

Philemon: Becoming Christ's Heart

335 words in the original Greek ... the shortest of all of Paul's letters.

... in fact, this was more of a note than a letter

... and yet it is intended for public hearing because it is addressed, not just to Philemon but to the church that met in the house of Archippus.

The reformer John Knox saw this as a letter to an individual wrapped inside the letter to a church.

The theme of this letter is the release of a slave from his deserved punishment and a recommendation to Philemon that, not only should he be treated with forgiveness, he should be welcomed into Philemon's home as a cherished family member.

Paul's advocacy of the slave's case was genuinely revolutionary and marked the opening of a new chapter in social relationships ...

... now defined, not by the dominant culture, but by Christ ...

... by mercy, grace, forgiveness and the kind of equality that can only exist inside the Church.

Here's the story ...

A slave named Onesimus had wronged his owner Philemon, a Christian living at Colossae (vv. 1-2; cf. Col. 4:9, 17 with Archippus named in the prescript),

... Onesimus has run away but the nature of his crime isn't clear

... verse 18-19 may imply that he had stolen money (or something) from Philemon.

But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it ... (Philemon. 1:18-19)

After running away Onesimus had come into contact with Paul ... probably as a fellow prisoner.

Onesimus' desire to seek Paul's protection wasn't without cost...

... according to Roman law whoever gave a run-away slave hospitality, they were liable to the slave's master for the value of each day's lost work.

Paul is promising Philemon that he will pay **WHATEVER** debt Onesimus owed.

... of course, Paul was hoping that Philemon would set Onesimus free.

Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. (Philemon 1:21)

What is so powerful about this is that in the Roman world there were a number of ways for a slave to gain his freedom ...

... but none of those ways were possible for criminal slave who had escaped.

... in those cases, the slave was to be arrested and brutally punished ... even executed.

Paul's implication that Philemon free Onesimus was revolutionary.

In fact, Paul writes something that entirely unique, gloriously profound, and wonderfully precious ...

Look at what Paul says to Philemon about Onesimus

¹² I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, (Philemon 1:12)

Paul describes Onesimus as a part of himself, as his "very heart."

Can you not see the love that Paul has for Onesimus?

Paul is willing to pay his debt!

Paul wants to see this humble slave made free!

Paul says treat Onesimus as if he were me ... **he is my very heart.**

This my friend is how the world I changed!

The advertisements are right ...Love changes the world

... but not just any love ... the love of the Lord Jesus Christ changes everything!!

That is what I see in this short letter ...

... not just the story of an apostle and a runaway slave he meets in Jail.

- Like the Passover lamb and the Israelites
- The King and the Shulamite woman in the Song-of-Solomon
- Boaz and Ruth
- Now here ... Paul and Onesimus

We see in the relationship between Paul and Onesimus a picture of the relationship that exists between Christ and the believer.

This letter says three things that every child of God needs to know.

1. You are FREE and of GREAT VALUE

¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, ¹¹ who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. (Philemon 1:10-11)

Onesimus was begotten (born) in and in/through Paul imprisonment

He who was USELESS is now useful—Christ knows nothing of hopeless cases.

Paul declares the freedom and value of Onesimus...

... Jesus declares your freedom and your value.

One day Jesus returned to his hometown of Nazareth, and it was the Sabbath ...

... In ancient Israel it was customary in the Synagogue for a common Israelite to read from the Torah on the Sabbath Day.

On this particular day in Nazareth Jesus stood up to read and they handed him the Isaiah scroll ... here is the scene ...

¹⁷ And the book of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. And He opened the book and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸ "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, ¹⁹ TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." ²⁰ And He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. ²¹ And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4:17-21)

- Jesus read, A messiah is coming who will be anointed to preach the gospel to the poor
- He will be sent to set the captives free
- The Messiah will cause the blind to recover their sight
- The Messiah will set the captive free

And then Jesus closed the book ... everybody was staring at him

... and Jesus looked back and said I AM THAT MESSIAH!

... and guess how hometown Nazareth responded to their native son???

They tried to throw him off a cliff and kill him!

Sin is so powerfully blinding that captives will fight to stay in bondage ... they will attack and kill anyone who tries to set them free ...

Jesus says something very strange in John 8

³⁴ Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. ³⁵ "The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. ³⁶ "So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. ³⁷ "I know that you are Abraham's descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. (Jn. 8:34-37)

Jesus tells these Pharisees “If I make you free, you will be free indeed” but here is the kicker...this is the very reason you are going to try to kill me

... my word has not place in you.

Make no mistake about it ... the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ is FOOLISHNESS to those who will not believe it!

Jesus was betrayed, bound, beaten and killed ... just so you could be set free.

... And not partially free ... COMPLETELY FREE!

There is one other thing

Paul says of Onesimus that he WAS USELESS to you but now he is USEFUL to all of us.

... what changed?

The gospel tells us that (**Romans 3:23**) that there is none righteous

(**Romans 6:23**) The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life

[And here is where the change comes] (**Romans 5:8**) God commended his love to us that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

... and how does that “love” come to us? (**Romans 10:9,10**) If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead you will be saved.

This is what happened to Onesimus.

... every blood washed born again child of God is FREE and of GREAT VALUE

- You're a valuable because of **who you are**—you are created in God's likeness.
- You're valuable because of **what you cost**—the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- You are valuable because of **what you can become**—as God's child (loved and adopted) you can be sure that God has a plan for your life.

2. You are no longer SLAVES but SIBLINGS of Christ

¹⁵ For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷ If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. (Philemon 1:15-17)

The key words to notice are- slave and brother.

Onesimus is NO LONGER a slave

Onesimus is to be A BELOVED BROTHER

Because of what has happened in the life Onesimus ... the NEW BIRTH... everything is different.

In fact, Paul says “accept Onesimus as you would me” ... in other words ‘as if he were me’

This is exactly how it is with us and Jesus.

Christ says to the Father, receive Nathan as you would receive me

²⁹ For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; ³⁰ and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified. ³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us? (Rom. 8:29-31)

One of the purposes of God in redemption is so that Christ would be the firstborn (here is the phrase) AMONG MANY BRETHREN.

To believe on Christ is to become a child of God ... and that comes with great reward.

¹⁶ The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (Rom. 8:16-17)

Here is an element of the Christian life that we often take for granted.

... being a child of God means to have a personal relationship with God.

... it means to live a life of knowing, desiring, following, and walking with God.

We consistently converse with God in prayer.

We hear God speak through scripture as He guides our life from day to day.

We know His presence for strength, comfort, assurance, guidance and direction.

As Romans 8:16 says, “His Spirit bears witness with our spirit and because of this we know we are His children.”

... This is what Jesus called “abiding in the vine.”

... This is what Paul meant about “setting your mind on things above.”

... It is from this well we draw strength and wisdom from day to day.

This is why we say that Christianity isn’t just a religion, it is also a relationship.

Paul’s love and relationship with Onesimus reminds us of our relationship with Christ ... and just to make this clear Paul includes one other thing...

Paul says to Philemon “if you regard me as a partner”

The word partner is the word ‘koi-no-non’ (similar to koinonia)

Here is how Benson defines this word:

One having fellowship with others in Christ, or a sharer with others in the blessings of the gospel, the dearest bond of friendship.

Through salvation we become the brothers and sisters of Christ and by virtue of that ...

... brother and sister to everyone else who also believe and put their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

- We are free and of great value
- We are no longer slaves but siblings with Christ

3. The ACCEPTED are called to be ACCEPTABLE

I want to go back to the first of this letter and begin in the middle of verse 6

I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. ⁷ For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. ⁸ Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you (Philemon 1:6-9)

Paul who has be directly instrumental in the salvation of Epaphras as well as Philemon ...

... Paul who has indirectly influenced the planting of the churches in Colossae and Laodicea

... Paul is asking (not demanding) ... asking for Philemon to do some things.

- Jesus who is our redeemer ...
- Jesus who is the cornerstone of the church ...

- Jesus, the one who has promised us the gates of hell would not prevail ...

Jesus, who paid our sin debt, has every right to make requests of us.

It is time for us to stop seeing the commands of Christ as something negative ...

They are wonderful!!!

Jesus is not like the lazy schoolteacher who delights in giving “busy” work...

... everything that Jesus asks us to do is good and beneficial for us.

In Matthew 6 when Jesus was condemning the praying, fasting, and giving of the Pharisees he wasn't telling us not to PRAY, FAST, OR GIVE ...

... He was saying do it, but do it right – with humility, reverence, worship, and for God alone.

When Jesus commended the widow who gave a penny and told the rich young ruler to sell all he had and give to the poor ... he wasn't saying don't give ...

... Jesus was saying give the right way ... give sacrificially.

Jesus, who paid our sin debt, has every right to make requests of us.

The ACCEPTED are called to be ACCEPTABLE

Look again at what Paul writes in verse 6

“I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.”

What exactly does Paul mean about the **“fellowship of our faith becoming effective through knowledge?”**

God is Sovereign and he could over rule and over ride anything ...

... and yet we find over and over again that the “tone of the Lord’s voice” is invitational ...

... O Jerusalem how often would I have gathered you under my wings like a hen does it chicks but you wouldn’t let me.

... follow me and I will make you fishers of men

... come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden

... seek ye first the kingdom of God and then all ...

... abide in me and I’ll abide in you...

... draw nigh to God and He’ll draw nigh ...

... seek ye the Lord while he may be found

... God shut the door of the Ark after Noah and his family willing entered

... he who is thirsty come and drink ...

Look how Paul deals with Philemon the same way ... with a “requesting” “asking” “beckoning” voice.

... Paul says, Philemon, I am sending Onesimus back to you, I rather keep him with me but I will not do that ...

without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. (Philemon 1:14)

Here is how you know you have a real, authentic personal relationship with the Lord ...

... you are serving and obeying him... not because you have to ... simply because you want to.

*** One of the most precious laws found in Deuteronomy 15 called “The Law of the Love Slave.”

A man sells himself into slavery to pay off the debts he could not pay.

Then in Jewish law that man was to be released from his slave obligations after the 6th year (7th year was the year of Jubilee)

At the end of the 6th year the slave was taken to the gate where he came through and is told you are free to go.

However, if the slave finds the life of service to his master better than life before ...

... he prefers life in the master’s house to life outside

... There at the gate he could say to the Master, “I don’t want to go free, I want to continue to serve you.”

The slave could place his ear against the door post and the master would take a sharp punch and punch a hole through the earlobe and put a ring in it.

... and everywhere that slave went ... everybody who saw him saw that ring

... and that ring was a constant reminder to everyone ... “he wasn’t serving the master because he had to ...

... the only thing that compelled that slave to serve and obey the master was LOVE

“I’m not serving the master out of duty, I am serving him simply because I want to.”

Friend, this is where Jesus is trying to bring everyone of us.

We are free and of great value ...

We are the children of God ...

... and we are living lives of glad acceptable obedience, not because we have to ... simply because we love Him.

Yes there is law because sinners need laws ... but to you and I they are not laws ... they are simply more opportunities to show Jesus how much we love HIM.