Today I will preach on our epistle, Philemon. We actually read the entire letter this morning. There is a clear message in our scripture: it is time to give up what we thought was important and find out what God asks of us. An epistle is, at the very core, a letter between one person and someone else often about topics of the day. The interesting part of an epistle is we only see one side of the conversation; in Philemon we hear only from Paul. We can only hope and imagine what the response from Philemon will entail.

Here are the characters. Paul is the author. Onesimus was enslaved. Philemon is the recipient of the letter and enslaver. Together, they are trying to create a new world order based on Jesus’ love rather than societal expectations.

Paul is a former persecutor of Christians and has turned into an evangelist. He has traveled to different places proclaiming the Gospel of Christ. Paul once traveled to the home of Philemon. Philemon is at least a middle if not upper class Christian. His religion is known, because Paul speaks of appealing to him on the basis of faith.

The subject of the letter is someone who was enslaved and ran away. Onesimus’ name literally means useful.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is a great deal of word play used with his name: saying he is no longer useless. Paul notes how Onesimus had become like a son to him.

Scholars believe that Paul wrote from prison in Ephesus. This is likely where Paul wrote the letter to Ephesians, Philippians, and Collasius. The location matters in that it means after Paul’s trial and hopeful release he could potentially go and see Philemon.

When I think of Paul in Prison, I think of a lonely man in a cell rotting away for life as punishment for a crime. In Rome, Paul is in prison awaiting trial. He is in that awkward time before being found guilty for a crime against the empire and being set free. Paul is in limbo hoping for a better future, yet he still finds joy in the Lord as he suffers for the sake of Jesus.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps we could learn to find joy in our own sufferings because of Christ.

When Paul asks for help, he does not affirm the typical hierarchical pattern in society. Look at other texts in the time period, the writer addresses someone as an equal and if not holds rank. Paul refers to this by noting that he could command Philemon regarding Onesiumus. Instead, Paul appeals to him out of faith.

To me, this is the style of leadership that we would want to emulate: we love God and want to guide others. If we have authority over someone, instead of appealing to power, we can guide them out of love. We lead people from one place to another instead of dragging them. A good place to start is where Paul begins: with the middle ground.

Paul uses a great deal of finesse in his wording. He doesn’t directly say to Philemon, “Please free Onesiumus. Thank you. Paul.”

Instead, Paul implores Philemon to vision a better social order based on the gospel. Instead of thinking of his personal family, his mother, brother, sister, children, etc, Paul wants Philemon to think of his Christian family. Again, the translation notes that now Paul has a son: Onesiumus.

Listen again to the words from the epistle, “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me…”[[3]](#footnote-3) Paul continues, “...so that you might have him back 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.”

This young man is one who had a grievance upon him and ran away. We can certainly understand not wanting to live within injustice and running, he was running from something serious, from being enslaved. Greek Law at the time was that those that were enslaved were able to seek refuge from a family member or friend.[[4]](#footnote-4) It is possible that Onesiums did just that: he sought refuge with Paul having met him upon an earlier visit to Philemon.

But why did Onesiumus run away in the first place? Some scholars believe that Onesiumus stole something from Philemon.[[5]](#footnote-5) In fact, Onesimus’ very existence away from Philemon’s household would be seen as a theft, in the eyes of the law, since he is enslaved and (unjustly seen) as property.

I cannot imagine the pain of this life or fact.[[6]](#footnote-6) Regardless, this is not how Paul sees matters, instead he sees two Christians needing to reconcile into a new world order.

Paul is not making this on his own, the power of Onesiumus’ actions as well must be noted. If he was not a Christian before his time with Paul, he knew enough of the religion to understand the riff between him and Philemon was not conducive to the new faith.[[7]](#footnote-7) Onesiumus took his fate into his own hands and made it apparent that, yes, the one enslaver would have to be convinced from someone who he saw as authoritative. Whether Onesiumus ran to Paul or was in jail with him, he took the opportunity to further his faith and hope for an appeal at a new life.

Paul requests that Philemon remember who he is called to be as a Christian. To open his heart to someone Paul refers to as his own heart. If Philemon receives Onesimus as a brother in Christ it will be a significant shift.

Our brothers and sisters, our family in Christ can never truly be useless to us, because they hold an example of the love of God for us. Each time we spend with our true family, we are in the presence of God. Therefore, it is Paul’s will that Onesiumus be freed.

The closing of this text is also quite brilliant: Paul tells Philemon that he will checkup on how things are going once he is out of prison. Think of when you were disciplined by a parent, guided to do the correct thing, if a parent told you that they would be back to check on your progress, were you not more likely to take their guidance?

It is within this context that it is for the sake of God’s kingdom and not Paul’s rules. What does this mean for us? If we want to follow Jesus, we must give up our old ideas and live into a vision of transformation. As Christians, this is something we have to do over and over again. It is exhausting, and still we have to look at ourselves and transform ourselves into models of Christ. This is a controversial idea. In the time of Paul it meant asking an enslaver to embrace the one he wronged by enslaving as an equal. In our time, it means embracing love before all else. Amen.

1. Wright, N.T. (2015). https://youtu.be/jESqfjqPMHE [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wright, .N.T. Udemy Course: Philemon. https://www.udemy.com/share/101qEI3@VHWgUrMcpuWSRX6RLGcgoyyz6HXUReaxx2pV3m6sZW7cuz5dMxINBiW1WbcLKn0=/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Philemon 1:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Martin, R.P. (1991). *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Martin, R.P. (1991). *Luke: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Other scholars believe Onesimus did not steal anything, merely ran away.McCaulley, E. (2022). *Reading while Black*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic. pp.152-159 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. McCaulley, E. (2022). *Reading while Black*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press Academic. pp.152-159 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)