

Following Jesus does not always seem easy. Even though we remember Jesus saying, “My yolk is easy and my burden light,” we can be quite stubborn and nearsighted when it comes to giving up our familiar vices.

What’s more, in our full and busy lives, it can be difficult to even *recognize* when we are veering off course. We are creatures who are experts in self-justification. We seek confirmation of our own assumptions and we are eager to dismiss evidence to the contrary.

Christians are no exception to this rule!

We can be very good at finding evidence to support why our choice is good, noble, and just... when it is also convenient and self-serving.

The same goes for Philemon. Here is a decent man who has not only become a Christian, but has opened his own home to host a fledgling congregation in his town.

He is no cold cleric or stodgy shepherd! He is a compassionate, loving leader. Even his name means “affectionate!”

He donates money, time, and resources, and has become a beloved leader. Like the young rich ruler in the Gospels, he is following the law and trying to do what is right.

And suddenly, Philemon finds himself in the middle of a controversy when Onesimus and this letter show up at his door.

We don’t know much about Philemon and his little church. And the little we do know comes from Paul’s letter, a mere 25 verses long.

Here is what we can reliably know based on the text and elsewhere in Paul’s writing:

During the course of his missionary journeys throughout the Mediterranean, Paul visited the city of Colossae, where he established a number of house churches. Among the converts was Philemon, a man with enough resources to host the church in his home.

At some later point, Paul finds himself in prison, possibly in Ephesus, where he is under guard, but still able to receive visitors and send correspondence.

Also around this time, a man named Onesimus, who is part of Philemon’s community, comes to Paul, and also becomes a believer.

We also know that Philemon and Onesimus have had a falling out of some sort, and Onesimus has apparently asked Paul to intervene on his behalf.

This is where the consensus ends and the debates begin.

Much ink and blood has been spilled arguing over the precise relationship between these two men and Paul’s hopes for them.

—First, In the letter, Paul calls them brothers “in the flesh as well as in the Lord” What does that mean? Are they actual brothers? Or half-brothers of different social status? Or are they simply fellow Jews? or fellow Greeks?

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Philemon 11-22
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—Next, Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but as a brother.” Was Onesimus *really* a runaway slave to be returned to Philemon, or was that merely the symbolic language of “slavery” that Paul has used elsewhere in his letters?

—Even more thorny, *if* Onesimus was a slave, does Paul *really* intend to return this runaway slave to his master, implicitly lending his support to the institution of slavery within the church and even between fellow Christians?

—Or does Paul subtly and deftly argue for, not only the forgiveness of Onesimus, but also for his freedom?

AND... I’m just kidding, that’s it.

It seems as if there are far more questions than answers in this little letter!

To complicate these things more, we need to remember that this is not a private conversation. This letter is also from Timothy, Paul’s disciple, and it is addressed to Sister Apphia and “fellow soldier” Archippus, and to “the church in your house.”

Indeed, the letter’s opening even invokes the presence of Christ himself!

The audience is assembled, and the scene is set: Paul has the theological high ground, but is far away in prison, Philemon has his local status and resources and Onesimus is indebted to him, but he himself is indebted to Paul. Onesimus is indebted to Paul and Philemon but has become “useful” to them because of his conversion.

And so, what began as a quiet personal matter has become an opportunity to demonstrate the Gospel’s power, not only for the early church, but for us as well.

Paul’s rhetorical abilities are renowned throughout the church, and Philemon might expect an exegetical smack-down when he receives this letter. He may be gearing up with ammunition of his own, a list of grievances, of damages caused, or wrongs wronged.

But then the letter is read:

“My dear friend and coworker” “grace” and “peace!” I thank God because of your love and your faith! I have received much joy and encouragement from you!”

These opening words serve as a testimony to Philemon’s character and faith. Paul, rather than cutting him down, is building him up in genuine love.

Now, for the cynics in the room, if Paul seems to be laying it on a little thick with the compliments, you’re not totally wrong. In all of his writing, when Paul boasts or brags, he always points ultimately to God’s glory, and this letter is no exception. In effect, he is reminding Philemon that his leadership and charisma are gifts of God.

Philemon is a person of good character, but he runs the risk of falling back into old patterns of thinking.

To counter this, Paul lays out the relationships between the three of them, including their relationships to one another, to the church, and to God in Christ.

This letter is no brokerage deal between two equals over the status of an escaped slave. Paul in the same breath claims superiority, equality, and inferiority to Philemon.

Paul is in prison, yet he is leading, begetting, and repaying. God is using Paul's vulnerable status as a prisoner to proclaim the gospel.

Here we should all recognize the model of Christ the Son, who is Lord of all, yet was a servant of all—even the unjust and unworthy.

A servant even unto death, and through that vulnerable openness, God was able to bring about the redemption and reconciliation of the world.

Suddenly, with Jesus in the mix, their social categories become much more complicated, but also much more simple.

The result of this muddled relationship status is to render those categories secondary to the primary bond of love in grace.

Paul may not openly argue against the slave status of Onesimus, but he certainly works to make the categories of slave and master unrecognizable.

Just as Onesimus was useless and is now useful, we too all of us are indebted to Christ. Because of this we are not merely equals, but brothers and sisters, responsible for one another, and cared for by one another. No longer are we bound by the categories that previously dictated our worth, but we are bound together in love.

This is the church. This is the body of Christ. It is in this receiving and sharing of God's grace that we experience "all the good." We are being given a family that cuts across all lines. No longer do we need to worry about maintaining categories for order.

So now we are ready to circle back to Paul's actual request of Philemon:

I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.

Paul has seen Philemon transformed by grace in faith, but he waits still to see that transformation shared with others.

The salvation we receive cannot remain hidden within us. When we live out our faith, all the good that we have received becomes apparent. When we live in grace, we are able to see others as God sees us. Not as enemy or object, but as a beloved brother or sister.

In this remarkable little letter, we see that Onesimus' faith is a model for Philemon. Unbelievably, Onesimus returns to face potential bondage again. He is not being forced or coerced, but comes freely.

In this way, Onesimus is no longer a slave in any sense of the word. Yes, he is "given back" to Philemon, but he is meant to be received as a brother, receives a brother... to be received as Christ receives us.

When we live under grace, we give people that same freedom. We share God's freedom with others. There is no greater good than to see another as God sees them. There is no room for fear, or hatred, or division. All other categories are made subordinate to our identity in Christ.

In the church we set aside the status and identity markers that the world assigns us, and we come freely, openly, and in love.

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In this way, Onesimus is not only a model for Philemon, but also for us. When we face conflict, division, and disagreement, how do we face one another? Paul and Onesimus do not start with abstract arguments on freedom and slavery, or forgiveness and reconciliation. Instead, Paul begins by reminding Philemon of who he is and what they share as fellow sinners forgiven by Christ.

For though we were all sinners, we were forgiven and redeemed by Christ. In our common redemption we are made one family, brothers and sisters of grace.

Whether it is democratic or republican, rich or poor, fundamentalist or agnostic, the categories in which we automatically place people are no longer able to hold the precious and wonderful individuals therein.

The difference between doing the right thing and doing all the good is more than flowery language. It is a total shift in orientation, away from a self-centeredness and toward God-centered life. It is putting God's grace at the center of *all* we do. This is not simply doing more, forgiving more, or sacrificing more. This is stepping aside and allowing God to take up residence in the center of our lives. After that, our actions will undoubtedly look different, but what is truly different is our orientation to the world.

Paul is trying to transform our imaginations, so that we no longer ask, *what is the right thing to do?*, and we instead proclaim, *because God is a God of grace and because I am saved by that grace through Jesus Christ, I will endeavor to share that grace with my fellow man, doing all the good, for the sake of Christ and my neighbor.*

Now let "all the good" that is that grace be seen in you and in your relationships. Amen.

"Love God, and do what you will" Augustine.