

Thought for 21st February 2021

Paul's letter to Philemon was written along with his letters to the Churches in Philippi and Colossi in AD 60 whilst under house arrest in Rome. Paul had met and led Philemon to Jesus during his time spent in Ephesus. Paul is writing on behalf of Philemon's run-away slave Onesimus pleading with Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus but to do something even more radical.

Paul's letter to Philemon despite its brevity and very personal nature is both explosive and challenging for us modern 21st Christians. Why, because it answers a fundamental question all believers are faced with when confronted with other believers "Who are you to me?" or perhaps "Who am I to you?" and "Where do I fit in to what's going on?".

Now, I don't know about you but when I came to faith and started to attend worship, I found myself amongst a very varied and strange group of people. Different ages, different jobs, different accents, different clothes, different attitudes you get the idea. These were all starkly different people from my family and friends and it appeared we had nothing in common apart from worshipping together on Sunday mornings. I often asked myself "Who were they to me?" and "Where do I fit in to what's going on?".

I guess that you have had similar questions yourself, expressed differently but all centred around how we relate to each other and our place in what was going on. Paul in his letter to Philemon addresses and answers these fundamental questions.

Let's start by taking a look at three of the very different people in Paul's letter. Firstly, Paul a ridiculously well-educated and intelligent Jew and Roman citizen. Secondly, Philemon a rich Roman slave owning citizen in Colossi. The followers of Jesus in Colossi were meeting in his home and he seemed to play a significant part in the life of the church there. And finally, Onesimus a runaway slave, possibly a thief but certainly a fugitive from the Roman authorities. Onesimus had no home, no hope and facing the real possibility of death if he was caught. Here are three very, very different people so let see how they relate to each other.

Before we move on let's take a minute to look at what it meant to be a slave like Onesimus in ancient Rome. Slaves accounted for about 30% of the population of the Roman Empire in Paul's time. Slaves formed the bedrock of Roman society and economy and without whom Roman society would simply breakdown. There was three ways that you could become a slave; as a captive from military action by the Roman army, by being born to a slave woman or becoming a slave to pay off a debt. At least in theory anybody could become a slave in Roman society and in theory any slave could buy their freedom, although in practice very few slaves ever managed to obtain their freedom. A Roman slave had no rights and wasn't even considered a real person just a tool over which their master had absolute authority. Slavery in Roman society was an accepted norm and vital to Roman society.

Now, Onesimus had run away from Philemon and like most runaway slaves did it that day headed for Rome. The reason Onesimus run away from Philemon is not clear but most probably from what Paul writes he stole from his master. Whatever Onesimus plans were for when he reached Rome he was about to experience one of the great truths of God, **Proverbs 16:9** *"In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps."* God led Onesimus to Paul who knew Philemon, his master the very last person Onesimus would have wanted to meet. God wasn't going allow this run-away thief merely to disappear in the vast sea of humanity in Rome. No God was going restore Onesimus. God was going to restore His relationship with Onesimus and he was going to radically restore Onesimus's and Philemon relationship.

We sang earlier "love moved first", God didn't wait for Onesimus to come to Him, he reached out and led Onesimus to Himself.

Now Paul as a Roman citizen should have turned Onesimus in. Roman law was clear anybody harbouring a runaway slave could face death themselves or at the very least they became liable for any loss of earnings or damages the runaway slave had cost their master.

Paul made a brave choice not to turn Onesimus in but to care for him and to share God's love for him. Onesimus responded to this practical demonstration of God's love by becoming a follower of Jesus. Paul refers to Onesimus as his v 10 "son" and call

him his very v 12 “heart”. It is interesting that the original Greek word translated heart actually means not only heart but lungs, liver and bowels. I am unsure how Gillian would react if I told her I loved her with all my bowels! Here Paul is using the word to describe the deep down, gut level, visceral, intense feelings of compassion and love he had for Onesimus.

I really like Paul's writing because every so often you get a glimpse of his humour in v 11, he writes *“Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.”* In English this appears a simple statement of opinion by Paul but in Greek it becomes a clever play on words. It may help to know that Onesimus means useful in Greek. According to Paul, Onesimus had been useless to Philemon, as a runaway, but was now useful to both Philemon and Paul as fellow believer.

Paul knew that no matter how useful Onesimus was to him and how much he loved him the situation could not go on. Each day Onesimus faced discovery and possible death. After all Paul was breaking the law so there was only one course open to him, despite how much Paul wanted Onesimus to remain with him, Onesimus would have to return to Philemon. Paul determined to send Onesimus back to Colossi with a personal letter for Philemon. Onesimus would be accompanied by Tychicus who also had letters for the believers in Colossi that meet in Philemon's home and to the believers in Philippi.

So, what was the heart of Paul's appeal to Philemon concerning Onesimus and how does it shed such light on who as believers we are to each other and how we fit in to all that is going on.

Paul starts by telling Philemon that Onesimus wasn't returning to him as slave, no he was returning to him as a brother in Christ, *“no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.”* For Paul, the idea of believers as brothers and sister in Christ is not some theoretical nice idea but a real and active truth that should influence who we relate to each other and treat each other.

Now I don't know about your families but I guess like my family we struggle with each other at times. Like all families we argue, fight and wound each other and yet when

all is said and done, we are still family. I have struggled with my father throughout my life. It is fair to say we just don't get on, perhaps we don't even like each other very much a lot of the time. Yet through the years he has and will always remain my father. We forgive and forget and move on, why because we are family. This is Paul's plea to Philemon, you are both part of the family of God so start treating Onesimus as you would treat your brother, forgive him and move on.

Of course, there is so much more to being a family other than forgiving and moving on and we will think about what the family of God looks like more next week when we look about one of Paul's favourite words Koinonia.

Paul also resets how Philemon relates to Onesimus when he writes, *"He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord."* Remember that slaves in Rome were thought of as not even being real a person. They were thought of as tools with no value beyond the purpose their master had for them. Paul reminds Philemon that Onesimus is a real person with an intrinsic value not simply measured in what he does for him. If you want to understand a person's true worth simply ponder that God gave His Son for them and you for that matter.

It is sad fact of human nature that we tend to relate better with those people who do something for us. This happens in the church all too often, it is easier to relate to talented worship leader compared to person who comes into church every week and sit quietly at the back, yet both are immeasurably valuable to God. How we relate to each other should be based on the realisation that the person standing before you is of incalculable value to God.

So "Who are you to me?" and "Who am I to you". We are brother and sister to each other and part of the same family and we are bound to each other. So "Who are you to me?" and "Who am I to you". We are each a person of infinite value to God. If we profess to love God, we cannot value each other any less than God does. How do I value the other person you may ask? Paul starts his appeal for Onesimus writing, *"yet I appeal to you on the basis of love"*. What does this love look like you may ask? John answers this question when he quotes Jesus's words, **John 15:12-13** *"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down*

one's life for one's friends." How do we love each? We love each other by laying down our lives or serving each other? So "Who are you to me?" and "Who am I to you?" we are each other's servant. This is the radical thing Paul is asking Philemon to do that he the slave master should become servant to his slave. This is radical and yet it is no more than Jesus did for us.

As I said earlier, we are going to look at Paul's idea of family and fellowship Koinonia next week and particularly how Paul it answers the question "Where do I fit in to what's going on?".