

Mid Week • Philemon

INTRODUCTION

A little background as we begin our study tonight . . .

Paul was a prisoner in Rome.

Because of his comment in v. 22, that he expected to be released and to visit Philemon, it's safe to conclude that this was his first imprisonment.

In fact, it was probably toward the end of that time when Paul knew his accusers were not going to be coming from Jerusalem to stand before Caesar.

Without the accusers there to level their charges against Paul, the charges would be dropped and he'd be released.

Paul wrote this to his friend Philemon who lived in Colossae. {Show Slide}

Colossae was a neighboring city to Ephesus where Paul had spent *three* years.

During that 3 year stay, the entire region had been evangelized and though there's no record in the book of Acts that Paul ever visited Colossae, there's a chance that he had indeed taken a trip there.

In any case, Philemon was a wealthy resident of Colossae who'd been won to the Faith.

If Paul had never been to Colossae, Philemon had *certainly* been to Ephesus, which was the commercial center of the area.

However the case, they'd met and become friends.

Because Philemon was wealthy and possessed a large house, the church in Colossae met there.

What prompted this letter from Paul was the conversion of a man named Onesimus in Rome.

It turns out that Onesimus was a runaway slave from Colossae.

Guess who his master had been – Philemon!

Onesimus had stolen some property from Philemon then skipped town, traveling all the way to Rome where he hoped to get lost in the crowds.

But God had his number and he ended up at Paul's feet.

Being under house arrest, Paul had to depend on others to take care of a lot of his ministry and personal needs.

It seems that Onesimus had attached himself to Paul as his personal assistant and Paul had come to depend on him.

But when Onesimus's story came out, Paul knew his conversion demanded his repentance manifest itself in restitution – he had to go make things right with his master Philemon.

So Paul wrote this as a *letter of introduction* of Onesimus – requesting that Philemon would show *mercy* to his new brother in the faith.

{Review the main people involved here}

Before we begin reading, we need to realize the very sticky situation we have before us here.

Roman law permitted a master to *execute* a rebellious or runaway slave, but Philemon was a Christian and as such, must demonstrate mercy and grace, specially to a brother in Christ.

If he *forgave* Onesimus, what would the other masters and slaves think?

He could be easily accused of upsetting the social order and inciting other slaves to run away.

If he *punished* Onesimus, how would it affect his testimony as a Christian?

Philemon was hung on the pointy horns of a serious dilemma!

Paul sympathized with this dilemma and offered some counsel.

While critics of the Bible often point to the lack of condemnation of slavery in the NT, this letter goes far to address their concerns.

Think about it – if the Apostles had attacked slavery and turned Christianity into an abolitionist movement, in all likelihood, it never would have survived the second century!

A dozen Jewish reformers taking on the entire Roman Empire and Greek culture where slavery had been an integral part of society and economy for hundreds of years.

It's simply absurd to shackle the apostle with this task.

Christ never gave them a mandate to redeem the institutions of society.

But he did give them a mandate to preach the message of the

redemption of their souls.

They had come to see from personal experience that where Christ rules in the heart, the world does change to become more just and fair.

Mercy and kindness to grow where there has been genuine conversion.

So they placed their only emphasis on preaching the gospel and saving men and women, knowing that as they did that, the larger society would be changed.

The proof that their strategy was the right one is the fact that, though it took several hundred more years, slavery *was* eventually abolished, as the gospel became the prevailing mode of thought in Europe.

What Paul writes here is proof that slavery is incompatible with Christianity.

The reality of what he writes in Galatians 3:28 becomes evident here: “There is neither... slave nor free... in Christ Jesus.”

In Col. 4:7-9 we learn that this letter, along with Colossians, was carried to Colossae by Tychicus and Onesimus.

In this letter we see a beautiful picture of what the Father has done for us in Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther commented, “All of us are Onesimuses!”

TEXT

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer, ²to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

Here in the standard greeting of the letter we find 3 other names mentioned.

Timothy was Paul’s companion and was by the apostle’s side while he was under house arrest in Rome.

Most commentators believe Apphia was Philemon’s wife while Archippus was his son, and possibly the pastor of the church there in Colossae.

Note that Paul calls Archippus a fellow *soldier* while his father

Philemon is simply a fellow *laborer*, which may mark Philemon out as an elder or deacon of the church.

Notice as well that the church in Colossae met in Philemon's house. Of course, most churches at this time met in homes. They didn't have their own buildings.

Churches wouldn't start meeting in special buildings until after the conversion of Constantine when Christianity was liberated from official persecution in the late 4th Century.

Even in the Book of Acts we see that the real life and dynamic of the Church was based in the homes of the members.

In Acts 2 we read that the disciples would gather at the temple to hear the teaching of the Apostles then would break up and meet from house to house where they would share a meal, say prayers, and encourage one another.

This application of the Apostle's doctrine on a personal level is what gave the early church its dynamic and strength.

This pattern of meeting in homes continues to be the dynamic for making Christianity more than merely another of the world's religions.

We meet here all together for the teaching and proclamation of the Apostle's doctrine, but then we encourage people to meet in smaller groups in homes to interact and share their lives, applying what their hearing when we gather all together.

Get in to a home group!

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers, ⁵hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints, ⁶that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. ⁷For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Paul had received a good report that Philemon was generous with his wealth and had not only opened his house to the church but had

opened his life to the saints, to minister to them in a practical manner.

You might say he not only opened his *house*; he opened his *home* to the flock of God.

The *refreshing of the saints* mentioned in v. 7 is a term that in the NT usually refers to some specific *material* gift that's been given.

As Paul speaks about this being Philemon's *regular* practice, it gives us the idea that as the church met there regularly, Philemon had taken steps to provide his guests with food and other practical assistance.

In Romans 14 we read that one of the gifts the Spirit gives to the Church is people with the gift of giving – meaning of their material possessions.

God will endow some of His people with wealth so that they can become channels of provision to those in need and when special needs arise in the local church.

He then moves on their heart to respond generously to people and needs.

We hear stories regularly about people who give large amounts anonymously to some missionary endeavor or outreach.

There are many very wealthy believers who've established foundations for the express purpose of identifying truly worthy works and then investing in them with grants and gifts.

Philemon seems to be one of these special spiritual gifts to the church in Colossae.

⁸Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains, ¹¹who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

Now Paul gets down to the real point of his letter – which of course would not have been lost on Philemon from the moment he started reading; after all, who would have handed the letter to him?

Onesimus, his runaway slave!

Notice how v. 8 begins – “Therefore”.

In light of Philemon's reputation as a giver and refresher of the saints, Paul doesn't need to apply a heavy-handed kind of tone with Philemon and demand that he forgive Onesimus.

He's confident that the *grace* that's been evident in Philemon's life heretofore, will be in evidence now.

Paul calls Onesimus his son and tells Philemon that he'd been won to faith by Paul there in Rome.

Onesimus may have left Colossae a treacherous and unprofitable scoundrel.

But he returns to his master a new man, one whose potential for good is already well demonstrated.

The evidence for that is his presence now before Philemon.

If Onesimus wasn't a different man, would he ever have returned to Colossae?

No way! He knew well what the punishment for his crime of running away was:

- 1) Either he would be executed out of hand by his master – or-
- 2) He would be sold to an owner of a mine somewhere which is where most runaway slaves ended up and then died shortly thereafter.

You see, an owner would want to get some kind of profit out of a good-for nothing slave so they would sell him off to the mines where life was short and brutal.

Who do you suppose it was who had told Paul of Philemon's reputation as a good and generous man?

Probably Onesimus!

Even still, Onesimus took a huge risk in returning, because he knew how Philemon would be faced with the dilemma of how to treat his runaway slave.

What we see here in Onesimus's return is the kind of change the Spirit works in the human heart when salvation takes root.

Not only is there sorrow for the sin that separates us from God, but there is a Godly regret that makes us desire to make right what can be made right – even though the consequences are difficult to bear.

Many are the stories of men and women who lived criminal lives and who then came to Christ.

The Spirit convicted them of their sin and moved them to seek out their victims and make restitution for their crimes.

Charles Colson & Prison Fellowship have been instrumental in bringing the idea of restitution back into the criminal justice system here in the US.

Rather than just locking criminals away and allowing them to be further corrupted by the close presence of other criminals, Prison Fellowship has been working with prisoners who come to faith in Christ in paying back the victims of their crimes.

When these prisoners eventually obtain their freedom, they have a much lower rate of recidivism than the rest because they've been able to reclaim a sense of dignity for having truly paid for their crime.

Onesimus knew he could not just hang out at Paul's side in Rome.

There was unfinished business to be done and so, not knowing what Philemon's reaction would be, but knowing what he was doing was right, he went home.

We miss it in the translation but there is a humorous word-play in vs 10 & 11.

The name Onesimus means "profitable".

In v. 11 he says that Profitable used to be unprofitable but now because of Christ has become ultra profitable.

12I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, **13**whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. **14**But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

Onesimus wasn't the only one who wanted to tie up the loose strings of his past.

Paul *too* wanted to make sure things were right between his spiritual son and his master.

Paul refers to Onesimus as his *own heart*.

It seems that the bond between the two men was stronger than most of Paul's other relationships.

Even before Philemon knew of Onesimus's whereabouts, Paul counted Onesimus as one of the many *gifts* Philemon had given

to the saints for their refreshment.

Paul saw Onesimus as Philemon's gift to him, to minister to his needs there in Rome.

But the gift needed to be *voluntary*, so Onesimus had to go home to Colossae.

Paul was hoping Philemon would tell Onesimus to return and take his place at Paul's side for the duration of his imprisonment.

Now Paul tries to help Philemon gain the kind of perspective we see him expressing in v. 1 when he calls himself a *prisoner of Christ Jesus*, and which we talked about in the message last Sunday.

15For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, **16**no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Paul suggests that Philemon look at the situation of Onesimus's running away from it's *result* – Onesimus ended up saved and sent back seeking reconciliation.

If he hadn't left Colossae and ran to Rome, he wouldn't have met Paul, and if he hadn't met Paul, there's a good chance he would not have been led to Christ.

God had turned the "all things" of Onesimus's rebellion into the good of his conversion.

Paul now asks Philemon to let the matter rest in the goodness of God and show the kind of mercy and forgiveness God had shown Onesimus, to say nothing of the mercy and forgiveness he had shown Philemon himself in *his* conversion.

What Paul says in v. 16 is the critical death knell to the institution of slavery in the Christian world.

He calls Philemon to see Onesimus -

. . . no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother,

The reason this marks the end of slavery for the followers of Christ is because a slave is not reckoned as a person created in the image of God, but as property to be bought, sold, and used.

Paul totally turns the tables on that idea by appealing to Philemon to reckon Onesimus, who was in fact a slave in a *legal* sense, as a *brother* in Christ.

Friends, no one who daily encounters slaves and holds them to be human beings created in the image of God for His glory, can tolerate the continuation of slavery.

Their conscience won't allow it.

The only way a person can justify the state of slavery is to dehumanize slaves.

Paul's words here went far to fuel the abolitionist movement and provided them with the moral & theological ammunition they needed to awaken the conscience of believers to the injustice of slavery.

17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. **18** But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

In effect, Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus as though it was Paul visiting him.

Then Paul says that any loss Philemon suffered because of Onesimus's theft and absence, he is to put to Paul's account, and he will pay it when he does come.

19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. **20** Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

Paul says he will indeed pay whatever loss Onesimus has caused him. But then Paul reminds Philemon of the debt *he* owed *Paul*.

That debt was his own salvation for it was Paul's ministry that had led him to faith as well as Onesimus.

Then the Apostle expresses his confidence that Philemon's reputation of generosity will continue in his following Paul's directions here.

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Paul is likely hinting at his hope that Philemon will do more than simply forgiving Onesimus and restoring him to the household. He's intimating that Philemon will forgive and then tell Onesimus to return to Rome as Paul's assistant. Paul then says that he expects to be released eventually and desires to visit Colossae.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, **24** as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.

Paul concludes by sending greetings from some of the those who were with him in Rome. This list of names gives weight to the idea that this was written during his first imprisonment.

2 Timothy, which was written during his second tells a whole different story.

Everyone had forsaken Paul and he was left alone.

Here we read he had a wide circle of friends and apparently a measure of freedom.

CONCLUSION

As a follow up to this letter, we can assume that Philemon heeded Paul's request.

The early church leader *Ignatius* tells us that Onesimus eventually became the bishop of the church at Ephesus, which was extremely large and influential.

That a slave could rise to such a position of authority shows the stunning impact of the Gospel in Roman society where only the wealthy became leaders.

I want to end by looking again at something we talked about earlier. It's notable that Paul does not ask Philemon to *free* Onesimus. The N.T. does not confront the institution of slavery directly. Instead it undercuts it, by encouraging believers to look at slaves as brothers in Christ rather than property.

When that happens, slavery falls of its own weight.
But what was true of slavery is true of many social ills.
We deal best with the immorality of our times, not by attacking the sin directly but by looking to the heart.

Most specific sin is symptomatic of some sickness of the soul.
Take rape and pornography for instance - If a man will purpose in his heart to see women as real or potential sisters in Christ, as people for whom Christ died, and as bearing the image of Christ, then he can no longer look at them as mere objects of prurient lust and impure desire.

Consider drug addiction - If the man or woman who struggles with addiction to drugs can learn to see him or herself as well as the people around them as the objects of God's unrelenting love, they will no longer yield to the temptation to self-destruct.

Consider violent crime - If the gang member could just see other people through God's eyes rather than through eyes of fear, anger, and hatred, they'd forsake the lifestyle of the streets.

The mandate Christ has given us is to go into the entire world and make disciples of all nations.

Disciples – NOT Political Actions Committees, not social reformers, not public do-gooders.

The route to lasting change in society is through the heart of men and women, one at a time.

It's important that we stand up and express our opinion to our elected representatives as we did recently with the casino issue.

But we must never put our hope in that kind of thing for real change.

If the change is not a change of heart – then it is no real change.
Our task, just as it has always been, but has been oft forgotten in the history of the Church, is to change the world one soul at a time.