

A MAN GREATLY CHANGED, ONESIMUS PHILEMON 08–21

Introduction

This is the picture of a man greatly changed — changed by Christ. It shows us the difference that conversion should make in a life and just how we should receive a person who has been converted. And remember: Onesimus was a slave and a thief. Few people would ever want to be seen with a slave much less be known as a brother to him. Yet, this is exactly what we are about to see. No matter how low and base a person is, we are to reach out to him and do all we can to bring that person into the fellowship of Christ and the church. This is a strong picture of a man changed by Christ.

- I. Paul wanted to make a special request of Philemon (v. 8-9).
- II. Onesimus was a son of Paul — born again (v. 10-11).
- III. Onesimus was facing his past — to right his wrong (v. 12-14).
- IV. Onesimus was a changed man (v. 15-16).
- V. Onesimus was to be welcomed and trusted as much as Paul (v. 17-21).

I. *Philemon 08–09 Paul's Special Request of Philemon*

Paul wanted to make a special request of Philemon. He had the right to demand that Philemon grant the request. Why? How can any believer, even a minister, demand that another believer do anything, especially if the believer differs or does not wish to do what is requested? There are two reasons:

=> It is the right thing to do.

=> It is a believer's duty to do it.

A believer, no matter who he is, should do the right thing; he should do his duty.

Therefore, Paul had the right to make a special request of Philemon. But note: Paul did not demand that Philemon grant the request. Philemon should, but Paul did not demand it. Instead, he appealed, urged and pleaded with Philemon because he loved Philemon. Note that Paul based his plea upon three things that should appeal to the heart of any believer.

=> Paul based his appeal upon love: the love of Christ and the love of believers for each other. This should mean that Philemon loved Paul as a brother in Christ, loved him enough to grant the request.

=> Paul based his appeal upon his age. He was apparently in his fifties and no doubt his body was somewhat more aged than the average person because of the wear and tear upon his body from the sufferings that had been inflicted upon him through the years.

=> Paul based his appeal upon the fact that he was a prisoner for the cause of Christ. He had suffered so much in order to carry the gospel to the lost of the world, to people who were hopeless and lost just as Philemon and his family had been.

Because he was a prisoner for Christ, Philemon should grant his request. Paul was tired and worn, about to close his ministry and life upon earth; therefore, he expected his dear friends to heed his last request.

What was Paul's request? It concerned Onesimus, a former slave of Philemon, a slave who had run away to gain his freedom and had fled to Rome. Imagine Onesimus having just returned to Philemon and having handed this letter to Philemon — and Philemon standing there reading this letter. What were his thoughts? What was the impact upon Philemon, the slave owner who had been converted to Christ? What would he do now? There standing before him was a former slave who had broken the law by running away, broken one of the major laws upon which the Roman empire was built. (Rome kept the peace by enslaving and scattering the people of conquered nations all over the world, breaking their loyalty to their homeland. Death was the punishment for runaway slaves.)

II. *Philemon 10–11 Onesimus, A Son of Paul*

Onesimus was a changed man, a man who had “become a son to Paul,” that is, born again. Paul had led Onesimus to the Lord. Remember that Paul was in prison. How then did Paul come in contact with Onesimus? Was Onesimus recognized as a runaway slave while in Rome and imprisoned himself? No! He could not have been, for he was not in prison. He had returned and was moving about freely and was now standing before his owner, Philemon. When Onesimus reached Rome, he had most likely run across some Christian believers, and they had befriended him and introduced him to Paul. Paul then led him to Christ.

Note that Paul pulled no punches. He readily admitted the wrong that Onesimus had done: he had not been useful. The idea is absolutely of no use, just good for nothing. But now he was useful. He had accepted Christ and he was of the greatest use to Philemon and to Paul for the kingdom of Christ.

Thought 1. Jesus Christ changes lives. He can take a useless, unprofitable, good for nothing person and make the most useful, profitable and good person imaginable. Jesus Christ can take nothing and make something out of any person — no matter...

- how low a person is
- how far a person has sunk
- how far a person has gone
- what a person has done

...Jesus Christ can change a person and make him the most useful person in the world. How? Jesus Christ takes a person and *creates him anew*. Christ gives the person a *new birth*, makes a *new creation*, a *new person* out of him.

John 1:12-13 *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God. Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

John 3:3, 5 *In reply Jesus declared, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.”.... Jesus answered, “I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”*

2 Cor 5:16-17 *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!*

Eph 4:22-24 *You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. (cp. v. 25-32)*

Col 3:8-10 *But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices. And have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.*

Titus 3:4-7 *But when the kindness and love of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.*

1 Pet 1:23 *For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.*

2 Pet 1:4 *Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.*

III. Philemon 12–14 Onesimus Faced His Past

He faced his past in order to right his wrong. This is clear evidence that the heart of Onesimus had been truly converted to Christ. He wanted to return and right the wrong he had done. Christ always does this to a person when he is truly converted. This is what Christianity is all about: converting and changing the wrong and evil in the world, changing it to a world of love and goodness and justice.

Note how dear this slave was to Paul. Paul says that he was sending a part of his own heart to Philemon. Paul loved this man who had been a law-breaker and thief (cp. v. 18-19). This slave had become dear, very dear to Paul’s heart. He was so dear that Paul would have preferred to keep Onesimus with him. Paul, who was in prison, desperately needed Onesimus — needed his companionship, encouragement and assistance. But Paul would not ask him to stay. Why? Because Paul would do nothing without the consent of Philemon. Onesimus owed Philemon and it was up to Philemon where Onesimus should serve: either with Philemon as a slave or to return and serve with Paul as a minister.

Note this, for it shows how Paul opened the door for Philemon to face Onesimus to be a servant of the gospel. The strength of Paul's wish is seen in his including Onesimus in the list of some great ministers who had been serving with Paul (Col 4:7-9). Paul elevated Onesimus so highly that he said that Onesimus could share exactly what had been happening to the gospel through Rome (also cp. v. 15-16).

Thought 1. A Christian believer is to make restitution, to right whatever wrong he has done — in so far as it is humanly possible. No Christian should ever try to escape from making restitution, from righting whatever wrong he has done. The very cause of Christ upon earth is morality and justice — to make the earth as good a place as possible — to teach and charge as many people as possible to live righteous and godly lives — to sweep the earth with the glorious gospel of love and care and the duty of one another to love and care for each other. If believers shirk their duty to right their own personal wrongs, then of what value is their Christianity? This is the reason Onesimus was returning to Philemon — the reason Paul was sending him back despite the fact that he himself desperately needed Onesimus.

Luke 11:8-10 *“I tell you, even though he will not get up and give you the bread because of friendship, yet because of your shameless audacity he will surely get up and give you as much as you need. So I say to you: Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened.”*

Lev 6:4 *When he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found.*

Prov 6:31 *Yet if he is caught, he must pay sevenfold, though it costs him all the wealth of his house.*

Ezek 33:15 *If they give back what they took in pledge for a loan, return what they have stolen, follow the decrees that give life, and do no evil — that person will surely live; they will not die.*

IV. Philemon 15–16 Onesimus, A Changed Man

Onesimus was a changed man. And what a change he had experienced.

1. He had been changed by the hand of God, that is, under the providence of God. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus had left for just a brief time so that he could return forever. God was overlooking and overruling the whole event for the sake of Onesimus' salvation. Philemon was now able to be associated with Onesimus forever. The implication is that both shall live forever with Christ, worshipping and serving Christ throughout all eternity.
2. He had been changed from a slave to a brother — a “dear brother.” Note what Paul says: Onesimus had left as a slave, but he...

- was now above a slave.
- was now a dear brother.
- was now of great value to Paul.
- was now of much more value to Philemon.

Thought 1. The point is well made: when Christ changes a life, the life is changed eternally. Earthly relationships are changed forever. The changed person becomes a dear *brother*. It does not matter what the relationship has been...

- a master-slave relationship
- a friend-enemy relationship
- a victim-criminal relationship
- a love-hate relationship
- a marriage-divorce relationship
- an abused-hurtful relationship

If the person has been truthfully changed by Christ, then he is to be received as a *dear brother*. Why? Because God has put His hand upon the person and changed him forever.

Mat 22:39 “Love your neighbour as yourself.”

John 13:34-35 “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”

John 15:12 “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.”

Rom 12:9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good.

Rom 13:8-10 Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellow-man has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “Do not commit adultery,” “Do not murder,” “Do not steal,” “Do not covet,” and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” Love does no harm to its neighbour. Therefore love is the fulfilment of the law.

Gal 3:26-28 So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

Eph 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household.

1 Th 3:12 May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you.

Heb 2:11 Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.

1 Pet 1:22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.

V. *Philemon 17–21 Welcome Onesimus and Trust Him*

Onesimus was to be received and trusted as much as Paul himself. Paul makes an astounding request. He asked Philemon to receive a slave who was a lawless thief just as he would receive himself. Most people would not even want to be seen with a slave or a lawless thief, much less be to be known as a partner or brother to one. But Paul boldly stepped forward and asked that Onesimus, the slave and thief, be received as a partner and brother. And note how sincere Paul was.

- ⇒ Paul said that he would personally pay whatever money or goods Onesimus had stolen. Why should Philemon accept this? Because Philemon should always remember the debt he owed for his salvation. Paul had led him to Christ; therefore Philemon owed his very life to Paul (v. 19).
- ⇒ Paul said that he would be filled with joy and refreshed if Philemon would receive Onesimus as a partner and brother in the LORD (v. 20).
- ⇒ Paul said that he had great confidence that Philemon would grant the request and even go beyond and do more (v. 21).

Thought 1. The one thing that people need above all else is to be received. No matter how low or base, useless and unprofitable, sinful and derelict, crippled and diseased, ugly and unattractive, unapproachable and distasteful — a person needs to be received and brought into the fellowship of Christ and believers. For too long, the church and believers have shunned and shut out the lowly. Christ loves and longs for every human being — man, woman and child — to be reached for Him.

We must always remember: we are debtors to Christ and to the world, every man, woman and child. Christ has saved us and given us the fellowship with Himself and God the Father and with one another. Therefore, we are spiritual debtors to all.

Mat 28:19-20 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Mark 16:15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

Acts 1:8 “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Rom 1:14-15 I am obligated both to Greeks and non-Greeks, both to the wise and the foolish. That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome.

1 Cor 4:7 For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

1 Cor 6:20 You were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your body.

2 Cor 8:9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

1 John 3:16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. ■