

Philemon: Coming Home

Philemon 1:8-17

Meet Onesimus. This slave, who belonged to the estate of Philemon, did not have a heart right with God nor a great salvation in Jesus. Therefore, his mind and heart made every provision for his flesh, that it could and would fulfill its lusts (Romans 13:14). This man then plotted in his heart to steal money from his master Philemon and take flight to the big city of Rome, and hide out there amidst the crowds. How do you think this would work out for this runaway slave with a shallow life and a hardened heart? Not well! Perhaps you recall our Old Testament friend Jonah, and his rebellion against God and subsequent escape plan:

Jonah 1:1-3

Now the word of the LORD came unto Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me. But Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them unto Tarshish from the presence of the LORD.

You know the rest of the story, and how God installed roadblock after roadblock on Jonah's path of pride. He wanted to resist God and go his own way to avoid his omniscient Father in heaven. To no avail! Beloved, only God can soften the hardened hearts of those on the run. And when the prodigals are ready, His arms are wide open to receive them in love and mercy. In a way, the books of Jonah and Philemon share this theme. While the Bible states that our sins will find us out, and that what we sow we will most certainly reap (Numbers 32:22-23; Galatians 6:7-8), God's grace and mercy are ready to receive us back when our hearts break from conviction of sin, and we are repentant:

Luke 15:11-32

And he said, A certain man had two sons: And the younger of them said to his father, Father, give me the portion of goods that falleth to me. And he divided unto them his living. And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. And when he had spent all, there arose a mighty famine in that land; and he began to be in want. And he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country; and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would fain have filled his belly with the husks that the swine did eat: and no man gave unto him. And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son: make me as one of thy hired servants. And he arose, and came to his father. But when he was yet a great way off, his father saw him, and had compassion, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him. And the son said unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight, and am no more worthy to be called thy son. But the father said to his servants, Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet: And bring hither the fatted calf, and kill it; and let us eat, and be merry: for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found. And they began to be merry. Now his elder son was in the field: and as he came and drew nigh to the house, he heard musick and dancing. And he called one of the servants, and asked what these things meant. And he said

unto him, Thy brother is come; and thy father hath killed the fatted calf, because he hath received him safe and sound. And he was angry, and would not go in: therefore came his father out, and intreated him. And he answering said to his father, Lo, these many years do I serve thee, neither transgressed I at any time thy commandment: and yet thou never gavest me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends: but as soon as this thy son was come, which hath devoured thy living with harlots, thou hast killed for him the fatted calf. And he said unto him, Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine. It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found.

Onesimus did not know Jesus, and so God arranged for this runaway slave to meet prisoner Paul, who did know Jesus. Cool? Let's go to the text...

Philemon 1:8

(KJV) Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,

(NIV) Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do,

Philemon 1:9

(KJV) Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

(NIV) yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus

Paul certainly had the spiritual position and authority to order his friend Philemon to fulfil his request. In fact, there a couple of ways to lead in the church which we see in Scripture:

Matthew 20:25-28

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Servant leadership, yes!

1Peter 5:1-4 *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ's sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.*

*QUESTION FOR MEDITATION: Recall in your time as a believer examples of people that demonstrated *religious leadership* or *Christ-like leadership*? What were the differences between these two types of leadership and how did you respond to each?

Leadership is all about character. Paul's true character is on full display here, as he appeals to Philemon's Christian character and commitment rather than his own apostleship. More than that, the tender tone which this letter is written reveals Paul's heart of brotherly love. Since he is about to address a possibly angry Philemon - who was robbed by his runaway slave - Paul no doubt softens his delivery as well:

Proverbs 15:1 *A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger.*

Perhaps Paul teaches us a lesson in communication here. Paul, here in his sixties, had lived the life of a hundred persecuted men and was feeling old beyond his years, so he is saying to Philemon, *look at me - I am old and in prison, my motive here is pure, my motive is love.* And no one who knew Paul and his life in Christ would doubt this claim, from the heart of the same apostle that penned these words:

1Corinthians 13:4-7

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

And in a very real sense, Paul is appealing to Philemon's Christian love as well, not in a manipulative way, but with heartfelt sincerity:

Romans 12:9 *Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.*

*STUDY POINT: Jesus said that out of the overflow of our hearts, the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). Find ten other Scriptures in the New Testament that would be helpful to remember, to cultivate a heart and tongue in alignment to God's Word.

Philemon 1:10

(KJV) *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:*
(NIV) *that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.*

And now the request. By now Paul has softened Philemon, and not in any manipulative way but through wisdom by the Holy Ghost! In his running away to Rome, Onesimus met Paul, who was in chains, and Paul brought him to Christ! Onesimus was now Paul's spiritual son. So much for running! God knew what Onesimus really needed! Paul also knew God's heart was to reconcile Onesimus with his master Philemon. This reconciliation is the purpose of Paul writing this letter and sending Onesimus off to deliver it to his master. Amazing!

Philemon 1:11

(KJV) *Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:*
(NIV) *Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*

Outside the Body of Christ we would expect that not all master/slave, boss/worker relationships thrive in love. These relationships can be congenial, even friendly, but most often are driven by duty, greed, and desperation. Inside God's household, and guided by the

Holy Spirit, however, Christian love can and should be the motive for workers to serve their masters in humble submission, as unto the Lord:

Colossians 3:23

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters

And Christian love should be the motive for believing masters to forsake treating their workers as utilities, instead regarding them as brothers and sisters in the Lord. This is truth of which Paul reminds Philemon. Onesimus literally means “profitable” or “useful.” While before coming to Christ, Onesimus may not have been a profitable or useful slave with a submissive heart, he was now a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) who would be a valuable and responsible worker, working as unto the Lord (Colossians 3:23-24) and serving as a dear brother in Christ to Philemon. Hallelujah!

Philemon 1:12

(KJV) Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

(NIV) I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.

Philemon 1:13

(KJV) Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

(NIV) I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel.

[Onesimus] *is my very heart*. This is family vocabulary. Through salvation in Jesus, Onesimus is now Paul’s spiritual son. And while certainly Paul would have found it useful to retain Onesimus for his own private employ - functionally and relationally - Paul sees a greater need here. Reconciliation.

Onesimus is coming home.

Philemon 1:14

(KJV) But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

(NIV) But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.

As I mentioned earlier, Paul appeals to Philemon’s Christian character, and trusts that his response would be righteous and Spirit-led.

Philemon 1:15

(KJV) For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever

(NIV) Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever

When we bring our sins to the cross of Jesus, they are instantly and effectively washed away by the shed *blood* of Jesus:

1John 2:1-2

My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

1Corinthians 6:11

And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God.

And when we persevere and trust God through many trials and temptations (James 1:2-4), crucify the flesh daily (Romans 8:12-13; Luke 9:23) and resist the world and the devil, our rewards are eternal (James 1:12). So, temporal and forgiven sin is nothing compared to the glorious present/eternal reconciliation with God and people. Paul so tenderly illustrates this in Philemon 1:15.

Philemon 1:16

(KJV) Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

(NIV) no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

Amen, Paul! Onesimus was coming home to be a double blessing - a slave of righteousness unto the Lord, and a reconciled brother in the Lord to Philemon. And that, my dear friends, is God's heart.

Philemon 1:17

(KJV) If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

(NIV) So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Paul appeals to his own character and value as a friend, and asks Philemon to treat Onesimus as if he were Paul himself.

Welcome him as you would welcome me. Beloved, how this substitutionary vocabulary reminds us of the cross - how Jesus died in our place!

Praise God!

- Reverend Darren McClelland