GGW Essay #2

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The epistle of Paul to Philemon is a letter with a very specific purpose that can only be understood in the social context of the time this letter was written. In this book, Paul implores Philemon to receive his former runaway slave, Onesimus, who later became Paul's spiritual child, and to treat him as a beloved brother with an equal standing in the church. With the help of socio-cultural understanding of slavery in the New Testament times, however, this request can be made emotionally more intense and significant to us. As a result, we can be greatly helped to appreciate what it means to be a brother and learn how we should view and treat our fellow brothers and sisters in the church.

In the Greco-Roman world, slavery was a widely-accepted practice in nearly every culture. Even a majority of Christians didn’t question the practice of slavery. Slaves accounted for at least one third of the Roman empire population. So it is safe to say that the society was heavily dependent on the laborfoce provided by slaves. The major source of slaves were the captured enemy soldiers, children sold by their parents to pay off their debt, and people who sold themselves for economic reasons. So a majority of slaves came from the same race, and it was hard to tell who were slaves and not by apperance.

Slaves held a wide range of occupations depending on their training and skill sets. Slaves were traded on the market, and their value varied according to the law of supply and demand. Romans didn’t consider slaves inferior to them by nature in terms of human capacity, unlike some cultures that thought slaves were what they were by nature. So Romans treated their slaves in more human and moral ways

than other cultures. However, most of them were still exposed to harsh treatments and sexual exploitation.

Romans allowed some slaves to be freed and become legal citizens even with the right to vote. However, fugitive slaves were subject to severe punishments such as whipping and branding on their forehead. They could also be crucified if they got caught. At that time, professional hunters were often hired to hunt them down and brind them back to their masters. In addition, Roman law banned people from harboring runaway slaves. It is in this social context that Paul urged Philemon to treat his runaway slave, Onesimus, as a beloved brother in the church.