

# *From Slave to Brother*

*Philemon*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**April 19, AD 2015  
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We're beginning a series called "Forgotten Gems of the New Testament." We'll be looking at several of the lesser known books such as Jude, Titus, 3 John and, today, the letter of Paul to Philemon. There's a backstory to this letter that is essential to understanding it.

Philemon was a man of some wealth living in the Greek city of Colossae. Under Paul's preaching, Philemon became a Christian. In fact, he hosted the worship gatherings of the Christians in his home. Slavery was an unquestioned component of the Roman economy in those days. As Rome conquered vast territories, captives were brought back to serve the Roman victors. Also, people might enter servitude for economic reasons such as paying off financial debt. A man of Philemon's stature might have had several household slaves. One of these slaves was Onesimus. His name, ironically, means "Useful." Ironic because useful Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon, becoming worthless to him. In fact, Onesimus may even have stolen money from Philemon as he made his getaway. After he escaped, Onesimus did what people on the run still do to this day: he fled to the big city where he could get lost in the crowd.

Even today, with all our tracking technology, a person can get away from another person in a big city like Rome. But, then as now, you can run but cannot ultimately hide from God. He can find us anywhere anytime. God had plans for this runaway slave. In Rome, on the lam, Onesimus encountered the apostle Paul. As Paul preached the gospel, Onesimus believed and became a Christian. He stayed with Paul as Paul was under house arrest, and served him freely. It seems to me that Onesimus had become something of an administrative assistant to Paul.

But Paul knew that Onesimus was a runaway. He knew that he had illegally broken away from his master Philemon. He had broken the law and was, technically, a fugitive. So in spite of all the help Onesimus gave him, Paul knew the right thing was to send Onesimus back to his master to face the consequences of desertion. But Paul also hoped that Philemon would reconsider the legal penalties he could justly impose on Onesimus. Paul hoped the slave would be received as a brother, forgiven and set free. This is where we pick up the letter. [Read Philemon 8-22].

Are you impressed with Paul's powers of persuasion? He makes himself the link between Onesimus the runaway slave and Philemon the aggrieved owner. He calls Onesimus the slave his own child, because Paul was his father in the gospel. He calls Onesimus his very heart, someone close to him and deeply beloved. He calls Onesimus important and useful to his ministry. Then Paul reminds Philemon the master that Paul had also introduced him to Christ his savior. He calls Philemon his partner, his fellow worker, in the cause of Christ. And, if that wasn't enough, he reminds Philemon that, spiritually speaking, he owes Paul his very self.

Many of you have met my colleague Robert Austell. He led our elders' retreat and played in worship back in January. When we worked together, even though he was the associate pastor, we had a very collegial partnership. What I mean by that was Robert never hesitated to be quite saucy with me. Then again, none of the staff here ever seem to hesitate to be cheeky either! Well Robert never really liked doing the children's choir club Bible study by himself. So, on the days when it was his turn, he would ask me to come lead with him. And then he'd say, "After all, what is that when you owe me your very life!" This week I realized he was quoting Paul's letter to Philemon. And truly, that's quite a persuasive line. I gave the message that led you from death and condemnation to eternal life in Jesus. Compared to that, what does this little request really matter?

Paul boldly asks Onesimus to absorb the wrong done to him by Onesimus. He asks him to write off the debt, the literal economic loss from losing a valuable slave. He asks him to write off the social debt of the insult of a slave's desertion. He urges Philemon to accept the slave back no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. So, do you think he did it? Did Philemon forgive Onesimus and set him free? Did Paul really give him a choice? Several folks in Bible studies this week noted that if Philemon had said no, we wouldn't still have this letter. He would have thrown it away and we never would have heard about it. But actually, history tells us that there was a first century bishop of the city of Ephesus named Onesimus. There was wide belief from early on that this important church leader was none other than the same former slave. He could have been jailed. But he became a bishop.

So what are we today to make of this letter? I think it has a lot to do with our relationships. Nearly every week we have to deal with a hard reality. We have to deal with wrongs done to us. We have to deal with insults, with swindlings, with deceits, with deceptions, and even wounds to the heart. We get challenged to forgive. Let's focus on this for a few minutes. How do we handle the debts incurred by our sisters and brothers in Christ? How do we respond to the wrongs

done to us? Being hurt or insulted creates pain in our hearts. It creates a sense of diminishment. The wound stings. When we are in pain, we quite naturally try to stop the pain. We seek to end the discomfort, to get away from the sorrow of the wound. We want to end our sadness about someone actually treating us that way. So how do we do it? It seems that we can start by noting at least three *wrong* ways we most frequently respond.

**1) We turn it back on the other person.** Wrongs hurt. I want to be done with the pain. So I give it back. I speak harshly right back at you. Or, if you have too much power in my life, I just talk about you to someone else. Can you believe what a jerk he was? Let me tell you something about her! Or, worse yet, I plot and carry out your active demise. In many ways, then, we seek to restore the balance and end the pain by returning wound for wound, eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. Disrespect threatens me as a person, so I have to regain respect by coming back at you, either directly or indirectly. Do I really need to remind anyone how counterproductive revenge is as a solution? It never satisfies. Do I really need to say how un-Christian it is to live in “I’ll get you back” mode? And, of course, we know where persistently living this way leads. To a life of bitterness. Holding grudges does not create joy. As the old saying goes, “Refusing to forgive is like drinking a glass of poison yourself and then waiting for the other person to die.”

**2) We try cheap forgiveness.** I try to get rid of the pain of what you did to me by saying too quickly, “Oh I forgive you. No big deal. Don’t worry about it. Forgive and forget.” Now those are very good words to say. That’s exactly right. But not if it’s a cover up for just stuffing the pain down. The deeper the wound, the longer it takes to truly forgive. Cheap forgiveness comes when we might still be in shock. I can’t process the pain of what was done so I just say I forgive when I really even haven’t realized what there actually is to forgive.

**3) We blame ourselves.** Because none of us have totally pure hearts, we can always find some part of a damaged relationship that is our fault. I must have done something to cause you to treat me like that. Somehow, I deserve what you did. So I stop the pain of how you hurt me by reasoning with myself, “This is just. This is what is due to me. I’ll take my punishment.” Once again, this is close to the truth. It’s crucial to resolving pain and conflict to admit your part, confess it and repent. But taking the blame can also be a way of avoiding the truth and refusing to walk in the costly forgiveness of Christ.

Dealing with the wounds others give us demands a truthful view of what actually happened. And that requires a true, deep connection to Jesus Christ.

Outside of seeing ourselves in the light of the truth of Jesus, we don't even see reality clearly. *Apart from him, we don't know right from wrong, let alone how to respond to wrongs in the right way.* Learning the truth of Jesus is not just a theological exercise. It's absolutely vital to learning to live in joy and love.

I am created by God in the image of God. God made clear the path for right living and blessed relationships in his Word. But I, like every other person, have chosen my own ways. I have sinned and it's created a mess I cannot solve. I need a savior and that savior is Jesus Christ. He is also the Lord and he summons me to give him control of my life. Living *from* Christ's love and forgiveness, I now seek to live *out* love and forgiveness among others. That's me, a beloved sinner, a redeemed mess, seeking to know God in his Word so that I can live out his truth.

I know that life in this world means that it is normal to be hurt and wounded by others. It is not good. It is not best, but it's a fact. I am willing to own the truth. What was said, what was done, that hurt. Sometimes it hurts bad. And it was wrong. Lying to me was not right. Hitting me was not right. Betraying me was not right. I know the Word and I know what you did was more than I deserved. And even if I did deserve it, it was still not right for you to do. That's wrong and I own the pain of it.

I'm blessed to have had in my life friends willing to engage in brutal honesty with each other. Sometimes we crossed the line from loving honesty to mean honesty. We still laugh about the evening while the three of us "discussed" some divisive issue, a scathing insult came out of one friend's mouth at me. My other friend hurled a bag of chips across the room at his face. "That's not right!" he said. And the conversation took an entirely different tone after that. A key part of forgiveness is owning the truth: what was done was not right.

But OK, Onesimus should not have run off. Philemon was wronged. Now what was he supposed to do about it? We have choices when we are wronged. Here are two to consider:

**1) Absorb venom.** Depending on the strength of your heart and the power of the blow, sometimes you can just take it. You just absorb the blow and let the poison flow through you without retort. You don't stuff it. No, you own it. Whew, that was ugly. That was really mean. But not lethal. I can take that and return love and blessing. I pray for the person. I let them go. The more we grow in Christ, the more anti-venom we develop in our souls. We can let more go.

**2) Charge it to another account.** But sometimes there are wrongs beyond our ability to absorb. I can't process that much hurt. There's a big, huge debt incurred against me and I don't know what to do with it. I want to kill you. I want to run away. I want to stop the pain by some means but I don't know how. What can I do? I've got to get this debt into someone else's account so I don't go berserk and bankrupt. Paul told Philemon "if he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." Now I don't think Paul was in a position literally to repay the economic damages Philemon had suffered from losing a slave. But he meant, when you consider what I have meant to you, compare that to this loss I am asking you to accept. For my sake, receive back Onesimus as you would me. Forgive him as you would forgive me. Indeed, sometimes we can do that. For Mom's sake, I'll forgive my brother and try to get along with him. For one friend's sake, we're going to give up our anger at another friend. For the children's sake, we're not going to go nuclear in our marriage. We charge off the debt to a higher love.

But sometimes even this is not possible. The wound is too deep. Bitterness threatens to creep in. We can't let it go. What do we do then? We still need to charge this debt to another account. But it has to be the account of the only one who has an unlimited bank balance of love and mercy. We have to go to the only one who has actually purchased all our debts, the Lord Jesus on his cross. It always *moves* me to consider that Jesus shed his blood to pay for every single one of my sins. It always *convicts* me that Jesus shed his blood to pay for every single one of your sins, including, especially, the sins you committed against me. I'd like to hold you accountable to me. But Jesus bought your debt as well as mine. When I'd like to hold your sins against you, he reminds me that he purchased, at infinite cost, even the wrongs committed *against* me as well as by me. That is the basis for true forgiveness.

With Philemon, Paul applied this principle by sending him to look at the sovereignty of God who can work all things together for our good. Maybe God even worked Onesimus' desertion into a better thing. In verse 15, he writes, "For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but as a brother." Paul doesn't say, "For this reason Onesimus ran away." No, it was wrong for Onesimus to run away. He broke the law. But in the bigger picture, God wove that wrong into a wonderful good. Onesimus ran away straight into the gospel. So he could be more than a piece of property to Philemon. He could be a beloved brother into eternity.

There's a great echo here with the story of Joseph. As you remember, Joseph was the second youngest of the 12 sons of Jacob. He was the favorite and he was a bragger. Of course his brothers hated him. One day they actually sold him away as a slave to some Egyptian slave traders. Joseph served as a slave in Egypt for years. He also spent years in prison. His brothers did him wrong. But in God's sovereign plan, Joseph eventually rose in prominence. He became second in power only to the Pharaoh himself. By Joseph's skill, Egypt survived the worldwide famine.

Years later, when Joseph's brothers appeared before him in the Egyptian palace, Joseph had his chance to exact revenge upon them. They were begging for bread and Joseph had in his little finger the power of life and death. But by now, he had learned forgiveness through trusting in God's higher purposes. He said, "Don't be distressed because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph does not minimize the act: brothers, you sold me as a slave. You did me wrong. But God had a higher plan. I charge your wrong to his greater account. I then realize that actually it was not you who sent me here, but God. Through the hard journey of my life, God has saved his people from starving.

As we seek to reconcile with those who've hurt us, faith sends us to see a bigger picture than is readily apparent. Maybe Onesimus was parted from Philemon precisely for the sake of finding salvation and leading others to salvation in Christ. Ultimately, Philemon paid only a small price for a great good. So for us, too, maybe God will do something more than we can ask or even imagine, when, for love's sake, for Christ's sake, we walk in the way of realistic, deep forgiveness.