

## Kinship with Onesimus

### Philemon

By Randy Wages

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Note: The text below was prepared for oral delivery rather than for publication in print. As such, be aware that sentence fragments are intentionally used and that this document has not been edited to correct the errors in grammar, sentence structure, etc.

#### I. Introduction:

- A. If you'd like to follow along, turn with me to the book of Philemon. Paul wrote this short letter to Philemon while Paul was a prisoner in Rome, being held under guard by a Roman soldier in what is referred to as Paul's "own hired house." You can read about that in the 28<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts where we learn that while Paul was being held captive there, he still was allowed to receive visitors. And there he would preach the Gospel to those who came to hear him.
- B. Now among those who went to hear Paul was a fugitive named Onesimus who had once been a servant to Philemon and his household. And from this epistle it would appear that Onesimus had either robbed or embezzled goods from his master, Philemon, and then fled to Rome where, by God's divine providence, he came to Paul's house where he heard the Gospel of God's grace in Christ and thereby was converted under Paul's ministry. So in Philemon we will read of Paul's efforts to reconcile Philemon, a fellow believer, to his former servant, as he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus – but not only as a returning servant, but now as a beloved brother in Christ.
- C. And in Paul's appeal for this reconciliation, we see a beautiful illustration (or metaphor) of how God reconciles sinners unto Himself. As such, most true Gospel preachers will emphasize how Paul willingly substituted himself on behalf of Onesimus – willingly standing in his place as his Surety to pay the debt that Onesimus owed to his former master, Philemon – just as the Lord Jesus Christ willingly substituted Himself as the Surety for all those He reconciles unto God – those He saves by having taken on and by actually paying the debt before God's holy justice due unto their sins – a debt they could by no means pay. And with their sin-debt being paid, their debt (their sins) are thereby fully forgiven. Now that is certainly a truth that stands out in this epistle and a truth that I would be remiss if I didn't likewise emphasize.
- D. But along with that, today I also want to direct your attention to how (spiritually speaking) all of fallen humanity by nature closely resembles this wicked thief, Onesimus. However, not everyone resembles Onesimus, the born again believer. With that in mind, I've titled today's message, "Kinship with Onesimus."

II. **Exposition of Philemon:** By way of background: Philemon was a Gentile believer who seems to have been a resident of Colosse and a fellow minister there as the opening verses indicate. Paul opens the letter with kind greetings and thankfulness for Philemon and for the manifestation of his faith towards Christ and love for fellow believers. Then picking up in verse 8, he writes...

A. Verses 8-11: **<sup>8</sup>Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, <sup>9</sup>Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, <or your elder> and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. <sup>10</sup>I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: <Paul here refers to Onesimus as his son, speaking as his spiritual father, Paul having been the instrument of his conversion while Paul was being held captive there in Rome. Continuing in verse 11...> <sup>11</sup>Which <or who> in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:** Certainly Onesimus had been anything but profitable to Philemon in his lost state, apparently having robbed or embezzled goods from him which left him indebted to Philemon.

1. Pause here and consider how all of us begin our walk on this earth much like Onesimus, spiritually unprofitable. God specifically describes us all that way as we read in Romans 3:10-12: ***As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one: <sup>11</sup>There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. <sup>12</sup>They are all gone out of the way, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one.*** Well, God is telling us here in Romans 3 that just like this thief Onesimus, none of us are profitable to Him in our natural state of spiritual darkness. We may say, "Well I'm not a common thief like Onesimus," but akin to Onesimus, we too began as spiritual thieves in that our initial religious thoughts reflected an attempt to rob God of His chief design – His glory in the salvation of sinners by Christ alone. You may say, well I never intended such – but in the spiritually lost state of darkness and blindness in which we all begin this life's journey, we unwittingly, but nonetheless, were doing just that by our initial religious notions in believing that salvation is (at least in some way) conditioned on me, the sinner – a false doctrine that effectively attempts to rob God of His glory.
2. Consider how that passage in Romans 3 describing all of us by nature continues on down in verse 15. It says, ***"Their feet are swift to shed blood:"*** This is not referring to murder here, but rather is in reference to the practice of religion that is consistent with our fallen nature. Here it is referring to the shedding of animal blood as the Jews were commanded to do under the Old Covenant – but this command was not given to support the false notion that their eternal welfare, their eternal salvation, was a result of their obedience in participating in these religious ceremonies.

Rather these sacrificial blood offerings were intended to picture and point them to the blood of the coming Messiah, Christ the God-man, whose infinitely valuable shed blood alone could and did fully pay the penalty due unto the sins of each and every one of those for whom that blood was shed.

3. In Romans 3, it goes on to say in verse 16, **“Destruction and misery are in their ways: <sup>17</sup>And the way of peace** <That’s speaking of peace or reconciliation between God and those He saves. And He declares that way of peace...> **have they not known: <sup>18</sup>There is no fear of God before their eyes.”** That is, they just don’t think about it that way because they have no reverential respect for the glory of God as He is uniquely revealed in the Person and work of Christ. Only in Christ and His finished work on the cross do we see how God can be God – both a just God (whose holy justice is not to be perverted or set aside, but rather must fully be satisfied) and still be a merciful Savior. That is His redemptive glory that all of us by nature deny and show no regard for as evidenced by our initial mistaken religious notions whereby we imagine that salvation is conditioned (at least in some way or to some degree) upon me, the sinner – not Christ alone. So spiritually speaking, we have nothing better than this thief, Onesimus, to offer unto God as we too all begin our religious journey with God-dishonoring thoughts that are akin to attempting to rob God of His glory. Some may say – that doesn’t describe me – but hear God’s word here in Romans 3 – This is His description of us all by nature. We, like Onesimus, are indeed unprofitable as God declares that we are unless and until God makes us profitable.
4. Look again back in Philemon verse 11 where Paul said of Onesimus, **“Which <or who> in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:** Onesimus in his born again state is now profitable to Philemon as his returning servant, but Paul speaks of how he is profitable to both of them – referring to the truth that He is now their fellow minister and brother in the faith and so profitable in that sense. We learn of Onesimus now being involved in the ministry of the Gospel from the mention of him in Colossians 4. Also, from both this letter and the letter to the Colossians, there are footnotes at the end of these epistles indicating that Onesimus was used to deliver those letters. That includes this letter of his own recommendation written by Paul to Philemon.
5. Now I want to digress a bit more to elaborate further on how we might be spiritually likened to Onesimus.

(a) Like Onesimus, we unprofitable sinners (in and of ourselves) also must be reconciled in our own hearts and minds to God and that in accordance with God's way of reconciliation – in strict satisfaction to His inflexible justice. That's why Christ had to die and suffer an equivalent of hell for all those He saves. Paul's empathy here of Philemon's own interest demonstrates his recognition that the debt due unto Philemon was legitimate and was to be paid.

Likewise, God does not show mercy to any sinner apart from His justice being satisfied for that sinner. He doesn't simply look over sins or save a people in spite of their sins because that would be a perversion of His justice. No, Christ died to pay the debt due unto their sins – justice was satisfied by their Surety, who took on and paid the penalty in full for all the objects of God's everlasting, electing love. That's in keeping with God's description of Himself as recorded in Isaiah 45:21b-22: ***"...and there is no God else beside me; a just God and a Saviour; there is none beside me. <sup>22</sup>Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else."***

(b) Now we're all, without exception, born into this world in spiritual kinship to Onesimus the unprofitable, runaway thief; but if NOW you are spiritually kin to Paul, and Philemon, and their born again spiritual brother Onesimus, know this – it is by way of God's justice being satisfied (the very righteousness of God in Christ having been put or imputed to your account). But how do you know if Christ died for you – if His justice was thereby satisfied for you? The only evidence is this: that His righteousness has been revealed to you through the preached Gospel and has been made precious to you just as it was to Onesimus by the God-given, blood-bought gift of faith that would have you look unto Jesus for all your salvation and repent of your former dead works and idolatrous thoughts concerning God and how He saves sinners. Now back to our text in verse 12 Paul speaks of Onesimus as one...

B. Verses 12-14: ***<sup>12</sup>Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: <Again, referring to the fact that Paul considered Onesimus his spiritual son in the faith> <sup>13</sup>Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: <sup>14</sup>But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.***

Here Paul is conveying the strict regard he had for equity and justice, knowing that Onesimus was Philemon's run-away servant and as such, still his rightful property, regardless of what authority Paul might otherwise have used to justify keeping him in Rome. Paul is saying there will be no perversion of what is just in this case.

1. Take particular notice of the end of verse 14 where he wrote that the ***“...benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly,”*** Paul seems to be saying that had he kept Onesimus with him in Rome, then any goodness that Philemon might attempt to demonstrate by way of forgiveness and in renouncing his rightful claim as his master might appear to be forced. Rather, if Philemon later sent Onesimus back to Rome after having first willingly received him upon his arrival, it would be clear that it was all of Philemon’s own doing.
  
2. Well, likewise, our acceptance by God is not as it were of necessity in this sense – it is not because He has become indebted to us as a result of some condition or requirement we may presume to have met. None are saved because they believe. Sinners believe because they are saved! Sinners believe on Christ (they are given the gift of faith) because it was purchased for them. Saved sinners are redeemed (bought and fully paid for) by the shed blood of their Substitute on Calvary’s cross. So God’s acceptance of sinners is not of necessity forced upon Him because He is obligated to us as is suggested by the popular but false notion that we, the sinner, must do something to save ourselves so as to acquire or appropriate God’s blessing – whether that be our believing, our receiving Him, our getting serious about religion, reading our bible, praying some prayer, whatever..
  - (a) As Lamentations 3:22 makes clear, ***“It is of the Lord’s mercies that we are not consumed,...”*** Not because you fulfilled some part you presume to play that causes you to be saved.
  
  - (b) Romans 4:4-5: ***Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.*** <That is, if you think you are saved because of something you do, then it would mean that God is now obligated to you. The presumption is that you have earned it.> <sup>5</sup>***But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly,*** <that declares a thief like Onesimus not guilty> ***his faith is counted for righteousness.***

In other words, it’s the object of faith – what faith looks to for righteousness. So this refers to that which God-given faith believes in for righteousness or to satisfy the requirements of a holy and just God (Christ’s work alone, not any work of the sinner). And that, His righteousness, has been counted or imputed to all who will believe. If it’s any other way, God would owe the sinner and that’s not a reward of grace, but of debt. That would be salvation by works which God says shall not be. Now back to our text in verse 15, Paul continues saying...

- C. Verse 15: <sup>15</sup>**For perhaps he** <i.e. – Onesimus> **therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;** Paul is now suggesting that the divine, overruling providential hand of God was in all that had taken place. Onesimus robbing Philemon and fleeing only to land in Rome under the sound of the gospel of God’s grace and now brought back to Philemon that he might rejoice with him in receiving his spiritual and eternal brother in the faith. He continues in verse 16 saying...
- D. Verse 16: <sup>16</sup>**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?** Paul is saying he now is much more than a servant to you. Not only is he returned to your family in the flesh as your servant and profitable in that sense, but in a spiritual sense he may now be received as a profitable, fellow citizen, a family member, and servant in the household of God – a double blessing. Now verse 17...
- E. Verse 17: **If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.**
1. What a picture of substitution! Drawing a spiritual parallel, we have God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit (one God in three Persons – partnering in their respective offices to achieve the one God’s design). And Christ in His interceding work is in essence ever saying, “receive these as you have received me in my resurrection glory – on the same basis of the very righteousness I established in their room and stead.” Consider in John 17, the words of the high priestly prayer of Christ when after having prayed specifically for His apostles, He goes on to add this in verse 20, “
  2. **“Neither pray I for these alone,<i.e. – His apostles> but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; <sup>21</sup>That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.”** All that the Father gave to Christ the Son are received into glory and into the presence of a holy God on the same basis upon which Christ arose from the grave – having the merit of His finished work – His righteousness made theirs by the Father’s gracious accounting or imputation of it to them. I hope you love this message for it is truly wonderful news to a sinner like me. And now back in Philemon, verse 18 Paul writes...
- F. Verse 18: **If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;** So here we have this beautiful illustration of imputation, picturing how the Lord Jesus Christ took on the debt incurred by virtue of the sins (the ‘wrongs’) of God’s elect – having the demerit of their sins imputed or charged to His account that He might bear the penalty due unto them and pay the infinitely valuable price of His own suffering and death (His blood) that no sinner could ever pay for themselves. Paul goes onto say in verse 19...

G. Verse 19: ***I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it:*** <And so likewise our Surety and Substitute entered into covenant promise to come in time and actually pay the debt on the cross – just as Paul here not only had the debt placed to his account – but was good for it – committing to actually pay it. And so Paul continues here in verse 19 saying...> ***albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*** Again, appearing to note that he would pay this debt even though Philemon in a sense owed him, Paul apparently having been the instrument of Philemon’s conversion as well. Now there’s a picture of mercy and grace! We owed the debt to God’s justice, but it was God that provided Himself a suitable and acceptable sacrifice. And so he continues in the remaining verses saying...

H. Verse 20-21: ***Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord.*** <and I believe he means here, ...give me that cause for inner rejoicing.> <sup>21</sup>***Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*** Paul is communicating again that in view of what Christ had done in paying their sin debt (both his and Philemon’s as well), and receiving them, how could they not forgive this brother in Christ and likewise receive him as such.

### III. Closing / Summary:

In summary, my emphasis today has been this: (1) that all without exception indeed bear resemblance to Onesimus as the unprofitable and run-away servant. But (2) while all men resemble Onesimus, the runaway, unprofitable thief, only those who are brought to recognize their kinship to that Onesimus, (the unworthy sinner with nothing to offer) sense their desperate need for Christ to be their Substitute and Surety. So unless or until you’ve been convinced of your kinship to Onesimus, the unprofitable, unworthy sinner, you would be tragically mistaken to consider yourself as spiritually kin to Onesimus, the born again believer and spiritual brother of Paul and Philemon, and all the other blessed objects of God’s mercy and grace in Christ.

You may have kinfolks you’d rather not claim, but it’s truly good news to be able to call Onesimus one of your kin folks.

Footnote from the author: While this sermon was prepared and delivered by me, I often utilize the commentaries, study helps, and teachings of others to supplement my own prayerful study of the scriptures. Since this document was not originally prepared for publication in print, please excuse and recognize that it was unfeasible to properly identify and credit all of the various original sources used to develop the content herein. Ultimately, it is my sincere and foremost objective to accurately present the gospel of God’s grace found in the only infallible source, God’s word itself – the Bible.