

“No Longer a Slave, But a Brother”

Philemon 10-20

Sep. 7, 2025 (Pen. 13-C)

St. Paul’s Lutheran, North Freedom

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—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.

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. (Philemon 10-20, NIV84)

Dear fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, our Redeemer from sin:

If there’s anything we divided Americans can agree on, it’s that slavery is a horrific institution. We denounce it. We consider slavery a stain on our country’s past, and are thankful that Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 freed the slaves. Even the most racist white supremacists aren’t clamoring for a return of the institution of slavery.

When Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, then, we might be disappointed that he didn’t condemn or at least scold him. Philemon, you see, was a slave-owner. His slave, Onesimus, had run away from his master and boarded a ship to Rome where Paul was being held “in chains,” under house arrest. Rather than keep Onesimus for himself or try to organize an “underground railroad” system to free more slaves, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, along with this letter of explanation.

The Lord did not call Paul, or us for that matter, to overturn institutions and lead revolutions to change society. He calls us to proclaim the gospel of Christ. It is Christ who transcends social divisions and man-made institutions. In Paul’s letter to Philemon, we see that gospel motivation oozing out of every word, as he appealed to this slave owner how to treat his run-away slave now coming back to him: Treat him as **“No Longer a Slave, But a Brother.”**

When we think of slaves, let’s not just think of blacks long ago being whipped by their masters in the southern U.S., or the sex-trafficking that’s a form of slavery today. Let’s think of ourselves. Jesus told the crowds, “Everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (John 8:34). Paul wrote to the Colossians, the congregation Philemon belonged to: “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord....Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven” (Col. 3:22; 4:1). If employees rebel and fail to do their jobs, becoming “useless” in their work, they’re not “breaking free” but are running from God, and demonstrating they are slaves to sin. Likewise, employers who are harsh and unfair to employees are slaves to sin.

Sinfulness binds us all to the cruel slave masters of Sin and Satan. We have to confess that. We cannot boast about being “free” to do what we please, because our sinful nature constantly pushes our will and desires against God’s will and commands. We were like runaway slaves, away from God.

But our Lord Jesus came to set us slaves free. He promises, “The truth will set you free” (John 8:32) and went on to explain, “If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:36). Jesus is the very Son of God, the one without sin, the Lord himself. And Jesus is “the Way, the Truth, and the Life” (John 14:6). Jesus had the credentials to free us slaves, and he did set us free. He paid the ransom price by enslaving himself, chaining himself to our sins as he was nailed to the cross, suffering hell as he hung there, dying, dead and buried to make sure every last sin was paid. Then Jesus rose, he is the Lord, and we are free—free from Satan’s cruelty, from sin’s power, from death and hell’s chains.

This gospel message changes us. It changed Philemon, who had his “faith in the Lord Jesus,” Paul wrote earlier in this letter (v. 5). It also changed run-away slave Onesimus, whom Paul called “his son”—he was now a child of God. “Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.” They were no longer slaves to sin, but free children of God. The same is true for us. That gospel has changed us; sin no longer rules us, for we belong to Christ and not to sin. Think of it: We’re no longer slaves of sin, but children of God!

And since we are God’s children, all believers call each other brothers and sisters in the faith. So let’s always view each other that way. Paul call Philemon his brother and appealed to Philemon to view Onesimus that way: “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother...a brother in the Lord.” Paul was saying, “Philemon, I know you’re upset that your slave ran away from you. But he’s a changed man. He believes in Christ, just as you do. You’re brothers. So treat him that way, not like property, but as a fellow believer.”

Paul encouraged Philemon to show this new relationship by welcoming him back: “If you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.” Paul illustrated this brotherly attitude by offering to pay back anything that Philemon had lost as a result of Onesimus’s absence: “If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.” Paul promised to pay it back, reminding Philemon that “you owe me your very self.” Philemon had come to faith by hearing the message of Christ that Paul had brought. He “owed” Paul. So certainly, Philemon could do Paul this favor of treating Onesimus no longer as a slave, but as a brother.

This short letter, just one chapter, has been described as “the most beautiful and intensely human of all St. Paul’s epistles” and even “the most gentlemanly letter ever written.” We can learn so much from it. When someone has wronged us in our relationships and they return, let’s learn to forgive—treat them as our brother or sister in the faith. Also, let’s learn how we view other people, regardless of their nationality or their station of life. I thought of this when my wife and I were away on vacation. We were on a cruise—my first, Kristine’s fourth—and I was impressed when I heard that the cruise staff was represented by 64 different nationalities. A waiter from the Philippines, a room attendant from India, the cruise director from Great Britain, and so forth. They all served marvelously, by the way. They came from all different lands, had different accents than our Midwest accent, but all of them are like us. We are all human beings, enslaved to sin, in need of a Savior. We are all purchased by the blood of Christ. When someone comes to faith, let’s treat them, regardless of their position and nationality, as a fellow brother and sister in Christ. Amen.