



# CAPITOL COMMISSION

## Like Christ: Being A Peacemaker (Philemon 18-25)

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### Philemon 18-19.

<sup>18</sup> *If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.*

### THE GOSPEL IN ACTION

In the previous verse, Paul had made known his request. He asked that Onesimus be welcomed back into Philemon's household as a brother in Christ. No doubt this was a bold request because we notice the great care Paul had taken in how he had broached this subject. This letter had sought to mend the serious breach between these two brothers. Yet, Paul can proceed no further without addressing the matter of the outstanding debt that Onesimus owed Philemon. Paul does not try to sweep it under the rug or treat this debt as an inconsequential matter.

Onesimus had evidently wronged Philemon in some way not made explicit or was financially in debt to him.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the word "if" (vv. 18) should not be understood to question the existence of this debt between Onesimus and Philemon. Rather it serves to acknowledge Onesimus' guilt of a serious offense, without totally siding completely with Philemon. Also, within the context of this passage "if" carried the force of "whatever." The effect is to communicate the extent of this debt. For example, "if" Philemon was wronged through a robbery prior to the flight, or "if" by the offense incurred earlier, or even the flight itself the assessment of the damage is left in the hands of Philemon.

The assessment of this debt is explained with the following condition. What was owed to Philemon by Onesimus will now be covered in full by Paul. The debt incurred will be paid on the following basis. It will no longer be Onesimus who will be making restitution to Philemon, but Paul himself. Paul's use of the Greek word *ellegeo*, "charge it to my account" is a commercial, technical term which states his commitment to fulfill this obligation. He makes this pledge at the stake of his own reputation. Paul, a man of limited independent financial resources, is making this astonishing pledge. Such a pledge would be considered legally binding by the sheer fact of signing the letter in this manner (vv. 19). Paul has assumed responsibility for the debt incurred by the actions of his dear friend and brother in the Lord, Onesimus. He will pay back in full all that Philemon deems necessary in this matter. He does this so that this brother, whom he loves, can be freed from this debt and be united with Philemon in Christian fellowship.

We find the Gospel on full display through Paul's actions in seeking to reconcile these two brothers. Paul understood the debt that existed between Philemon and Onesimus was an obstacle that would prevent these two men from experiencing Christian fellowship. This is the lesson of the cross. Our debt before God was insurmountable because of our sin. There was no way for us to pay this debt; we needed one who could redeem us from the wages of our sin. As the prophet, Isaiah, proclaimed, "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, by his wounds we have been healed."<sup>2</sup> The cost of our having peace with God was not cheap, for it cost the son of God his life to pay this debt. However, those of us who respond to the gospel have the privilege of approaching God's throne with confidence. In Christ we now approach a throne of grace, instead of judgment, through the blood of Jesus our Savior.<sup>3</sup>

### APPLICATION:

In the economy of human relationships Paul demonstrates for us that debts incurred require restitution. It is not permissible for us to take advantage of one another under the guise of Christian brotherhood. However, when Jesus calls us to be a peacemaker in Matt. 5, it takes on new depth when applying the pattern of the cross to this beatitude. It is not enough for us to encourage unity and fellowship between those in the body of Christ who are in conflict with one another. For Paul to be a peacemaker between Philemon and Onesimus carried with it a cost to himself personally. Yet he was willing to take upon himself the debt incurred by Onesimus in order that there would be no obstacle between the reconciliation of these two brothers. Let us also demonstrate the same commitment toward those we love in the body of Christ. When we see others who have been wronged or when disunity has the potential of blossoming because of the effect of man's sinful nature, let us be like Christ. Let us be willing to sacrifice ourselves for others, to seek to make restitution in order that others may be brought together in unity. Let us not only be like Christ with our words, but may our deeds demonstrate the reality of the cross' impact.

Philemon 20. *Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

### THE BENEFITS OF CHRISTIANITY

Paul here expresses his desire to have some benefit from his relationship to Philemon. It was Paul's sincere hope that because of their previous

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association Philemon would trust Paul's assessment of the situation and welcome Onesimus as a brother in the Lord. Paul does not rely on his authority as an apostle in this situation but on a relationship in which Philemon owes Paul his own self. Paul would now like to see Philemon respond in a manner that would benefit Paul himself.

What is this benefit in the Lord that Paul is seeking? The only thought at this point in Paul's mind is the uniting of Philemon and Onesimus as brothers in Christ. He is seeking nothing other than the working out of the Gospel in the lives of these men. The benefit he seeks is the news that Onesimus was welcomed into Philemon's household. In this Paul's heart would be refreshed.

### APPLICATION:

How often do we define the benefit we receive from others in the Lord in terms of the Gospel's impact, instead of some type of fringe benefit? When Christ is at the forefront of our thought, we will be less consumed with ourselves. We will be free to find ourselves refreshed as the Gospel impacts others for Christ. We will see those who were once enemies come together through the power of the cross, and through this, we will gain the benefit in the Lord that Paul sought from Philemon.

*Philemon 21-25. <sup>21</sup> Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. <sup>22</sup> 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.*

*<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, <sup>24</sup> and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. <sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

### A PARTNER'S CONFIDENCE

Previously Paul had appealed to Philemon, in asking him to consider whether he was actually his partner. However, Paul turned the tables. He made clear the confidence he had in Philemon's partnership with him. In his appeal, Paul had been careful to provide Philemon the maximum amount of room to make his own decision. Now, Paul stood back and asked Philemon to make a decisive move. Paul used the word "confident." In Greek, this word is "*pepoitbos*." This word denotes a trust of someone who has been convinced that such a trust is warranted.<sup>1</sup>

The culmination of this outlook of mutual trust is seen in the final words of the sentence: "knowing that you will do even more than I say." This is more than a matter of hope or even trust. It is the knowledge that comes from a personal relationship and mutual admiration, Paul has no hesitation Philemon will act more charitably than the situation warrants. Since he has talked so far only of Philemon receiving Onesimus back "forever" (vv. 15–17), and of forgiveness (vv. 18–19), "even more" must mean something further. The most obvious alternatives would include Philemon freeing Onesimus and/or sending Onesimus back to Paul to continue to serve Paul on Philemon's behalf (vv. 12–14). But it is left entirely to Philemon to decide what is appropriate.<sup>1</sup>

### APPLICATION:

In this entire communiqué, you can sense a different approach from Paul's various letters where using his apostolic office, he settled matters within the church. However, in dealing with Philemon as an individual, he approaches this matter differently. Initially, he confirms the current Christ-like pattern of Philemon's life. Then, based on the trust he had previously established, he is able to make his appeal in this matter.

While we cannot predict the situations which will arise in our lives, we must trust that God is providentially working through them. We learn from this epistle that part of God's providence is the arranging of relationships between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. This we must apply to our own lives. The brothers and sisters God has placed in our path are there by His design. We must take the time to develop relationships that are grounded first in what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. Let us become partners in the gospel of Jesus Christ and be people who love, serve, and sacrifice for one another. In these relationships, we will truly experience a "Radical Fellowship" of which the world can never know. Jesus promises that, through this, all men will know that we are His followers because of the way we love one another!<sup>4</sup>

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1 - James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans Publishing; Paternoster Press, 1996).

2 - Isaiah 53:3

3 - Hebrew 4:14

4 - Matthew 13:34-35