

Series: Philemon

Title: Love and Forgiveness

Text: Philemon 8-16

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Verse 8

Paul transitioned to make his appeal on behalf of Onesimus by saying, “Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required...” (Philemon 8). The apostle intimated that he could have made a “command” for Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus. As an apostle of the Lord, he had a “perfect right” to make such a command to a church leader.¹ However, in what would follow, Paul would make a gentle and loving appeal. His method and manner in requesting forgiveness from Philemon is a showcase of Christian humility.

In addition, Paul’s method of dealing with Philemon is a great example for pastors. It is unseemly for those who serve as shepherds in Christ’s church to make commands and demands of God’s people. Shepherd’s lead sheep to drink of Christ’s waters; they don’t drag them. Calvin noted, “...pastors are reminded that the hearts of their people must be soothed with all possible gentleness....”² Perhaps this is why the book of Philemon is included in the section of the New Testament that includes the Pastoral Epistles.

There is perhaps another reason why Paul didn’t reference his apostolic authority. He did not command love and forgiveness from Philemon, because he wanted Philemon to sincerely forgive Onesimus from a willing heart. One has noted, “Merely obeying an order would not necessarily elicit from Philemon that increase in understanding and love for which Paul has prayed.”³ Parents who have raised children are familiar with how children can reluctantly ask or grant forgiveness to a sibling because of parents’ demands. Paul wanted to avoid a similar scenario. As we will see in verse 9, he wanted Philemon’s response to be motivated by genuine love.

Despite Paul’s humility in verse 8, he did remind Philemon of his proper duty. The word rendered “required” is one that referred to “one’s duty,” or to “that which is fitting.”⁴ Paul wanted Philemon to remember that he had a responsibility to forgive Onesimus. Because of the work of Christ, forgiveness is always required of God’s people. It is unseemly for a Christian to harbor bitterness and withhold forgiveness. Paul had told the church at Colossae, “...if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive” (Colossians 3:13).

Verse 9

Paul further exhibited Christian gentility by saying, “...yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus” (Philemon 9). Paul used the same Greek word translated “old man” in writing to Titus. In Titus 2:2, he said, “Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.” Since cognates of the Greek word for “old man” (*presbútēs*) were sometimes used of the

¹ Robertson, A.T. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1933), 466.

² Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1948), 353.

³ Wright, N.T. *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Nottingham, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 180.

⁴ Rogers Jr., Cleon and Cleon Rogers III. *The New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998), 514.

official ministers of the church (Acts 10:17), some believe Paul used the word in our current text to speak of his role as a minister. However, it is important to note that the word is only used in reference to old age within the New Testament (Luke 1:18; Titus 2:2; Philemon 9). It seems best to assume that Paul used the word in reference to his older age. Perhaps he wanted to show deference as an older man, or maybe he meant to appeal to his maturity and life experience as an older man.

Many believe Paul was perhaps a bit under sixty years of age at the time of his writing. Acts 7:58 tells us that Paul was a “young man” at the time of Stephen’s stoning. The apostle had changed, aged, and seen a lot happen since the time of those harrowing events. He was now an older man who had been transformed and seasoned by grace. By modern standards, Paul’s age may not seem “old.” However, age was regarded quite differently in the ancient world. Hippocrates regarded a man from forty-nine to fifty-six as being old.⁵ Based on Psalm 90:10, Hebrews viewed seventy years of age as being the standard life expectancy.

Notice that Paul made his appeal “for love’s sake.” Instead of swinging his apostolic weight around, Paul made Christian love his main claim. As he wrote to Philemon, the Lord’s Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40) was in the forefront of his reasoning. Paul’s method of dealing with an estranged brother provides a model for Christians of all generations. In seeking reconciliation and forgiveness with others, we are never free to make demands or issue strict commands. Rather, we aim to speak the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15). We should always strive to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16) and to deal with others with “with gentleness and respect” (1 Peter 3:15).

Verse 10

In making his appeal, Paul said, “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment” (Philemon 10). The word “appeal” meant “to urge,” “to beg,” or “to beseech.” Paul used the term earlier in verse 9. He used it a second time in our current verse for emphasis.

The title “my child” was a “tender and affectionate reference” to one Paul had personally led to faith in Christ.⁶ In rabbinical teaching, the father/child relationship was often used as a metaphor for the relationships between rabbis and pupils. Paul used such a Jewish convention to speak of his loving relationship with Onesimus. Somehow, Onesimus had come into contact with Paul during the apostle’s imprisonment. Maybe Onesimus had been imprisoned himself, or maybe he travelled to visit the apostle in prison. Whatever the case, their encounter during Paul’s imprisonment had led to Onesimus’ conversion. Onesimus had become a disciple underneath the tutelage of Paul.

How Onesimus ended up in prison with Paul is unknown to us. Also, it is interesting to imagine how Epaphras, the pastor at Colossae (Colossians 1:7), ended up in contact with both Paul and Onesimus. Did the pastor travel to Rome to visit Paul specifically and then ended up running into Onesimus in the process? Imagine the surprise of Onesimus when Epaphras showed up in Rome! Or, did Epaphras receive word that Onesimus was with Paul in Rome? Did this prompt Epaphras to travel and see both men?

Remember that it is believed that Paul had led both Epaphras and Philemon to Christ when Paul ministered in the regions surrounding Ephesus (Acts 18:23-19:10). The men had then returned back to their homes in the Lycus Valley. In time, the Lord used the men to start churches in the region. A church gathered in Philemon’s own home (Philemon 2). As a household servant, Onesimus had likely heard much about Christian faith. He had likely even heard talk of the one named Paul, the man who had led his master to trust in Jesus Christ for salvation.

⁵ Robertson, 466.

⁶ Robertson, 466.

Who knows how Onesimus happened to meet Paul in Rome. Maybe Philemon had sent out some sort of alert concerning his runaway slave, or maybe someone tipped off the Roman authorities concerning the slave's presence in Rome. Another possibility is that Onesimus, in trying to eke out a living in Rome, committed some sort of petty crime or theft. Perhaps such things led to his arrest and imprisonment. As providence would have it, Onesimus' imprisonment led to an encounter with the apostle Paul, the one who had led his master to Christ.

Some propose that Onesimus had fled to Rome to start a new life. Overtime the man fell into dire straits. As the prodigal son came to his senses when he ate from a pig's trough (Luke 15:16-17), Onesimus came to his senses and realized that life was better when he lived in Philemon's household. For some reason unbeknownst to us, he knew of Paul's imprisonment in Rome. Perhaps he purposely went to visit Paul in order to seek help.⁷ Wanting to return to his master's household, he believed that Paul could help him, since his master had spoken so highly of Paul.

It must have made an impression on the man when he met Paul in a Roman prison. Perhaps the encounter produced much remorse in Onesimus' heart, as his mind raced back to experiences he had previously had in his master's household. Maybe the act of meeting Paul even produced a conviction of sin, the type of conviction that leads to conversion (John 16:8). Perhaps Philemon had witnessed to his household servant in the past. After running away from Philemon, Onesimus' encounter with Paul may have startled him and prompted him to respond to the gospel summons he had heard previously.

Verse 11

Paul' described Onesimus' relationship to both Philemon and himself by saying, "...Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me..." (Philemon 11). The name "Onesimus" was a common slave name in the first-century world. Given its meaning ("useful"), the name might have been a nickname of sorts that was given by masters to slaves who proved especially helpful.⁸ Slaves and household servants were often given monikers that described their features or abilities. The name "Onesimus" was a Latin designation that meant "helpful" or "profitable." There is a play on words in the original language of the New Testament. In fact, there is what we could call a "three-way play on words."⁹ The apostle played the words "Onesimus," "useless," and "useful" against one another. Such a literary device was common in ancient Greek literature.¹⁰ Though Onesimus' name meant "profitable," the man had become "useless" to Philemon when he run away from his master.

In the first-century world, a run away slave was regarded as a bad investment. A found slave was considered even a worst investment, since such a slave was often given a death sentence under Roman law. Paul, however, had confidence that the man had been made new by Christ and that he was "useful" once again. If Philemon would forgive Onesimus, Paul was confident that the man would live up to the meaning of his Latin name — Onesimus ("useful"). In the original language of the New Testament, Paul placed the word "useful" in an emphatic position.¹¹ He wanted to emphasize his confidence in Onesimus' ability to be profitable to Philemon once again. Though Onesimus bore ignominy because of his crime, his relationship

⁷ Johnston, Mark G. *Let's Study: Colossians and Philemon*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2013), 146.

⁸ Wright, 181.

⁹ Johnston, 146.

¹⁰ Wright, 182.

¹¹ Wright, 182.

to Christ had made him new. Through the glorious gospel of Jesus, he had promise of “a new name” in glory (Revelation 2:17). He was useful to his master once again.

Onesimus’ life reveals that Christians are people who are useful to God’s purposes in the world. Though they were previously useless because of the stain and defilement of sin, Christ’s blood secures their freedom and forgiveness. Those who are in Christ are useful for representing Christ and reflecting his image to a dark world. Concerning the things related to our text, one has said, “There is, thus, an illustration of the change the gospel makes. Useless members of society can become valuable and productive.”¹² Paul used the same Greek word rendered “useful” when writing to Timothy: “Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work” (2 Timothy 2:21). Paul also used the word of John Mark, a man who had previously been of no use to Paul (Acts 15:37-38): “Luke alone is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, for he is very useful to me for ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). Maybe you feel useless to God, like your life is of no use to him and his kingdom purposes. Perhaps you feel like you are of no good and of no help to anyone. The Bible teaches that the Lord can restore you and make you useful to him and to others.

Verse 12

After sharing his formal appeal, Paul announced that he was sending Onesimus from Rome to be reunited with Philemon. He said, “I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart” (Philemon 12). The Greek word translated “I am sending” appeared in what is often called “the epistolary aorist.”¹³ The verb tense was used to portray the action of a courier. As a result, it indicated that Onesimus personally delivered Paul’s letter to Philemon. Human imagination can certainly visualize the emotion and tension that was likely present when Onesimus showed up at Philemon’s house and presented Paul’s letter.

The language of verse 12 was also legal language from the first-century world.¹⁴ It was often used of a defendant being transferred from one court of law to another, or from one judge to another. It was also used of an appeal to a higher court.¹⁵ Paul implemented the term in order to show deference and humility to Philemon. Perhaps such language was near to his mind because of his own legal troubles. The apostle had his own opinion concerning what should have happened to Onesimus, but he transferred the decision to Philemon. He knew the ultimate decision was not his decision to make. Philemon was the one who rightfully had the authority to decide Onesimus’ fate.

The word for “heart” was one that referred to the human bowels.¹⁶ In the Greek, the term (*splágchnon*) was an onomatopoeia that produced sounds that alluded to human internal organs.¹⁷ It was used of the spleen, kidneys, intestines, and stomach. It figuratively spoke of deep, yearning emotions that seemed to emanate from one’s bowels. A cognate of the term is used in Mark 6:34 to speak of Jesus’ compassion for people. Paul’s words depicted his deep love for Onesimus. Though the apostle hadn’t know the run-away slave very long, the two had become quite close in the bonds of Christian fellowship. Apparently the man had served and assisted Paul in gospel ministry. He had undoubtedly been a great source of spiritual

¹² Melick Jr., Richard R. *The New American Commentary: Volume 32*. (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1991), 361.

¹³ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 514.

¹⁴ Wright, 182.

¹⁵ Melick, 362.

¹⁶ Calvin, 354.

¹⁷ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 514.

encouragement and refreshment for the imprisoned apostle. As Paul sent the man on his way, his heart went with him in a sense. The apostle's language is reminiscent of language he used of his love for the Colossians in Colossians 2:5. Onesimus had been such a help to Paul that it was emotionally difficult for him to send the man over a thousand miles away on a return trip to Philemon.

Verse 13

In verse 13, Paul said, "I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel" (Philemon 13). Perhaps Paul's words were a subtle hint that Philemon could have sent Onesimus back to Paul. If the man no longer wanted Onesimus in his service, and if he was willing to drop charges of wrongdoing against the man, Paul would have welcomed the opportunity to have Onesimus serve alongside him. Since Paul was imprisoned, Onesimus was surely of great comfort and assistance to the apostle. Onesimus surely provided the lonely apostle with company and fellowship. In addition, maybe he ran correspondence for Paul and kept Paul informed concerning news related to various churches. The relationship between the two men likely provided a living embodiment of the truth Solomon expressed in Ecclesiastes: "Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up!" (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

Paul would have loved to have kept Onesimus with him, but Paul wanted to do what was right. If Onesimus needed to face his due punishment, if that is what Philemon wanted, Paul gladly entrusted the situation to Philemon. Paul's handling of the situation with Onesimus demonstrates the need for Christians to handle all things with integrity. In addition, the requirement for Onesimus to return to Philemon provides a precedent concerning the consequences of sin in the Christian life. Even though one may be forgiven of a wrong before the Lord, natural and earthly consequences may remain. A criminal may be forgiven of a crime in a spiritual sense while still having to face earthly consequences from a court of law.

Verse 14

Paul continued his train of thought by saying, "...but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord" (Philemon 14). In saying "I preferred," Paul used an aorist tense verb. Thus, he referred to a single action in the past. His language was likely intended to portray the apostle as engaging in a conscientious, prayerful decision. He wanted Philemon to know that he had thought things over in relation to Onesimus. He had not been flippant or unthoughtful in his decision to send the runaway slave back to his master. As a result, he hoped that Philemon would lovingly receive Onesimus and acquiesce to Paul's request.

The word translated "goodness" (*agathós*) was the New Testament term for the good works that should flow from a regenerate life (Matthew 7:17-18; 12:35; Romans 12:9; Ephesians 2:10). The apostle knew well that the Lord desires for good works to flow from willing hearts (Psalm 51:16-17; 2 Corinthians 9:7). Thus, he didn't want to force Philemon's hand. He wanted the man to gladly receive Onesimus from the goodness of his heart. One has said that Paul's reference to compulsion carried the idea of pressure.¹⁸ In effect, Paul's words in verse 14 were intended to say, "I don't want to pressure you. If you receive Onesimus and forgive him, I want you to do it because you genuinely want to do it."

Verse 15

In his appeal, Paul proposed a possible divine purpose in Onesimus' departure from Philemon. He said, "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever" (Philemon 15). Paul didn't condone Onesimus' sin; however, he realized that

¹⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 514.

Onesimus' sin, in the sovereignty of God, played a part in a great, big redemptive act. The entire scene was a living display of the truth of Romans 5:20 — “Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.”

The Greek verb rendered “he has parted” appeared as a passive voice verb in the original language of the text. As used by Paul, the verb appeared as what modern Bible scholars often call a “divine passive.” The verb expressed an action performed upon an individual by God. In our current text, it portrayed God as being the one who instigated Onesimus' departure from Philemon. One has said that Paul's words contained a Hebrew “mode of expression to denote the hidden action of God.”¹⁹

It seems Paul wanted to portray the providence and sovereignty of God as being instrumental in Onesimus' affairs. He believed that the slave's escape was intended by God to do something significant for the kingdom of Christ. The fact that we are reading and studying about the incident today gives testimony to such a reality. What man had intended for evil in Onesimus' departure, God intended for good (Genesis 50:20). Paul reasoned with Philemon concerning such things. In essence, he said, “Philemon, please see the sovereignty of God at work in Onesimus' escape and subsequent conversion. Receive him and do not hold his wrong against him.” Paul's words were not the idle, self-serving words. He himself saw the providence of God at play in his own imprisonment. In his letter to the Philippians, he said, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment” (Philippians 1:12-14).

A lesson is found for us in such things. When wrongs are committed against us, we should consider the fact that the Lord may have a purpose in such things. The Lord can take even the difficult things in life and weave them together to create a beautiful tapestry for his divine purposes. In his letter to the Romans, Paul famously said, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Commenting on such things, Calvin said, “If we are angry on account of offenses committed by men, our minds ought to be soothed, when we perceive that those things which were done through malice have been turned to a different end by the purpose of God.”²⁰

The Greek word translated “forever” at the end of verse 15 is one that was commonly used in the New Testament to speak of eternity (Matthew 19:16; Acts 13:46; Romans 6:23; 1 John 3:15; Jude 21). Perhaps Paul intended an innuendo through his use of the word. Maybe he wanted to point to the idea that the Lord had accomplished eternal purposes through Onesimus' crime. Or, it could be that Paul wanted to subtly remind Philemon that Onesimus was a fellow-heir of eternal life; thus, Philemon should have received Onesimus back with a forgiving spirit.

Verse 16

After speaking of the way the providence of God was behind Onesimus' departure from Philemon, Paul made a gospel appeal. He said, “...no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Philemon 16). The words “more than a bondservant” literally meant “beyond a slave.” The terminology pointed to Onesimus' new identity in Christ. Paul wanted Philemon to no longer view Onesimus as a slave but as a “brother” in Christ. Because both men were saved and “in Christ,” they were not fully bound to human ways of measuring relationships and status. Yes, socio-economic, ethnic, and gender realities will always remain in one sense. However, Christians who are brothers and sisters in Christ don't regard each other

¹⁹ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 514.

²⁰ Calvin, 356.

with the restrictions and requirements imposed by the world's labels. Instead, they see each other as being one in Christ. In his accompanying letter to the Colossians, Paul spoke of the way Christ transformed relationships between slaves and masters (Colossians 3:22-4:1). Paul promoted this type of thinking when he wrote to the church at Galatia: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:27-28). There is no superiority or rank in the church. In a sense, even apostles and slaves are equals. Jesus made reference to such realities in his teaching (Mark 10:42-45).

Paul's words in verse 16 were an appeal to gospel realities as the motive and means of reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. One has noted, "The fact that all of us as human beings, who by nature are worse than runaway slaves, are also by nature 'useless' to God; but we too can become 'useful' to him when we are restored to our rightful Lord and Master. And this, not merely because he is our Creator God, but because he has been willing to redeem us — 'buy us back' — at extraordinary cost through the death of his Son on the cross...The power of the gospel was a compelling reason for Philemon to see the return of Onesimus in an altogether different light."²¹ The story of Onesimus and Philemon is ultimately a story of Jesus' work of redemption. Through the individuals before us, we are reminded of the way we have been forgiven and of the way we should be quick to forgive others. In writing to the Ephesians, Paul said, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32).

Ultimately, the verse before us would prove to be a lynchpin in the abolitionist's philosophy that led to the downfall of slavery in the Western world. Unfortunately, slavery is still alive in many parts of the world. Wherever Christ reigns and biblical truth is known, slavery normally crumbles.

Paul's request was certainly a big one. In the Roman world, runaway slaves were subject to great punishment. This was so because of the potential economic impact of such an action. Since a great portion of the population relied on slave labor, it was believed that strict penalties needed to be enacted in order to maintain social order. At times, runaway slaves were crucified in public. As the most lenient punishment, apprehended runaway slaves were tied hand and foot and returned to their owner.²² Owners were then completely free to punish a slave as they pleased.

²¹ Johnston, 148.

²² Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 514.