

# Onesimus – My Spiritual Twin

## Philemon

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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. Today I'll be preaching from 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.
- C. Now this epistle records Paul's efforts to reconcile Philemon 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.
- D. And in Paul's appeal for this reconciliation, we see a beautiful illustration of how God reconciles sinners unto Himself. As such, I'm sure some of you have heard this book presented with a strong emphasis on 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 actually paying the debt before God's justice due unto their sins – a debt they could by no means pay. And that is certainly a truth that stands out in this epistle and one that I would be remiss if I didn't likewise emphasize.
- E. But along with that, today I also want to direct your attention to how (spiritually speaking) we all by nature closely resemble this wicked thief, Onesimus, but not everyone resembles Onesimus, the born again believer. With those thoughts in mind, I've titled today's message, "Onesimus – My Spiritual Twin."

F. In my study of this book, I found that many commentators speak highly of the wisdom that Paul uses in his approach to Philemon, his humility, as well as the persuasive kindness that attended his arguments. But as we consider the spiritual parallels to this story of reconciliation, I believe that Paul's kindness and even the approach he took in going to bat for Onesimus is not solely to be attributed to his wisdom in using diplomacy or tact or his people skills, but rather I believe this is a product of the love of God having been shone abroad in his own heart by the mercy and grace in Christ that he had experienced.

You see, love begets or produces love. So I don't consider it a mere coincidence or especially remarkable that Paul's approach to Philemon (about being reconciled to his servant Onesimus) can be viewed as such a beautiful picture of the reconciliation of a sinner before a holy God. I think that is true because Paul saw himself as the undeserving object of God's mercy and grace – much like his spiritual brother, Onesimus. So I'm suggesting that Paul's gracious approach seen in this epistle pictures how Christ deals with His sheep in salvation because of Paul's own experience of God's grace toward him.

II. **Exposition of Philemon:** Now in the interest of time, I'm going to skip over the introduction and closing of this letter so that we might concentrate on the main body of the letter. By way of background: Philemon was a Gentile who seems to have been a resident of Colosse and a fellow minister there as the opening verses to the chapter 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. Following that, Paul continues in verse 8, writing...

A. Verses 8-9: <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.* I believe the sense here is Paul telling Philemon that while he could take a more direct approach, leaning upon Paul's apostolic authority as Christ's ambassador so as to direct Philemon to do that which is "convenient" or would be becoming of him as a fellow believer and minister, he instead opts to take a different approach more in keeping with how the triune God had mercifully shown His love to both Paul and Philemon in receiving them in Christ, their Substitute. And so Paul begins his petition in verse 10, saying...

B. Verses 10-11: <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, having apparently 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. As God describes us all by nature in Romans 3:10-12, we read: *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. Akin to Onesimus, we too are spiritual thieves in that our initial religious thoughts reflect 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 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 robs God of His glory.
  
2. Consider how that passage in Romans 3 describing all of us by nature continues 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 blood offerings were intended to picture 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 have they not known: <sup>18</sup>There is no fear of God before their eyes.**”* That is, they have no reverential respect for the glory of God as 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 be satisfied) and still be a merciful Savior. That is His redemptive glory that all 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 our twin Onesimus to offer as we too all begin our religious journey with God-dishonoring thoughts that 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 unless and until God makes us profitable.

4. Look again at 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. So Paul continues now in verse 12, referring to Onesimus, saying...

C. 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.***

1. I believe Paul is relating here how that as he had been the instrument used in the conversion of Onesimus (being his spiritual father) that he may have been justified in keeping him in Rome to have him assist in the ministry there; however, he states that would not do so without considering the mind or interests of Philemon. 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. Now I want to digress a moment 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 to God and that in accordance with God’s justice being satisfied. That’s why Christ had to die and suffer an equivalent of hell and more for all those He saves. Paul’s consideration here of Philemon’s interest demonstrates his recognition that the debt due unto Philemon was legitimate and to be paid. Later in this chapter we’ll see this even more clearly as Paul stands in for Philemon as his surety (one who takes own the debt of another) to provide the just and equitable payment that was due.
  - (b) To show that there must be a just and equitable reconciliation before God, consider what is recorded in Exodus chapter 34 after Moses had asked God to show him His glory and God describes Himself (His glory or the revelation of what He is like).

In Exodus 34:7a He says of Himself that He is a God who is, ***“Keeping mercy for thousands, <He is a merciful Savior> forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, <but notice He adds also that I am a God ...> and that will by no means clear the guilty; ...”*** In other words God does not show mercy to any sinner apart from justice being satisfied for that sinner. He doesn’t simply look over sins or save a people in spite of their sins which 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.

(c) 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.”*** Now we’re all, without exception, born into this world in spiritual kinship to Onesimus the unprofitable, runaway thief; but a crucial question is, “Are we (are you) now in spiritual kinship with Onesimus, the born again, profitable believer for whom reconciliation has been made?” You see, he was not only to be reconciled here before his master Philemon, but as Paul asserts he was among those already reconciled before a holy and just God by virtue of Christ’s substitutionary work for him. How do we know that? Because he was given the blood-bought gift of faith.

(d) Today, are you spiritually kin to Paul, and Philemon, and their spiritual brother Onesimus? Well if so – it is by way of justice satisfied (the very righteousness of Christ put to your account) and the evidence is that this has been made known to you and precious to you as it was to Onesimus by the God-given gift of faith as he heard this same gospel message of God’s grace in Christ wherein His righteousness is revealed – wherein His perfect satisfaction to God’s justice is set forth.

2. Now back to our text in Philemon, note Paul’s addition at the end of verse 14 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 would 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.
3. Well, likewise, our acceptance before 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 (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 prevalent but false notion that we, the sinner, must do something to save ourselves so as to acquire 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 tells us, ***“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 His God-given faith believed in for righteousness or to satisfy the requirements of a holy and just God (Christ's work alone, not his own). And that, His righteousness, was counted or imputed to him. 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. Christ shall have all the preeminence in the salvation of a sinner. God willingly saves His elect – those He gave to Christ that He might live and die for them to accomplish their eternal salvation. Now back to verse 15...

- D. Verse 15: ***<sup>15</sup>For perhaps he 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...
- E. 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 and servant in the household of God – a double blessing. Now verse 17...

F. 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.” As Christ prayed to the Father in John 17:4, “***I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. <sup>5</sup>And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. <sup>6</sup>I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word.***”
  2. And lest we restrict this to refer only to the apostles, consider further down where Christ continues in vs. 20 saying, “***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 that 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 – just as He had accounted or imputed the demerit of their sins unto Him, their Surety and Substitute in order that He could pay the just sin debt on their behalf. I hope you love this message for it is truly wonderful news to a sinner like me. And now verse 18...
- G. 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...
- H. 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...

- I. 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.

Well, I'll stop here and you can read the last few closing verses of this book on your own, but in summary, I leave you with this to contemplate...

### III. Closing / Summary:

As I've set forth, all without exception indeed bear resemblance to Onesimus as the unprofitable and run-away servant. But 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 as 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, all the other blessed objects of God's mercy and grace in Christ.

You know twin brothers and sisters bear a much greater resemblance to each other than other siblings. And that's why I used this description in the title of today's message. You see, believers stand accepted in the beloved – in Christ; and as such they all stand before God with the exact, same perfect righteousness – the one very righteousness of God which Christ accomplished for them – His righteousness graciously put to their account.

Well, like Onesimus, someone you may have providentially been brought for the first time to hear this wonderful news of God's grace in Christ – the very Gospel that Onesimus came across in Paul's hired house there in Rome. I pray that God likewise will be gracious to that someone you so that you too can identify with Onesimus – my spiritual twin.

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.