

# SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

## Redeemer of Relationship The Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost September 5, 2010

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### Philemon (NIV)

**P**aul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, <sup>2</sup> to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: <sup>3</sup> Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. <sup>6</sup> I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. <sup>7</sup> Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. <sup>8</sup> Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul--an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- <sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. <sup>11</sup> Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. <sup>12</sup> I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. <sup>13</sup> I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. <sup>14</sup> But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. <sup>15</sup> Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. <sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. <sup>18</sup> If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back--not to mention that you owe me your very self. <sup>20</sup> I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your

**obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask. <sup>22</sup> And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. <sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. <sup>24</sup> And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. <sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

Paul's Letter to Philemon is unique in all the documents in the New Testament because it doesn't mention any lofty doctrine or high theology. It's a personal note. In our age, it could have been an email. It deals with a personal issue between the sender and the recipient. Yet in its fewer than 500 words, Philemon teaches deep lessons about Christ's redemption of relationship.

The background of this letter is fascinating. Though Philemon's name only appears in the Bible in the first verse of this letter, we know a few things about him. He was a leader in the church at Colosse. Paul addresses him as his **"dear friend and fellow worker"** who has **"refreshed the hearts of the saints."** A "fellow worker" with an apostle is someone who shares in hands-on mission ministry. With the exception of Philemon's own name and that of Apphia, who was probably his wife, everyone Paul names in this letter he names also in his letter to the Colossians. From Colossians we know it was Epaphras, not Paul, who brought the gospel to Colosse. But somehow it was through Paul's ministry that Philemon received Christ. This comes out in Paul's pointed remark that **"you owe me your very self."** Lastly, we know that Philemon was relatively wealthy. The Colossian church, or some portion of it, met in his home, and he owned at least one slave, Onesimus. Onesimus' relationship with Paul and Philemon and the relationship of all three with God is the reason for Paul's writing this little note.

Philemon's slave Onesimus has run away from Colosse to wherever Paul is in prison. Almost every ancient culture practiced slavery, and it still exists today in parts of the world. The life of Jesus and the New Testament church was lived in the Roman Empire, which had ancient foundations in slavery. By the time of Christ the Roman economy had become dependent on slavery. Unlike the American South, most Roman households owned at least one or two slaves.

The universality of slavery in human history—including our own-- shows how profoundly capable human beings over all ages and cultures are of corrupting and degrading their relationship with God and with their fellow human beings. Roman slaves lived in constant fear of their masters, who had complete

freedom to punish them ferociously for any reason. But slave owners were also fearful. It's estimated that 25-35% of the Roman population were slaves, so the free population lived in constant fear of a slave revolt. Three unsuccessful slave rebellions actually did take place, with armies of up to 120,000 slaves fighting for their freedom. All were ruthlessly put down.

It's against this background that Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Paul is dealing here with a very delicate situation, and so he uses exquisite tact and courtesy. Onesimus has risked his life in running away—and in going back. Captured runaway slaves were brutally punished and often crucified. From Philemon's slaveholding cultural point of view, Onesimus has deeply offended him. Having a slave run away makes him look weak and unable to control his household, not to mention that he has lost a useful piece of property. "Onesimus" was a common slave name which means "useful", just as "Fido" is a common dog's name which means "faithful."

Paul must be diplomatic, so up to verse 7, his love-filled greetings sound very much like those in his other letters in the New Testament. But then in verses 8-10 he drops the bombshell: **"Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, <sup>9</sup> yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul--an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus-- <sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains."** Through Paul, Onesimus has become a Christian. His relationship with God has been restored. He has received adoption as God's child through faith in Jesus Christ. God has given him new birth into the company of a new family of brothers and sisters, which includes Paul--and Philemon.

At great risk, Onesimus is going back to his master in Colosse. We know he actually made the trip from this passage in Paul's Letter to the Colossians, which was almost certainly sent along with the Letter to Philemon. **"Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a dear brother, a faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. 8 I am sending him to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts. 9 He is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you. They will tell you everything that is happening here."** (Colossians 4:7-9)

Paul's supreme and overarching concern in all his writings, even this personal note, is the gospel, the good news of salvation. Paul's gospel is rooted in the fact that Jesus' supreme lordship over all reality dwarfs all other lordship, authority, power and dominion into insignificance. But Jesus exercises his lordship through love and servanthood. He **"emptied himself,"** says Paul in

Philippians, **“taking the form of a slave,”** and **“became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”** (Philippians 2:7-9 NRSV) Like Jesus, Paul exercises his authority as an apostle on the basis of love and servanthood. This is why he appeals to Philemon rather than ordering him. He wants Philemon not simply to lend him his slave Onesimus to come back to him and serve him in prison. He wants Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom so that Onesimus can join Paul in the ministry of the gospel.

Paul pleads tactfully with Philemon, **“Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- <sup>16</sup> no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord. <sup>17</sup> So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”**

This brief note is full of God’s life and love and we can learn a lot from it, but let me focus on three things. First, Paul’s ultimate concern, even in this very personal matter, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is the good news that God became a human being and entered this world to cancel the guilt of sin and repair its damage to human beings and their relationships. They are no longer under God’s deserved wrath, but they have been redeemed, “bought back” by the love gift Christ made of himself for them on the cross. This is why Paul can tell Philemon, **“you owe me your very self.”**

When our relationship with God is restored, our relationships with one another are completely transformed. Ethnic and racial and gender and social categories become meaningless. We are all one **“in Christ”**. Christ, who for us gave God the life of obedience we rightly owed him, gives us his own identity as God’s beloved children. We are his representatives here in this world, commissioned, like Christ, to spread this wonderful gospel of forgiveness and redeemed relationship.

Second, Onesimus is facing a huge risk, but so is Philemon in the choice he faces. On the one hand he could go back to his old relationship with Onesimus as master and regain the social status and family harmony he had been raised to value so highly. On the other, he can act on the reality of his and Onesimus’ new birth as children of God, welcome him as a brother, and release him for gospel ministry, which would certainly cost him prestige in the pagan community.

The third point I’d like to make ties all three together. Paul pointedly does ***not*** order Philemon to set Onesimus free. He says in verse 12, **“I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will**

**be spontaneous and not forced.”** This is the true test of Philemon’s discipleship. Can he recognize the freedom Christ has won for Onesimus? Can Philemon humble himself to serve Onesimus by asking his forgiveness and setting him free? Is he willing, without compulsion, to abandon a part of his upbringing and way of life, not simply because it’s destructive of his relationship with God and Onesimus, but in order to further the advance of the gospel?

The choices you and I make every day are not nearly so wrenching as the one Paul asked Onesimus and Philemon to make, but they involve the same factors. Jesus Christ is the same redeemer of relationships today that he was for Paul and Philemon and Onesimus. He has transformed forever our relationship with him and with everyone else who has trusted in him.

Yet every day, like Philemon, we feel the pull of our old ways, our old prejudices, the many ways in which we have been subtly socialized and conditioned. We’re tempted to see others not as God sees them, as potential or actual children of God through faith in Christ, to whom we owe service in Christ’s name. Too often we see them only as members of this group or that belief system. We fear the same fears Onesimus did from people who in the past have mistreated us.

Yet in verse 6, Paul gives Philemon and us the key experiencing God’s redemption of our relationships: **“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”** Paul had shared his faith with Philemon. For Paul, faith was something he always acted on, often in costly ways. That’s why he’s in prison. He’s asking Philemon to act in a costly way on the faith Paul had shared with him, to forgive Onesimus and be forgiven by him, and to set him free as he himself had been set free in Christ. By acting **“on the basis of love”**, Philemon would experience God’s own freedom in granting Onesimus freedom.

Paul’s closing to his **“brother and fellow worker”** should give each of us hope: **“Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.”** Paul was not confident that Philemon would do what he wanted. He was confident in Christ, whose life and love filled Philemon with the will to obey not Paul, but God, in a costly way. Every one of us can be confident in Christ’s life and love in us to empower us to acts of trustful risk taking to obey him and learn of the great riches he has given us.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for restoring our relationship with your father through the costly gift of yourself on the cross. Pour your Spirit into our

hearts to redeem our relationships with those whom you have given us as brothers and sisters, and with those whom you are calling to yourself, that together with them we may rejoice in the glory and joy that comes from knowing and following you. Amen.