

## PHILEMON.

In the course of his extensive ministry the Apostle Paul must have written many private letters. A man with as many strong personal friendships as he formed, over so wide an area, would find many occasions for personal correspondence. Of all these letters only one has been saved. When you read it you wish we had more. Some of the most valuable pages of human history have been preserved in the private correspondence of men and women.

The letter to Philemon reveals a strong personal friendship. It proves that Paul had the same deep love for individuals that he had for the masses. Paul fought a great fight for the gentiles as a class. He was ever at grips with any force that threatened to rob a poor man of his God-given heritage. In fighting for a class or group it is so easy to forget that it consists of men and women, each with a great hope and a great destiny. Many reform movements have completely ignored the individual life. One weakness of the movement that is sweeping Germany and Italy today is they completely ignore the individual life. Here the state is everything, the individual nothing. To promote the welfare of the state men and women are ground to dust beneath a great mass movement. Hearts are crushed, lives are wrecked, and virtue and purity laid on the altar of a man-made God. Anything is justified that will achieve the objective in view. A few months ago the magazine "Time" carried a shocking story of the prostitution of Italy's young

83

womanhood, in an effort to increase the population of the state.

Such a complete disregard for human lives reminds us of the story of Napoleon and the little drummer boy. It is said that on one occasion, when Napoleon's army was crossing the Alps, a little drummer boy fell over a cliff into a deep snow-filled gorge. It would have required but a few moments to rescue him with a rope. But so harsh was the iron-like discipline of the French army not a man dared to break step. What was the life of a boy to the glory of France? The story closes with the pathetic picture of the lad, left to freeze, starve, or be eaten by the wolves; but loyally beating his little drum to the step of the iron-heeled conqueror.

How different was Christ's love for the masses. Christianity, from its very beginning, was a great mass movement. But the Great Founder of Christianity never forgot, for one moment, the hopes and tears of a single life. He did not tread down a single life to set up His kingdom here. He did not break a single heart except His own. No man's ear was ever more sensitive to the voice of the multitude than His. No man ever understood better than He the psychology of the crowd. He loved the milling throngs as no one else had ever loved them. But His great heart responded just as quickly to the cry of the lone man or woman as it did to the cry of the multitude. The cry of blind Bartemeus stirred His great heart with the same

sympathy He felt for the hungry thousands. He put His life in jeopardy and His whole program in danger to heal a woman's child.

There are lots of people who will champion the cause of the poor and oppressed who have very little patience with the poor ignorant man or woman. This truth is illustrated very forceably in an incident in "Uncle Tom's Cabin." "Miss Ophelia" was a Northern lady of deep piety and great sicerity, who had come South to do mission work among the Negro slaves. One of the first to come under her influence was "Topsy", a poor little wayward black sheep, who had never known any love higher than "love of candy an' sich lack." After she had made a complete failure with the child she overheard a conversation between her and her white mistress, Little Eva. When little Eva reminded Topsy how much Miss Ophelia loved her she grinned incredulously, and said, "She'd sooner a toad would touch her as me." Miss Ophelia was compelled to confess that this was her feeling toward the little Negro, but was surprised to find that the child knew it. You cannot win men with mass love. No matter how zealous a man is for our party or class we will never believe he is our friend if he is cold and indifferent to us as an individual.

Paul's love for men was like that of the Master. He was interested in the church in Philemon's house, but he was also interested in Philemon. He was deeply interested

in his family, in everything that touched his life either temporal or spiritual. His letters also show a deep interest in another poor man, a poor wayward black sheep that didn't have a friend besides. The letter was written in behalf of a poor run-away slave named Onesimus. He had run away from his master, Philemon, and come to Rome, where all ways, both bad and good, met. Here he met Paul. No doubt he was already acquainted with the great preacher. But friendless people usually find their way to a kind heart. He was converted and wanted to make amends for a crooked life.

The letter hints slightly that he was a thief. This is no surprise to anyone who knows the baleful influence of the institution of slavery. This is one of the sins it invariably fosters. Booker T Washington says that the only time he ever tasted chicken while a slave was at midnight. Yet, even at the close of his great life, he does not condemn his mother for this petty pilfering. Under different circumstances he would have considered such theft a great wrong.

But Paul was not afraid to preach the whole truth to rich or poor, bond or free. He knew that two wrongs cannot make one right. When a man is forced to get his wages at night, with no one there to tell him how much to take, he would have to be a mighty honest man if he did not take too much. Especially if he knew his wages were long over-due. He would be like the little boy whom Uncle Remus knew so well. He had been into his grand-

mother's jam. Uncle Remus asked him if his grandmother gave him the jam? He said, "No." His grandmother was not at home: He said she would have given him the jam if she had been there, so he just got some. The only trouble he had was that he did not know just how much to take. He said he just had to guess at that. Uncle Remus said, "Yes, honey, an' I bound you stretched yo' guesser."

Paul knew that Onesimus had taken more than was right. He taught the poor fellow an honesty that transcended any he had ever known. Instead of seeing his former master as his enemy, he now saw him as his brother in Christ. He wanted to go back and ask his pardon. Paul wanted to see the two men united, not as master and slave, but as brothers who deeply loved each other. In spite of Onesimus' guilt, he knew there was much to be forgiven on each side. If Onesimus was willing to go back to bondage, then Philemon ought freely to forgive the wrong. He makes a masterly plea for this forgiveness. His letter has been described as "the glove of velvet with the grip of steel." He even offers to pay the debt if it takes that to secure the pardon. "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that to mine account."

Was this act of Paul's an indorsement of human slavery? Before we answer this question it is well to remember that Onesimus' act was absolutely voluntary. No blood hounds were put on this fugitive's track and no chains on his hands. If it had been necessary for

Paul to send him back that way we know he would have let him go free. If he had sent him back like that, Apostle that he was, he would have stood forever condemned in the eyes of all just men. Under Roman law the course take was perhaps the best one open to the poor slave. There was no place on earth where he could have his freedom lawfully. Wherever Roman arms reached-- and that was to the uttermost bounds of the known world-- he was still a slave. It was only by theft and robbery that he could live. A reconciliation with his Christian master might lead to a lawful freedom.

It has been asserted that Paul's sending Onesimus back was a recognition of Philemon's property right in the poor fugitive. It was no more a recognition of his property right than it was an indorsement of slavery. Whatever the laws of men may declare a man or woman cannot become property. Every such decree ever written was in defiance of the highest law of heaven. The harp of the soul is too finely tuned for a chattel. God has stamped His image on every human face and written His law on every human heart. He has endowed every normal child with a potential greatness that rises far above all material possessions. Whoever willfully degrades a temple so lofty, whether he knows it or not, has committed a great crime. With Paul's high sense of human values he never could have sanctioned a decree so unjust.

The question has often been asked, if slavery was

wrong, why did not the early church condemn it emphatically? It did. When the early church threw its doors wide open to the slave and his children, making no difference between the bond and free, it condemned slavery in strong terms. It was a stinging rebuke to the cruel laws of men when master and slave knelt at the same altar and took the sacred elements together. In this solemn covenant they acknowledged they were brothers, and created with equal rights. It was a stinging rebuke to the cruel laws of men when the slave was taught to fashion his own poor broken life after the glorious life of the Master, and told that he could do this in spite of all human laws. Slavery could not live long in an atmosphere like that. To keep a man in bondage you must break his spirit, crush his hope, and keep him ignorant. No highly intelligent race has ever been kept in bondage long. The door of knowledge is the door of liberty. The early church opened this door for the poor bondman in defiance of all human laws.

Early Christianity started fighting slavery in the right way. In striking off the shackles of the spirit they gave a death blow to slavery. You cannot free a man's body till you have freed his soul. If Christianity had continued the friend of the oppressed slavery would not have continued sixteen centuries longer. If the church had remained true to Heaven's high law of human brotherhood it would have been abolished before the third century.

It was a later Christianity that joined hands with the oppressor, shared in the profits of the slave dealer and the master, and put its blessing on bloody and unjust war. It was the cowardly act of a later Christianity that closed the door of hope to the poor slave for sixteen more centuries. When the Christian church began recognizing class distinctions, when she began preaching one gospel to the rich and another to the poor, one for the slave and another for the master, when she erected two doors to her entrance and racial and social lines that barred the innocent from all her privileges, she crushed the hopes of the oppressed for ages to come.