

PUT THAT ON MY ACCOUNT

INTRODUCTION:

Imagine being an old man in prison because of your faith. Although you can't get out, visitors can come to see you and can bring you things—like food or clothing. One day a young man comes to visit you and brings you some food. You ask him his name and where he is from, but he doesn't answer. 'Maybe someday I'll tell you,' he says. To your surprise, he shows up the next day and again brings you food. Instead of asking him about his name and where he is from, though, you tell him about yourself and your faith and why you are there. Day after day this young man shows up with food—and day after day you share with him the good news that Jesus saves sinners and that all of his sins—past, present, and future—can be forgiven.

Finally, the young man breaks his silence. 'I am Onesimus,' the young man says, 'And you know my master, Philemon. I stole from him and ran away and don't know what to do. I need to be reconciled to my master. Can you help me?'

Any of this sound familiar? If the scenario didn't give it away, the names most certainly should have. Paul wrote the little book of Philemon during his first Roman imprisonment about 60 A.D. He also wrote Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians during that same, roughly two-year span. Of the many things we can learn from this little book, the concept of "reconciliation" is one of the more prominent—and important—ones. What is reconciliation?

On-line dictionary: The process of making two people or groups friendly again after they have argued or seriously fought and have kept apart from one another.

Ryrie: A change of relationship from hostility to harmony and peace between two parties.

Expanded definition: *Reconciliation is rooted in forgiveness and mercy, and it is maintained through patience and longsuffering. It assumes that there is a source of conflict, but that the conflict has been put aside in order to pursue something better, namely, mutual peace with one another, mutual love for one another, and mutual ministry to one another.*

What was the source of conflict between Onesimus and Philemon? Let's turn to the book of Philemon and begin by looking at verses 10-14. I'll demonstrate this more as we go through the book, but in a nutshell Onesimus was a slave and had run away. Why is that a big deal? MacArthur writes: "Such an act was a grievous and serious offense, with severe punishment attached, even **death**. If slaves were found, they were branded with an "F" for *fugitivas*, and they were tortured, and some were even crucified. Running away was not tolerated because people had valued investments in slaves and slaves had great responsibility."

Was there slavery in the Bible? Yes; it was part of the culture at that time. The point of this letter is not about the rightness or wrongness of slavery, however—it is about how to reconcile with someone who has sinned against you.

1. The People

There are 11 people mentioned by name in this book—quite a large number considering it only has 25 verses. We aren't going to look at all of them, but we do need to highlight some things about the key individuals.

A. Paul. Notice some things that Paul mentions about himself in this letter:

--He is in prison. In v 1 and 9 he calls himself a prisoner; in v 10 and 13 he refers to his "bonds"

--He is an apostle and could have "pulled rank" on Philemon. We see that in v 8: "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient." "Enjoin" means to command and Paul, as an apostle, could have commanded Philemon to do what he asks

--He led Onesimus, Philemon's slave, to saving faith in Christ. Notice v 10: "I beseech thee for my **son** Onesimus, whom I have **begotten** in my bonds:"

--It is quite likely that he was also the spiritual father of Philemon. Look at the end of v 19: "...albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides." Philemon was wealthy—and most certainly didn't get his wealth from Paul! If Philemon owed Paul "his own self," it is pretty safe to say that Paul's influence in his life is what God used to bring Philemon to the Savior!

B. Philemon

--He was from Colossae. Paul is writing this letter to him (v 1), but also to Archippus.

Colossians 4:17 "And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it."

--He was wealthy. The church of Colossae was in his house (v 2) and he had room to put Paul up when he got out of prison. Notice v 22: "But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you."

--He was a man of God; a brother in the faith. Paul calls him "dearly beloved" and a "fellow laborer" in verse 1, "brother" in vs 7 and 20, and "partner" in v 17.

--Philemon wasn't just a fellow believer, however—he lived out his faith!

Paul was thankful for him (v 4) because he has heard of "the love and faith, which thou hast toward the **Lord Jesus**, and toward **all saints**" (v 5). In v 7, Paul commends him again for his love: "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." "Bowels" here does not refer to part of the *digestive* system—it refers to the **hearts** of God's people. And the hearts of God's people were refreshed—they were encouraged—by the love that Philemon had for them and others.

What kind of things did Philemon do to be a blessing to others? We don't know because we aren't told.

Arthur Patzia wrote: "Paul is not as eager to describe Philemon's actions as he is to accentuate his spirit; that same spirit of love will determine how he responds to Paul's request regarding Onesimus" (pg 109). And just as Philemon refreshed the hearts of others, Paul is hoping his heart will be refreshed according to verse 20.

C. Onesimus

--Was also from Colossae. That is understandable, of course, because his master Philemon was from there!

Colossians 4:7-9 "All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: ⁸Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; ⁹**With Onesimus**, a faithful and beloved brother, **who is one of you**. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here."

--He had come to Paul in Rome and Paul led him to Christ (v 10). Paul also calls him "a brother beloved, specially to me" (v 16).

--He was a help to Paul somehow in prison. Did he bring him food like I suggested in the intro? We can't say for sure, but we do know Paul calls him *profitable* to him (v 11) and Paul wanted to keep him there with him. Notice v 13: "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel." Although we don't know how he "ministered"—served—Paul, it was such a blessing that Paul didn't want to send him back!

2. The Problem

A. He was a slave that had run away

Notice v 15-16 "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above (more than) a servant..." The word "servant" here is translated from the Greek word *doulos* and means *slave*. Onesimus was not a servant that was free to come and go; he could not leave Philemon and go find another place of employment. Stated another way, he belonged to Philemon; he was Philemon's property.

My guess is that some of you at this point are thinking, ‘Pastor, that’s horrible. A follower of Christ who loved the Lord Jesus and loved other people had a *slave*?’

MacArthur points out some helpful information about how slaves were treated in the 1st century.

--They often had better living conditions than some free man. Some free men lived on the streets or in cheap rooms, but slaves had a “roof over their heads”

--They often had better food and clothing than some of the free men

--And they were treated very often as part of the family, used to teach the children; provided health care, finances; were allowed to own property, develop financial stability, and even received estates willed to them by the owners.

--The point I’m making is this—don’t think of slave owners during this time in the same light you think of slave owners in other periods of history.

Problem 1—he was a runaway slave. Problem 2...

B. He possibly stole from his master Philemon

We don’t know that for sure though. What we do know is this from verse 11—he had been unprofitable “in time past.” Commentators point out that Paul uses a play on words here because the name Onesimus means “useful” and “profitable.” In essence, Paul was saying ‘The one whose name was useful was actually useless—but now he really is useful to both of us!’

Another reason some suggest that Onesimus stole from Philemon comes from v 18: “If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought” (anything). Even if Onesimus had not literally stolen anything, at a minimum he had stolen “time”—he had responsibilities that he was to perform and obviously didn’t do them because he wasn’t there! And because those responsibilities weren’t done, someone else had to do them. And because someone else had to perform those responsibilities, it “cost” his master Philemon something to have someone else do it.

Let’s recap what we’ve learned so far. The apostle Paul, while in a Roman prison, through the providence of God, met Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus. Paul leads him to Christ and although he is helpful to Paul while in prison, Paul does the right thing and sends him back. He sends him back with Tychicus, who is quite likely carrying the letters to both the Ephesian church (Eph 6:21) and the letter to the Colossian church (Col 4:7). How does Philemon get his letter from Paul? Either from Tychicus—or possibly from even Onesimus himself!

We know some of what Paul **said** to Philemon about Onesimus; let’s consider next....

3. The Proposal

Paul didn’t just write the letter to give Philemon some information—he wrote to *ask* Philemon to do something! What did he request Philemon to do? What was Paul’s proposal? Primarily two things:

A. Receive Onesimus back (vs 12, 17)

V 12 “Whom I have sent again: thou therefore **receive** him...”

V 17 “If thou count me therefore a partner, **receive** him as myself.”

Was Paul merely asking Philemon to take him back and restore him to his position as a slave? No; look at verse 15-16. “For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest **receive** him for ever; **Not** now as a servant, but above (more than) a servant, a **brother beloved...**”

Onesimus was repentant—that’s why he was going back—and was seeking to be reconciled to his master. As a Christian, Onesimus understood that he needed to make things right with his master. Paul was helping in this process by asking Philemon to forgive him and receive him as a brother in Christ—the same way he would receive Paul himself!

Can’t help but think Paul had Colossians 3:13 in the back of his mind “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel—complaint or grievance—against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.”

Paul didn't just ask that Philemon show his forgiveness of Onesimus by receiving him, he also asked that Philemon...B. Release Onesimus from his debt (v 18-19)

Paul is not ignoring the fact that Onesimus did wrong—he is offering to pay his debt for him! Your neighbor can forgive your son for accidentally throwing a baseball through his window—but that doesn't fix the window! It needs to be repaired and paid for. Pretty good chance your young boy doesn't have the money to pay for the window, so who pays for it? The Dad does, right? That is what Paul is saying here.

--v 18 "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;"

--v 19 "I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it..." "Written with mine own hand" carries the idea of signed I.O.U.—'I promise I'll repay what he owes, you have my word on it!'

Lastly, let's consider...

4. The Picture

Is not this a wonderful picture of being restored to a right relationship with God—and having our sin-debt "charged" to Jesus?

A. Received by God because of Jesus

Why did Paul want Philemon to receive Onesimus back? Because **God** had received Onesimus and Paul had received Onesimus and it was only fitting that Philemon should receive Onesimus, too!

Why does God receive **us**? In a nutshell, God receives us because we receive **Jesus**!

John 1:12 "But as many as received Him [Jesus], to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name:"

John 14:6 "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man **cometh unto the Father, but by me.**"

Acts 10:43 "To Him give all the prophets witness, that through His name whosoever believeth in Him shall receive remission [forgiveness] of sins."

Not only is this a picture of us being received by God because of Jesus, it is also a picture of being...

B. Released from our debt because of Jesus

Notice again v 18-19 "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it." Paul was obviously able—and willing—to pay the debt or he would never have promised to do so. But how much of a debt did Onesimus owe—and did Paul *actually* pay it? We don't know because we aren't told.

There is no "if" for us, though—we **do** owe a debt that we cannot pay. Our sin separates us from God. Our sin bars us from heaven. And our sin must be gotten rid of to get into heaven. We can't possibly pay the debt to get rid of our sin, but Jesus says "Put that on mine account." Why? Because He loves us. And God did put the payment for **our sin** on Jesus' account.

What happened when our sin went on Jesus' account? Jesus died for our sin and because He did, we were freed from the debt we owed. **II Corinthians 5:19** "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, **not imputing their trespasses unto them...**" We are freed from the debt we owe because Jesus was able...and qualified...and willing to pay our debt for us!

I can't help but think of that wonderful third stanza of "It is Well with My Soul."

My sin—O the bliss of this glorious thought—my sin, not in part **but the whole**,

Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, Praise the Lord. Praise the Lord, O my soul!

That's what happened, didn't it? Our sin was charged to Jesus' account and He paid for it. And because of that, the penalty for our sin has been removed and we are reconciled to God. The cause of conflict between us and God—our sin—has been taken care of and we are no longer enemies, but sons!

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS:

1. What is your reputation as a Christian? When Paul wrote to Philemon, he commended him for the faith and love he had toward Jesus and others. Do others think of us in that way?
2. Have you forgiven those who have wronged you? That's what we are called to do, isn't it? Why? Because Christ has forgiven us.
3. Have you experienced the joy of being forgiven—heaven bound—because your sin has been charged to Jesus' account? If we do not receive Jesus as our Savior, our sin remains on **our** account. It is on a ledger in heaven and those books will someday be opened and we will be judged according to our works.