (This does not mean that rights should not be fought for; simply that fighting for them does not solve the problem). What we are experiencing today is only a modern aspect of an old unsolved problem, and it will never be solved until men find community of interest, and an equal footing, in Jesus Christ.

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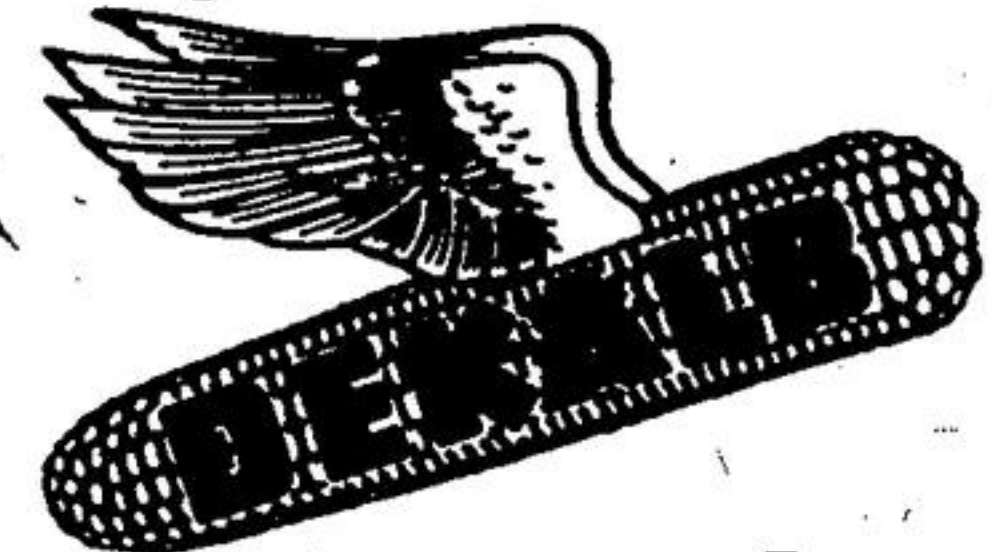
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