

Maybe this is the reason that Onesimus was separated from you for a while so that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave but more than a slave—that is, as a dearly loved brother. He is especially a dearly loved brother to me. How much more can he become a brother to you, personally and spiritually in the Lord!

So, if you really consider me a partner, welcome Onesimus as if you were welcoming me. If he has harmed you in any way or owes you money, charge it to my account. I, Paul, will pay it back to you...

—Philemon 1:15–19a, CEB

LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand how Paul's intervention on Onesimus' behalf follows the pattern of Jesus.
2. To discuss how to implement that pattern in our own time and culture.
3. To better understand the function and purpose of community.

REFLECTION

As we saw last week, the tiny book of Philemon is a fascinating look at a first-century drama, as the reader gets a peek into how Paul handles a delicate social situation and reaches out on behalf of a slave, whom he views as his own heart, his brother in Christ. As you will recall, Onesimus is Philemon's slave, and the short letter finds him with Paul, having somehow become "useless" to Philemon, whether because he stole from Philemon, or because he and Philemon had a falling out, but surely because he was somehow in Philemon's debt. It is possible that Onesimus was a slave *because* of debt; in the ancient world, inability to pay a debt could land one in prison or in slavery.

Paul's intervention on behalf of Onesimus is reflective of Jesus on a number of levels. As an apostle, he could essentially command Philemon to treat Onesimus a certain way. He acts, instead, out of love, and urges Philemon to do the right thing, but leaves the decision to him (Gorman, 465).

Paul then makes it harder for Philemon *not* to respond with mercy, as Paul himself offers to pay Onesimus' debt completely, not even knowing what that debt is. The parallel to Christ's willingness to pay any price in pursuit of God's children is hard to miss. Paul is not thinking about what it will cost him, nor is he calculating whether or not Onesimus is somehow "worthy" of his help. He loves Onesimus and sees him as his brother and son in the faith, and he moves in a strikingly selfless way to help.

Nordling writes, "what Paul intends to do... is direct Philemon's attention away from what must have been an all-engrossing attention to Onesimus's past crimes to the promise that Paul shall pay for everything no matter what" (Nordling, 72). Keep in mind, in the Roman world, a slave was a thing, property. Paul is pushing hard against social norms by not viewing Onesimus as a slave, and instead, loving him. He is "stressing the importance of loving all the saints, and he does not make an exception for a slave" (Sanders, 109).

Paul then asks Philemon to see Onesimus as Paul does, as a brother in Christ. He asks this potentially wealthy slave owner to treat his slave as a brother, an equal. Talk about raising some eyebrows! The truth is, this places Philemon in an interesting position. If he receives Onesimus as a brother, no longer in debt and owing nothing, it is very difficult to accept him as a slave (Sanders, 113).

Paul's intervention on behalf of his beloved brother Onesimus must have shocked those in the house church that met in Philemon's home. These brothers and sisters were watching to see how this drama would play out, and the stakes were even higher than that. Nordling writes, "Surrounding congregations, which the New Testament indicates were no less filled with peevish masters and chafing slaves, must quickly have taken note of how repentance, forgiveness, and restoration genuinely prevailed in

Philemon's house congregation as a result of the proper use of Paul's brief letter, not force (or) retaliation" (Nordling, 83).

One might wonder about the outcome of this drama. There is no definitive statement as to how things all worked out, but there are hints. For example, in Colossians 4:9 there is this: "I sent him with Onesimus, our faithful and dearly loved brother, who is one of you. They will let you know about everything here." Also, there is a book outside the canon, the Constitution of the Holy Apostles, and it contains a list of all the ordained bishops during the apostles' lifetime. It says, "Of Colossae, Philemon. Of Borea of Macedonia, Onesimus, once the servant of Philemon" (Sanders, 114). This would suggest that Onesimus was not only freed, but eventually became a bishop.

In the final analysis, Paul sets the bar high for Christ followers. Sanders states that "he (Paul) asserts that love to the point of equality is the key to the necessary unity of the church" (Sanders, 114). Thompson and Longenecker add that essentially Paul said to Philemon (and to us), "Be who you are, and who you are primarily is a person in the Lord, a person in Christ. So Philemon, act accordingly" (Thompson and Longenecker, 189).

Mother Theresa (Note: this goes with 2c under "Lesson Plan")

Mother Theresa was the Catholic nun revered for her lifetime of devotion to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta. Each of her days was filled with ministering to the sick, the smelly, the dirty, the broken, the sore-covered, the cast-offs of society. She was known to say, as she scooped them up and looked into their eyes, "Ah, my Jesus, here you are in your most distressing disguise." She valued them not because of what they could do, but because when she looked at them, she saw Jesus. She was known for restoring not only their health, if possible, but their dignity as fellow image-bearers of God.

"A Hindu gentleman once approached Mother Teresa and pointed out that while both he and Mother were doing social work, the difference was that he and his coworkers were doing it for *something* while Mother Teresa was doing it for *someone*. The

compassionate nun didn't help people simply because 'it was the right thing to do.' She helped them because she knew, deep in her bones, that by serving others she was serving Jesus himself." (Brandon Vogt)

LESSON PLAN

1. Engage

- a. Read Philemon 8–25.
- b. Cover material under "Reflections" to provide a context for the discussion below.

2. Involve

- a. Paul moves decisively to help Onesimus, and is willing to pay in social capital and money to help him in his plight.
 - i. Who are the marginalized in America in 2017? Said another way, who is thought of as less-than, who has to struggle to be heard or valued, who do we look down on?
 - ii. Who marginalizes them? What responsibility does the church/Christian community bear in marginalizing some groups?
- b. Blogger John Pavlovitz is quoted as saying this: "Jesus prepared a meal for the multitudes to remind us that we feed people not because we believe they deserve it, but because they're hungry."
 - i. Did Paul seem to have a checklist for Onesimus before he would help him? Did Jesus wait until people were "deserving" before he healed them?
 - ii. Do you see instances in our culture where people seem to justify not bringing help or dignity to others because they don't believe they deserve it (they have made bad choices, they have an addiction, they are dirty and smelly, they could help themselves if they wanted to)?
 - iii. Is the church guilty of this? How could we better follow the example of Paul and Jesus?

- c. Read the story of Mother Theresa above, and discuss the following questions:
- i. Did Paul's assistance on behalf of Onesimus restore more than his freedom? How must it have felt to Onesimus to go from "useless" to "useful"?
 - ii. How do we restore dignity to people on the margins of our society?
 - iii. How should we be helping those who are cast out?
 - iv. If we are honest with ourselves, how has the church come up short in engaging with the people society casts off? How have we contributed to making them feel like outsiders?

3. Challenge

- a. What does Glenwood do well in addressing the needs of those society pushes away? What could we do better? Is there anyone who might not feel welcome at Glenwood?
- b. Write out Mother Theresa's quote: "Ah, my Jesus, here you are in your most distressing disguise." Tape it to your phone, your rearview mirror, anything that will help bring it to mind. When you see someone who makes you uncomfortable, repeat the quote. Look for Jesus. How does it change what you see? How does it change what you do?
- c. Optional, if time and equipment allow: In light of the discussion of Paul's activity in Philemon, play the video of the song "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" by the Hollies (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dKowlFlj_Zs). Discuss if time allows, or ask class to leave in silence after they view it, and let people think about it.

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