

***Onesimus: A Brother and Ministry Partner***  
Summer Sermon Series “God Uses People Like Me”  
Kenwood Baptist Church  
Pastor David Palmer  
July 9, 2017

**TEXT:** Philemon 1:1-25



We continue in our spring series on how *God Uses People Like Me*. Many of us struggle by noting famous people, and we think of the gap between ourselves and those of great reputation and fame. We think oftentimes in the Scriptures of very famous figures and often compare our lives with them. Statistically, most people who go on Facebook report that when they are off of Facebook they feel depressed and worse because their lives don't seem to be as fast-paced and glorious as the people they see electronically. Sometimes when you see people taking selfies and

posting them, you think you're watching the reality, and the electronic presentation of that bears little resemblance to what is real. The New Testament is filled with normal people that God uses in remarkable ways, and we been looking at these throughout the summer. This morning, we turn to the narrative that takes place in Paul's shortest letter. It's really a story that revolves around three people: the figure of Philemon, Onesimus, and then the Apostle Paul plays a key role. Philemon is Paul's shortest letter. It's only 335 words, and it fills just one page in printed editions of the Bible. It is last in Paul's corpus, not because it's unimportant, but because Paul's letters are arranged by descending length. That's why Romans is first. It's the longest and that's just the Greek Library convention. So, Philemon is at the end because it's the shortest and not because it's unimportant. This short letter contains in it a narrative that the gospel affects, in very real ways, how we relate to one another. As this story unfolds around these three figures, we discover that there is a conflict between Philemon and Onesimus, and we discover the unique role that Paul plays in orchestrating the reconciliation. We also discover that the gospel is not just an abstract theory, that the gospel of Jesus Christ really does change the way we relate to one another and makes all kinds of ways of relating possible only through the forgiveness that we have received through Jesus Christ. We have the privilege of looking through this short letter and following the plot as it unfolds. Then, in the end, we will see a summons and challenge for each of us in light of what we discover. Let's keep the text open to the book or letter to Philemon, that single, great page.

The movement of this letter starts with a focus on Philemon. In Philemon 1:1, we read:

*“Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker,”*

Paul identifies himself as a prisoner—the only time in his letters that he identifies himself first in this way—that he is a man bound in chains for Christ Jesus. The letter is sent with Timothy our brother, and it is addressed to Philemon, a beloved fellow worker. The name Philemon means *affectionate one*. It's a pagan name. It's the name that comes from yet another person who has been converted through Paul's missionary journeys and his preaching, probably in the city of Ephesus. This man, whose given name means *affectionate*, is beloved by Paul. He is someone that he considers a cherished coworker and laborer in the gospel. The letter is also addressed in Philemon 1:2 to:

*“and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:”*

Apphia is probably Philemon's wife, and some scholars consider Archippus may be their son. The letter is addressed to the church that meets in their house, and we have yet another window into a theme this summer of using the places in which we live as outposts for the Kingdom. If you haven't read our summer read, I encourage you to pick up a copy of this very small book: *The Simplest Way to Change the World, Biblical Hospitality as a Way of Life*. Philemon lives in Colossae, and with his wife, they host the church in their house. Their dwelling place becomes an outpost of the Kingdom of God, and Paul has great affection for this family. He says in Philemon 1:4:

*“I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers,”*

Do you have people like that in your lives, that whenever you think of them you thank God? Paul thanks God for Philemon because he hears the good news, the good report, that Philemon's love and his faith toward the Lord Jesus spills out into a love and faith that is shared with all God's people. You can test the reality of your love for Jesus by how the love for Jesus within you flows out into lives around you. It simply will not do for New Testament Christianity to say, “I love Jesus, but I treat the people around me terribly.” That incongruity does not cohere with the New Testament vision, and Paul has great affection for this man, *Mr. Affectionate*, because his love spills over towards Christ for those around him. Paul's prayer for him in Philemon 1:6 is:

*“...and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.”*

He prayed that the sharing of his faith would become even more effective, more abundant. The Greek word means energetic, and his prayer is that Philemon's faith would radiate out in a way that would become energizing or effective, and that as his faith is shared, he himself comes into a full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. It's a great mystery of our faith that the more we share our faith, the more we enjoy it. The more you share Christ, the more love you have for Christ. It is like a fountain with no limits. Paul says about this man in

Philemon 1:7:

*“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”*

So, this first portion of this short letter is really a celebration of this man that Paul feels great affection for. It is a portrait of a godly and honorable person; a portrait of someone who exercises hospitality and hosts the church; a portrait of someone who is generous with time and resources, who refreshes the hearts of many. Yet, this man has a story inside his discipleship that becomes vivid in the next section of the letter.

The second movement of Philemon brings into focus the request that Paul has for this beloved friend and coworker, and this change begins in Philemon 1:8. Look with me at it. In light of the affection Paul has for him, Paul says:

*“Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, . . .”*

Paul knows that he could use his apostolic authority, his position and calling, to give orders or issue decrees. Paul knows that he could just tell Philemon what to do, yet Paul gives us a great model of how we are to influence others. He goes on to say in Philemon 1:9:

*“. . . yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—”*

I feel a little bit threatened by this personally because Paul at this time is probably in his mid to late 50s and those numbers seem closer to me. Yet Paul says, “I’m an old guy now.” When I taught the Homebuilders class recently, I said, “I’m 46 years old now, how does that sound?” Homebuilders said, “That sounds really young!” But Paul says, “I am old and I am a prisoner, and yet I am appealing to you out of sheer friendship, and I'm appealing to you out of love.” Don’t try to influence the people around you with threats. Don't try to exercise a heavy-handed authority, but make an appeal that’s motivated out of love. Paul knows that he has a staggering request. The request becomes evident in Philemon 1:10. He says:

*“I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.”*

The name Onesimus means *useful* in Greek. It is a very common name given for slaves. No one names their child *useful*, as *useful* is a name given to people who work in your household. Slavery in the first century was a widespread institution. It was very different from the slavery that many of us have in our mind when we think of the exploitation of the African slave trade. The first century slavery was still a terrible institution. People came into slavery, some through conquest, some because they couldn't pay the debts, but the most common form of people coming into slavery in the first century was to be born into it.

The Roman social pyramid at this time is a steep triangle, with those of wealth and means at the top, and at the bottom, the institution and broad band of slavery really drove the economy

and many of the households. Slaves in the first century comprised 15 million people, a huge percentage. In fact, the Roman Senate debated a bill whether they wanted slaves to wear clothing that identify themselves as slaves. They ended up at the end of the discussions vetoing this proposal because they thought that if the slaves knew how many of them there were, they might rise up in revolt. So, we have Philemon, who sits closer to the top of the social pyramid, and Onesimus, someone probably born into slavery. Paul says that this Onesimus is his child. He becomes his child, he says, "Because I became his father during my imprisonment." In other words, Paul says that Onesimus has become born anew through his ministry. Paul says that he has given birth to Onesimus. In other words, Onesimus, the former slave, has experienced a new birth. Onesimus has become converted, and this becomes very clear in Philemon 1:11. Paul says:

*"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me."*

Paul's description of Onesimus in this verse is a play on words that describes his conversion to faith in Christ. He says that at one time, Onesimus was *useless* and now has become very *useful*. He doesn't use the normal word for *useful* like Onesimus' own name, but he literally says, "He was *achristos* and now he is *euchristos*. You can hear within it the word *Christ*. He was without purpose; now he has a good purpose, and that great purpose is that Onesimus has placed his faith in Jesus Christ and that he has now been working with Paul in his imprisonment. We still don't know the full story. We don't know how it is that Onesimus was separated from Philemon, but this begins to unfold as we read further. Paul says in Philemon 1:12:

*"I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart."*

Onesimus must have left Philemon. We're not told the reason, although there has been great speculation about this. Some say that Onesimus fled from Philemon's household. Some speculate that Onesimus had done something wrong or maybe taken goods. Some speculate that Onesimus was sent on a journey and he delayed returning and Philemon has suffered the loss of his labor.

The truth is we just don't know what happened, but what we do know is that Onesimus, who was a slave and part of Philemon's household, has left his home and somehow made it to Rome, that he has been converted and become a Christian during Paul's imprisonment, and that Paul now desires to send Onesimus back. We don't know the details, but we can imagine that there is a situation where the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus ruptured and Paul sees that the implications of the gospel is that these two men are to be reconciled and reunited. Paul says: "I am sending him to you." In Philemon 1:14, he says:

*"I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord."*

In Philemon 1:15, Paul invites Philemon to consider that their separation was actually part of

God's sovereign plan. He says:

*"For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever."*

Sometimes when we consider God's providence, we rightly begin with the word *perhaps*. It is often the case that life's circumstances will take us into places of uncertainty. We will sometimes be in circumstances that we don't fully understand, and yet under God's sovereign, powerful hand, He is working all things according to His purpose, for those who are called and beloved, He works all things for good. Paul invites Philemon into God's providence: "Perhaps this is the reason that he was separated from you. He was parted for you *for an hour*," the text literally says, "that you might have him back *forever*." How is this so? This becomes clear in Philemon 1:15b-16:

*". . . that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."*

This is a staggering request to receive Onesimus back, no longer as a servant or slave but to receive him back as he now is, a beloved brother in the Lord. This staggering request that Paul makes surmounts first century convention for Philemon to receive him as an equal member of his household, to treat him now as a beloved brother and member of the family. Paul knows that it is a staggering request.

Sometimes when there is conflict between people, the details don't often matter. Reconciliation, though, is a supernatural event. It is not the normal human course, and we see the task of Onesimus to return, to be willing to obey Paul's order for him to go back. That he had trusted Christ means that he had to go back to Philemon. You can imagine the fear for Onesimus to confess his sin and request and ask for forgiveness. For Philemon, it meant to lay down his pride and to extend forgiveness, and Paul knows that this is a supernatural act. He knows that this is an enacted parable of the gospel, and so Paul does something that you and I are called to do. He does not make such a request from a distance, but rather he inserts himself right into the middle to orchestrate this reconciliation.

The third movement of Philemon begins in Philemon 1:17 where Paul risks his relationship with both of these men and places himself in the middle. He says:

*"So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me."*

Paul risks his relationship with Philemon and says for him to receive Onesimus with the same affection that he has for Paul. By stating it in this way, he is challenging Philemon: "If you don't receive Onesimus, it is like you are not receiving me." Paul goes further in Philemon 1:18. This is not orchestrating reconciliation from a distance, but, risking the relationships, he places himself

at a place of sacrificial cost. He says:

*“If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”*

Paul says, “I’ll pay the bill; reckon his debt to me.” In Philemon 1:19, Paul says:

*“I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.”*

We imagine Paul taking the stylus from the hand of the scribe and writing these words, “I will repay it,” using the precise language of restitution from Exodus 21 and 22. Reconciliation does not come about easily. Paul plays a role in an enacted parable of Christ in the center of this drama and says: “Whatever cost there is, whatever outstanding debt, whatever loss of labor, whatever violation, the compensation can be charged to me.” Are you willing to do that? Do you know people who at odds and you invite them together and you say: “If there is any injury, just charged it to me”? This is a staggering request. “I will repay,” he says. In Philemon 1:20, he says:

*“Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.”*

The word *benefit* that he uses, in the original is actually a play on the name Onesimus. In other words, he says to Philemon, “Yes, Philemon, I desire the restoration of Onesimus from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.” Reconciliation breeds life. It is a replay of the gospel that we have received. Paul’s challenge to Philemon, and the side challenge to Onesimus, within this is contained in Philemon 1:21. Paul says boldly:

*“Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”*

Isn’t that great? That’s a replaying, a representation of the gospel in real lives, in real time. We need bigger minds, bigger hearts, to grasp the fullness of what God has done for us in Christ. Paul says to him, “I know that you’re going to receive him. That’s bare minimum, and I know that you will do even more than what I ask.” It’s a tantalizing suggestion. He doesn’t tell us what this ‘even more’ might be. Some have speculated that Paul seeks that Philemon will send Onesimus back to him so that he can labor with him and help in the gospel ministry while he’s in prison. Others imagine boldly that Paul is challenging Philemon to grant Onesimus his freedom and that he would enter life as a new man. Paul’s last challenge is to Philemon in Philemon 1:22, the final imperative of the letter. Paul says:

*“At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.”*

It’s a challenge to say: “I’m going to follow up on that email,” isn’t it? “I want you to do this and I’m sure you’re going to do even more, and by the way, I’ll be over next week to see how things have turned out.”

Well, how did things turn out? The New Testament doesn’t tell us. N.T. Wright, in his

commentary on Philemon, says that the very inclusion of Philemon in the New Testament canon probably is a signal that Paul's request was obeyed. We actually have a beautiful piece of evidence from early church history of how things played out. It comes from an unexpected source, the letters of Ignatius. Ignatius was the third leader of the Church of Antioch, the sending church that sent Paul out on his missionary journeys—first Paul and Barnabas, and then later, Paul and Silas. This sending church is where the believing community was first called Christians, because the pagan world looked at them and said: “These people who are diverse, who have very different stations and places in life, different names, different backgrounds, different ages, have one thing in common, and that's faith in Jesus Christ, and so we are going to call them *Christ-ians*.” The very place where the Christian community was first identified as following Christ, the third leader of that Christian community was a man named Ignatius towards the end of the first century. During a wave of persecution under the Emperor Domitian, Ignatius was arrested and taken from Syria en route to Rome where he would die a martyr's death. On his way to Rome, he stopped and visited Christian churches in Asia Minor, in this very area of Colossae and Ephesus, where these events are playing out. Ignatius writes six letters to churches, and one letter to the leader of the church in Smyrna, Polycarp. In his letter to the church at Ephesus, he writes these words: “When I was bound from Syria for the common name—that is the name of Jesus—trusting through your prayers to fight with the beasts at Rome, so that by suffering I may be indeed become the disciple of Him *‘who gave Himself for us as an offering and sacrifice for us,’* you hastened to see me.” Ignatius says he was on his way to Rome and the church in Ephesus went to visit him. They visited him in the person of the leader of the church in Ephesus. The leader of the church in Ephesus is named, and do you know who he is? Ignatius tells us: “I received you in the name of God. I received your whole congregation in the person of your leader Onesimus.” Onesimus, the fugitive slave who was sent back and was received, forgiven, probably granted this freedom, ends up becoming a pastor of the church of Ephesus. That's the gospel. Do not dare to put limits on what the gospel can do in our life together.

There is a challenge for each of us. If you are like Philemon this morning, the wronged owner, the wronged person of means, of reputation, of status, the gospel calls you to humility and to extend forgiveness. If you are like Onesimus this morning, maybe born into an unpayable debt, having fled, or done wrong, do not underestimate the power of God's forgiveness and transforming work in your life and put no limits on who you can become. Onesimus helps Paul. Onesimus carries the letter of Colossians, and Onesimus carries even this letter of Philemon. When Philemon reads the letter, Onesimus is standing there wondering, “Will I be forgiven? Does God have a future for me?” If you are like Onesimus, the gospel calls you to face your fear head-on and place no limits on your usefulness to the Lord. If you are like Paul in this intimate portrait of ministry, then I challenge you to step forward where you need to play the role to orchestrate a reconciliation between estranged brothers or sisters. Put your own relationship

with each on the line, sacrifice your time and resources and prayers so that the gospel can be played out in real time, in real lives. Hallelujah, amen! Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we desire more of You this morning, and this short, intimate letter has much to teach us. Lord, I pray for those who are coming to this passage from a position of strength and yet perceived offense. I pray Father that those who feel offended might offer forgiveness without limit and with generosity. I pray, Father, for those who like Onesimus fear that their backgrounds have disqualified them or put limits on who they can become. Father, I pray for those who are like Paul, that You would give us the courage to risk all in light of what we have received in Christ, Lord, we pray that You would take each of our lives this morning and use them for your glory.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.