



CAPITOL COMMISSION™

An Easter Message from Philemon

TIM PAULEY

PHILEMON

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During the regular session, the capitol is a place where we see many of the principles found in our federal and state constitutions played out in real life. Lawmakers go about the business of proposing and passing legislation as the governor continues to perform his executive duties. All the while the Supreme Court works to interpret and apply the laws to specific situations. They all demonstrate the separation of powers enumerated in our constitution which is so important to our form of government. All are elected officials serving the people who elected them by following through with the representative republic form of government laid out by our founding fathers. While there may be frustrations with some things that take place during the regular session, it is actually exciting to see the central tenants of our American form of government demonstrated in such a practical way.

This coming Easter Sunday points us to the central tenant of Christianity – the perfect life, suffering and death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the reconciliation of sinful people to a Holy God because of Him. We can see the examples of this truth practically demonstrated in the lives of those who believe and follow Christ. When we truly understand and believe the gospel, then we will seek to live out its implications in our daily lives. When we do so, we have many opportunities to portray the truths of gospel for the world to see. We see this both in Paul's actions and in his writing to Philemon. When we see how Paul demonstrates the gospel, we find another big message in this little letter.

We do not see Paul explicitly teaching about the gospel in Philemon as we do in his other letters. We do not see a specific Easter message in his writing. Rather we find a practical application of gospel teaching to daily life. In Paul's writing and in his actions he showed us pictures of the gospel and how he was overwhelmed with what Christ had done for him. We have already considered how the issue of forgiveness and reconciliation is the main theme of Paul's letter to Philemon.

Because of God's forgiveness of us and the reconciliation we have with Him through Christ, we are to forgive and be reconciled to others.¹ However, we can find at least two more great gospel themes in Paul's actions and his writing in Philemon that remind us of all that Christ has done for us as we go into this Easter weekend.

“CHARGE THAT TO MY ACCOUNT”

In verses 18-19 we find a striking statement from Paul:

But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

Onesimus had wronged Philemon, perhaps stealing from him and causing other harm by running away. He has now repented and trusted Christ, his life is changed, and he is returning to Colossae to be reconciled with Philemon. Onesimus had no resources and was not able to pay off the debt on his own. Philemon had every moral and legal right to expect and demand a payment of the debt in order to make things right. So Paul steps in and offers to have Onesimus' debt placed on his account, with a promise signed by his own hand that he would repay it. While Paul does not spell it out, it is not too much to read into this statement to see a dramatic illustration of what Christ has done for us. Because of our sin we owe a debt to a holy and righteous God that we can never repay. We tend to minimize and rationalize our sin, but any breaking of God's law make us guilty and places us under His judgment. R.C. Sproul spells out the seriousness of our sin against God:

In the smallest sin we defy God's right to rule and to reign over His creation. Instead, we seek to usurp for ourselves the authority and the power that belong properly to God. Even the slightest sin does violence to His holiness, to His glory, and to His righteousness. Every sin, no matter how seemingly insignificant, is truly an act of treason against the cosmic King.

One of the ways the Bible describes this sin is as a debt (Matt. 6:12, Matt. 18:21-35, Col. 2:14). It is a debt we can

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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never pay back on our own no matter how good we try to be. So Jesus took this debt of sin upon Himself. In essence He said to God the Father, “If they have wronged You in any way, or owe You anything, charge that to My account, and I will repay it”. So our sin was charged to Jesus’ account and He paid that debt which justice required by suffering and dying on the cross, taking upon Himself the punishment which we deserved.² His resurrection which we celebrate at Easter is proof that God accepted the payment. That is only half the transaction. When we repent and trust Christ then His holiness and righteousness are then credited to our account. We are forgiven and God sees us as holy and righteous in His sight. Paul describes this transaction in 2 Corinthians 5:21:

He (God) made Him (Christ) who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Paul clearly understood this transaction that had taken place in his own life. He knew the great debt Christ was willing to pay on his behalf. As a result, he was willing to demonstrate that truth in his own life by taking Onesimus’ debt upon himself. Paul hints to Philemon this same truth, with the expectation that Philemon would forgive this relatively small material debt in light the sin debt he had been forgiven. We have every reason to believe that this was the case. In it all we see a vivid illustration of the gospel truth of what Christ has done for us.

“I APPEAL TO YOU FOR MY CHILD ONESIMUS...”

Paul is interceding on behalf of Onesimus. He is intervening between the two parties with a view to reconcile their differences. He does so based on His relationship with Philemon, and on all he had done for him in ministry.

Though Paul does not specifically mention it, this is a tremendous picture of what Christ is doing for us. Jesus lived a perfect life so that He might be able to die for our sin and have His perfect righteousness credited to us. This all took place in the past with His suffering, death, and resurrection. However, Jesus is still at work in His present ministry of intercession on our behalf.

There are two passages which describe Jesus’ ministry of intercession for us:

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Romans 8:33-34

Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them. Hebrews 7:25

This is a tremendous part of the Easter message. Jesus, who died and is now risen and alive, is in heaven interceding on our behalf before the Father. Why this ongoing ministry of intercession? Because we continue to sin on a daily basis, and Jesus’ presence in heaven shows His sacrificial work on our behalf is finished. Our sins – past, present, and future – are paid for in full and forgiven. If we have trusted Christ, we can find great comfort and assurance in His intercessory work on our behalf.

CONCLUSION

The central tenant of Christianity is not being a good person. It is the forgiveness of the debt of sin of those who are not good people through Christ and His work. The debt is paid when you turn from sin and self-effort and put your faith in Him. As we approach Easter Sunday and its reminder of all that Jesus had done, please consider this important decision.

As believers we should consider how we demonstrate the truths of the gospel in the capitol and in our daily lives. We can sacrifice for others as Paul demonstrated with Onesimus. We can seek to help others find reconciliation. We are exhorted to intercede for others in prayer, particularly government leaders (1 Timothy 2:1-2).

➤ LET US CAREFULLY CONSIDER HOW WE MIGHT LIVE OUT THE TRUTHS OF THE GOSPEL AND THE MESSAGE OF EASTER THIS WEEK.

¹ You can read our previous study, “*Forgiven Much?*”, at <http://capitolcom.org/west-virginia/studies>

² The biblical, theological term for this transaction is “imputation”. Our sin was imputed to Christ. His righteous is imputed to us.