

## Philemon 1:1, 10-21

The Apostle Paul's letter to **Philemon** is one of the **shortest** books of the Bible, but it is **not** one of the more **familiar** ones. So, before we get into our text today, perhaps we would benefit from a little **background** material on Paul's letter to **Philemon**. Most of Paul's letters were written to **congregations**, but **this** one was written to an **individual**. Philemon was a wealthy and important citizen who had been converted to Christianity by Paul. He lived in the city of **Colossae**, and the Colossian congregation met for **worship services** at his **house**. Paul's letter to Philemon is one filled with **love** and **concern**. Luther called it, "*A masterfully lovely example of love, for we are all Christ's Onesimi (or useful ones) if we will believe it.*"

It's important to know that Onesimus was a **slave** who belonged to Philemon. Onesimus had **run away** to Rome. It was **there** that he met the Apostle **Paul**, who was **imprisoned** at the time. This letter to Philemon gives us the Biblical answer to the question of **slavery**. Usually **we** think of **slavery** as being something **bad**. But Paul doesn't lay down a law which **forbids** slavery, rather he presents the beautiful spirit of the **Gospel**, which changes the hearts of men so that the **harshness** and **abuses** of slavery **wither** and **die**. That **Gospel** is the message that Jesus came to the earth to **pay** for their **wickedness** and their **evil** with His own perfect life, by dying on the **cross**.

The letter centers completely around the relationship between **Philemon** and **Onesimus**. As we study our text we will see these **Two Men Become New Men**. Let's look at **Onesimus** first. Paul writes, "*I appeal to you for my son, Onesimus, who **became** my son while I was in **chains**. Formerly he was **useless** to you, but now he has become **useful** both to you and to me.*" I suppose Paul **could** have written, "I am writing to you about **Onesimus**, the reputedly good-for-nothing **slave** of yours who, probably after **robbing** you, **ran away** from you." But he **didn't**. Instead, Paul points out some positive **changes** which had taken place in Onesimus.

Paul refers to him as his **son** - obviously not his **physical** son, but rather his **spiritual** son. In other words, during their encounter in Rome Onesimus had become a **Christian**. Here it is particularly comforting to note that even though God's **messenger** is bound in **chains**, God's **Word** is **not** bound. In fact, the Holy Spirit isn't hindered in **any** way from working **faith** in the heart of Onesimus through the Word.

This conversion of Onesimus is the real **key** to our entire text. What a difference **conversion** makes! The slave who once was **useless** becomes doubly **useful**. Evil becomes good, and unprofitable becomes profitable. As a **Christian** Onesimus was a **changed** man. He had a new **attitude** toward his **servitude**. Instead of working **grudgingly**, he was ready to **willingly** serve his master, out of **gratitude** to **Jesus**, his **Savior**. After all, Jesus had already given up His **life** on the cross to **remove** all of his **sin** and **guilt**. There is a little play on words going on in the original Greek, which is **lost** in our English language. It involves the name “**Onesimus**” which actually means **useful** or **profitable**. As a Christian he would now strive to **live up** to his name, and glorify his heavenly Father with his **actions**. That’s what **happens** when we are Christians. We can’t **help** but show our faith through our **service to God**.

Actually, Onesimus had not only become useful to **Philemon**, but he had become profitable to **Paul** as well. Even though Paul was in **prison**, he rejoiced and was comforted in the fact that God had used him as an **instrument** to deliver the message of forgiveness to a soul who deeply **needed** that message. Indeed, that privilege brings great joy to **every** Christian pastor, teacher, and parent - for what a **pleasure** it is to be privileged to share the Good News of our salvation with the sheep and lambs of Jesus’ flock who have been **entrusted** into our care. There is no joy on earth which can even be **compared** to helping someone learn about the way of **salvation**. That way of salvation is to **turn away** from trusting in **ourselves**, or our **nation**, or our **family** and **friends** to remove the guilt of sin, and to believe that **God** has done **everything** which needs to be **done** through His Son, **Jesus**.

Onesimus **knew** that and **believed** that - and that change in his heart made **him** a new man. But that’s not the **only** change which took place in our text. Philemon **also** became a new man. Throughout the bulk of our text Paul focuses on **positive** aspects rather than **negative**. He tells Philemon about the **conversion** of Onesimus to Christianity, and about how **helpful** he has been to Paul during the time of his **imprisonment** in Rome. He even says, “*Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good - no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.*” Paul doesn’t try to **overlook** the fact that Onesimus was **guilty** of running away, but he doesn’t **harp** on that guilt either. Rather, he points out **God's** hand in the matter. In effect Paul is saying, “Philemon, you haven’t lost a **slave**, you’ve gained a **brother** - a brother in the **faith!**” Although he had been separated from this slave **for a time**, because of the new **faith** of Onesimus, Philemon would now be joined with him **forever** as a Christian **brother** in heaven.

Paul also recognized the **fragile** quality of the faith of Onesimus. As a recent convert he was still a spiritual **child**, and he needed lots of tender loving **care**, lest his newly acquired faith would suffer a **setback**, or perhaps even **die out**. So, to remove every possible stumbling block for his return, Paul even offers to repay any **financial** loss which Philemon may have incurred because of the **absence** of Onesimus. Paul writes, *“If he has done you any **wrong** or **owes** you anything, charge it to **me**.”*

And in order to further help Philemon recognize the great **blessing** he is receiving in the return of Onesimus, as well as the **change** which must take place in his own **thinking**, Paul sends Onesimus back accompanied by his co-worker, **Tychicus**. These men were bearing **two** letters: one for **Philemon**, and one for **all** the Colossians. We have already seen Paul’s tremendous support for Onesimus in **this** letter, but it is **also** found in his letter to the **Colossians**. There Paul wrote, *“Bear **with** each other and **forgive** whatever grievances you may have against one another. **Forgive** as the Lord forgave you.”* And also, *“Masters, provide your slaves with what is **right** and **fair**, because you know that you also have a **Master** in **heaven**.”*

Forgive and forget - that’s the **change** which **Philemon** would have to implement in **his** life. He would show that he really understood and cherished **God’s** forgiveness for **his** sins, by forgiving those who had sinned against **him** - in this case, **Onesimus**. This is what Paul meant when he concluded, *“I do wish, brother, that **I** may have some benefit from **you** in the Lord.”* The greatest benefit to Paul would be his **joy** in seeing that Onesimus was **lovingly** received as a brother in the **faith**. After all, both Onesimus and Philemon were Paul’s spiritual **children**, and he wanted to see them getting along **well**.

That’s really not so different from **any** of us, is it? Parents like to see their children getting along **well**, and not **fighting**. Teachers receive great joy when their students **cooperate** with each other, and develop strong Christian **friendships**. And pastors are happy when there is little or no **strife** among the members of their congregation. All we have to do to accommodate this spirit of cooperation is to remember to **forgive**. And **why** should we forgive those who have sinned against us - because our **God** has **first** forgiven us.

Paul’s letter to Philemon is one of the **shortest** books of the Bible. In most editions it is only **one page** long. But as we have seen, it is full of **excellent** advice for us. Read the entire letter when you get home today, and then put it into

**practice.** Pray that God will continue to **strengthen** your faith, and that He will enable you to wisely be **forgiving** at all times, for Jesus' sake. Amen.