

Text: Philemon 17-21

Title: Reconciliation Based on Imputation

Truth: Paul exemplifies reconciliation and illustrates the Gospel.

Date/Location: Sunday April 24, 2016 at FBC

Introduction

After introducing himself and offering thanks for Philemon and his Christian faith and love, you will remember that Paul prayed for Philemon to have a faith that was effective and growing. In verses 8-16, he began his appeal for Onesimus. He asked Philemon on the basis of love—not command. It was interesting to see how Paul would have been happy to employ Onesimus in his own ministry, but he knew that Philemon could only offer his slave for such service in a completely voluntary manner. There could be no coercion about this.

The last portion we examined, verses 15-16, was informative in that it gave a glimpse into how Paul saw the bigger picture. He says that "perhaps" Onesimus went away for the reason that he needed to be saved. God arranged all the circumstances, so the "perhaps" was God's will. This was fairly easy to see "after the fact."

"Perhaps" you are in circumstances right now that make you wonder what God is doing. And since you are in the middle of it and not after the fact, you cannot say with certainty. I would caution you that even after the fact it is possible to draw wrong conclusions about what God was or is doing because we are sinners and are finite and not all knowing. But you can use Scripture to remind you generally that, if you are a believer,

1. God is working things out for your good (Romans 8:28).
2. God is training you to make you more holy. This may include corrective or simply formative discipline (Hebrews 12:3-14).
3. God is trying you to strengthen your faith and increase your patience (James 1:2-7, 12-17).

A question arises then, which is this: will you humbly accept what God is doing? The same question was relevant for Philemon. He was faced with the prospect of having to respond to Paul's request to take back a formerly thieving, useless slave who Paul says is now saved.

I. Paul's Two-Fold Request, v. 17-18

A. Paul asked Philemon to impute Paul's good standing to Onesimus in place of Onesimus' bad standing and receive him on that basis, v. 17.

1. This imputation is a reckoning, a thinking kind of thing. We see this with the keywords of the passage, words like count, account, receive, repay, and owe.
 2. Furthermore, after doing this "thinking," then what Paul is asking for is a receiving, accepting, welcoming kind of thing. It means to extend a welcome and receive into one's home or friendship. Examples are found among people in Acts 28:2, Romans 14:1 and by God toward people in Romans 14:3, and by both in Romans 15:7.
 3. This is a tough issue for Philemon to be ready to handle. Whether or not the debt is ever paid back, Philemon is being asked to bring this man back into his household. For a long time he may have felt like he could not do that. But now comes the test for him.
- B. Paul further asked Philemon to impute the bad Onesimus did to Paul, v. 18. This is also difficult to do. How do you take the bad of person A, and consider it to belong to person B?
- C. Note how Paul talked to Philemon. He indicated that Philemon thinks about Paul in a certain good way, and should transfer (impute) that kind of approach to his slave. And then as he thinks about Onesimus, he should transfer that kind of thinking to Paul.
1. This means that Paul takes the brunt of the whole situation. He not only supplies a positive merit for Onesimus, but he also takes the negative demerit from Onesimus to himself. He is an intercessor, a man standing between and causing the transfer of good to one and bad to another.
 2. Then the man at the top of the equation, Philemon, has to acknowledge that transfer and see things differently than he did before. That is to say, he must permit a substitution of one person for another for this whole thing to work. Paul could agree to pay the debt but if Philemon doesn't accept the swap, it will all be for naught.
 3. All of this provides a wonderful illustration of the gospel. See the two slides I prepared to demonstrate this.

II. Paul promised to repay Onesimus' debt so that the imputation would not be based on a fiction, but a reality, v. 19

- A. Paul "signed" his name to a "note" indebting himself to pay for whatever Onesimus owed Philemon. The name Paul occurs 156 times in the NT (NKJV; 161 in ESV). Of those occurrences, he writes it in his own letters

28 times. Of those, 13 are used in introductions. In several letters, Paul wrote the closing greeting with his own hand (1 Cor. 16:21, Col. 4:18, 2 Thess. 3:17).

- B. Here the use of his name is a bit different, because he is making a personal promise to Philemon to pay a debt. The fact that Paul said this, and that he wrote at least this portion of the letter in his own handwriting, makes this a clear promise to do what he says. His yes means yes, and he is recording that "yes" in writing with his own signature for sake of posterity so that there will be no question about what he said; no "he said/she said," no doubts, no going back and saying "I never said that," etc. He is saying what he will do. This sort of thing is necessary for all of us in our various relationships. He is well aware of the prohibition against oath-making (Matt 5:33-37; James 5:12), and he is not making an oath. He is, like we all must be, a man of his word.
- C. It may be the case that he thinks Philemon will outright forgive the debt, but we cannot accuse Paul of dishonesty in making this promise. He is serious. And that says something about his friendship with Onesimus.
- D. What is even more amazing than Paul elevating Onesimus to brother status from mere slave status was his offering to pay for the wrong done by the slave! Who would do that?! *Scarcely for a free man would one pay their debt; maybe for a good free man someone would pay their debt; but Paul demonstrated his love for Onesimus in that while he was still a slave, he paid his debt.* Here is Paul, a man who will stand in the gap for a "mere slave." So Christianity elevates the slave to brother status, equal to master, but also goes beyond that and says that another Christian can rightly serve the slave! "He who is greatest among you will be servant of all" (Matthew 20:26, 23:11, Mark 9:35). Isn't that Jesus' model for us?
- E. Philemon "still owing" or "owing besides" means he owes on another "note." This is a pressing word in the midst of the mention of Onesimus "owing" something to his master. Philemon owes his eternal life, in a human sense, to the apostle.
 - 1. Does this cancel out what Paul might pay, bringing his debt to zero? Maybe in the end it would.
 - 2. But remember the "owing" is of a different sort. Philemon cannot possibly pay back Paul for the full value of what he gained in the gospel and the teaching of God's word. His debt is "spiritual." But Onesimus probably could eventually pay back what his wrong was toward his master. His debt was material. Other passages talk about the truth that material support for the Christian ministry is nothing by

comparison to the spiritual benefit provided by that ministry (Romans 15:27, 1 Cor. 9:11).

F. I said in the title of this section something about a "fiction." Paul does not sweep under the rug the matter of thievery that Onesimus had done. Even though Onesimus is a new man now, he still has some old debts! Nor does Paul ask Philemon to sweep those under the rug. That would not be righteous. In a similar way, Christians do not go to heaven on a fictional handling of sin, despite charges to that effect by official Catholic teaching. Their sins are truly and really paid for by Christ.

III. Paul was confident that Philemon would respond in accordance with his request, v. 20-21

- A. There are two big applications in this text that I see. The first is this: do you stand ready to forgive those who have wronged you? Would you take back someone who wronged you like Philemon did? Would you be like the father in the story of the prodigal son, who warmly welcomed his errant son back? Or are you like the older brother, who represented the Pharisees, and insisted that his brother was still as good as dead and not worthy of any normal, much less special, treatment?
- B. In verse 20, Paul reiterates his request by saying that he will get joy out of the positive response of Philemon (and the church). How that response would be communicated is probably by letter or, at least, by messenger coming back to Paul from Rome. All the while Paul waits for a reply, he is probably praying that things will go well. When people do the right thing, it is refreshing to the Christian's heart; to the pastor's heart too!
- C. Paul knows Philemon well and has every confidence that he will respond positively to this request. In fact, he expects that Philemon will go beyond what Paul asks in some way. How refreshing!

Conclusion

In asking Philemon to bring Onesimus back into his household, Paul exemplifies Christian reconciliation on an interpersonal level.

He also illustrates reconciliation in salvation. This is the second big application I see from this text. Notice that what Paul did for Onesimus toward Philemon, Jesus did for the sinner toward God. How do you respond to that?

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