

Accepting Has a Price

Sermon of 2020-09-13

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Today we want to focus our attention on the shortest book in the Bible: Philemon. It's tucked between Titus and Hebrews and is one of the Pauline epistles. It's short, but nonetheless very significant! To understand the letter, though, we need to understand the story behind it. So here's some background.

At the time of its composition, the Apostle Paul is under house arrest in Rome because of his work spreading the Gospel. (It is believed that he wrote this letter as he was awaiting trial, around 58-60 AD.) In the course of his imprisonment he came in contact with a young man named Onesimus and was able to lead him to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul learns that Onesimus is, in fact, a runaway slave from Colossae (likely through confession, but we don't know for certain!) Now being a runaway slave wasn't a small thing in that day; there were, in fact, severe penalties ... imprisonment, perhaps even death! Knowing this, Paul is very determined to see Onesimus return to his master so that things can be made right again.

Paul happens to know Onesimus' master, Philemon, which is no coincidence. While Paul wasn't responsible for Philemon's conversion, he had

been instrumental in his faith journey. And Paul knew Philemon (and his wife Apphia) as the couple who hosted the church in Colossae. The letter is addressed to Philemon, whom Paul calls “our dear friend and fellow worker”, making it clear that they share a close relationship that is based in the mission of the church.

Onesimus’ situation is complicated further by the fact that he didn’t just run away from Philemon and Apphia, he stole from them in the process (vs 18); and likely something of value that would have sustained him while he was “on the run”. Paul knows that Onesimus needs to return home, but it won’t be easy given the circumstances surrounding his departure, so he sends him with this letter.

Paul’s pastor’s heart is evident through the letter. He expresses gratitude for and affirms Philemon’s faith and love (v 5,7). He encourages Philemon’s witness (vs 6). He appeals to Philemon’s heart and his personal integrity, rather than ordering him as he could have done as an Apostle (vs. 8-9). He presents Onesimus as his “own son” (vs 10) and his “very heart” (vs 11). You can feel his love, both for Philemon and for Onesimus, from start to finish.

Most significantly, Paul highlights the change that has taken place in Onesimus’ life ... a change that impacts his relationship with Philemon. Because of his faith in Jesus, Onesimus is now a brother in the Lord, he is part of the family of God, part of the church. He is saved, redeemed, made free in Christ! In verse 10

Paul asserts that Onesimus became a Christian under his ministry. Paul is his spiritual father; Onesimus a spiritual son. And, on that basis, Paul declares in verse 11, *“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”*

Ironically, the name Onesimus literally means “useful”. As a run-away slave, Onesimus had proven useless to Philemon – unreliable, disloyal, unfaithful. Now, though, as a brother in Christ he was truly useful – to God, to the church, to Paul and to Philemon. Paul sees and expresses the silver lining in the dark cloud of Onesimus’ abandonment in verse 15. In running from Philemon he found Christ. God used his desertion to bring him deliverance. Christ turned him from betrayer to brother.

Paul emphasizes the new relationship that Onesimus and Philemon now share in Christ. They are brothers. In fact, Onesimus is a ‘dear brother’ (vs 16). As a slave, he had been a significant part of Philemon’s family previously. But now, he returns as a bond-slave, choosing to serve faithfully, and as a brother, eternally linked by faith in Jesus Christ. And so Paul appeals (on the basis of Christian brotherhood) to Philemon to take Onesimus back!

What does that look like? Well Paul makes it clear that:

1. He was to welcome Onesimus (vs 17) – really welcome him!

Paul says, “welcome him as you would welcome me”; and let’s be honest here, believers of that day were eager to welcome Paul into their home! So what is Paul asking?

- Throw the welcome mat out.
- Have a party in his honour.
- Give him a place to hang his hat again.
- Embrace him ... heart and soul!

But this was no easy ask! Onesimus had robbed them, abandoned them, left them looking like fools. His actions would likely have caused people to question Philemon and Apphia’s Christian character and witness. I mean, why would their slave run? Given the history, it would be difficult to trust Onesimus and even more difficult to welcome him. Yet, Paul, through the Spirit, appeals to Philemon to do just that ... to welcome him back AS A BROTHER!

Do you struggle to fully embrace brothers and sisters who have caused you harm; believers who have caused you to suffer loss? Perhaps not a real physical loss, but maybe an emotional or spiritual loss? Loss of dignity. Loss of integrity (in other people’s eyes). Loss of confidence. Loss of hope. This little letter is a reminder that, no matter the hurt, no matter the harm, no matter the losses experienced at their hands, we are called by God to welcome our brothers and

sisters. We are to make room for them in our lives; to accept them as family, even if they have cost us dearly. Often, the acceptance that God asks us to extend comes at a price! The plea here is to accept and love dearly the sinner who has become a sister or brother! (vs 16). Are you?

2. He was to forgive Onesimus.

In Philemon and Apphia's case, welcoming meant forgiving a significant debt. Paul is clearly aware of this as he offers to cover the debt himself, if needed (vs 18). Of course, he also reminds Philemon that he himself is indebted to Paul who has mentored him in the Gospel.

The truth is we are all indebted. We are indebted to Jesus Christ who paid the price for our sins and offered us His complete forgiveness.

This real-life situation between Philemon and Onesimus paints a picture of the forgiveness that is required as we welcome lost ones home into the fold and family of God. Jesus offered that forgiveness first. And we, as His children, will often be called to extend it as we welcome new brothers and sisters. The forgiveness we have received, we are to give. Big debts, little debts – it doesn't matter. Forgiveness is ours to offer. That's what God's family does!

So who is it that you are struggling to forgive today? Is it a brother or sister in Christ? Then this little letter is a reminder of the need to forgive. We can't

claim to welcome them if we aren't prepared to forgive them. It isn't easy, but through Christ's love poured out in our hearts, we can forgive. And we are known to be His by the love we have for one another. Holding grudges, keeping score, creating distance, living in bitterness and unforgiveness is not God's way. It isn't an option in the family of God.

3. He was to "Do Even More"!

At least that's what Paul anticipated from Philemon (according to vs 21)!

What might that "even more" have entailed?

- Releasing Onesimus from slavery? – perhaps
- Fully restoring him within the household and family? Absolutely
- Fully receiving him as an equal member in the church? Definitely
- Acknowledging publicly how God had used a negative (Onesimus' abandonment) to create an amazing positive for Onesimus (he is now a believer and brother!), for the Kingdom (one who was lost has now been found, and is eager to serve the church and its mission), and for Philemon (he would grow significantly in his faith as he welcomed and forgave Onesimus, he has a new brother, he has his lost slave back)? For sure!

What about those you are being asked to welcome and forgive? What might that “even more” look like in your circumstance? Do you believe that, through the Spirit, you can offer them even more? Are you willing?

All are welcome in the family of God! We know the wonder of that truth, as we have been welcomed and embraced by Jesus, adopted as His children, loved as His daughters and sons. Jesus forgave the rulers who sentenced Him to die, the crowd who demanded His crucifixion, and the very soldiers who nailed Him to the cross. He proved that there is nothing He will not forgive. He proved His love that day! And so He asks us, the welcomed and forgiven, to welcome and forgive the sinner who is made a saint through His cleansing blood!

Is there an Onesimus in your life today that you need to welcome? Let Christ’s love flow into and through you so that you can embrace that brother or sister with open arms of forgiveness and acceptance. Let’s help them know they are welcome in the family of God!