

No Longer a Slave

Philemon 1:1-25

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There are many voices that compete for our attention, but week after week we hear the voice of almighty God speaking to us in holy Scripture, so let me invite you now please to take a copy of God's Word in your hands and turn to Paul's letter to Philemon, Paul's letter to Philemon, on page 1000 - after Titus; right before Hebrews. Once you have your Bibles open before you, would you bow your heads as we pray together. Let's pray.

O our Father, how we need Your Word to speak into our confusion, Your light to penetrate our darkness, Your grace to cleanse and subdue our sin and cause new obedience to spring to life. And so, as we bow before You we do so hungry and thirsty for righteousness, pleading Your promise that we might be filled. Speak to us and give us ears to hear what the Holy Spirit says to His church. Grant that as we hear the Word of God read and proclaimed we might be changed into the likeness of Christ who speaks to us in it. For His sake we pray, amen.

This is the Word of Almighty God:

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister
and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to

do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you - I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus - I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. 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 more than a slave, as a beloved brother -especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it - to say nothing of your owing me your very own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken in His holy and inerrant Word.

Background to the Book of Philemon

Well we come tonight to the central section of the wonderful little letter of Paul to Philemon. You will recall the situation that occasioned the letter. Onesimus, Philemon's household slave, has run away to Rome, and after having stolen some of his master's property or his money to finance his escape, he finds himself in Rome doubtless seeking to disappear among the crowds from across the empire, somehow face to face with the apostle Paul who is there under house arrest. And while he is there, Onesimus is wonderfully converted to faith in the Lord Jesus and becomes very dear to the mighty apostle Paul under whose influence he's brought to know the Savior. And in the wake of the saving change wrought in Onesimus' heart, Paul would have liked nothing more than to have kept Onesimus with him. Onesimus was proving an invaluable assistant to Paul as he served the Lord Jesus, even in chains. But Paul is as much concerned about Philemon and the Colossian church that meets in Philemon's home as he

is about Onesimus. And so he resolves to return Onesimus to Philemon in the company, most likely, of Tychicus, who also carried the letter to the Colossian church. The letter to Philemon is the companion to Paul's epistle to the Colossians. And Philemon was written, as we began to see last Lord's Day Evening, to heal the breach between Philemon the slave owner and Onesimus the runaway slave. Paul wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus and to welcome him home.

The Life of a Slave

Now under Roman law, Philemon would have certainly had precedent if he insisted not on receiving Onesimus back with open arms but rather on Onesimus' execution. Or, he might have, if he chose to be merciful, he might have Onesimus branded on the forehead with the letter "F" - fugitivus; runaway. Or perhaps even the letters "CF" - cave furem, "beware the thief;" or all three, since Onesimus would qualify. Onesimus really had no rights in the situation so that his position was, to say the least, precarious, dangerous. But as the letter to Philemon gives us a fascinating, even if rather alien to us window into the life of an ancient Roman household - slaves and masters, it also reveals something quite unusual for Paul's day, actually unusual for our day, something we might even say is revolutionary that was taking place within this particular Roman household. Instead of the typical options discussed in the case of a runaway slave who has been apprehended, there is not a word here about retribution or punishment or restitution. Instead, the letter to Philemon bears witness to a miracle having taken place and still taking place between people of different rank and standing in a profoundly divided society. Paul, the educated Roman citizen, speaks of Onesimus as his "very heart," verse 12. He urges Philemon, doubtless a wealthy householder, to welcome Onesimus back now no longer as a slave but much more "as a beloved brother," verse 16. He is to welcome Onesimus as he would have welcomed the mighty apostle Paul himself, verse 17. The average slave-owning Roman would read this letter, if they were not Christians I am sure, utterly baffled. What has come over these people? How can Paul speak of Onesimus with love and trust and invite Philemon to treat him with such dignity when by rights he should at least be flogged or branded? How is it possible that Philemon and his wife Apphia who have been so wronged, and Archippus their pastor and the church that meets in Philemon's home who have been so scandalized by all of this, and Onesimus the lowest of the low, a dropout, a washout, the dregs of society, how is it possible that they should even talk to one another let alone love each other like this?

The Impact of the Gospel

The letter to Philemon, do you see, bears beautiful testimony to the power of the Christian Gospel to utterly revolutionize human hearts and human relationships. It is, as we said last time, Gospel solvent that dissolves and disintegrates alienation and prejudice and the old injustices of an ungodly social order. The

saving power of the good news about Jesus births a new society, right into the midst of the messed up, broken down, twisted, unjust culture of our world. It did it in Philemon's day, the letter to Philemon testifies to that, and it does it still in our day too. Here in Philemon then is a glimpse of the society of the forgiven who are learning to forgive. Or to give it its other name, here is the church of Jesus Christ being who she was called to be. And tonight we are considering the words of verses 8 through 16 in Paul's letter to Philemon where he makes his appeal to Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus back on the basis of three things. First he says forgive because of a pastor's love; forgive because of a pastor's love. Then secondly, forgive because of a Gospel change; forgive because of a Gospel change. And then thirdly, forgive because of a deeper insight; forgive because of a deeper insight.

I. Forgive Because of a Pastor's Love

First of all, forgive because of a pastor's love. Look at verses 8 to 10 please. "Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you - I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also of Christ Jesus - I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment." Do notice carefully the tone of Paul's appeal. He acknowledges, doesn't he, that his role is to be the inspired spokesman of the risen Lord Jesus Christ, and in that role he has the authority to require obedience from Philemon and "bold enough in Christ to command you," he says. Look at verse 9 again. Our version reads Paul self-identifying as "an old man and a prisoner also," but the words "old man" I think are better translated ambassador. "I, Paul, an ambassador, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus" - he's saying, "Jesus has sent me to speak for Him, to enact the policies of the King of kings in a strange land." He is Christ's ambassador. He is emphasizing his authority. He is the apostle, the ambassador of Christ, so everything here from his office and his role, even to include his chains and his imprisonment suffering for the Gospel, highlights and drives home upon Philemon's consciousness Paul's rights to Philemon's obedience.

Commending for Love's Sake

And just as an aside, that really is something worth noting. When someone becomes a Christian, apostolic authority compels them. A Christian submits to and is made subject to the authority of Christ speaking through the apostles, now committed wholly unto writing in our Bibles. Paul might have compelled Philemon's compliance, binding his conscience with the authority of divine revelation. When the apostolic word speaks a command, a Christian bends the knee in submission and rises quickly in obedience.

But Paul does not use that authority here, does he? Instead, look how he approaches Philemon. "I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is

required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you." For love's sake I appeal, not command; love. Love that had been so much a feature of Philemon's life, Paul has commended him for love. Philemon was known for his love for the Lord Jesus, verse 5, and for all the saints. Even Paul himself in verse 7 has derived, he tells us, much joy from Philemon's love that has refreshed the hearts of so many others. Philemon, Paul knows, is a godly, faithful Christian leader, someone who stands out for his sacrificial, generous, faithful love for the whole people of God.

And love is what now we also see beats in the heart of the apostle Paul. You see that in our passage? Paul clearly loves Onesimus whom he calls his child, whose father he became while in prison, verse 10. He calls him, verse 12, "his very heart," and in verse 16, "a beloved brother, especially to me." This is not some cold, pastoral harangue, brow-beating Philemon with wagging finger into compliance. It is a model, isn't it, of pastoral exhortation. So teaching and ruling elders of First Presbyterian Church, men training for Gospel ministry at our seminary, take note. Paul has an authority that no minister or servant of the Word ever has. He is the directly authorized spokesman of the risen Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak the Word of God, and yet as he leads Philemon to overcome, perhaps hurt feelings - maybe public embarrassment caused by Onesimus - as he leads Philemon to think Christianly about how to respond to this situation in a way that is altogether different from the standard responses of the world, do you see he wins Philemon with love. He wins him by love.

The Minister's Call to Love

I have a favorite mug at home. We got it on a family trip to Disney one summer. It features Grumpy the dwarf in classic pose, like this, and the caption in big letters reads, "Cleverly disguised as someone who cares." It's perfect. And one reason that I love it so much is that it reminds me that a pastor is never simply disguised as someone who cares. He is someone who cares. There is such a thing, you know, as pastoral authority. It derives from saying what God says the way God says it in holy Scripture. Our authority, our Book of Church Order tells us, is "ministerial and declarative." It's service declaring what God says. We have no authority of our own to bind your consciences with our own words and our own ideas as elders and servants of the Word of God. Instead, we are to make our appeal, the love of Christ constraining us, for love's sake. So brothers in ministry, let love be the great mark of your labors. Let love be all the force and compelling power that your appeals and exhortations really require. Love, you know, clears a path for hard words and it makes even difficult duties sweet. Love. Forgive, Paul says to Philemon first of all, because of a pastor's love. "Take Onesimus back, Philemon, because a loving word from a wise pastor has helped you now to see the ugliness of unforgiveness and the beauty of Christian fellowship and tender love."

II. Forgive Because of a Gospel Change

Forgive because of a pastor's love, and then secondly, verses 10 through 12, forgive because of a Gospel change. Forgive because of a Gospel change. Paul has become Onesimus' father while in prison. You see that in verse 10? "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment." He doesn't mean of course that he legally adopted Onesimus while in jail. It is language Paul uses time and again to express his relationship to individuals and to churches in whose lives he has been instrumental in leading them to know the Savior. 1 Corinthians 4 verse 15, for example, he says to the whole church in Corinth, "I became your father in Christ Jesus through the Gospel." That's what's happened here. Onesimus has believed in Christ through the Gospel Paul preached to him. He has been converted. He is a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come. He has become a child of God born, not of the will of man nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of blood, but born of God. Paul was the one who led him to the Lord. He became his father through the Gospel. Onesimus, remember, is a runaway, a fugitive, a thief, an outlaw. Like an illegal immigrant undocumented under the radar trying to start over, hiding away in Rome.

You have to wonder, don't you, how it is that Onesimus came into contact with Paul in the first place. Paul is in jail himself, in Rome. So how does Onesimus run so far from Colossae all the way there only to run into Paul of all people, who, if I'm reading verse 19 correctly, seems to have led Onesimus' master, Philemon, to faith in Jesus? Did Onesimus himself find his way to prison for a season while in Rome? However it happened, in the marvelous providence of God, which is a theme to which we will return, Onesimus was brought face to face with Paul at what must surely have been a dreadfully low point in his life. He is stateless and in constant danger, trying to stay one step ahead of the law. Maybe he was planning to keep running; Rome was just one stop along the way. But Paul knew that runaway Onesimus could not outrun the hound of heaven. God the Lord cannot be really hidden from. And no matter where Onesimus went, his conscience, his sin, his guilt, his lostness would remain. Paul led Onesimus to see however far from Philemon he ran Onesimus could never be free. He would always take his slavery with him. He was by nature a slave to sin and to death and to the devil.

Freedom From Slavery

Picture the scene - here's Paul in chains but truly free, telling Onesimus, whose trying everything he knows to get free, that he can never stop being a slave by any efforts of his own. "But let me tell you about one who was bound and beaten and tortured and crucified, Onesimus." You remember that crucifixion was reserved for slaves and traitors. "There is one who was made to suffer a slave's fate so that you might be freed indeed, Onesimus. Let me tell you about Jesus Christ." And there Paul explained the good news - Jesus bearing our penalty,

winning our pardon, the price of our manumission, our redemption, the slave-price paid in full in the wounds of our Savior, and there with the sound of the shackles of the apostle for accompaniment, the voice of Onesimus could now say at last, "Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night. Thine eye diffused a quickening ray, I woke, the dungeon flamed with light. My chains fell off; my heart was free! And I rose, went forth, and followed Thee!"

There is freedom for you in Jesus. Whatever your outward circumstances, you must know that your heart is enslaved by nature to sin and to death, and however hard you try, however far you run, you can never be free except Jesus make you free. You are in chains tonight if you are not in Christ tonight. But if the Spirit of God makes you free, you will be free indeed. Jesus came to proclaim liberty for the captives in the acceptable year of the Lord's favor. He can set your heart free from the bondage of sin forever. That was the message Onesimus did not know he needed to hear, and when he heard it, it changed everything. And it may be the message you need to hear tonight. The one you need most of all is Jesus Christ. He can bring liberation into your soul. When Paul said he became a father to Onesimus he wasn't suggesting either that he adopted him or that he somehow was the cause that generated Christian life within Onesimus' heart. He didn't make Onesimus into a Christian. There is no formula or method or ritual by which a person is brought from spiritual slavery into freedom, from bondage into liberty, from death to new life. It is the supernatural work of God in the heart, and unless like Onesimus you are born again, neither your religion nor your rebellion can possibly alter your heart's real condition. You must be born again. Have you been born again? Are you a child of God by the work of the Spirit of God and the word of God in your heart? It is the one thing you must have and the only thing that can bring you liberty.

Evidence of the New Birth

Do notice the evidence to which Paul directs our attention of the new birth in Onesimus' life. He points Philemon to two things. First he says there is new behavior and then secondly there are new relationships. Evidence of the new birth - new behavior, verse 11. Onesimus has a wonderfully ironic name. He had, no doubt, been a constant frustration in Philemon's household and a running joke in Philemon's community. The name, Onesimus, means "useful." But according to Paul, he was anything but. While living with Philemon and Apphia he was useless. Perhaps he constantly shirked his responsibilities. Maybe he cut corners. Maybe he was dishonest, unreliable. Whatever the case, Onesimus was a problem. And then to crown it all, he ran away, stealing from his master. What a joke Onesimus' name really was! Mr. Useful! Really, Mr. Useless.

But all of that has changed now, hasn't it? Verse 11, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me." So useful, in fact, that Paul wishes he could keep Onesimus with him, verse 13, "so that he might serve on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel." We really do need to insist in

these days that one of the marks of the new birth, of authentic spiritual life, is change, change. Onesimus, who once ran from service, now delights to serve. He doesn't think it beneath him anymore. Pride, it seems, no longer rules his heart. Self-interest is no longer his governing passion. He is prepared to go back to Philemon and face whatever may be waiting. Now he wants to make a difference, not in some grand, ostentatious way but in quiet service to the needs of Paul in chains. What a change has overcome Onesimus. New behavior.

There's also new relationships. We've already seen that, haven't we? Onesimus loves Paul; Paul loves Onesimus. He is his child, his very heart, a beloved brother. When a person is converted and comes to trust in Christ, they do not remain the same. The bondage and dominion of sin in their hearts is overthrown and they begin to serve and love and care in ways they did not before. They relate to others, especially to other Christians, with new affection and new tender humility and respect. New bonds are forged between them, between people who have no other business together, that would have been quite unthinkable, impossible. People from different backgrounds and social standing and education and ethnicity made one in Christ, bound together with Gospel love.

New behavior and new relationships. As you scrutinize your own heart under the microscope of holy Scripture, can you see those realities there? What evidence is there of the new birth in your life? Have you been born again? It shone all over Onesimus. Is there any spark of it in you? "Take Onesimus back, Philemon, because he's become your brother in Christ. Forgive him because he's been born again and already stands forgiven in God's tribunal." That is the force of his argument here. There really is nothing more inconsistent with new life in Christ than unforgiveness in the church. Let me say that again. There really is nothing more inconsistent with new life in Christ than unforgiveness in His church. What a scandal Philemon's remaining hostility would have provoked within the church that met in his home once Onesimus came back with Tychicus! How disruptive and divisive it would have been! But what a powerful testimony to the watching world looking at the new born church with constant suspicion. What a testimony Philemon's acceptance and forgiveness and love would be to welcome Onesimus back now no longer merely a slave but a beloved brother in Christ. "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." Brothers and sisters, if you have been born again one of the great marks that all the world can see is the way you love and forgive and welcome and care for one another for Jesus' sake.

III. Forgive Because of a Deeper Insight

Forgive because of a pastor's love, forgive because of a Gospel change, then finally forgive because of a deeper insight. In verses 13 to 16 Paul presses Philemon to welcome Onesimus home as his brother. He doesn't want to presume on Philemon's kindness, he says, and simply keep Onesimus with him

because he's so useful. He returns him, rather, so that any future ministry Onesimus might exercise would result not from compulsion but from Philemon's free generosity. And then having said all of that, Paul offers an insight to Philemon that is designed to help him reassess the whole situation, the whole problem. Look at verse 15. "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 more than a slave, as a beloved brother." He's pointing Philemon, isn't he, to the sovereign providence of God superintending all of these events, Philemon - Onesimus' theft and his escape, his eventual arrival at Rome, his coming somehow into contact with Paul of all people, his wonderful conversion, and now his return - utterly, irreversibly changed. All of it is the product, Paul says, of supernatural sovereign design guiding Onesimus' every step, leading him from Philemon to Paul and now back to Philemon. The Lord did it all, we learn, to save Onesimus and restore the relationship between him and Philemon, even to transform it, that now he's no longer merely a slave, for there is in Christ neither slave nor free, but he is a beloved brother, one with his master in Christ Jesus.

The Surprise of God's Sovereignty

Sometimes I think we are too quick to question the mysterious working of God's sovereign purposes. We wonder at the waywardness of rebel children or the steady drift of an unconverted spouse or the terrible lostness of a dear colleague friend. We've been praying for them and witnessing to them and nothing happens. In fact, sometimes it seems like circumstances conspire and they drift further and further! In those moments, remember Onesimus. Remember Onesimus - how far he drifted, how far he wandered. All the way to Rome he ran! But though all his meandering steps may have seemed random and disordered to him and to us, yet in the perfect design of God they led directly to Paul and to a new beginning. Never doubt the perfect wisdom of God who does all things well. "Forgive him, Philemon, because of a pastor's love, forgive him because of a Gospel change, and forgive him because of a deeper insight. Do you see what God has really been doing, Philemon?"

There is actually evidence from history that Philemon and the Colossian church did welcome Onesimus back. At least one ancient witness tells us that Onesimus the slave went on to become the bishop of Ephesus. Philemon, it seems, forgave, and God worked and Onesimus, Mr. Useful, went on to be a Gospel servant used for the good of many others in the years that lay ahead. A lack of forgiveness disrupts the fellowship of the saints and poisons the church, but true forgiveness does much more than simply heal the breach between two hostile parties. It strengthens the whole body and gives testimony to the world of the transforming power of the Gospel. Who knows whether an unforgiving attitude toward Onesimus might have discouraged him or sent him away, closed down all possibility of remaining in Colossae and serving the church. But he was forgiven and restored and he did become truly useful indeed. Forgiveness opens possibilities that alienation forever closes. And so, with God helping us as we

learn to love each other well, who knows what avenues of usefulness might open to us, to you, for the advancement of the kingdom of God that we, all of us, might be useful by the grace of God at work in our lives. May God help us and make us a people of forgiveness and reconciliation to the glory and praise of His great name. Will you pray with me?

Father, we bless you for the Gospel. We pray now as we receive Your Word that You would cause it to bear fruit in our lives, first to flee for freedom to Christ and then, having been forgiven, to learn to forgive that new avenues of usefulness might be opened to us and the watching world may see what the Gospel does, mighty in bringing change and birthing a new society, the society of the forgiven, learning to forgive - the church of Jesus Christ. For we ask this in our Savior's name, amen.

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