

COMMUNITY GROUP QUESTIONS FOR PHILEMON

WARM UP

Slavery is one of those social issue that occurs in the Bible and is a hot topic in our country today. As a group, list other social issues that exist today in our country. Are they mentioned in the Bible?*

What stood out most from Sunday's sermon on the book of Philemon?

** Social issues can be defined as "a state of affairs that negatively affects the personal or social lives of individuals or the well-being of communities or larger groups within a society and about which there is usually public disagreement as to its nature, causes, or solutions" (Britannica).*

EXPLORATION

- 1. The book of Philemon is a letter from Paul to a man named Philemon. In this letter, Paul asks Philemon to set free his slave, Onesimus. This is not the first time we have come across slavery as we have been reading through the Bible. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen. 37 & 39), the whole nation of Israel was enslaved by the Egyptians (Ex. 1), the Law (Ex. 21:2-11 & Lev. 25:44-46) allowed for slavery and in the New Testament, Paul wrote about it in his epistles (Eph. 6:5-9, Col. 3:22-4:1, 1 Tim. 6:1-2 and Titus 2:9-10).*

Why do you think God, giving His Word through men who were empowered by the Holy Spirit, doesn't come right out and condemn slavery? How might the principle Jesus teaches about divorce in Matt. 19:3-9 apply to slavery and other social issues?

2. *Read Philemon 1-25. As you read through this letter, what evidence do you find that Onesimus became a believer. Based on what Paul writes here and in his other epistles listed in question #1, discuss Philemon's options and if there was a "proper" or "befitting" (v. 8, in Greek, aneko = what is due to a person, one's duty) thing for him to do.*

3. *Based on Colossians 4:9, we know that Onesimus was from Colossae, which means Philemon and the others listed in Philemon 2 were also from Colossae. Also, from v.2, we know that Philemon was a prominent believer who had a church meeting in his house. Read Col. 3:22-4:1 to understand Paul's general instructions to the church at Colossae regarding slaves and masters. Now, put yourself in Philemon's place, living in a culture where slavery is common, you may own other slaves besides Onesimus and you have just read this letter from Paul. What factors weigh on your mind? What does your heart tell you to do? What are you actually going to do?*

4. *Like question #3, put yourself in Onesimus' place. You are away from Paul, your spiritual father, who sent you away with this letter. Since you have been with Paul, he probably has told you what he has written to churches on the subject of slavery. You are standing before Philemon, who is your legal master (owner) and whom you have offended by running away and to whom you may owe money (v. 17-18), which may be the reason you are enslaved. What would you be thinking? How would you be feeling?*

5. Notice how Paul organizes his letter to Philemon. Use a few words to outline the three sections below of this letter:

v. 4-7, v. 8-14, v. 15-16, v. 17-21

How might you use this approach when appealing (v. 9 & 10, in Greek, *parakaleo* = to call to one's side, related to the name "Comforter", given to the Holy Spirit by Jesus) to others regarding social issues?

APPLICATION

Paul documents the change in relationship that has occurred between Onesimus and Philemon, now that Onesimus has become a believer in Christ (v. 10 & 16). Imagine someone you know outside the church (e.g., a boss, an employee, a co-worker, a neighbor, a person in government, etc.) becomes a believer or starts attending your church.

How might that affect your relationship?

How do you navigate that situation outside and inside the church?

In towns like Corvallis, Albany and Philomath, this happens all the time, just as it did in Colossae. Share your experiences and what you have found that has worked well and not so well. How might the principles from Philemon guide you?