**Philemon 1,7-21** September 4, 2022

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*Philemon 1:1,7-21 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker… 7Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.*

*8Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, 9yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—10I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. 11Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.*

*12I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 13I 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. 14But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. 15Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—16no 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 man and as a brother in the Lord.*

*17So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. 19I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. 20I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.*

**Be Willing to Be Reconciled**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

Imagine these three short scenarios.

1. An uninsured motorist was driving under the influence and smashed into your car. You are fine, but your car is a total loss. You only had liability insurance. There’s not going to be any check in the mail.

2. A substitute teacher (no one you know) was teaching a high school class. Students were giving her a hard time, and then right as the bell rang, one of the students distracted her while another stole her phone. She didn’t know who or exactly how. She was just trying to substitute, to help out.

3. The young man hadn’t chosen a path in life. He finally decided on a trade and made the first payment for a private trade school. Day one of classes, he showed up and the doors were locked with a note scrawled on a piece of paper taped to the glass doors. “Closed until further notice.” Never got a dime back or a day of instruction.

These three—the accident victim, the substitute teacher, the would-be student—all three were wronged, but none was hurt. Some will say, “It’s just money,” but it’s not just money. Truth be told, they’ve lost a lot more than money. How can justice be done?

Building off those examples, imagine yourself in another scene. (Warning: for this you are going to have to set some of your 21st century sensibilities to the side and just imagine this without passing judgment.) You are a first century Greek, you have the toga and everything! You live in a modest Greek city. You are moderately wealthy, married, probably middle age. You are Christian. Your Christian faith is so central to your life that you host the local Christian congregation at your house *every week!!!* As all people of your social standing, you have a couple slaves. That slavery is quite a bit different from the plantation slavery the word conjures up in our minds. Your slaves live in your own house… and there’s lots of other stuff we don’t have time to get into. (I’m not praising it, just saying it was different.)

That’s who you are. Now here is the event:

You see a young man standing at the front door. You recognize him as your slave who ran away a few months ago. Back when he first ran away, you were furious. You had invested a lot in him, trusted him, and he betrayed you. At first you were shocked and enraged. Over the months you had begun to move beyond the past. Then today, suddenly, like a sore tooth you had almost forgotten about, he stands on your front step reminding you of past events you’d like to forget. With him is another man with a letter in his hand. You go out front to meet them.

You, your name is Philemon. The unwelcome man on the front step, your runaway slave, is Onesimus. The letter is from the Apostle Paul.

It is important for us to imagine ourselves in Philemon’s shoes, because today’s apostolic Word of God was addressed to Philemon. Paul, the author, knew the right answer. Onesimus, the runaway slave, had been brought to do the right thing. But this letter addresses the difficult situation and choices in front of Philemon.

These situations and choices are not so different from those sometimes in front of us. Days, weeks or months after we have been wronged, we have recourse to justice. Not revenge, mind you, just justice; our dues, our rights. But when people are involved, especially fellow believers in Christ, it gets complicated, as it was for Philemon.

Let’s rewind the story a thousand miles and a few weeks. In Rome, the largest city in the world of its time, we find the Apostle Paul. He is imprisoned waiting for trial. We might ask whether it is really even an imprisonment. True enough, his right hand is bound to a soldier’s left at all times, but he lived in a rented house, not a dungeon. His friends were free to come and go and to provide for his needs. Paul was free to speak the Gospel to all who visited. *And,* sometime during this two year house arrest, a runaway slave named Onesimus happened upon Paul. What drew him to Paul, who knows, but he knew Paul at least by reputation if not personally. Paul, that ultimate evangelist and missionary, whether he knew Onesimus’ troubled runaway slave story up front or not, he spoke the story of Jesus Christ to this unbelieving man. Through Paul’s patient sharing of the Gospel, Onesimus got saved! That’s what Paul means in verse 10 when says, ***“Onesimus became my son while I was in chains.”***

As the reality of the Christian faith dawned on this runaway, he gave himself in service to Paul. More likely than not, he did legwork for Paul who couldn’t leave his confinement. Forgiveness in Jesus worked Onesimus into becoming a servant, a slave if you will, of Christ. At some point, Paul must have broached the subject of what was the right thing for Onesimus to do. How that all went down with a soldier tied to him, I’m not sure. But Paul led Onesimus to realize that things couldn’t continue as they were. The right thing for him to do was to return to his slave master. (I told you you would have to check your 21st century sensibilities at the door, didn’t I!)

But here was the problem. Onesimus was a runaway slave. In the custom of the day, slaves did kind of have a provision for temporarily “hiding” while issues with a master were resolved. (I can give you a resource for that fascinating discussion if you would like. Witherington, p.70) But by fleeing all the way to Rome and his long absence, Onesimus had exceeded all allowances. He was a runaway. Runaway slaves could be dealt with severely, even to the point of being put to death—though usually masters wanted to protect their investment and so resorted to less extreme measures like whipping or maybe branding. At any rate, for Onesimus, “doing the right thing” was complicated with some very big worries!

At this point, Paul lived up to his faith. He had once been a violent man and persecutor of God’s church. He knew first-hand the joy of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Paul was only too glad to be a mediator between these two Christians, the runaway Onesimus and his disgruntled master, Philemon.

Paul wrote the letter. Then, committing Onesimus together with another man named Tychicus to God, Paul sent them on their way. Maybe 2-3 weeks later, they showed up at Philemon’s door.

Now let’s go back to imagining being Philemon. When you meet Onesimus at your front door, you don’t welcome him with a smile and a hug. Have you ever had an employee take you to the cleaners? Nor do you burst into a foul-mouthed fit of rage. You are a Christian; I know you are. But you find yourself in an unexpected place, trying to figure out what is going on. Bad memories are bubbling to the surface.

You have a serious face, maybe even a scowl as Tychicus hands you the letter. You open it and the first thing on the paper tells you who it is from, ***“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother.”***

It reads, ***“To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker,*** *to Apphia our sister (Philemon’s wife)…and to the church that meets in your home: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”*

Yes, Paul knows the buttons to push! He reminds you that no matter what situation any of us are in, every Christian always lives under the grace and peace of God through Jesus Christ. We are forgiven. We are adopted. We are favored by God. And so in every single personal interaction in life, we act like people under God’s grace. You may feel victimized, wronged, misunderstood or whatever, but God has been so kind to you! And so God’s goodness shapes every interaction you have, even when you are hurting.

Paul goes on, ***“Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.”*** Yes, Paul knows the buttons to push. He lays it on thick. You have a reputation of being a Christian among Christians. As such, you have something to live up to.

Paul, a leader of church leaders, then says, ***“Although in Christ I could be bold and order you (Philemon) to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love”*** (8). He lets you know that he isn’t going to order you to do the right thing. You have this runaway who really has it coming, but Paul is cutting you off at the pass. He is appealing to the new Christian life in you. Paul hopes that you will do the right thing to the runaway slave, but that it ***“will be spontaneous and not forced.”***

And then, after appealing to your Christian nature, Paul also pleads Onesimus’ case, ***“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains… I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.”*** Whatever you might think of Onesimus, Paul thinks very much of him. And then Paul makes his big request of you, ***“That you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother… if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”***

This letter puts you in a hard place. In the past few months, you have gotten used to thinking of yourself as wronged. In a way, it’s a comfortable place to be—you in the right and Onesimus in the wrong. You can complain about the unfairness of it. You can point out your innocence, and the other person’s guilt. You can hold your head high while the other person does God knows what with their ill-gotten gain. Yes, it’s a comfortable place to be, holding a grudge, being the victim. But Paul’s letter asks you to leave all that, to set aside justice as well, and to welcome this slave as if he were God’s apostle.

He’s asking a lot, isn’t he! And he is not demanding you do it, simply putting the right thing in front of you, blinking breathing, literally on your doorstep.

There was a Christian man who decades ago stood up in a group of church people, 50, 80, a hundred of them and he called them fools; “stupid” was the word he used. The chairman of the meeting told the man he was out of line and ought to apologize. He apologized, because he was told to. An hour later he stood up again. Everyone was ready for another outburst. He said, “Last time I spoke, I apologized to all of you because someone told me to. I wasn’t insincere, but my heart wasn’t in it. I needed time. And now, my heart is where it needs to be, and so again I say, ‘I am sorry.’”

Paul can’t make you take Onesimus back for the right reasons. You have to want to do this for the right reasons.

A couple weeks ago, totally unexpectedly, there was this guy on the radio talking about Aristotle, the Greek philosopher. Aristotle discussed two powerful forces for good in the world: justice and friendship. Which is greater? Aristotle said friendship. Friendship is greater because when you are with friends, you set aside justice. Your friend may owe you something—making him repay would be justice—but you say, “Don’t worry about it.” You set aside justice for friendship. You may say something offensive, but your friend doesn’t demand an apology, he overlooks it—because you are friends. Friendship trumps justice.

At the end of three years with the disciples, you know what Jesus said? Jesus said, *“I call you friends.”* You know what he was doing? He was setting aside justice, wasn’t he? All that we owe and can’t repay, is forgiven. Friendship is greater than justice. Then Jesus told his friends, *“This is my command: Love each other”* (John 15:15-17).

Philemon, are you listening? Christians, Are you listening? In Christ Jesus, set aside justice for friendship, be willing to be reconciled. Amen.