

Philemon 1:9-25

Christ's Love Changes Everything

8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,
9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you -- being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a
prisoner of Jesus Christ --

10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,

11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,

13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the
gospel.

14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion,
as it were, but voluntary.

15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,

16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave -- a beloved brother, especially to me but how much
more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.

18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay -- not to mention to you that you owe me even
your own self besides.

20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I
say.

22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be
granted to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

We are taking up this letter at the point at which we left off last week. Paul has been rightly praising
God for his works in and through his beloved brother Philemon, and now Paul comes to the difficult
part of the letter, he is going to make a request.

There are times when every pastor wishes that his powers including that of compulsion, especially in
matters where the correct course of action is clear and biblical, you wish that instead of simply
directing and declaring you could tell someone "*just do it*" in the way that parent can command and
then compel their children to say clean up their room. And then if the person failed to carry out the
command, instead of having to wring your hands or if it is say a serious sin or failing, go through
church discipline, you could just spank them and be done with it.

But unfortunately, or rather I should say fortunately, that is not the kind of power that pastors have.
Our power is strictly ministerial and declarative, we are not legislators or magistrates, we are
Ambassadors of Christ, and our duty is to tell people what Christ the king has declared and to allow the
compulsion to come from the work of Spirit in their hearts. Even in church discipline, the most that can
happen is the casting out of the guilty party from the communion of the church. Any attempt to add a
power of compulsion to the church, in the way that for instance, in Islam apostasy can be punished
with death is wholly inappropriate.

If we doubt that, we have only to recall that Paul and the Apostles did not use their office as a club to compel men to do their bidding. So that writing here, Paul does not simply command Philemon in regards to Onesimus. Rather he relies that the love of Christ, which Philemon has manifested in his own good works in the church will produce a willingness in Philemon to comply with his request. Calvin writes: ***“By his example he shows that pastors should endeavor to draw disciples gently rather than to drag them by force”*** but then he follows that up by saying ***“but yet so as to know that they who are treated so gently have nothing less exacted from them than what they ought to do.”***

Paul is not commanding Philemon, he is asking, indeed expecting him to do the right thing even though it is the hard thing. Because he is going to ask him to forgive his runaway slave Onesimus. But not just any slave, he doesn't speak of him in harsh terms calling him Onesimus that good for nothing robber.

He speaks of Onesimus as His own beloved Son, begotten in the faith, and what he means there is not that he had by his own power caused Onesimus to be born again. Throughout this epistle Paul refers to the sovereign grace of God in all the events especially in the conversion of Onesimus. Again I hate to quote him twice in a row, but he's very eloquent on this point:

When he says that Onesimus has been begotten by him this must be understood to mean, that it was done by his ministry, and not by his power. To renew a soul of man and form it anew to the image of God — is not a human work, and it is of this spiritual regeneration that he now speaks. Yet because the soul is regenerated by faith, and “faith is by hearing,” (Romans 10:17,) on that, account he who administers the doctrine holds the place of a parent. Moreover, because the word of God preached by man is the seed of eternal life, we need not wonder that he from whose mouth we receive that seed is called a father. Yet, at the same time, we must believe that, while the ministry of a man is efficacious in regenerating the soul, yet, strictly speaking, God himself regenerates by the power of his Spirit. These modes of expression, therefore, do not imply any opposition between God and man, but only show what God does by means of men.

And I really want you all to see this because it is the heart of the letter. Paul is essentially arguing that all the things that have taken place, Onesimus running away, Onesimus bumping into Paul, being converted, ministering to him while the now aged Paul was imprisoned, and yes even the events that he now believes will happen have been directed sovereignly by God and will be used for good in every respect.

Onesimus, even while he was still in Philemon's household, had the heart of a rebel and a runaway, and so he was exactly the opposite of his name. His name Onesimus means useful, but this slave was actually useless to everyone. But now by God's working he has become useful, to Paul, to God, and even to Philemon. But not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ, one who serves God and the brethren not out of compulsion, but out of love.

And in fact, because of God's working in him, Onesimus has become so “profitable” to Paul and the cause of the Gospel, he could have wished to keep him there, especially because he loves Him as a Son. But Paul says essentially in that regard I am sending him back to you, because Philemon I wanted you to have an opportunity to do the right thing willingly and not by compulsion and not by *fait accompli*. Paul doesn't write and say, ***Philemon, I know you'd want to help me out here in Rome, so I'm keeping Onesimus here to minister on your behalf. Thanks***

So Paul advances his belief in verse 15 that all that has taken place occurred under the direction of God. It wasn't Philemon's purpose in stealing money and running, to become a Christian to help Paul out and to advance the gospel, but it was God's purpose all the time.

In that sense its rather like the story of another man, Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers. They meant to do him evil, but God planned everything that happened in the life of Joseph and used it for good:

Gen. 45:5 "But now, do not therefore be grieved or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

6 "For these two years the famine has been in the land, and there are still five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvesting.

7 "And God sent me before you to preserve a posterity for you in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 "So now it was not you who sent me here, but God; and He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house, and a ruler throughout all the land of Egypt.

As Calvin again put it: ***"the elect of God are sometimes brought to salvation by a method that could not have been believed, contrary to general expectation, by circuitous windings, and even by labyrinths"*** Certainly the last thing I would have expected in 1992 was to be standing here today preaching the gospel... [Came to Northern Virginia not to get converted, etc]

So no doubt, Philemon is amazed to hear about what has happened but Paul expects that he will glorify God to learn that Onesimus is now being returned as beloved brother in Christ.

There is of course, still the matter of the money that Onesimus stole from Philemon in order to reach Rome. Here we don't know whether Paul was told about that by Philemon, or whether he was using pastoral insight, what I sometimes refer to as Pastoral "Spidey Sense" to guess what had happened. But either way Paul loves him so much that he says to Philemon, taking the pen from Timothy and writing in his own hand in verses 18-19 ***"put it on my account"***, and writing as it were an IOU.

Now, it is unlikely that Philemon would actually have demanded that money from Paul, as Paul reminds him you owe me your own self. What does that mean? Well more than probably that Philemon was himself saved either through the preaching of Paul, or through the preaching of Epaphras, who had himself been saved and trained by Paul. But either way to have demanded money would be like a child giving their aged parent a bill for living in their house. One is reminded of the story of the wicked servant in Matt. 18

Finally Paul closes by mentioning two things, first that he is confident the Philemon will not refuse his request but do *more* than he has requested, and possibly that includes the emancipation of Onesimus, and we'll talk more about that.

Then Paul implies he is going to visit, this is what good Pastors do in order to ascertain whether their directions are indeed being carried out. But how is he going to get there, after all he is still in jail. Well once again Paul speaks as one who knows God is in control, and therefore he feels certain to be released via the agency of the prayers of the saints, just as Peter was in Acts 12.

Applications: 3

First an incidental but a sobering one – Demas is mentioned as Paul’s fellow laborer in the closing of this letter, as well as Colossians and yet in 2 Tim 4:10 *10 for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world, and has departed for Thessalonica*

Second regarding slavery, and its connection to Christianity, as I said before Christianity did not preach radical emancipation.

1 Cor. 7:21 Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it.

22 For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ's slave.

23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

Brothers and Sisters, leveling

Gal. 3:26 For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.

27 For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ.

28 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

Col. 3:10 and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him,

11 where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all.

Third, regarding the sovereignty of God:

Jer. 10:23 O LORD, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps.

Romans 8:28 And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

This should be of the greatest consolation to believers in times of difficulty and as they seek to understand why awful things occur.