

**Going to do something a bit different:** The Bible, OT & NT, is a huge library of 66 books. We heard read an entire book of the Bible this morning. And I’m going to go through the whole thing with you.

**Well, it’s really just a postcard from the Apostle Paul to someone named Philemon.**

We don’t know exactly what happened before this was written, or how it ended, happily or not. But it’s an intriguing story, and Paul outdoes himself persuasively.

**Paul is in prison, he admits the same in the first verse**—not only in jail but a **prisoner of Christ Jesus**. In other words, Jesus owns him. Paul is a **captiv**e to God’s will.

Timothy is with him, and so is another man: **Onesimus**. Apparently he was a runaway slave. He had committed some major misdeed to make his owner, Philemon, and the Roman courts angry at him. Locked up with Paul.

This runaway slave, troublemaker, or scoundrel meets Paul in prison. And Paul listens to his story and persuades him to follow Jesus. **Onesimus becomes a Christian in prison.**

**So Paul is led to write to Philemon** about his runaway, lawbreaking slave, as well as **Apphia and Archippus**—we don’t know who they are, but could be Philemon’s wife and son, or else co-leaders with Philemon of **“the church in your house,”** as Paul puts it.

**And then the persuasion begins... and Paul lays it on thick:**

“When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.” Doesn’t that make you feel good? **[Bishop Bevel Jones: “Peter, I think of you every time I see you!”]**

“I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ **[a little foreshadowing there preparing for his request]**. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.”

**Wow, this Philemon is one wonderful slave owner**—I mean **church leader**, isn’t he! Paul **pours on the praise and the compliments**. You know he’s **buttering** him up for something. And it must be really something **big and bad!**

**Paul continues,** “For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to **command** you to do your duty, yet I would rather **appeal** to you on the **basis of love...**”

So Paul is saying he really could—as Apostle Paul, primary evangelist and leader of the early church, just **order** Philemon to do whatever it is he’s asking. But, he’d rather Philemon simply be persuaded **“on the basis of love.”** Not a decision of his head but his heart.

**And then he adds** a sort of a “poor me, you really owe me” message to ol’ Philemon—“and I, Paul, do this as an **old man**, and now also as a **prisoner** of Christ Jesus.” Confess: I’ve used the *old card* before—**look, I’m an old man now, you gotta do this for me.**

**Finally, Paul gets to the main issue,** everything he’s set out leads up to this: “I am appealing to you, Philemon, for my **child [!]**, Onesimus, whose **father** I have become during my imprisonment.” Paul has become very close to Onesimus, leading him to the way of Jesus right there in jail, teaching him and accepting him as a brother in the Lord.

“Formerly, he was **useless** to you, but now he is indeed **useful** both to you and to me.” Now Paul is having fun here, because the **Greek name “Onesimus” means “useful.”**

**So here’s what he’s asking:** Paul wants to send Onesimus back to Philemon—Onesimus, who must have done something terrible, run away as a slave, apparently previously **useless**.

“I am sending him, that is, **MY OWN HEART**, back to you. I wanted to **keep** him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do **nothing without your consent**, in order that your **good deed might be voluntary** and not something **forced**.”

**Paul continues to lay it on thick.** He’s sending his “own heart” back to Philemon, that’s what he calls Onesimus, again asking him to accept him without Paul having to force him.

“Perhaps this is the reason he was **separated** from you for a while”—apparently he ran away!—“so that you might have him back forever [**and get this!**]—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.” Now

Onesimus is a **brother in Christ, a sibling in faith, and that relationship will last forever**, Paul tells Philemon... **so you better get used to it!**

**Paul is not finished with this short missive:** “So if you consider me your partner, **welcome** him as you would **welcome me**. If he has **wronged** you in any way, or **owes** you anything, charge that to my account.” **And he adds**, “I Paul am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it!” He’s putting his **John Hancock** right on the charge invoice!

**And then he rubs it in more:** “I say **nothing** about **your owing me** even your **own self** (your very life!). Yes brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! **Refresh my heart in Christ**. Confident of your **obedience**, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do **even more than I say**.”

**I don’t know how Philemon could ever turn Onesimus down now, do you?**

Onesimus was **useless**, a **troublemaker**, and **ran away from his owner illegally**. He ends up in jail with Paul of all people, and **THINGS CHANGE**.

Don’t **punish** this man, your property as a slave owner. Rather, **set him free**. Rather than being his **owner**, be his **brother** in Christ.

**I love this story.** As I say, we don’t know how bad Onesimus was—he **must have really been bad the way Paul pours on the guilt here**—and we don’t know **how** Philemon responded. I certainly would assume he obeyed Paul!

**But this raises questions, doesn’t it, for our own lives. Who are we alienated from?**

Let’s put ourselves in **Philemon’s** place. He no doubt wanted **justice!** Probably wanted Onesimus **punished**, then **returned** to him as his slave. **So who in our life**—what person, family member, neighbor, are we **separated** from? **What is Paul saying to us?**

**What group of people** turns us off because of **where they came from** or **how they live** or **how they believe** or how they **vote**? **What is Paul saying to us?**

**Put yourself in Onesimus’s place**—who have we **hurt**? Who have we **run away from**, avoided, abandoned, gotten free of, **left things unfinished with**?

**In Galatians 3, Paul writes** “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ.” You all belong to Christ, and you are all heirs according to the promise.

**Paul calls us all to love, acceptance, brotherhood, sisterhood, siblinghood, equality.** The **dignity** of every person. **Seeing everyone as “MY OWN HEART.”**

So, let’s listen to Paul’s words to us, and **ask ourselves:**

**Who is Philemon to us? Who is Onesimus to us?**

**Who are we alienated from? Who needs our forgiveness?**

**Who do we need to forgive?**