

Sermon Discussion

29 March 2020

Philemon 8-14 (read)

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 for 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.

Dig Deeper

The name Onesimus literally means **“useful”** or **“profitable”** and was frequently given to slaves. He is also mentioned in Colossians 4:9 as accompanying Tychicus with the letter to the Colossians. In verse 11, Paul uselessly describes his former life as **“useless.”**

The play on words describes the before and after of Onesimus's conversion. By stealing from Philemon and running away, Onesimus had become **“useless,”** but having repented and become obedient to Christ, Onesimus had now become **“useful”** both to Paul and to Philemon. This change particularly highlights the transforming power of the gospel.

1. Paul mentions that he is in prison multiple times in this letter. In what ways are you challenged by Paul's faithfulness to continue to advance the gospel even while in prison (see verse 10)?
2. In Acts, when Paul and Silas were imprisoned they sang praises to the Lord. What do you think moved Paul to be willing to suffer anything for Christ and be joyful about it all the way? Would you describe your service to the Lord as joyful sacrifice? Why or why not?
3. Onesimus means **“useful”** but prior to his salvation, he was described as useless. In what way have you seen the gospel transform you or others to be useful for God's kingdom?
4. With Onesimus becoming **“useful”** through salvation, what should this tell us about finding our true identity in Christ?

Philemon 15-18 (read)

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, 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.

Dig Deeper

In verse 15, we see the phrase **“why he was parted from you”**. The Greek verb is passive, meaning that it does not indicate who is responsible for action expressed. It is best seen as a “divine passive,” where God is understood to be sovereignly behind the events. It is reminiscent of Joseph's betrayal by his brothers, which resulted in his long stay in Egypt. After Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he remarks, **“it was not you who sent me here, but God”** (Genesis 45:8).

Another point to consider is that Paul could have said more explicitly, **“no longer a slave,”** in verse 16, which would make it clear that he expected Onesimus's emancipation. However, the language allows more freedom for Philemon to ponder and then choose to do what was right, rather than having Paul command him directly. Clearly, however, Paul expected an entirely transformed relationship between the two of them based on the fact that Onesimus was now Philemon's beloved brother.

1. What can we learn from Paul's example in this letter about helping others be reconciled to one another in Christ?
2. What stands out to you about the phrases he was led to write or the actions he was willing to take to help Onesimus and Philemon be reconciled?
3. Why was it important for Onesimus and Philemon to be reconciled? Why is right relationship with other believers important in our congregation as well?
4. What experiences have you had with trying to help other brothers and sisters in Christ to be reconciled? How did those experiences turn out?

Application:

1. Paul reminded Philemon that he had the authority from the Lord God, through Christ, to make demands upon him. He chose, as has God, to appeal to based on love.

Ask the Holy Spirit to give our church a stronger sense of love, rather than obedience and/or ritual, so that our service to others is both joy-filled and sacrificial. Pray specifically for the many volunteers who lead our church's ministries.

2. Would you be willing to pay the debts of someone whom you led to Christ, mentored, loved dearly as a brother or sister in Christ in order that they might be reconciled to another brother or sister in Christ whom they had previously wronged?

Let's go even more simple. Have you ever been discipled? If yes, have you ever discipled another? If no, what's stopping you from finding someone to help you?

Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you someone who needs discipling or someone you can ask to disciple you.