

ONCE UNPROFITABLE— NOW PROFITABLE

Theme: Paul's words about Onesimus teach us how to be reconciled to someone when we are the one who caused the offense.

Over the past few weeks we have been studying the tiny New Testament book of Philemon with a practical goal in mind. We have been seeking to learn some lessons on how the work of 'reconciliation' within the church can be done—that work within the body of Christ in which a cause of division between two believers is removed and resolved; and that those who were formerly hostile toward one another can now brought together in peace and made friends again.

Last week, we studied what this letter tells us about Philemon—and from it, how we should work toward reconciliation when we are the offended party. And in this morning's lesson, we'll consider the offender, Onesimus; what the lessons of what it is that we should do when we ourselves are the one who caused the hurt.

As we have already learned, Onesimus was a slave. Slaves were numerous in the ancient Roman world. In some cases, they exceeded the number of free people. Philemon—a Christian in whose home the ancient church in Colossae met—suffered a lot of heartache and damage to because of Onesimus. It appears that the slave ran away and even stole from Philemon's household. Apparently, while on the run from his master, Onesimus met up with the prisoner Paul; and God used Paul to lead Onesimus to salvation Christ. And now, Paul was sending the runaway-slave back to his Christian master.

It's important to understand that Onesimus had been transformed by this point. We was manifestly sorry for his sins and wanted to do what was right. Paul would not have written this letter if that was not so. But how should Onesimus go about this? And what are the things that it would be important for us to do when we seek to be restored to someone we have wronged?

I. BE SURE THAT YOU YOURSELF ARE FULLY SUBMITTED TO CHRIST.

- A. Onesimus himself had become right with Christ. Paul wrote to Philemon about the slave—calling him “my son Onesimus”. We can understand Paul's meaning when we go on to read, “whom I have begotten while in my chains” (v. 10). Paul had led him to the Lord Jesus by faith and considered himself Onesimus' spiritual father. But it would seem evident that Paul not only led him to the Lord, but also disciplined him and helped him to grow into spiritual maturity. Paul spoke in a similarly “fatherly” way of Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2, 18; 2 Timothy 1:2, 13, 2:1; 3:10, 14). Paul was declaring a sincere testimony of the growth of Onesimus when he said that the slave was once “unprofitable” to Philemon; but now “is profitable to you and to me” (v. 11). Paul was able to make the case to Philemon, “For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him 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” (v. 15-16).
- B. This teaches us that, if we would truly seek reconciliation with an offended brother, we

need to begin by making sure that we have been rightly reconciled to God first through Jesus Christ in all humility of spirit. All true reconciliation begins with God through Christ (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). We sin not just against people, but against Him in sinning against people (Psalm 51:4). We cannot be fully right with God until we have done all we can to make things right with our offended brother; but, as Proverbs 16:7 says, “When a man’s ways please the Lord, He makes even his enemies to be at peace with him.”

II. SUBMIT YOURSELF FULLY TO THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE BODY OF CHRIST.

- A. As a part of his right relationship with God, Onesimus also had a right relationship with the believers at large. When Paul sent this letter, he also seems to have sent one by the hand of Onesimus to the church at Colossae; introducing him as “Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you” (Colossians 4:9a). He was very much in fellowship with Paul; as Paul indicated when he wrote, “I am sending him back [some texts add an emphatic 'him'--as if to say, “Whom I'm sending back—in person”]. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel” (vv. 12-13). “If then you count me as a partner,” Paul told Philemon, “receive him as you would me” (v. 17).
- B. In being restored to a wounded brother or sister, it's important that we seek the support of the body of Christ in doing so. We need to be open to the help of others in the body of Christ in the process. Paul himself experienced such help. He had—for a long period of time—greatly harmed the church; but once he was right with the Lord, it was Barnabas who put his arm around Paul and led him to the Apostles and then into fellowship in the church he had harmed (Acts 9:26-27). The Lord Jesus ordained that reconciliation with someone in the church involve the church in the process (Matthew 18:15-20).

III. PERSONALLY 'OWN' AND 'MAKE RIGHT' WHATEVER DAMAGE WAS DONE.

- A. Paul stepped up to promise that he would do whatever might be necessary to help pay for whatever damage Onesimus may have done to Philemon. He wrote, “But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay . . .” (vv. 18-19a). But we shouldn't assume that this means Onesimus didn't have to do anything. It may be that he could not in any way restore what had been lost. He may have been like the prodigal son of Jesus' parable—and now, all that had been taken was squandered away. It seems that Paul expected Onesimus to return to his place as Philemon's slave (vv. 15-16). One of the things that Onesimus had to do—and perhaps it was the hardest of all—was to willingly go back to Philemon and face the one he had wounded. But whatever Onesimus might have had to do when he got back, it's clear that what was taken from Philemon was to be restored.
- B. When we are the one who has offended another, we must be ready and willing to do all that is in within our power—enabled by the love of Christ Himself—to personally make things right. Paul illustrated this when he described the attitude of the repentant Corinthians: “For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: What diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal, what vindication! In all things you proved yourselves to be clear in this matter” (2 Corinthians 7:11).

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By God's grace, may we—when we are the one who has offended another brother or sister—seek, in His power and with the church's help, to do all that we can to restore the relationship!