The historic and contemporary reality of slavery is never far away from how we think about the Bible. Instead of a frontal attack on the culturally pervasive institution of slavery in his day, Paul took another approach, for example, in his letter to Philemon. Onesimus was a slave. His master Philemon was a Christian. Onesimus had evidently run away from Colossae to Rome where Paul, in prison, had led him to faith in Jesus. Now he was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. This letter tells Philemon how to receive Onesimus.

Paul does at least 10 things that work together to undermine slavery.

I. Paul draws attention to Philemon’s love for all the saints – “I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints” (1:5).

• This puts Philemon’s relation with Onesimus (now one of the saints) under the banner of love, not just commerce. Philemon must now take business out and place Christ in this situation. In other words What would Christ do if you were in your situation.

II. Paul tells Philemon you can fix this problem with love – “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you” (1:8-9).

• This points Philemon knew the law as on his side and that will hold sway between him and Onesimus. Paul is acting out of freedom from a heart of love to mend their relationship. Paul demonstrates to Philemon that making an appeal is more effective than giving a command when it comes to relationships when they are governed by love.

III. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus a part of the family of God – “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (1:10).

• Remember, Philemon, however you deal with him, you are dealing with my child. When you discipline him remember his is a child of God, he is also my child. Paul is trying to reach Philemon by saying that Onesimus is not mature enough spiritually to handle harsh discipline, but in fact is growing up and coming back to him to settle things the right way.

IV. Paul again pleaded how he is emotional attached to Onesimus – “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart” (1:12). The word for “heart” is “bowels.”

• This means, “I am deeply bound emotionally to this man.” Treat him that way. Paul is starting to set he plea for freedom by appealing to Philemon emotional heart. This tells me that Philemon was not really a bad Christian. There are a lot and I mean a lot of good Christians that get caught up doing bad things and not realize it until it is too late.

V. Paul again emphasizes for Philemon to do the right thing – “I would have been glad to keep him with me...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord” (1:13-14).

• This is pointing Philemon how to deal with Onesimus so that he too will act “of his own accord.” This was all up to Philemon. According to Roman law Philemon could have him thrown in prison and there was nothing Onesimus and Pual could have done to stop it. But Paul was reaching out to Philemon’s Christianity not his business sense.

VI. Paul gives two reasons for why Onesimus may have left – “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever” (1:15).

• The first reason was so he could meet Paul and soon he would be saved. Second, it is because Onesimus would not coming back into any ordinary, secular relationship, but it would be as a brother in Christ forever. I’m sure Paul would tell him that if or when he is free, he still needs to pay his debt. But it would be better to do it as a free man and not as a slave.

VII. Paul says that Philemon’s bond can no longer be the usual master-slave relationship – “[You have him back] no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother” (1:16).

• Whether he lets Onesimus go back free to serve Paul, or keeps him in his service, things cannot remain as they were. “*No longer as a slave*” does not lose its force when Paul adds, “*more than a slave*.” This very short verse ends the argument whether the New Testament teaches slavery is acceptable.

VIII. Paul refers to Onesimus as Philemon’s beloved brother*.*

• This is the relationship that takes the place of slave. “No longer as a slave...but as a beloved brother.” Onesimus now gets the “holy kiss” from Philemon and eats at his side at the Lord’s Table. Philemon will have to share the Lord’s supper with a man who was once a slave but now is free. It looks like Philemon set him free to help Pual in the ministry.

° 9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you of everything that has taken place here. Colossians 4:9

IX. Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus the way he would receive Paul – “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me” (1:17).

• This is perhaps as strong as anything he has said: Philemon, how would you see me, treat me, relate to me, receive me? Do you think that Philemon received Paul as a slave? Treat your former slave as new brother the way you treat me, “free”.

X. Onesimus would have been set free when Paul returned – 17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. 18 If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Philemon 1:17-19

• Whether you believe that Philemon did the right thing and forgive Onesimus debt (which is what I believe), or that Paul paid for his debt upon returning to Philemon at the church of Colossians, either way the man was set free from his physical debt and spiritual debt.

Conclusion: What are some faith lessons we can learn this morning:

1. We need to love one another

2. Freedom is not Free unless you forgive

3. Forgive each other both if you are indebted to or if someone is owing you a debt.

4. This small book points out that slavery, both sin and man, is wrong.

We need to see each other not as slaves and masters, but as brothers and sisters in the Lord. “We have right the wrongs, so let’s move on.” Forgiveness is the key to setting us free.

° 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. John 8:36