

FOR LOVE'S SAKE

Philemon

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PROLOGUE

Actions can speak louder than words. Mary Chambers tells about a man who was trying to be more diligent about witnessing as he was standing in the "10 Items or Less" checkout at the grocery store. "All have sinned," he began, sincerely looking at the clerk scanning his items. "Including you, Mac," she said, without looking up, "I count seventeen items here."

SCRIPTURE

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, {2} to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: {3} Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. {4} When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God {5} because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. {6} I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. {7} I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother. {8} For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, {9} yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love--and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. {10} I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. {11} Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. {12} I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. {13} I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; {14} but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. {15} Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back 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} So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. {18} If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. {19} I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. {20} Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. {21} Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. {22} One thing

more--prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. {23} Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, {24} and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. {25} The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit (Philemon NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

The brief New Testament book known as Philemon is actually a personal letter of appeal by Paul on behalf of a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. Apparently, Onesimus had fled from Philemon's household (located somewhere in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor), somehow met up with Paul, and was led by him to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul then convinced Onesimus to return to Philemon, bearing this letter with him.

The request in the letter, when understood in its totality, is extraordinary. Not only does Paul want Philemon to take no vindictive action against Onesimus, he also wants Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ, set him free, and send him back to Paul to be a partner in the Gospel ministry!

Why does Paul think he can make such a request? Paul could have made his appeal to Philemon on the basis of their friendship. He could have tied his request to the fact that Philemon owed Paul a huge favor. For that matter, Paul could have ordered Philemon to do this on the basis of his authority as an Apostle. But instead, he wanted Philemon to be motivated by the love of Christ within himself. It is as if he asked him, "What are you willing to do for the sake of the love you have experienced in Jesus Christ?" – a question that needs to be answered by all Christ followers. What are you willing to do for the sake of the love you have experienced in Jesus Christ?

1. ARE YOU WILLING TO TAKE RISKS FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE?

Onesimus, Paul and Philemon each faced a situation of risk. Under Roman law, slaves were considered disposable property. The head of a household could lawfully slay his slaves. But this seldom happened in practice unless a member of the household was murdered or a slave escaped. Onesimus faced severe punishment or even death if he returned to Philemon. But he was willing to do so for the sake of the love he had experienced in Jesus Christ.

Paul was already under a kind of house arrest for his evangelistic work. If he got caught helping an escaped slave, he faced more serious penalties. But he was willing to do so for the sake of the love he had experienced in Jesus Christ.

Philemon faced the scorn of society and rejection by his affluent peers if he failed to punish Onesimus. So what did he do? We do not know for sure, but the fact that he did not

destroy the letter but circulated it among the churches in the valley strongly suggests he set Onesimus free. And if he did so, I believe, it was for the sake of the love of Christ.

What risks are we willing to take for the sake of the love of Christ? One prominent Christian leader has said, “Faith is spelled R-I-S-K,” (John Wimber) and I have to agree. Recall that in Jesus' parable of the talents, the servant who was unwilling to take any risk was condemned and his talent given to the one who had risked the most (Matt 25:14-30).

American Christians have difficulty even thinking about taking risks for God. We remain complacent in our religion and reject change no matter how desperately it is need. A preacher received a renewed vision for ministry and declared it to the congregation one Sunday morning. “God wants us to move forward,” said the preacher, “Let the church walk!” The people got excited and shouted, “Amen, let it walk!” The preacher then said, “Let the church run!” The people said, “Amen, let it run!” “Let the church fly!” cried the preacher. “Amen, let it fly!” replied the people. “Now it’s going to take money to let it fly,” shouted the preacher. “Let it walk,” said the people, “Let it walk.”

What risks are we willing to take for the sake of the love of Christ? I am not talking about foolish risks, but thoughtful risks that show we belong to the Kingdom of God. It may not be a dramatic, life-threatening risk, though certainly that can happen. It may not involve large sums of money. It may not require long distance travel. More likely it may be something like leaving our “zone of comfort” to walk across the room to meet someone new. Or speaking up when we see injustice rather than looking the other way. Or taking the time to listen to someone who needs a sympathetic ear.

Twenty-five years ago First Church took a chance on a new program called “Stephen Ministry” that trained people how to bring Christ’s love to those who are hurting. The name of the program comes from a man mentioned in Acts 6 who was called Stephen. He was the first person commissioned by the apostles to provide caring ministry to those in need. Perhaps God is calling you to risk a bit of your time and energy to become a Stephen Minister. Regardless, “What are you willing to risk for the sake of love?”

2. ARE YOU WILLING TO SUPPORT A CAUSE FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE?

Onesimus not only became a Christian after he met Paul, but he also joined in the work of spreading the Good News of Christ to others. This wonderful transformation also became the occasion for a piece of dry wit from the Apostle. He says of Onesimus:

Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me (11).

The name Onesimus means “useful.” So Paul makes a play on words by saying, in effect,

“Before he was *not* Onesimus but now he *is* Onesimus.” The love of Christ had changed him into the real Onesimus. Christ can do the same for anyone.

Paul tells us in the Acts of the Apostles:

“The most important thing is that I complete my mission, the work that the Lord Jesus gave me - to tell people the Good News about God's grace" (Acts 20:24 NCV).

This is the greatest cause the world has ever known. As Christ followers we have the privilege to share in this work. But the Lord wants us to share his love and grace with others not out of reluctance or because we feel our arm is being twisted but out of joyful gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Are you willing to support the cause of Christ for the sake of his great love for you?

Bill Hybels has said:

God wants us to become contagious Christians—His agents, who will first catch His love and then urgently and infectiously offer it to all who are willing to consider it. This is His primary plan, the one Jesus modeled so powerfully, to spread God's grace and truth person to person until there's an epidemic of changed lives around the world.¹

But this does not mean that our witness must always be verbal. St. Frances of Assisi said, "Preach the Gospel all the time - If necessary, use words." But whether in words or actions, in a large group or one-on-one with a friend, we are to help people know the love of Christ.

3. ARE YOU WILLING TO TREAT PEOPLE DIFFERENTLY FOR THE SAKE OF LOVE?

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus came to Christ out of completely different backgrounds. Paul had been a strict Jew, unsurpassed in his zeal for the laws of Moses. Philemon was a wealthy Gentile from Asia Minor. Onesimus, as an escaped slave, would have been regarded in the ancient Roman world as the most despicable of all creatures. Yet all three were united in Christ.

The New Testament does not comment on the origin of slavery nor does it provide justification for human beings owning other human beings even though it does provide evidence that some early Christians were slaves and some were slave holders. On the other hand, it does not call for a social revolution to abolish slavery nor does it promote a slave

¹*Becoming a Contagious Christian*, p. 23.

uprising. The focus instead is on transforming personal relationships that lead to freedom.

Paul's letter went beyond other documents of the era in not only pleading for mercy for an escaped slave but asking that he be set free because he was now a Christian. So powerful was this precedent that many early American slave holders did not want their slaves exposed to the Gospel, for fear that they would have to free them. Only later was the Christian message distorted into something that could justify the continuation of slavery.²

Today, many consider the Letter to Philemon to be the seed that split the rock of slavery. It demands an answer to the question, "Are you willing to treat people differently than the world treats them for the sake of the love you have experienced in Jesus Christ?" For Paul, Philemon and Onesimus the answer was "Yes." May that be true for us as well.

CONCLUSION

Whatever happened to Onesimus? About fifty years after Paul wrote to Philemon, Ignatius of Antioch, one of the great Christian martyrs, was taken to Rome to be executed. During the journey he wrote many letters including one to the bishop of the Church in Ephesus. The bishop's name was Onesimus. Coincidence? Perhaps. But many think it is the same person. Ignatius wrote to him, using the same dry humor as Paul: "Onesimus by name, Onesimus by nature." Ignatius described him as man always doing things for the sake of love. We also know that Paul's letters were collected first at Ephesus. Most of these were meant to minister to entire congregations, even when addressed to individuals. One and only one personal letter was added to the collection: the Letter to Philemon. It was as if Onesimus wanted the whole world to know that he was once a runaway slave set free by the love of Jesus Christ.

²(see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1978]).