



# CAPITOL COMMISSION™

## How the Gospel Changes Lives: Onesimus

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PHILEMON

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Hundreds of bills are introduced in the West Virginia legislature during every regular session. Each one is carefully prepared by legislative services and staff counsel to insure they are in proper form, are in keeping with the constitution, and are clear in presenting the requirements and details of the proposed law. Lobbyists and other interested parties study the proposals carefully to determine how they might impact groups or individuals. Much careful work goes into the preparation and passage of every proposed legislation.

In His Word God has clearly revealed what He requires of us. It is important for us to carefully study and consider what we must do in order to have a right relationship with Him. One of the requirements God has clearly spelled out that we often overlook and neglect is that of *repentance*. We see an attitude of repentance clearly demonstrated when we consider how the gospel changed the life of Onesimus.

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon in the city of Colossae. He wronged his master, perhaps by stealing from him and fleeing to Rome. There he met the Apostle Paul who shared the gospel with him and led him to Christ. As he grew in his faith, Onesimus realized he should return to Colossae and make things right with his master, who is now his brother in Christ. Paul sent him back along with this letter exhorting Philemon to forgive Onesimus and accept him as a brother. The change in Onesimus' life, and his return to Colossae to square things with Philemon vividly demonstrate what the Bible calls repentance.

### THE IMPORTANCE OF REPENTANCE

The term "repent", or "repentance" is used over 60 times in the New Testament. Jesus' first recorded words as He began His ministry were "**Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**" (Matthew 4:17). As Jesus sent the twelve disciples out to preach, "**They went out and preached that people should repent**" (Mark 6:12). As Peter and the other disciples began boldly preaching the gospel following Jesus' resurrection, they preached a message of repentance and faith in Christ (Acts 3:19). Paul preached that "**God is now declaring to men that people everywhere should repent**" (Acts 17:30). He went on to share in Romans, what could be

considered his "brief" on how we can be saved, that it is the "*kindness of God that leads us to repentance*" (Romans 2:4).

From this quick overview of the issue of repentance, we should understand that is vital for us to understand how important it is. It is important for us if we want to be right with God. It is important for us if we want to share with others how they can be right with God. Let us look at the changed life of Onesimus as well as some other scriptures so that we can understand a clear definition and description of true repentance.

### THE DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF REPENTANCE

In the Bible the term repentance literally means "to change your mind". However it is much deeper than merely giving mental assent to some truths about God or Jesus Christ. It is a change of mind as to what we think or understand about God, ourselves, our sin, and about what we must do to be right with Him. The famous London preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, described repentance this way:

*Repentance is a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it. It is, in fact, a change of mind of a very deep and practical character, which makes the man love what once he hated, and hate what once he loved.*

Another preacher shared that repentance is "A grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed".<sup>1</sup> Yet another described repentance as "a thorough change of man's natural heart, upon the subject of sin."<sup>2</sup>

God's Word makes it clear that each and every one of us has sinned and fallen short of His glory and perfection (Romans 3:23). We tend to minimize and rationalize our sin and compare ourselves with others. When we repent we understand the seriousness of our sin and our sinful condition. We feel sorrow and remorse for the things we have done. We recognize that our sin was so serious that it took the death of God's own Son on the cross to pay for our sins and provide forgiveness. We turn from those things and in faith follow Christ and trust in Him alone for our salvation.

### BIBLE STUDIES

LOBBYIST / STAFF STUDY: **TUESDAYS, 12:00 NOON**, TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

LEGISLATOR / ELECTED OFFICIAL STUDIES: **THURSDAYS 8:00 A.M. & NOON** TREASURER'S CONFERENCE ROOM (EB 54)

# West Virginia

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What is involved in genuine repentance?<sup>3</sup> There is *a knowledge of sin*. Our eyes are opened to understand the awful nature of our sin against a holy God. There *is sorrow for sin*. We are touched with remorse for our sins against God and against others. This proceeds to *confession of sin*. We admit to God we have sinned and acknowledge our guilt before Him. This is demonstrated in a *forsaking of sin*. We turn from our sin and strive to keep clear of it and avoid. This is because we now have a *hatred for sin*. The repentant person abhors what is evil and clings to what is good (Romans 12:9).

In the Bible, genuine repentance is always accompanied by a change in life and actions. John the Baptist in preaching to prepare the people for Jesus' earthly ministry warned the self-righteous religious leaders that they needed to "*bear fruit in keeping with repentance*" (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8). In Luke 3, John goes on to describe some of the actions that would demonstrate the people's repentant hearts. As Paul stood before one of the highest government leaders of the land, he shared testimony of the message he proclaimed, "*That they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance*". Acts 26:20

Onesimus clearly demonstrated this repentance as he returned to Colossae to make things right with Philemon. He had repented and trusted Christ. Now he was bearing fruit in keeping with that repentance. Paul uses a play on Onesimus' name to describe the change in his life. (vs. 11). Onesimus' name meant "useful". Though he had been useless to Philemon, he was now useful both to Philemon and Paul. He was performing deeds appropriate to the repentance that had taken place in his heart. This could not have been easy. It involved a long journey. It could have involved great personal cost as legally he could have been punished as a runaway slave. It is always difficult to go before someone we have wronged, confess our sin to them, and ask their forgiveness. Since Paul felt the need to write this letter, we might assume that the outcome of Onesimus' attempt at reconciliation might not be assured. Paul even indicates that it was important for restitution to be made (Philemon 18).<sup>4</sup>

Onesimus' physical journey gives us a picture of genuine repentance. He sins, and leaves Colossae to flee to Rome. There, he hears the gospel and understands his sinful condition and his need for a savior. He repents and trusts Christ. Now he turns around and heads back to Colossae to make things right. This is a change of direction that perfectly describes the inner change in heart and the outward change in his actions – a perfect description of genuine repentance.

### REPENTANCE AND THE BELIEVER

Repentance is not a one time thing that takes place at the time of our salvation. It is the ongoing heart attitude of the follower of Christ. We will continue to sin, but we will hate it, we fight it, and we will seek to rid it from our lives. As we grow in Christ we will gain victory over it. There are two Psalms which portray a vivid expression of repentance in believer's life. Reading Psalm 32 and 51 will help us as believers see how we should deal with sin in our lives

### CONCLUSION

- **THERE ARE MANY WHO CLAIM TO BE FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST WHO HAVE NOT EVER EXPERIENCED THIS GENUINE REPENTANCE OF WHICH THE BIBLE SPEAKS. HAVE YOU COME TO THE PLACE WHERE YOU RECOGNIZE THE SERIOUS OF YOUR SIN SO THAT YOU TURN TO CHRIST ALONE FOR SALVATION?**
- **AS BELIEVERS WE SHOULD LIVE IN AN ONGOING ATTITUDE OF REPENTANCE. ARE THERE SINS IN OUR LIVES WITH WHICH WE NEED TO DEAL?**
- **ARE THERE OFFENCES OR WRONGS TOWARD OTHERS WE MAY NEED TO MAKE RIGHT (MATTHEW 5:23-24)?**

<sup>1</sup> Watson, Thomas. The Doctrine of Repentance. <http://www.gracegems.org/Watson/repentance.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Ryle, J.C. *Repentance*. [http://www.gracegems.org/24/Ryle\\_repentance.htm](http://www.gracegems.org/24/Ryle_repentance.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Ryle. *Repentance*. Kindle Edition. Location 30.

<sup>4</sup> For another good example perhaps you recall the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19. He was the crooked tax collector who repented and followed Christ. After his salvation he declares "**half my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much**" (Luke 19:8).