

Sermon to the Saints of God assembled at Topeka, KS: Sunday, November 23, 2014

Today I would like to spend some time with Paul's epistle to Philemon. It is a short little letter (25 verses) – it is the shortest writing of Paul's that we have, and is the 3<sup>rd</sup> shortest book in the whole Bible (behind 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John); but despite its length, it is jam packed with wonderful instruction and comfort. It is a beautiful and personal work of exhortation (encouragement), and provocation to love and to good works. The short of the letter is this: Philemon had a servant named Onesimus, who stole from Philemon, and ran off. Onesimus, by the grace of God, was converted at the preaching of Paul, in Rome. Paul is asking Philemon to forgive this penitent man, and to receive him as a brother.

**Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ** [literally imprisoned at Rome while he wrote this], **and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,**

**2 And to our beloved Apphia** [Philemon's wife], **and Archippus** [Philemon's son] **our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house** [I take that to mean the church at Colossae, which met in his house – more on that later]:

**3 Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.**

**4 I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,**

**5 Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;**

**6 That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.**

**7 For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother.** [Clearly Paul has gotten a very good report of Philemon and his household – likely from Epaphras and Onesimus – more on that later]

**8 ¶Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee** [command] **that which is convenient,**

**9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee** [beg, plead], **being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.** [In other words – Paul's saying: I'm right about this matter with Onesimus, and I have authority from the scriptures, and as an Apostle to command you in this matter, but I'm not doing that, because of the love that I have for you, and because of the love that you and your family show for the family of God – instead, I'm entreating you.]

**10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:**

**11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable** [an unfaithful thief], **but now profitable to thee and to me:**

**12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:**

**13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:**

**14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.** [Whether he stays to help Paul is Philemon's decision]

**15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;**

**16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?**

**17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.**

**18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;**

**19 I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.** [That's a powerful statement: if you're going to insist on payment – if you are going to demand of Onesimus to “pay that thou owest”, then I'll pay it for him. But, you had better remember my labor for you, and more importantly, remember that you were forgiven the eternal debt that YOU owe.]

**20 Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.**

**21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.**

**22 But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you.** [Paul clearly had a hope to get back to that part of the world, and commune with these people, but we know that he never got that chance.]

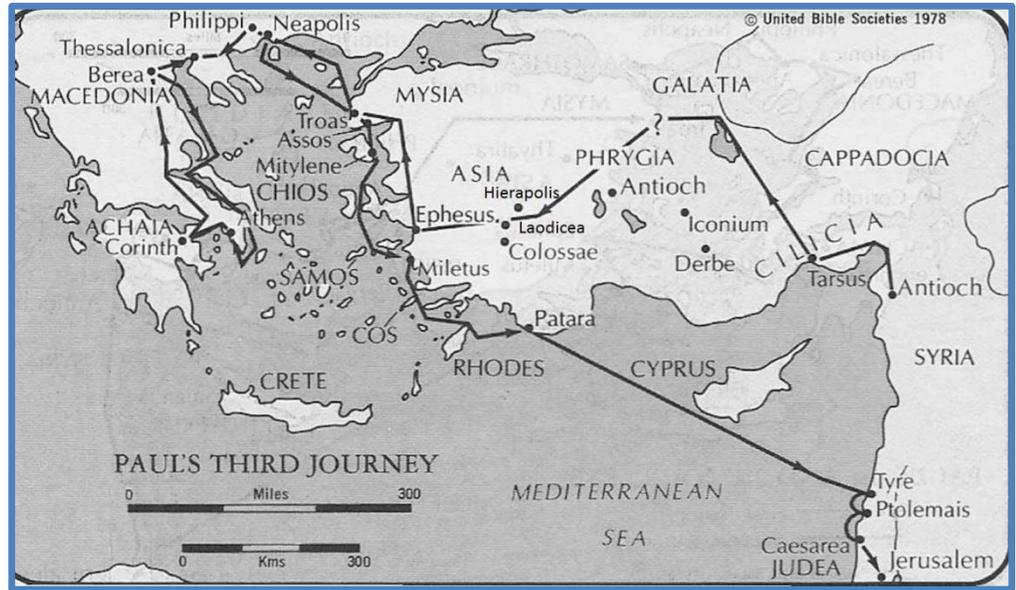
**23 There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;**

**24 Marcus** [John Mark, who wrote the Gospel of Mark – this is also the guy that Paul was mad at, and that occasioned the split between Paul and Barnabas – you see here that they have reconciled], **Aristarchus, Demas** [Who would later forsake Paul and the gospel], **Lucas** [Luke, who wrote the Gospel of Luke, and the Acts of the Apostles – nearly ¼ of the content of the New Testament], **my fellowlabourers** [Paul, Timothy, Mark, Luke, Epaphras - These are some heavy hitters taking an active interest in this relatively private matter involving a servant! That is the way of the sheep – we are not to be respectors of persons! God, in his providence preserved this tiny letter, so we could see this example!].

**25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Written from Rome to Philemon, by Onesimus a servant.**

Having read through the letter, let's look closer at the following:

- 1) Context
- 2) Paul's approach
- 3) Make it right!
- 4) A message to Masters
- 5) Parallels to Christ



1) Context:

- Philemon / Apphia (Philemon's wife) / Archippus (Philemon's son):
  - This was a family that lived in Colossae. They appear to be a family of some wealth and prominence.
  - Philemon was likely a Pastor ("fellowlabourer", Phm. 1:1), as was his son Archippus (his "ministry", Col. 4:17; "fellowsoldier", Phm. 1:2).
  - Paul evidently had some personal knowledge of Philemon – likely from his time at Ephesus. There is no record of Paul having been to Colossae. Verse 19 says that Philemon owes Paul "thine own self", implying that he was directly involved in the conversion of Philemon.
  - "the church in thy house": There's all kinds of speculation out there as to what this means, but I think it's pretty straightforward:
    - Most of the early Christian churches had no designated building for their meetings, so they met in the house of one of their members. Owning a house with enough size to accommodate the church was a wonderful resource that a man like Philemon could use to minister to the saints. Knowing that he lived at Colossae, it seems most likely that the church of Colossae met at his house. Alternatively, there could have been more than one church at Colossae, and his church met in his house. Being a man of some substance, it's possible that his "household" (which would include the servants that we know he had) may have been large enough to constitute a church on its own.
    - Gill, Spurgeon, and others speak to the idea that Christians ought to order, discipline, and care for their houses / families such that they resemble a church. While I think that's a good

concept, and much could be said about that, I don't think that's exactly what's being said here.

- You'll see Catholics try to twist this scripture by saying that it means there were lots of little "house churches" throughout every city, and then there was a "City Bishop" that presided over them all.
- Onesimus:
  - A servant of Philemon.
  - He was an unfaithful steward, who evidently ran off with some of his master's money. (Phm 1:11) This was a major crime, punishable by death.
  - He fled to Rome; over 1000 miles from Colossae.
  - He was converted at the preaching of the imprisoned Paul (Phm 1:10), and became a great help and comfort to him in his bonds (Phm 1:11-13).
  - Onesimus is a Greek word that means "Useful" or "Helper".
- Colossae (see map):
  - Located in ancient Phrygia, part of the Roman territory of Asia Minor (modern day Turkey)
  - One of 3 cities in the Lycus River Valley, at the foot of Mount Cadmus. Colossae, Laodicea, Hierapolis.
  - 10 miles from Colossae to Laodicea, 13 miles from Colossae to Hierapolis. It was near to the "Great Road" from Ephesus to the Euphrates, putting it on an important trade route – a meeting place between east and west.
  - 100 miles east of Ephesus, a major port city on the Mediterranean Sea.
  - A chief part of their commerce was a fine, purple wool called collossinus
  - Although it was a thriving, wealthy city during the times of the Persians and Greeks, the city eventually fell to ruins after severe earthquakes, and a change in the road system during the Roman empire that made Laodicea of greater prominence.
  - At the time of Paul's writing (62AD) Colossae was a city in decline.
  - There were many Jews living there, and they were filled with superstition and idolatry, including the worshipping of angels. Keeping those false doctrines from infecting the church was clearly a continual struggle that Paul speaks to. (Col 2:18-23)
- Paul / Epaphras

- During Paul's second journey (52AD), he preached in Ephesus; this is likely when the church at Ephesus was planted (Acts 18:19).
- During Paul's third journey, he stayed for two years, teaching at Ephesus (54-56AD) (Acts 19:8-10)
- Likely Epaphras and Philemon (both from Colossae) were converted at the preaching of Paul in Ephesus (Phm 19).
- Epaphras carried the gospel back to Phrygia, likely planting the churches at Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis. (Col. 1:7-8; 4:12,13)
- Epaphras was a Pastor at the church in Colossae. (Col. 1:7)
- Epaphras traveled to Rome to minister to the imprisoned Paul, give report of the churches in Phrygia, and likely seek counsel from Paul regarding some false doctrines that were arising in those churches, which you see reflected in Paul's warnings to the church at Colossae [Col. 2:16-23].
- Paul's letter to Philemon and his letters to the churches at Colossae, Ephesus, and Laodicea were all written at the same time, in Rome (where Paul was imprisoned), and were to be delivered by Tychicus and Onesimus.
- The letter to the Colossians was also intended to be read to Laodicea, and vice versa. Colossians 4:16 "And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea."
- Colossae is the smallest church that Paul wrote to (of the writings we have).
- He is imprisoned at Rome at the time that this epistle is written in 62AD, and would be martyred by Nero somewhere between 64 and 67AD.
- Philemon and his family (including Apphia and Archippus) are said to have been martyred during this same time period, under the first general persecution of Nero.

## 2) Paul's approach:

- It is full of humility and true affection – he writes it (at least in part) with his own hand (Phm 1:19), even though we know that he had a practice of having others scribe for him.
- Paul doesn't lord over Philemon – he puts himself on an even footing, which in turn models the right attitude and behavior for Philemon to have toward Onesimus. **"Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock"** (1Peter 5:3). We must continually strive

to teach through our own behavior, and not just our words. Not just hearers (talking) of the word, but doers (James 1:22).

- This letter is a wonderful example of exhortation (encouragement), and provocation to love and to good works, which is one of the primary obligations of the saints, and one of the incredible benefits of the way that the Lord has patterned his church in the earth. We are to labor at exhortation, and we are greatly blessed when we are exhorted. Think about it, beloved! Think about all of the myriad ways that the Lord encourages, instructs, and comforts us – through one another! Not always directly with words, but through our close communion, and being partakers of one another’s joy and grief – seeing the work of the Holy Spirit in and through one another. Each lively stone being full of goodness and able to admonish (Romans 15:14). These “free agents” that roam the landscape, despising the New Testament church pattern, do not have that blessing!
  - **“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”** (Hebrews 3:12-13)
    - You can be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, when no one will tell you that you’re headed in a bad direction, or when you prevent people from telling you that you are headed in a bad direction.
    - You can also be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, when you refuse to engage in exhortation [insert excuse here], and are puffed up in pride, thinking yourself better than those around you.
    - Inscrutability is the mortal enemy of exhortation. We can employ a million devices by which we don’t seek counsel, we avoid counsel, we fight against counsel, we quarrel over the way that people bring us counsel, and make their lives miserable for having tried. It’s shameful, my friends, and we must strive against it. Philemon might have had some of those thoughts when he read Paul’s letter – “Really? You wrote this to my wife? The whole church? I’m supposed to listen to what they all have to say about my personal business?” - but Lord willing, he put that prideful nonsense away. So should we! Love instruction, my friends, and thank God for it!
  - Exhorting one another daily requires an understanding of what’s going on with a person, so that they can be encouraged in a

meaningful way. That takes work! That takes submission! That takes humility! It requires a considering of your brother or sister – considering their frame, and how you might be most helpful to them. Paul certainly considered Philemon in every word of this letter.

- Exhorting one another is often preventative – Philemon hadn’t done wrong at this point, but Paul, knowing the pride, anger, and deceitfulness of the human heart, seeks to edify his brother – that is to build him up - such that he will clearly see what he ought to do when this situation is put in front of him. A person might be going along fine today, but tomorrow they run into a circumstance that fires up their lust or pride such that Satan has an advantage over them! We have to watch, and encourage, beloved. Today it might be you, but tomorrow it might be me!
- Consider that Paul didn’t only exhort Philemon here, but he specifically included his wife, his son, and indeed the whole church in the salutation. Now Philemon is obliged to show that letter to all of them! They will each be instructed, and if Philemon struggles, then each of those others – his bosom friends - are now armored with a godly outlook on the matter, and can bear up their brother.
  - To be clear, I’m not saying that every issue is open for public consumption, to the contrary, we are not to be busybodies, chasing after other men’s affairs. Also, this is not a Matthew 18 “offense” type of situation, in which the matter should be discussed between the two of them alone. Philemon hadn’t done anything wrong here.
- Ultimately, having given the best counsel, he ensures that the decision is Philemon’s to make. We cannot force a person to believe, and to behave themselves. We cannot create faith. We can instruct, reprove, rebuke, exhort, admonish, etc., and then we can inspect the fruit and act accordingly.

### 3) Make it right!

- Paul could have easily kept Onesimus with him, especially seeing that he was so helpful and comforting to him. But he knew it wasn’t right, and he knew that Onesimus needed to go back and be reconciled to Philemon.
- These words from the Lord Jesus Christ make this issue very simple: **“Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; Leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.”** (Matthew 5:23)

- Onesimus could not go forward with offering sacrifice in the form of service to Paul and the other brethren at Rome, while he knew that he had wronged Philemon. Philemon may well have sent him back to Paul at some point, but Paul wasn't going to decide that for him.
- **“But the end of all things is at hand: be ye therefore sober, and watch unto prayer. And above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins.”** (1Peter 4:7)
- **“Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Confessing your faults to one another that ye be healed, and your prayers are not hindered.”** (James 5:16)
  - We know by these verses (and many others) the vital importance of Charity – unfeigned love – to the soul of a Christian, and to the unity of any church. This notion of confessing our faults one to another is a continual act of contrition and humility – something that this proud flesh absolutely despises, and yet it is one of the primary devices whereby our hearts are knit together in love, and our prayers are made effectual before God.
  - I'm not talking about some kind of 12 step program, where you make a list of everyone you have wronged and go apologize to them. I'm talking about a continual considering of your brothers and sisters in Christ, and not leaving some offense hanging in the air. We know very well when we have offended someone – make it right! If there's not a burning need inside of you to keep unity and peace with your brothers and sisters in Christ, then I'm worried for you! No excuses, no delay – put away pride, and make it right! Every moment that hearts are turned aside and prayers are hindered because of an offense, is another moment that our armor is laying in the dirt while Satan takes aim at us. Make it right!

#### 4) A message to Masters

- In the early days of this country, this letter to Philemon was shamefully used to justify slavery. They argued that Paul doesn't outright denounce slavery, and so it is perfectly acceptable. Of course it does no such thing, and Paul specifically speaks to slavery in 1Timothy 1:10, when he lists “Menstealers” amongst the wicked.
- I would point out that there is some difference between Chattel Slavery (where people are stolen from their lives, and traded as personal property) and indentured servitude (where a person has bonded to work for a specified period of time, in order to pay a debt). Indentured servitude is

what is spoken to in the Mosaic code, not chattel slavery. Of course depending on the circumstance there may be very little practical difference between the two, and we know that many of those hateful Jews did everything that they could to abuse that system.

- I cannot conceive of a circumstance at this hour where a Christian would “own” someone. However, rather than turn aside to trying to figure out exactly what that all looked like, and what was right and wrong about it, I’ll give you what seems clear to me, and what seems to be the point that Paul is making: Whenever we find ourselves in the role of a master, we must seek to emulate OUR Master.
  - Whether that be as a pastor, a father, a mother, an employer, etc., you will be held accountable for the way that you used your authority.
  - **“My brethren, be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation.”** (James 3:1)
  - **“Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.”** (Ephesians 6:5-9)
  - Masters are servants, and must see themselves in that light, and must behave accordingly while using their authority! Charles just showed us the example that our Master left us, by taking on the role of a servant, when he washed the feet of the Apostles.

## 5) Parallels to Christ

- Consider the ways that Paul parallels the role of Christ in the covenant of Grace.
- Onesimus falls away from his master, through sin, and is worthy of death.
- While he is pursuing the desires of his flesh, he is constrained by the Holy Spirit to encounter the preaching of Paul, and to believe what he hears. The Holy Spirit directs the steps of a righteous man, and like the cutting horse, he will not be denied.
- Paul represents the working of Christ in at least 3 ways:

- Christ is the Word, and is spoken at the mouth of God's preachers in this earth. It was the preaching of Paul that the Holy Spirit used as the means to convert Onesimus. "For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." (1Corinthians 1:21)
- Christ is the intercessor between fallen man, and God the Father: Paul makes intercession to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.
- The intercession of Christ is received because he paid the debt on behalf of his people: Paul offers to pay the debt that Onesimus cannot pay.
- By this intercession, the fallen sinner (though worthy of death) is reconciled to his master; he is delivered from bondage into liberty.
- There is great love and mercy here, my friends, and we are to emulate that: **"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."** (Matthew 5:7,9)
- **"Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."** (2Corinthians 5:16-21)

I love you all. Amen.