

Onesimus (Colossians 4:7-9, Philemon 10-18)

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Introduction

1. Last week, we considered the courier of Paul's letters, Tychicus of Ephesus, Province of Asia Minor.
 - a. His mission (Colossians 4:7-9) was to deliver the Paul's letters, to inform the churches of Paul's circumstances, and to encourage the believers by way of teaching and exhortation.
 - b. He was also to accompany the return of Onesimus, a runaway slave, and deliver Paul's letter of appeal to Philemon, Onesimus's owner.
2. The information provided in Colossians is very scant therefore we will also examine information presented in Philemon.
3. The lesson of Onesimus is the greatness of gospel power to transform lives, alter relationships, and build community out of unlikely people.
4. Facts.
 - a. Philemon was a wealthy man who owned slaves and had a house large enough to host church gatherings (Phile. 2).
 - b. Onesimus was in trouble because he fled from his master, trouble that would lead to severe punishment, even death.
 - c. The letter is addressed to Philemon but includes Apphia, Archippus, and the church meeting in Philemon's house.
 - d. Tradition informs us that—
 - 1) Philemon was saved under Paul's ministry in Ephesus (Phile 19). They became close friends and Philemon was a great help to Paul (Phile 7).
 - 2) Apphia was Philemon's wife.
 - 3) Archippus was probably Philemon's son and leading elder in the church in Philemon's house (see also Col. 4:17).
5. Questions and speculations.
 - a. Why did Onesimus run away from Philemon? Was he abused or was he trying to the gospel?
 - b. Why did Onesimus go to Rome? What providence brought him into contact with Paul? Did he come to Rome to seek out Paul?
 - c. Did running Onesimus finally realize that he could not escape God's "Hound of Heaven," the Holy Spirit?
 - d. It is no speculation that Onesimus became a child of God under Paul's care.

I. Paul's Appeal to Philemon

1. The appeal concerning Philemon was based on their mutual Christian *love* (Phile. 8)
 - a. Paul could have but did not use apostolic authority to resolve any problem with Onesimus's return.

- b. Paul's approach illustrates the great principle that is to govern all relationships in Christ—handling issues with genuine love (Gal. 6:2).
 - c. Using authority may get results, but it creates tension, destroying peace and joy so valued by Christ (note Phile. 7; Rom. 14:17).
2. The appeal to Philemon was governed by Paul's *circumstances* (Phile. 9)
- a. His *age*—the Greek term used designates a man above the age of 50 with its authority of respect.
 - b. His *incarceration*—not in fact but by reason for it—the gospel of Jesus Christ. In other words, this was not an appeal for sympathy, but loyalty.
 - c. His *expectation of release* and hoped for reunion (Phile. 22).

II. Paul's Appeal for Onesimus

1. Paul's appeal for Onesimus based on *compassion* (Phile. 10).
- a. Paul had become the spiritual father of Onesimus. Onesimus was now a child of God and Philemon's brother in Christ.
 - b. The gospel changed the relationship of slave and his owner forever. They were now equals in God's kingdom (Gal. 3:28).
 - c. The onerous reality of slavery is destroyed by the unity imposed by the gospel, requiring compassion of Philemon's part.
2. Paul's appeal for Onesimus based on *change* (Phile. 11-13).
- a. His former uselessness was transformed by the gospel to usefulness.
 - 1) This suggests that before salvation Onesimus was problematic to Philemon.
 - 2) Paul testified that his change made him very valuable to Paul, who wanted to keep him there.
 - 3) Paul further testifies that he is now faithful (Colossians 4:9).
 - b. This change in Onesimus, however, did not cancel the alter the fact that he was a runaway slave.
 - 1) The law said that Onesimus was still the property of Philemon and his owner rights were to be considered (Phile. 14).
 - 2) Nevertheless, gospel change must be considered and this prompted Paul to appeal (Phile. 14-18). Philemon was now a beloved brother, very close to Paul's heart.

In light of this passage, we need to ask—

1. What changes has the gospel produced in your life?
2. Can those around you testify to that change?
3. Are you easily appeal to on the basis of love and compassion, or are you stubborn and willful?
4. How has your relationship to Christ improved your relationship to those around you who also know Christ?