

*1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,  
To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, 2 and to  
Apphia our sister, and 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 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, 5  
because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the  
Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; 6 and I pray that the fellowship of  
your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good  
thing which is in you for Christ's sake. 7 For I have come to have much  
joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been  
refreshed through you, brother.*

*8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you  
to do what is proper, 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since  
I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ  
Jesus—*

*10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in  
my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful  
both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is,  
sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on  
your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;  
14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your  
goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free  
will. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a  
while, that you would 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 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. 18  
But 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 (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as  
well). 20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my  
heart in Christ.*

*21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.*

*22 At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.*

*23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.*

*25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

We made a good start in this little epistle last week. We spoke of human interactions with humans, and how those interactions differ from the rest of the world, when Christ is common to both parties.

Christians are supposed to interact in a plane different from the rest of the world. The world has it's rules, that we also noted are in a constant state of change, and Holy Spirit indwelt believers, sanctified out of this world, have a different set of rules.

Let me lay some groundwork for how we are to interact with each other before we dive into our remaining verses.

2 Cor. 5:17 should be a very familiar verse to us all. It simply says; *Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.*

Christians are changed people. Regeneration is a word that doesn't get used much these days. When we become christians, indwelt by the Spirit of God, there are fundamental changes.

Paul says we are quickened to life spiritually. Made alive together with Christ. Jesus told Nicodemus, you must be born again. And if we are real christians, that has become true of us. The Holy Spirit comes to live inside our hearts, and we are new people. New creations. Different from our old selves.

That is the basis for Paul's reaction to the Corinthians where he

confronts how the interact with each other; 1 Cor. 6:

*1Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous and not before the saints? 2Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? If the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? 3Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more matters of this life? 4So if you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? 5I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, 6but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers?*

*7Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? 8On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud. You do this even to your brethren.*

We don't interact with each other the same as the fallen world does. Paul says, we live on higher ground than that. Paul says, you should rather suffer loss than sue each other in the worlds courts.

This letter to Philemon is a perfect example to us of christians interacting with christians. This is the right way to work with each other.

Now, when christians in this world enter into agreements and contracts with the unbelieving world, it's OK to seek the worlds remedies when we are cheated or wronged. Sometimes. But we have a new wisdom dwelling in us and with us.

When Heather was struck by a pickup truck on her bicycle by a local fellow in this town, the district attorney was astonished that we didn't want to sue the man.

The wise thing to do was to forgive the fellow and thank God that the injury wasn't worse than it was. The guy was in the wrong place at the wrong time and he wasn't driving any worse than I often did on the same

road. We forgave, thanked God, and moved on.

In the case here in Philemon, something interesting has transpired. Onesimus was a worthless slave and robbed his master of property and service.

Now in that case, no one would blame Philemon who is a christian for seeking the worlds remedy against someone who is not a christian and has caused harm.

But what's most interesting here is that Onesimus has become a christian in the mean time. God in His providence has caused Paul and Onesimus to come together in a city of 1.5 million people, and Onesimus, who likely knew Paul from meeting him at his masters house in the past, has somehow come into contact with Paul, and God has opened up Onesimus' heart to receive Him and Onesimus becomes a new creation. A new creature.

That's a game changer for Philemon who probably never expected to see or hear from Onesimus again. It's a delicate situation, because Philemon was harmed, but that was the old useless Onesimus, and this is now the new creature, the useful Onesimus. There's that play on words because Onesimus name meant useful.

So, Paul has to work with Onesimus to come up with what is the proper way for christians to treat each other that is glorifying to Christ for all involved.

We can imagine that Onesimus is probably terrified to return to Philemon. But Paul says, all parties involved now are new creations, and we live at a different level, a different plane than the rest of the world.

But Philemon needs to be brought up to speed about what has occurred and the right thing to do is for Onesimus to return to Philemon; but with a twist. Paul hopes that Philemon will release Onesimus to him for service and ministry.

*12 I have sent him back to you in person,*

There's so much going on just in those words. Christianity comes with a cost. This is where the rubber meets the road for Onesimus. Is his christianity genuine? Will he be obedient to his new master, the Lord Jesus, and to Paul, and go back to Philemon whom he has caused harm?

This is the mark of true conversion. To set things in order, as much as is possible, with people who you have caused harm in the past.

Zacchaeus comes immediately to our minds. From Luke 19:

*1He entered Jericho and was passing through. 2And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. 3Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. 4So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. 5When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." 6And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly. 7When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." 8Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." 9And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house*

Salvation causes us to act different, to be different from the rest of the world. Paul says to Onesimus, as a real believer, you've got to go make it right with Philemon. Difficult to do. Not easy to go back to someone you've robbed and cheated.

When salvation comes to a house, sometimes it's not easy. Sometimes you've got to go do the hard thing.

Onesimus is lucky. At least there's hope because the person he wronged is a genuine christian. That's far more hopeful than if Philemon was just a rich roman who had been robbed and cheated by a slave.

This might be a good place to ask; Was it OK for Philemon, a christian, to own slaves? That's a huge topic today.

And the answer might be; in our current world the answer is NO. It's not OK for christians to be involved in chattel slavery. But in the first century world, perhaps it was OK with some caveats.

Roman slavery was not exactly like our blighted experience in the United States. Slavery in this country is forever blighted by the fact that the persons enslaved were the result of man-stealing. That's banned by Moses, and the second thing in the United States was the racial inequality.

The widespread belief that people of color were somehow less than and subserviant to white anglo saxon's. That was forever a sin against Jesus teaching about who is a neighbor.

The presbyterian church in the southern United States cast a blind eye on slavery here and argued effectively though wrongly, that church unity must trump questions of slavery. Arguing about slavery was upsetting church unity, so the presbyterians in the south split from the north and said basically, these matters are off the table.

150 years later, the presbyterian church is largely dead, but the little contingent which is split off from the main line liberal presbyterian church (the PCUSA formed in 1983) that is very much alive is just within the past 5 years repenting of that old sin. With tears. They realize they were blinded and it ultimately killed them as a christian force in the world.

But slavery in Roman times wasn't a racial distinctive, it was more or less a group of poor people who needed employment at the most basic level and were dependent on wealthier people to supply those basic needs in exchange for work.

Now make no mistake, it was indeed a system of humans owning humans and we can be sure where sinful humanity is interacting with other sinful humanity, there were abuses.

In the case of Onesimus, if Philemon was not a christian, but just an ordinary roman citizen of wealth, the remedy of a slave who had stolen from you and was worthless to boot, might be death.

What about slavery in the first century christian world then. Did the church abolish slavery? No.

Paul addresses this issue with the Corinthians in 1 Cor. 7:21 *Were you a slave when you were called? Do not let it concern you, but if you can gain your freedom, take the opportunity. 22 For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman. Conversely, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men....*

Christianity changes everything. Paul says if you were a slave when you were called, still be a slave, but know that you now belong to Christ and in that sense, you're this worlds slave but Christs freed man.

In the spiritual world, you've been freed from the bondage of sin. Sin no longer enslaves us. But likewise, if you're a free man in this world, and you become a christian, good for you, you're now a slave of the Lord Jesus.

Paul tells slaves not to worry about their earthly position, but of course, if freedom is offered, to take it. Our position in the next world in christianity always trumps our position in this world.

That said, if you were like Philemon and owned slaves and became a real christian, your relationship to those slaves has changed. They are no longer chattel, they are neighbors to be loved and honored and respected.

There were situations where setting a slave free might even be detrimental. If the slave is uneducated and has only field skills, that society wasn't a friendly place. He'd likely have to endure himself to another master in order not to starve.

The best case for someone like Onesimus is to go back to a christian master who has his best interest at heart and will love and respect him as a fellow christian. Or better still, the outcome Paul is asking for Onesimus.

*12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.*

Paul says, this new Onesimus is useful not just to you, but also to me. Paul wants Philemon to release Onesimus back to him, for service in the cause of Christ.

Church tradition is that Philemon did receive Onesimus back and did allow him to go back and serve Paul. What an educational opportunity for Onesimus. To be with Paul was to be in the best theological institution in the world.

Other church tradition is not as clear, but there is a hint that Onesimus later became the bishop at Berea. A capable student, trained by Paul, that ultimately is serving the church as a pastor. What a turn-around that would have been.

Paul says to Philemon, this is an opportunity for you to minister to me. Onesimus is useful to me.

But in the way that christian people are to interact with other christian people, Paul doesn't demand that outcome, even though in his position in the church, perhaps he could have.

*13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything,*

Paul won't force Philemon's will. Paul is the gentleman that every christian everywhere should copy.

To the Philippians Paul reminds; Philippians 3:17

*Join one another in following my example, brothers, and carefully observe those who live according to the pattern we set for you.*

And to the Corinthians the message is the same; (1 Cor. 11:1,2)

*1 You are to imitate me, just as I imitate Christ. 2 Now I commend you for remembering me in everything and for maintaining the traditions, just as I passed them on to you....*

We need to study Paul's demeanor to Philemon, because Paul is imitating Christ, and we are to imitate Paul. Christians don't treat other christians how the world treats the world. Paul is the perfect gentleman here.

*14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.*

Paul says, this is how christians treat each other, and it doesn't count if I pull rank on you and force you to do it, the blessing comes if it comes from a heart changed from the world, a heart that is a new creation by Christ.

*vs. 15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would 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.*

Paul appeals to Philemon to consider what has happened to Onesimus on a higher plane than just a slave who stole from you and ran away.

God's providence was in play. The harm was temporary, but the result is that we'll spend eternity in joyful union with Onesimus. You lost him for a while, but you'll have him forever.

You lost him as a worthless slave, but in Christ, you'll have him back as a brother, forever. And that isn't just pie in the sky. Paul says this is a

real time fact NOW. You lost a worthless slave, you've regained a brother, both now, and forever. *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.*

When people become christians, everything changes. Values change. Philemon relates to Onesimus with a new heart, new values, and new reality, a new world. *Old things have passed away, behold all things are new.*

In a non-christian context, Onesimus if rounded up and returned to Philemon might face disgrace and harsh treatment at best, and perhaps capitol punishment at worse.

In a christian context, Paul urges Philemon to consider Onesimus departure as a providence of God, and Onesimus, now a christian, as a beloved brother. What a difference in being truly born again. A whole new set or rules apply.

Onesimus goes from being a criminal harshly treated for his harm, to a beloved brother, welcomed and forgiven, valued as a fellow heir of Christ.

*17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.*

The word for partner here is koinōnōn. It's used for someone who is a fellow in a brotherhood. Koinoneus is the word translated fellowship in the new testament.

Paul is appealing to Philemon as fellow christians. Again, this is Paul the gentleman. Philemon might have rightly thought of Paul as a father to his faith. If christians are ranked like military, Paul outranks Philemon. By a LOT. But Paul appeals to Philemon as simply an equal. Two brothers owned by the same master. A fellow slave.

Paul says, I want you to receive Onesimus as if you were receiving me. Because in this army of Christ, Onesimus is equal to Paul and Philemon. We are all just fellow slaves who belong to Christ. Paul urges Philemon

to receive Onesimus in that way.

But there's still this very real little matter of the money Onesimus stole from Philemon. Paul doesn't tell Philemon he has to step away from that fact.

Instead Paul writes Philemon an I. O. U.

*18 But 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 (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).*

But of course, Paul, the gentleman would never remind Philemon that he owes him his very life. He wouldn't mention *that*. But he just did. Paul has a wonderful sense of humor and there has been a playful overtone in this whole letter.

His play on words. His joyful lead in to the serious request. The entire letter seems to us to be bathed in joy. Paul could be serious as a heart attack when necessary, but he can also be a humble and winsome fellow slave. He can tongue in cheek tell Philemon that he owes his life to him.

And by that same rationale, ask him to allow Onesimus the freedom to ultimately go and win other lives, out of this perishing world, to safety and glorious wealth in the Saviour.

*20 Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.*

Paul said at the beginning his heart was filled with joy in every remembrance of Philemon because he was a christian that refreshed the saints.

Now Paul says, let me be that person who is refreshed. You refresh others, now let my heart be the one that is refreshed by you. What a joy to be the one able to bring a blessing to Paul who had exhausted his life bringing blessings to others.

*21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. 22 At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.*

Paul wrote with the confidence that real christians have in real christians. The Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts causes not only obedience, but a hearts desire to do more than what was asked.

And finally Paul says, would you pray me there, please. What a delicious hope for Paul, the prisoner of Christ, to be released to his brother Philemon. Paul hoped to visit all of the churches again in Asia minor.

As far as we know, it wasn't to be. Sometimes God says yes, but sometimes for our benefit and His glory, He says no. It was the Lord's pleasure that Paul should finish his course for His glory, in Rome.

*23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, 24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.*

*25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*