

Profitable For You and For Me

Philemon 1-25

It should not surprise us by now when we read a passage of Scripture that we have read (who knows how many times before), and a brand new, very powerful revelation springs off the page and grips our heart. Such was the case just recently when I was impressed to open the Bible to the Book of Philemon.

I knew the story already, and I thought that I had a fair grasp on the message of the story, until—you know, such is the nature of revelation—when you really get it, everything that you had or thought you had before you “get it” is subsumed in what you “get.” One of the amazing things about the truth of the Scriptures is that it is quite normal for the truth to be revealed to us in layers. That is what happened to me with the letter to Philemon as I read through it on a recent Tuesday morning. I received some understanding that built upon what I already knew about the story. I got another layer of the truth from this precious letter.

The story that unfolds in Paul’s letter to Philemon involves the three primary persons that are highlighted in the story. Those three are Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. There is a unique relationship between these three men. The commonality in the relationships is Paul. It is apparent that Paul has a relationship with Philemon, and that Paul later has a relationship with Onesimus. Paul serves each of these two men as a spiritual father. Though the particularities of Paul’s relationships with the two men are very different, both men are spiritual sons to him.

It is not my intention in this message to delve too deeply into the historical background of the three individuals referenced in the letter. In this message I am far more interested in the behavioral template that is communicated by Paul to Philemon. Paul is writing this letter and sending it by hand delivery to his spiritual son, Philemon. The person chosen to deliver the letter is Onesimus—also a spiritual son to Paul. I wish here to set up the context within which the letter is written and delivered. What is the relational interplay between Philemon and Onesimus? And, how does the Lord insert Paul into that interplay, and why?

We must back up to the beginning of the story in order to get a more complete understanding of who Philemon and Onesimus are and also to understand the circumstances involving them into which the Lord inserts Paul. Here are the undisputed facts of the case:

1. Philemon is a slave owner.
2. Onesimus is a slave, whose owner is Philemon.
3. Onesimus runs away from his master.
4. Onesimus is apprehended by the authorities.
5. Onesimus is put into prison.
6. Onesimus is imprisoned in Rome where Paul also was imprisoned.

This is the setup of the story: a slave owner and a run-away slave who is jailed with Paul in Rome. Now we can come forward into the second set of facts. It is in the place of being jailed with Paul that Paul communicates the gospel of Jesus Christ to Onesimus. Clearly, Onesimus receives the message of the gospel and accepts Jesus. And, clearly, Paul is discipling Onesimus in the ways of God. We know these things to be true, because Paul refers to Onesimus in verse 10 as “my

own son, Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds.” Furthermore, it is not a stretch for us to say that Paul is teaching Onesimus the ways of God, because Paul emphatically declares that he is considering keeping him in Rome as a personal assistant. Paul goes on to say that Onesimus is profitable as a helper to him. Of course, Paul could not have, in good conscience, prevailed upon Onesimus to stay with him because he is the slave of Philemon. For that reason, Paul concludes that he should send Onesimus back to Philemon. What I have outlined so far is a snapshot and a surface view of the situation, including the relational conflict between Philemon and Onesimus. This situation is one that the Lord sovereignly places Paul into: (1) so that Onesimus would come to Christ and (2) so that Paul could steward the relational circumstances of Philemon and Onesimus for the best possible outcome for both of these sons.

Moving forward in the story we come to a segue. Apparently, it becomes known to Paul that Onesimus is going to be released from prison. With that information, Paul is compelled to make an appeal to Philemon by letter. The appeal is intended to advocate for Onesimus, but more so, to advocate for righteous rule in the matter pertaining to Philemon and Onesimus. Righteous rule, as you know, is one of the elements of the standard of the House of God and the lives of the sons of God. Paul was fully apprised of the circumstances involving Philemon and Onesimus. He is a doctor of the law; he understands the legal and the practical implications of the case. He understands the seriousness of the case, but Paul understands something larger. Paul understands that this is an opportunity to put on display the superlative quality and wisdom of righteous rule. Paul knows that assuming both men will submit to God, that the glory of God will shine through this conflict to bring about the best outcome. It could also provide a benchmark precedent for the believing community. These outcomes are the motivating factors that result in him writing this letter to Philemon.

The way that Paul sets up this letter is nothing short of artful. The choice of language and the orderliness of the writing is genius. But, Paul’s goal in this letter is not to impress. Paul’s goal in this letter is to appeal to Philemon with a hope of influencing and encouraging him to represent the Father in his actions and response. The redemptive goal of the appeal that Paul makes is to shift the way that Philemon sees Onesimus. This shift would inform the way that Philemon will receive and treat Onesimus when he returns to him. Paul is laboring to reset the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. We know that because the specific appeal that Paul makes to Philemon is, that when he receives Onesimus, to forego receiving him as his slave but rather receive him as his beloved brother in Christ. Even in the minute detail of the construction of the letter, Paul layers the language in a very precise way so as to build a rock-solid case that would cause Philemon to come under the accountability of the revelation of the ways of God that are expressed in His nature and character. This is Paul thoughtfully, even meticulously, communicating the standard of righteous rule which is designed to govern the affairs of the sons of God, particularly in this case—in the matter of judging and bringing divine order to the relational impasse between these two brothers. This case seems to be complicated by the fact that Onesimus is Philemon’s slave and that Onesimus has broken the law by escaping and running away. I use the phrase “seems to be,” because the particular arrangement of slave owner and slave, though never intended by God, does not escape the treatment of the written Scriptures (see Ephesians 6:5-8).

For the believing community in Biblical days, the relationship of slave owner and slave was always intended to be governed by higher law. That law is the law of God. For that reason, Paul makes

an appeal to Philemon based on higher law. This sets up the basis of Paul's appeal. It also informs the particular construction of his letter. Paul's approach in his letter to Philemon is certainly one of humility and one of hope. Paul's approach and his tone in the letter to Philemon are familial and not formal. Though Paul has the authority to address Philemon formally, he humbles himself and subjects himself to a familiar tone in his letter. Paul has a hope and an expectation in the good work that God has done in Philemon. It is also a hope that Philemon would be appealed to upon the basis of his own experience with the goodness and with the love of God.

Paul's Appeal

I have commented a couple of times about the construction of Paul's letter. Allow me to elaborate. Paul addresses Philemon as "our dearly beloved brother" in verse 1. In verse 4, Paul thanks God for Philemon and tells him that he is always in his thoughts and prayers. In verse 5, Paul inserts a reminder to Philemon of the primacy of love by saying that he is "hearing of his (Philemon's) love and faith." And Paul also includes that this love that Philemon has, of which he, Paul, is hearing, is "toward all of the saints." It is critical for Paul to emphasize the matter of love in his communication and appeal to Philemon. So, Paul emphasizes the love that Philemon has experienced and received from the Father, the love that Philemon had experienced and received from Paul, and the love that Philemon routinely showed and gave to the brethren. Paul does all of this because his intention is to make a withdrawal from the reserve of the love that the Father had built up in Philemon. And, this withdrawal is to be made on behalf of Onesimus.

Paul goes on to say in verse 6 that his hope is that the "communication" of Philemon's faith might "become effectual" by the "acknowledging of every good thing that was in him in Christ Jesus." The word that Paul selects for the letter translated "communication", is *koinonia* which primarily infers actions toward another person. Paul is appealing to Philemon specifically for some beneficial action toward Onesimus. Paul then salutes Philemon for being the agency and instrument of refreshment for the saints. Paul artfully arranges the language of the opening portion of this letter to Philemon by speaking to the common reputation of Philemon's love for and service to the saints. Paul does this in the hope that Philemon can be depended on to continue that service and ministry, by pouring out the love of God upon and for the benefit of Onesimus.

Paul continues in verses 8 and 9 with a reminder of his relationship with Philemon. He underscores his honor for Philemon by submitting his remarks to him as a consideration rather than a command. Paul knows that he has the authority to command Philemon in the matter of the nature of the relationship between him and Onesimus, but Paul also knows that if he insists in Philemon's obedience to him, he would take away from Philemon the joy and fruit of his actions flowing from a heart of willingness. Paul is going for the gold! Paul has no interest in a "win/lose." Paul was swinging for the fence, and he knows it. There is something huge on the table and Paul wants the very best outcome for Philemon and for Onesimus. I also believe that Paul knows that this is a test case that will be looked at as precedent for the whole believing community.

In verse 10, Paul establishes a record of his relationship with Onesimus. Onesimus is, as Paul says, "my own son whom I have begotten in my bonds." Paul wants no ambiguity as it regards his relationship with Onesimus. He is not just a son of God; he is Paul's "own son in the faith." Paul is saying, "I am testifying to you that I am an eyewitness of the authenticity of this man's genuine conversion to Christ. I was with him when he received Christ. I judge his conversion as *bona fide*, and I unreservedly attest to the fact that Onesimus is a true Christian brother." Then in verse 11,

Paul communicates his affirmation of the quality of this man's life and character by stating that, "he is profitable to me." Paul is speaking out of his own experience with Onesimus, but he does not stop short there, because he also makes the written declaration that Onesimus is profitable to Philemon by saying, "he is profitable to you."

It is also important to note that the particular dynamic of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus sets up the need for "another." Paul represents "another." He is standing outside of the circumstances that Philemon and Onesimus are standing in. Oftentimes the ones standing inside the circumstances are biased by how the circumstances have affected them—have hurt them. Paul is standing outside of the circumstances and the consequential effect of them, and because of that, Paul is unbiased due to the fact that he is on the outside. He is the perfect "another" for God to send as a minister of reconciliation to Philemon and Onesimus.

Furthermore, Paul has the latest information about Onesimus. Paul knows things about Onesimus that Philemon does not know. Remember, Philemon is in Colossae, whereas Paul and Onesimus are in Rome. Paul has been with Onesimus and at the writing of the letter, Paul has the latest information (which Philemon does not have). Paul knows of the changes in Onesimus. Paul has experience with the new creation man, Onesimus. So, Paul has a totally different view of Onesimus—one that Philemon would not have had.

There is a very important lesson in this for all of us. We cannot afford for our view of a person to only be informed by our experience with that person. Often, our view of a person is informed by our frustration and disappointment with that person. We see them "according to the flesh" and our view is earthly. I am consistently called into accountability to 2 Corinthians 5:16. The instruction is to stop looking at those in Christ according to their flesh, or in the natural. This is particularly challenging when people wrong us, hurt us, and disappoint us. But, none of that—nothing about our personal experience and view—actually changes the standard of responsibility that we have as representational sons of our Father!

Profitable / Useful

Now, here, to my mind, is the manifestation of God's divine nature: He knows the end from the beginning (Isaiah 46:10). He begins with the end in mind. I say that because, even though the circumstances of Onesimus' life and his conduct is what it is, there was always an eternal hope attached to Onesimus' destiny. We know that because the name Onesimus means "profitable" or "useful." The Father always saw Onesimus as profitable. The Father always saw Onesimus as useful, even in the worst of circumstances. Because God knows the end from the beginning, He always sees Onesimus as profitable and useful. So, God knows that Onesimus is profitable and useful. And then Paul knows that Onesimus is profitable and useful. At the writing of this letter the question that remains is this: How is it that this runaway slave is profitable and useful to Philemon?

No doubt, the escape and absence of Onesimus is troubling to and problematic for Philemon. We can be certain that Onesimus' escape causes unrest in the ranks of, not only Philemon's help but, very likely, the news of it has spread throughout the area among the other slave owners and their slaves, too. Secondly, there is a negative economic impact resulting from Onesimus' absence. The trouble for Philemon is certainly significant. How, then, can Paul so boldly declare that Onesimus, though at one time unprofitable, is now to be considered profitable to Philemon? It is that Paul has a different vantage point from which he can see and declare the higher purposes of God. Paul is looking at the situation from a "heavenly point of view" (2 Corinthians 5:16). He no

longer considers Onesimus' essential identity as "slave," but now as "son." Paul's view is governed by the eternal, not by the temporal. The eternal is just that; it is not the temporal. Onesimus, at the time of the writing of this letter, is a new creature, born again with the nature of God. Onesimus is a son of God. And, he is a son every bit as much as Philemon is. This is what Paul knows and what informs his appeal to Philemon.

The Big Ask

Here is the thing: Paul is not simply asking Philemon to change Onesimus' title; Paul is asking Philemon to change Onesimus' status! If Philemon receives Onesimus as a beloved brother in Christ, he is then also receiving Onesimus as a spiritual equal. I am not here suggesting that the status of slave and slave owner is changed (but maybe it was). The larger point is this: that whether or not the slave owner/slave arrangement changed, the larger reality of brother to brother needs to change. Can you begin to imagine what must have gone through Philemon's mind when he read this letter? This is indeed a "big ask." It is the stuff from which a new precedent is made. It can, perhaps, upset the entire slave owner/slave relationship arrangement throughout the whole slave-owner community. This is a big ask.

Upon being returned to his rightful master, how is it that this runaway slave is "profitable." Simply put, Onesimus represents a door of grace to Philemon. Paul knows that if Philemon decides in favor of humbling himself under the mighty hand of God and truly yielding to the appeal in the letter, Philemon will go to a brand new level of maturity. If Philemon obeys the appeal to love and receive Onesimus, Philemon will go to a new level of Christlikeness. For Philemon to genuinely love Onesimus, he must forgive and release Onesimus. If Philemon does that, he goes free and into an experience with God more so than ever before. The key and operative word in all of this, however, is "IF." If he will, then God will. If Philemon will, then God will. So, Onesimus is a door. Onesimus is carrying a grace for Philemon. Onesimus is a point of entry.

This answers the question—How can this runaway slave be profitable to me? How can this one, the one who has hurt me and who has injured me, be profitable to me? He is profitable to you, because he embodies the opportunity to forgive, to receive, and to love. He is profitable, because the Father is sending him to you, and if you receive him as the gift that he truly is to you, you will be the recipient of the Father's grace and you will be further conformed to the image of Christ.

Paul is Invested

Paul concludes his appeal to Philemon by reminding him that they are partners (see verse 17). He further assures Philemon of his investment in the Philemon/Onesimus project by saying to Philemon in verses 18 and 19, "If he has wronged you or owes you anything, put that on my account, I will pay it." Paul was not neglecting the practical matters that should be addressed by way of restitution. "I will pay it," Paul says. He knows that Onesimus does not have the means to repay any debt that he owes Philemon. So, Paul says, "I will pay whatever he owes you." Paul is saying to Philemon that he was not asking him to do something that he himself would not do. Paul has and will continue to have "skin in the game."

At this point Paul also reminds Philemon, in sort of a back-handed way, how much Philemon owed him. My interpretation of the last portion of verse 19 is this: “I should not have to remind you that you owe me everything! So, brother, let your actions bring joy and refreshing to me.”

Then Paul salutes the capacity that he knows is resident in Philemon. He does so by basically saying, “I am so confident in your obedience that I expect that you will want to do more than I have asked you to consider doing—and, by the way, prepare a place for me to stay when I come to visit you.” In this, Paul fully expects Philemon to rise to the occasion and he anticipates that when he visits Philemon and Onesimus he will find the proof of abundant fruit that has been produced by the powerful work of the Holy Spirit in these relationships.

Finally, Paul sends Philemon greetings from the brethren that are with him in Rome. He ends the letter by declaring that the attending grace of the Lord Jesus Christ would be over and upon them all.

A Necessary Warning

Before I dig into the idea that God himself has sent or will send to you an Onesimus, I should make some things clear. It is important for me to say to you that some of you will have a significant download of understanding as a result of hearing this message. Others will gain some understanding and will be equipped by receiving this message. However, some will object to the fact that in this message I refer to persons who may be of close affinity to them—perhaps even relatives—as slaves or run-away slaves. The objection that may arise could be that such persons are saved, and even, Spirit-baptized. That objection does not take into consideration the issue of the genuine, personal maturity of the person who is being considered to be an Onesimus. If you have been in the Christian experience for any length of time, you know that, as believers, we are surrounded by fellow believers who are at all different levels of maturity. Paul, speaking to the Corinthians in his first letter to them, states that he could not speak to them as to mature believers, as spiritual believers, because they are, in fact, babies (see 1 Corinthians 3:1-4). He had previously said that he was carrying a message of wisdom for the mature (see 1 Corinthians 2:6 NIV). As babies, the Corinthians were divisive, and Paul called them carnal. Carnal Christians are oftentimes influenced by the flesh as opposed to being influenced by the Holy Spirit. That does not mean that the Corinthians are unbelievers, but it does mean that they, at times, act like unbelievers. In that same manner, an immature brother or sister in Christ will often act like an unbeliever. Thus, my choice of language for this message is to use “slave”, “run-away slave”, and “slave-mindset” to describe how an immature believer in Jesus may, at times, behave like an unbeliever.

Jesus promises that He will not leave us as orphans (see John 14:18 NKJV and NIV). Here the Greek word is *orphanos* and means bereaved or comfortless. It is translated as comfortless and fatherless. Any person who truly accepts Jesus and is born again, immediately upon conversion has a father—God becomes Father to them, and Jesus becomes the Everlasting Father to them. So upon anyone being born again, they have a Father and for that reason they are no longer an orphan. Here is the catch: no person is born again fully mature. Maturity is a progressive continuum. And concerning that continuum, there is never a guarantee that any person will chose to get on and stay on the path to full maturity. If a person does not go on to maturity, even though they have a Father and are not technically an orphan, their life and thinking will routinely be dominated by an orphan mentality.

I also want to say two other things about how people will respond to this message. (1) If this message and the understanding that it may bring to you cause you to react negatively to the one that the Lord shows you is an Onesimus in your life, then you are giving up the high ground that the grace of God in this message offers you. (2) If you reject this message on the basis of a doctrinal technicality, you will refuse the grace that your Father wants to give you through this message. True equipping from God arms us against our enemy and not against our brothers and sisters! The intention of this message is to arm us with the mind of Christ and to equip us to be better representational sons. If this message does not bring you into a greater experience with the compassion of Jesus and the love of the Father, then somehow, we have failed to appropriate and administrate the grace that I know the Father is offering to us by giving us this message.

Who is your Onesimus?

Every one of us currently has or have had an Onesimus in our lives. Every one of us currently has or have had a runaway slave in our lives. Some of us currently have or have had more than one Onesimus in our lives. To be clear, that person, that Onesimus, may well be or have been a person who is born again—even baptized in the Holy Spirit—but whose conduct and character are that of an orphan. We need to remember that the predominant imperatives of an orphan are provision, protection, and place. The person with an orphan mindset is obsessed with his or her provision, protection, and place. That mindset, beloved, is indeed the mindset of a slave. So, you may have a born-again runaway slave in your life (or more than one). Typically speaking, the runaway slave will leave a trail of hurt people in his or her path. A runaway slave will hurt others in many different ways. But remember this, beloved: your Onesimus is profitable for you. Your Onesimus is a gateway, an entry point for you. After all, if you only love the ones who love you, you can do that without Christ. You can do that without the power of the Holy Spirit. You can do that without the fruit of a life that has been transformed by God (see Luke 6:32-35).

When God sends your Onesimus back to you, will you be ready? At this point it is important to note that perhaps your Onesimus has not physically left and returned. Perhaps your Onesimus is standing right beside you even now. Will you be prepared to enter a new season of relationship when your Father is moving to arrange it? I urge you to prepare ahead of time. Forgive ahead of time. Release ahead of time. Bless ahead of time. Be a light in the world by doing what Jesus did. He forgave; we must forgive. He released; we must release. He blessed; we must bless. God has, without a doubt, put an Onesimus in your life. If you do not see that person in this immediate season, do not worry, you can be assured that person is on the way to you. And, please remember **THAT PERSON IS PROFITABLE FOR YOU!**

I pray that every grace needed would attend you as you submit to your Father's ways. My hope is that we too, as Paul said to Philemon, would "have joy" and "be refreshed" by your obedience to the revelation of our Father's will for your life in this season. Blessings from God our Father to you.

Michael Barrett

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