

“For Love’s Sake”

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Last week we began looking at what happens to be the shortest book in the entire Bible, this short letter written by the Apostle Paul to a man named Philemon about one of his slaves, Onesimus, who had run away. But as it turns out, this letter is not just a personal letter. Paul intended this letter to be read in the church and so we find some important instructions for us, especially in the areas of forgiveness and reconciliation. So this morning as we study this passage we’re going to look at the *relationship*, the *request*, and finally the *result*.

Forgiveness is not something that comes naturally to most of us. C.S. Lewis said, “Everyone thinks forgiveness is a lovely idea, until he has something to forgive.” In other words, we like the idea of forgiveness, especially if we’re the ones who need to be forgiven. But when someone does something to *us*, forgiveness isn’t quite so easy. We want that person punished. Paul knew this natural tendency of humans and so this letter is his way of helping Philemon to understand the Christian responsibility of forgiveness.

In the verses that we discussed last week, Paul is kind of buttering up Philemon. He says, “I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints.” You can tell that he is leading up to asking for something and sure enough, beginning in verse 8 Paul begins making his case for Philemon to receive Onesimus back without punishing him.

The reason Paul is so concerned about Onesimus is because Onesimus is not the same man he was when he ran away. At some point Onesimus had come in contact with Paul and was able to hear the gospel in a saving way. Onesimus had become a follower of Jesus. He was now a new creation. In verse 10 Paul says, “I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.” Notice that in this passage Paul uses the words son and

father and brother when he’s talking about this man who was a slave and a criminal. Paul is showing us the importance of the *relationship*.

You see, becoming a follower of Jesus Christ is about more than just securing a place in heaven when you die. It means becoming a part of a family. The picture we get in the Bible is that God adopts us into His family – not because we deserve it because He wants to. That’s what the Church is all about. We’re a family. Participating in a church should be like a family reunion and we should be welcoming new people into our fellowship, making them truly feel like they’re part of our family.

So because of the part that Paul played in helping Onesimus become a part of the Christian family and learn what it means to follow Christ he refers to Onesimus as his “child” in the faith. That also means that the relationship between Onesimus the slave and Philemon the master has changed, even though they are still slave and master. The point is that for those of us who are in Christ, our relationships change. It doesn’t necessarily mean that our earthly positions change, but those positions are now understood in light of our eternal positions. Who we are in Christ then affects how we live our lives and how we perform our work. This is what Paul means in Colossians 3 when he says, “slaves obey your masters like you would obey Jesus. Do your work as if you’re working for the Lord.” Then in Colossians 4 he says, “Masters treat your slaves fairly and justly, knowing that *you* have a master in heaven.” Our relationships with each other are determined by our relationship with Christ.

The second thing I want us to look at in this passage is the *request*. There are basically two reasons, two motivations for us to do something. We can agree to do something because we *have* to, because we have no other choice, or we can agree to do something because we *want to*.

In verse 8 Paul says, “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.” What he’s saying is that as an Apostle he has the authority to require Philemon to accept Onesimus back without punishing him. But commanding it wouldn’t change Philemon’s heart.

What God is giving us here is actually a model for Christians to help rebuild damaged relationships. This is a pattern for reconciliation. First of all, we need to appeal to love. We are to love each other as Christ loves us and so our first commitment in resolving a conflict like the one in Philemon is to love God and love each other. The second step is to acknowledge the positive that has already taken place. Paul points out that Onesimus was useless but now he’s useful. He was formerly unconverted, now he’s a brother in Christ. Paul also points out the way that Philemon already treats the other saints. He’s already in the habit of treating other Christians the way Paul hopes he’ll treat Onesimus.

The third step in Paul’s request for reconciliation involves sacrifice. We must be willing to give up something that is important to us in order to repair the relationship. Paul points out that he wishes he could keep Onesimus with him in prison, but he must give that up for the greater good. Paul also tells Philemon that he’s willing to pay for any loss or damages from Onesimus running away. Onesimus also is risking his health and life by going back after running away. The Roman laws were very harsh on runaway slaves. And Philemon is being asked to give up his right to have Onesimus punished, and restoring the relationship will also cost him financially. So that’s Paul’s *request* – that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus be not only restored but that there be better relationship as fellow Christians, and that Philemon would make the right decision because he wants to not because he is coerced into doing it.

The final point this morning, then, is the *result*. What happened and what can happen if we will work for biblical, godly reconciliation in our own lives? To illustrate, let me point out that the Apostle Paul loved to use word-plays in his

writing and this letter is no exception. In verse 11 he says, “Formerly Onesimus was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.” The name Onesimus means “useful,” which is why it was such a fairly common name for household slaves. Paul says Onesimus was formerly useless. We don’t know if he means that Onesimus was useless while he was working for Philemon or if he simply means that a runaway slave is useless. The point is that now that he has become a Christian he has developed a true servant’s heart, like Paul had, making him useful to Paul and to Philemon and to God.

Not only is Onesimus now useful, but in verse 15 Paul points out that “this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother.” The trajectory of Onesimus’ life was forever altered when he became a follower of Christ. He and Philemon were then connected to each other forever.

Paul seems to hint in this letter that he would like Philemon to send Onesimus back to him, but he doesn’t come right out and say it. We don’t really know what happened when this letter was delivered. We do know that Philemon is closely connected with the letter to the Colossians and that they were probably written and delivered at the same time.

We also know that a number of years later Ignatius of Antioch was being taken to Rome to be executed. Along the way he wrote a number of letters to the churches in Asia Minor. In his letter to the church in Ephesus he mentions their much-loved bishop, whose name is Onesimus. Now we don’t have any definitive proof, but it’s very likely that Onesimus the slave who gave his life to Christ under the influence of the Apostle Paul became Onesimus the bishop who oversaw the compiling of the first collection of Paul’s letters, which forms the largest section of the New Testament. That’s a God-sized result.

So what can we take away from this today? A couple of things, I think. First of all, as Christians we are all called to be mediators, to help Christians to be reconciled and to rebuild relationships. We can only do that by the power of the Holy Spirit and by appealing to love,

acknowledging the positive on both sides and by being willing to sacrifice for the sake of the relationship. Second, I think we need to trust that God really does make all things work together for the good of those who are called according to his purpose. Even those things that seem like bad things at the time.

Finally, and I think this is the most important, you and I need to recognize that in God's eyes *we* are Onesimus. We are the rebellious, runaway servant. Just as the Apostle Paul was essentially offering his own self to pay the debts of Onesimus, even more did Christ put himself in our place to pay for ours. When Christ claimed you as his own he said to God the Father, "whatever they owe charge that to my account." Friends, what a blessing we have each received. My hope and prayer is that we would repond in love, not out of compulsion, to be the church and to have a passion for those people in our community who don't know Christ yet. I pray that we as a congregation would find creative ways to share the good news with our friends and neighbors, even if it means having to sacrifice, that we would be about the business of reconciling relationships, and that we would do it all for love's sake.

Amen