

The Fellowship of the Reconciled

Philemon 1-21

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This is a really interesting book – if you want to call it a book. It is really just a note dashed off by Paul. It's only 330 words long in the Greek—about a type written page. Philemon has also been the subject of some dispute that it should even be part of the “Canon” – those books and letters in the Bible that the historic Church has recognized as authoritative. It seems too short; just a bit longer than the Gettysburg address. It seems too personal; it is a letter directed to an individual as opposed to a church.

It has also been the subject of controversy through the years because it has been used as a text in defense of slavery. It is a story of a runaway slave and his owner and Paul sends him back to his owner. A theology of slavery was very popular within the American Christian Church at one time, I'm sorry to say. For instance, in an 1853 edition of *The Weekly Messenger*, a newspaper published in Hannibal, MO, home of Samuel Langhorne Clemens aka Mark Twain, the editor reviewed and praised a book titled *A Bible Defense of Slavery* which propounded this theory and contained several hundred pages of racist pseudo-science based on the "curse of Ham" theory. The newspaper editor had so many inquiries about the book that the following week he announced that he had the book for sale at his paper's office.

Just as slaveholders in Hannibal, such as Clemens parents, could go to church on Sunday and be assured that they would not have their consciences pricked, they could also safely take their slaves with them. In fact, religion was an important control mechanism. At church, preachers frequently told slaves the story of Philemon, a runaway slave converted to Christianity by Paul. After Philemon's conversion, Paul instructed him to return to his master. The story was considered an endorsement of slavery. One old former slave, whose story was

recorded during the 1930's Depression, recalled how tired he and his friends got of hearing that story. I hope to show you this morning that the opposite is true – the letter is a condemnation of slavery and contributed to its demise at least in the household of Philemon and the church in his home.

As I said, it is a letter – a personal letter. Correspondence in those days was by carrier – not Cliff Clavin types of mailmen from the TV show Cheers, but letters carried by individuals who happened to be going in the direction you needed. There must be some heroes associated with Paul's letters. Some of their names may be listed in Paul's letters, but many were anonymous. They would have had occasion to cross the seas, go through mountainous terrain, and risk dangers of bandits and brigands. They are unheralded heroes who were essential to the compiling of our New Testament. Onesimus is one such carrier and he is also the subject of this letter. Onesimus is a thief, a slave, and a refugee.

Philemon was likely a wealthy man. I say that, and I admit that I am making an assumption, but it is sound one to make. First, he owned slaves and secondly he had a house large enough to serve as a church for the Christians in Colossae. In any event he met Paul. He probably met him in Ephesus because Paul never visited the city of Colossae. The story of Paul's work in Ephesus is in the book of Acts, chapter 19. It is interesting. Ephesus was the largest pluralistic city in Western Europe and Paul moved into that city with a desire first of all to reach the Jews. According to Acts 19, he went first to the synagogue. He tried preaching there, but after three months there were disturbances in the synagogue and the leaders threw him out. Then Paul rented a theatre or lecture hall. There are footnotes on some Bibles that say that Paul rented the theatre from 11AM to 4PM – the hottest part of the day, and likely the cheapest rate for the rental. As Paul begins to minister now to the gentiles, his method or technique has to change. If you would like to know how Paul speaks to the Jews, read Romans. In Romans, Paul quotes the OT some 97 times. He was a walking

Bible encyclopedia. When he spoke to Rabbis he used their method of teaching, recalling the prophets, and history and all the OT books. When he spoke to the Greeks, that method didn't work. Luke describes Paul's teaching method in the Book of Acts as a dialogue. Paul really uses a Socratic method of teaching. Questions and Answers.

Paul works for two years, five hours a day in the theatre at Ephesus and according to Acts 19:10 his ministry could be summarized: "the gospel was heard all over Asia." The gospel spreads out from Paul's work in Ephesus. Now apparently Philemon and his wife Apphia attend the theatre in Ephesus. It is not unreasonable to assume that a landowner and slaveholder of wealth from a town ninety miles away would attend the theatre for that was about how far the twin cities of Laodicea and Colossae were from Ephesus. Just like today, people come from small towns to major cities to buy the latest fashions, take in the sights, culture, and museums, and concerts. While they were there, they visited Paul's theatre and heard his preaching. Philemon came to faith after hearing Paul preach at Ephesus and it resulted in a church plant in Colossae. Philemon took Paul's message home and started a church in his house. There likely was the bond between Paul and Philemon.

Now Philemon had slaves, including one named Onesimus. The name Onesimus is a play on words because the name means "profitable" or "useful". We will come back to that. Onesimus is unhappy about being the slave of Philemon and he breaks into Philemon's house steals whatever he can carry, the wife's jewelry, money, gold and takes off. He wants to get lost, become anonymous, get lost in the crowd. He runs away a great distance – to the great City of Rome. I would think that he enjoyed himself in Rome – just freed, money stolen from Philemon – he had a good time. Somehow he meets a friend of Paul's, who says to him, "I have someone that you need to meet. A great teacher, a scholar, he's been everywhere, he understands everything." And so it is arranged that Onesimus meet Paul while Paul is under house arrest in Rome. According to Acts 28, Paul, while in Rome, argues and

debates with people from morning to night, while under house arrest and Onesimus becomes a Christian through Paul.

So Onesimus becomes a Christian and begins to minister – to serve Paul. They became like Father and son. I imagine one morning Onesimus walked into Paul' study and asked if they could talk. "Of course." "Paul there is something I have never told you – I come from Colossae the household of a guy named Philemon." "Really I know Philemon. When you see him give him my best." "Ah...I don't think so Paul." So they talk this over and come up with a plan. Onesimus agrees to go back to make this right and Paul agrees to write a letter for Onesimus to take with him. This is an ancient example of what is known today as "restorative justice." "Restorative Justice" is a philosophy of dealing with criminal behavior, which involves the offender and victim coming together – arranging restoration, forgiveness, and reconciliation, the kind that Paul calls for in the lives of Philemon and Onesimus.

I imagine that Onesimus guarded that letter with his life – it was his only hope. The penalty for what Onesimus had done was clear; it was a capital offense. In his book, *Politics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle devoted an entire chapter to slaves. In Aristotle's opinion, a slave was property, not a person. If you caught a runaway slave, he would be branded as a fugitive with an "F" burned into the forehead – everybody would know of his escape. But if a fugitive slave steals from the master and escapes, the penalty is death. That was Roman law.

Onesimus goes back to Philemon. Philemon sees him coming and thinks, "That looks like that uppity slave, Onesimus who stole from me. Holy cow, it is." As he meets Philemon, he says, "before you say anything, read this," and he hands him the letter. "This is from Paul, you know Paul? Is he in jail?" "Yes".

Nice opening. Then I picture Apphia, the wife coming in. "Hey where's my stuff? How dare you come back here." Now the name irony comes into play. Paul writes in vs. 10 and

11. “I appeal to you for my child Onesimus. Formerly, he was not onesimus to you, but now he is indeed onesimus both to you and to me.” Paul is saying, “Once Onesimus wasn’t useful to you; now Onesimus is useful or profitable to you.” The “not Onesimus man” is motivated by selfishness; his method is robbery and stealing. The “Onesimus man” is motivated by love and his method is service. Jesus transformed Onesimus from one not useful to one now useful – to God, to Paul and to Philemon, and to the church and the entire community.

What should happen now? Paul writes to his partner Philemon, “If he owes you anything, charge it to my account. And by the way, I hope to come and see how things are working out – get the guest room ready.” Paul assumed that things were going to be worked out between the two—former slave owner and slave, now brothers in Christ—were going to be reconciled. Those who wrote that this letter justifies slavery have missed the point entirely.

Philemon had three options under the law. Brand him with the “F”, execute him, or set the fugitive free. What do you think Paul was expecting Philemon to do? Let’s imagine the first two options. Philemon calls his slaves together to let them see how he deals with runaways and thieves. Can you picture Philemon standing to address his property? He says to Onesimus, before branding him in the forehead, “Would you like to share your testimony about how our Jesus has transformed you before or after I disfigure your face?” Then he applies the red-hot iron and hears his beloved brother scream.

Or imagine Philemon opting for the execution. “Onesimus, you are going to be standing with Jesus in just a few minutes. Hallelujah! Say hello for me.” I don’t think so. I think the landowners and slave owners of Colossae got together with Philemon and said, “If you don’t act here – you will lose all of your slaves.”

That is what happened. Because of Paul’s artfully drawn demand, he could not even consider punishing Onesimus. The other slaves would know it – they would be able to run away and become believers and be freed. This is shaping up to be an economic disaster. It

is not only the freeing of this one slave, but the ultimate end of slavery itself. It is probably how the second “Church of the Acts” in Colossae was started. Those who disagreed with Philemon’s decision would move across town and begin a rival church made up of those who didn’t want to set the slaves free and letting them be members of the church and marry their daughters. You get the picture.

I think that because of Paul’s letter, we have for the first time an integrated house church – where a slave was welcomed into the membership of the church as a brother in Christ, not as a slave. Paul had written in Galatians that in Christ, there was no difference between slave and free, Jew and Gentile, male and female. But it took time for that pronouncement to take effect. I think Philemon’s church made that ideal a reality. Paul maybe hedged his bet a little bit by addressing the letter not just to Philemon but also the church that met in his house, (verse 2). Paul wanted the church also to adopt Onesimus as a full participant in the church and maybe put some pressure on Philemon, if necessary. Paul wrote, “if you consider me a partner...(and Paul knew he did) then charge whatever Onesimus owes you to me. I will pay you.” What Paul did for Onesimus, Christ did for men and women who put their trust in him. He forgave the debt that each of us owes to God.

So, what can 21st century followers of Jesus garner from this marvelous story? First, there is room for all. The early church set the standard that slaves and slaveholders, Jews and Gentiles, woman who were considered property and men, wealthy and poor, were altogether in those early house churches. It was a radical, unprecedented happening. Such arrangement threatened the carefully crafted social structures of society. No wonder Christians were considered a threat.

It also means that we are all cut from the same cloth of humanity with the same needs for significance, meaning, forgiveness, community, and restoration. All of us, men and women, gay and straight, rich and poor, black, white and brown, have drawn the wage of sin.

We can all be self-concerned, short and nasty, duplicitous, indifferent, lazy, boastful, lying, insecure, vengeful, short-sighted—you name it. We are all in debt to God's love, grace and forgiveness—the length of which was shown on the cross when God took all of the wickedness of the world into and upon the divine heart. Just as Paul paid any debts that Onesimus owed Philemon, so Jesus paid the debt we owed to God. The cross is the great leveler.

Third, because we are all one at the foot of the cross, we need to forgive one another and be reconciled to one another where there has been a falling out. This congregation has had a lot of disagreement—whether over same-gender marriage, the effectiveness of Wendy's ministry, how to spend money and organize ourselves, different preferences in music and worship, who looked at whom cross-eyed, you're sitting in my pew—you name it. For good or for ill, it comes with our congregational form of government—we don't have a bishop knocking our heads together, we don't have a doctrinal statement we must all sign, but we are responsible to listen for the Spirit's voice together and sometimes that gets messy. Some folks have said and done some hurtful things, so if you need to get right with someone, go to them in humility and grace and ask for or receive forgiveness. The fellowship of the reconciled has no other option.

Lastly, this little letter demonstrates the transforming power of the gospel. How so? Let me come back to my initial question. Why is this short note in the Bible? Imagine the curtain has closed on the NT. The last living apostle, John has been banished to the island of Patmos and we don't know how it ended for him. A fellow named Ignatius has become a leading figure in the Christian church, preaching in Antioch, a great mission church found in the Book of Acts. Persecution against Christians was on the rise. Ignatius was arrested and taken off to be executed. On the way to his execution, he was kept in chains and marched from town to town and put in local jails overnight. When the soldiers got him to Smyrna, he wrote a letter from prison to the Bishop of Ephesus.

The bishop in Ephesus was a man named Onesimus. Scholars have studied this letter in detail. In the letter to Bishop Onesimus, Ignatius calls him the “profitable bishop” using the same play on words that Paul uses in verse 11 of the text. Many scholars believe that our Onesimus is the same bishop of Ephesus. A.T. Robertson, a great Greek scholar published an essay on Onesimus in which he gave twelve reasons for why he believed it was the same man. Joseph Fitzmeyer, a leading Catholic scholar of Paul’s letters, agrees with him. Many of the people who have studied this history agree. The bishop of Ephesus was the same Onesimus. Did he become useful or what?

There was a conference of Church leaders in Ephesus in 94 AD held to determine which of Paul’s letters should be included in the Church writings, the scriptures; which are in and which are out. Talk about an important committee meeting, this is it! Onesimus, the Bishop of Ephesus is at that meeting. Imagine, there is no doubt about Romans, Colossians, Ephesians and so on. Onesimus says, “Look at this note, this needs to go in. I will support you on Romans, but I need your support on this; it changed my life.” I admit here I am making assumptions. This could be wrong but doesn’t it make sense that Onesimus led the way for the letter’s inclusion? “Listen if it wasn’t for that letter, I don’t know where I would be. Because of that letter, I am forgiven, set free, changed forever. That letter changed my life.”

That letter can change your life too. If you are on the way to faith, doubting, questioning, skeptical-- this letter is for you this morning. It reminds us all that we are forgiven and accepted because God forgave the debt of our waywardness, our indifference, our rebellion. It reminds us that there is room for all in the household of God. And it reminds us that God is still in the business of making un-useful lives, useful. We are the fellowship of the reconciled. That is the good news this morning; it is the best news we will ever hear.