

Philemon

Christ's Intercession Reflected by Paul's Intercession

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus... v. 10

The Lord has been pleased to reveal the truth of the gospel so plainly and so fully that it is easily understood by sinners and Christians alike. *And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures*, Paul writes to Timothy, *which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus* (2Tim. 3:15). I believe it is willful blindness, rather than difficulty of understanding that holds sinners back.

And the Lord has utilized a number of literary devices or styles in the Scriptures in order to accomplish his aim of making the gospel plain and clear. He has utilized historical narrative which is what we find in the gospels. He has utilized in depth explanation which is what we find in the epistles. He has also seen fit to utilize vivid illustration and this is what brings us to this epistle written to Philemon.

It's worth noting by way of introduction that Paul's epistle to Philemon is a church epistle and not merely a personal epistle to Philemon. While the name, Philemon, appears at the top of the book and while Philemon is personally addressed in v. 1 you'll notice that in v. 2 Apphia, and Archippus are also addressed as well as *the church in thy house*.

Had the content of this epistle only been intended by Paul to be a matter of personal correspondence between himself and Philemon these other people listed would not have been mentioned. But I believe Paul knew, and certainly the Holy Spirit knew that this epistle would have more far-reaching significance through the ages than only Paul's dealings with Philemon. And that significance would be more far reaching, even, than the ethical issues that are raised in this epistle.

It has been suggested by some that where the ethical issues are concerned in this epistle, you find Paul calling for the abolishment of slavery. Not only is he calling for the named, slave, Onesimus to be freed, but by the words of v. 21 where Paul expressed confidence that Philemon would do even more than Paul asks, it has been suggested that Paul was calling on Philemon to free all his slaves.

Such ethical issues are important. I wouldn't downplay their significance for a moment, but even acknowledging the significance of the ethical ramifications of this epistle, I believe, nevertheless, that there is an even greater importance still to this epistle. This epistle vividly illustrates the truths of the gospel.

I think the key verse, and the verse that certainly reveals Paul's immediate purpose is given to us in v. 10 *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds*. This is, to be sure, a letter in which Paul is making intercession to Philemon for Onesimus, a runaway slave who evidently in the providence of God had made his way to Rome and somehow met up with the Apostle Paul and was converted under Paul's ministry while Paul was in prison.

Perhaps he had gone to Paul with the knowledge that Paul knew his master and that Paul might be prevailed upon to use his influence to sway his master to be merciful to him. And in the process he gained much more than Paul's advocacy on his behalf, he gained eternal life by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is certainly touching to one's emotions to envision the dramatic circumstances behind this epistle, but what I want to do this morning, in preparation for the remembrance of Christ is to raise this story to a higher spiritual level. It is true that this epistle reveals to us Paul's intercession to Philemon for a runaway slave. It's also true that Christ makes intercession to his Father for many who have run away from God.

And so what I'd like to bring to your attention this morning is:

The Reflection of Christ's Intercession through Paul's Intercession

I. The Subjects of Intercession – Runaway Slaves and Thieves

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus – Paul writes in v. 10. We do well to look at the character of this man, Onesimus, for on a spiritual level we have some things in common with him.

He was, to begin with a servant to a master. We don't know with any degree of certainty just what kind of servant Onesimus was. The term *servant* in v. 16 does denote one who is a slave or a bondman, one who is in a servile condition. Interestingly enough it is a term that Paul sees fit on various occasions in his epistles to apply the term to himself. He was a servant, or a slave to Christ.

We are at once, then, reminded of a truth that we are all servants to someone or something. It's not politically correct for us to consider anybody in such a capacity – we consider it to be beneath human dignity to be a servant to anybody. I remember when Ron Barnes shared with us the story of how he had been pulled over by a cop for a traffic violation. Ron tried to argue his way out of a ticket and in the course of discussion with the cop Ron made the remark *Aren't you suppose to be a public servant?* – to which the officer replied *I'm not a servant to anyone.* At that point Ron saw the futility and even the potential hardship he could bring upon himself by pursuing the debate any further.

In spite of any resentment, however, that men be feel toward servitude the truth stands that we're all servants to someone or something. *Ye are of your father the devil*, Christ says in Jn. 8:44 *and the lusts of your father ye will do. Ye were the servants of sin* Paul writes in Rom. 6:20 and at that time you were free from righteousness.

So between being a servant to Christ, or a servant to the devil, or a servant to sin it's safe to conclude that you're a servant to something. Onesimus was a servant or a slave to Philemon. This is how we meet Onesimus in this epistle. He begins as a servant. And the point I want to make is that as creatures of God, being created by God, we were originally created to be servants of God. We were never created to be autonomous beings apart from

God. We were created to rule in God's kingdom but to rule under God. So we share this character trait with Onesimus. We, too, are servants of one kind or another. We were originally created to be servants to God. That's a very broad and generic thing to say and yet it's a truth that is resisted by sinners that deceive themselves into thinking that they're the ones who rule – everybody is or should be subservient to them – they, by way of contrast are subservient to no one.

But we must take this analogy a step further. While Onesimus was, as we meet him initially in this epistle, a servant to his master, we can't help but note that he became an unprofitable servant to his master. Note the words of v. 11 which, referring to Onesimus says *Which in time past was to thee unprofitable*. He ran away from his master. It seems reasonable to state also that he wronged his master by robbing him. Verse 18 says *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought*. It might seem on the surface of our Authorized Version to interpret the phrase as if Paul is making a hypothetical statement which may or may not be true. A.T. Robertson notes, however, that the two Greek words which come together and are translated by the particle *if* presents what he calls a first class condition which is assumed to be true.

Simply put – Onesimus was a runaway slave who was also a thief or a robber. I call your attention to these characteristics of Onesimus because spiritually speaking you and I are the same. We are a part of a race (the human race) that has run away from God. I can still remember the words that are recorded in Berkhoff's systematic theology that draw the difference between liberal theology and Biblical theology. Liberal theology purports to be the study of man's pursuit of God. Biblical theology is the story of God's pursuit of man. And that's exactly the truth of the matter. Adam and Eve didn't go looking for God after they had sinned. They sought instead to escape from God. They would run away from God. They would hide from God and it would be God that would pursue them.

And no wonder sinful man runs away from God – we have robbed God. We have robbed him of his glory by defying the purpose for which we were created and declaring our own independence from God. I call your attention to these characteristics of Onesimus because this is the character of the man for whom Paul makes intercession.

By the same token – these same characteristics describe the ones for whom Christ makes intercession. Christ, you know, doesn't pray for everyone. That's a controversial statement to make in the minds of some Christians but the matter is really beyond controversy. Listen to Christ's words in his high priestly prayer found in Jn. 17. *I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me* (v. 9).

So Christ doesn't pray for everyone. The question for you to consider, then, needs to be – does Christ pray for you? He doesn't pray for everyone. He only prays for them given to him by his Father – does he pray for you? And how can you know?

You can know by knowing the character traits of the people Christ came to save and by asking yourselves whether or not those character traits are true of you. In other words - Are you a runaway slave from God? Have you robbed God of his glory by your sin? Do

you consider yourself to be your own man rather than a servant to anybody? These are humbling but true things every true child of God will acknowledge about himself. There's a sense in which such an acknowledgement accompanies our partaking in the Lord's supper. When you think on the broken body and shed blood of Christ there needs to be an acknowledgement by faith that it was your sins that broke Christ's body and it was your sins that brought the whip upon his back and the nails into his hands and feet and the spear thrust into his side all of which contributed to the shedding of his blood.

So we have in this epistle an illustration of Christ's intercession and in the character of Onesimus we find the kind of people Christ intercedes for. To put the matter succinctly we have the words of Isa. 53:12 which tells us *he hath poured out his soul unto death: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.*

Would you consider with me, next, that Christ's intercession is reflected in Paul's intercession by:

II. The Grounds for Intercession – Imputation, Obligation and Love

We find in vv. 18,19 one of the most vivid illustrations of the doctrine of imputation found anywhere in the Scripture. Note what Paul says in v. 18 and the beginning of v. 19 – *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.*

Put his wrong-doing on my account, Paul says. Impute it to me, in other words. I will pay his debt. And it's interesting to note here the stress that Paul places on this issue when he says *I have written it with mine own hand*. Paul generally didn't write his epistles with his own hand. He usually had his epistles taken down by the hand of another. So in Rom. 16:22 in the context of various people that are extending greetings to the saints at Rome you find this statement *I Tertius, who wrote this epistle, salute you in the Lord*. Tertius, of course wrote the epistle in the sense that he was the one that applied the ink to the paper as Paul dictated the epistle to him.

There are, we know, some exceptions to Paul's practice. To the Galatians Paul writes in Ga 6:11 *Ye see how large a letter I have written unto you with mine own hand*. Some commentators suggest that this verse shows why Paul didn't write with his own hand very often. His eye-sight was perhaps so bad that when he wrote he had to write in large letters in order to read his own writing. We know that he also authenticated his epistles by signing them in his own hand but in the instance that we are now considering in his letter to Philemon it becomes quite apparent that Paul is placing an emphasis on his statement by noting that he's writing it in his own hand.

In other words, Paul was very serious about what he was writing. He wasn't speaking in some vague and hypothetical manner. How often do we find ourselves asking others to borrow something when we know and they know that we're not terribly serious about paying them back. *Can I borrow a cup of sugar? Can I borrow a couple of eggs?* There's

something about the bluntness of simply asking if you can have a cup of sugar that doesn't sound right and so we use the term *borrow* and maybe we'll pay it back, maybe we won't. chances are the person giving you the cup of sugar will not really regard the matter as being a loan.

Paul was not writing to Philemon in that manner of speaking. He really meant it when he said *If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.* Paul was in earnest about the matter. And so we find Paul basing his appeal to Philemon on this statement so that the issue of the wrong-doing of Onesimus would be removed when it came to Philemon's consideration of whether or not to receive back this runaway slave.

We certainly find Christ-likeness in Paul in these verses don't we? For we certainly recognize in the New Testament that Christ bases his intercession for his people on their sin-debt being charged to him and on his actual payment of that debt by the shedding of his blood. This is what the bread and the cup should bring to our remembrance this morning. Your sin-debt was imputed to Christ and he not only has pledged a willingness to pay the debt – he has, in fact, actually paid the debt.

But we find Christ's intercession reflected in Paul in another way. And let me qualify this next consideration by saying that no illustration is perfect. We're considering this epistle to Philemon as an illustration – an illustration of Christ's intercession. And I say that no illustration is perfect on this next thought because while there's a similarity between Paul's intercession and Christ's intercession, there's also a notable contrast.

I'm referring now to Paul basing his intercession to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus not only on the willingness of Paul to have the debt of Onesimus charged to him but Paul's plea is also based upon an implicit obligation on the part of Philemon to Paul. Paul is not pressing this issue but neither does he want Philemon to be wholly unaware of it. Notice what Paul reminds Philemon of in v. 19 where he writes *I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*

It becomes apparent from this statement that Paul considers Philemon to be obligated to him in all likelihood because Paul was the one that had led Philemon to Christ. Now, like I say, Paul is not pressing that aspect of Philemon's obligation to him too strongly because Paul wants to base his appeal on something even more binding and more compelling than Philemon's obligation to him. Look at what Paul writes in vv. 8,9 *Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient – or in other words, though I might press your obligation to me in this matter Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee... I beseech thee for my son Onesimus.*

Now bring these two ideas together – the idea of obligation and the idea of love. Paul is basing his intercession on these two things and so likewise does Christ base his intercession for his people on the same things. Remember what I've said – no illustration is perfect and it would not be right to think that God had the Father had an obligation to

God the Son in the same sense that Philemon had an obligation to Paul. Philemon from a human perspective owed his salvation to Paul. In a sense he owed his very existence as a saint to Paul. There is no such obligation between the Father and the Son. Christ does not owe his existence to his Father – they are both God – the same in substance equal in power and glory.

But, by the same token, God the Father entered into a covenant with his Son. It was a covenant based on love – love for each other and love for sinners. *God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son. Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again* (Jn. 10:17). It was because of this love that God the Father and God the Son obligated themselves to each other.

And when you keep these truths in mind – the truth of love and the truth of obligation then it enables you to get a very clear picture in your mind of what Christ’s intercession is all about. Some Christians, I’m afraid, can do no better than to envision Christ’s intercession as a plea coming from Christ toward a reluctant Father to bestow blessings upon his people. They see intercession as some kind of arm-twisting, as it were – Christ trying to persuade his Father.

What a different picture emerges when you think in terms of the Covenant of Redemption. In love to his Son the Father gives to Christ a people. In love to his Father Christ represents those people – becomes one of them by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul and then proceeds to meet their every obligation by fulfilling the law for them and by paying their sin-debt for them. *If they owe thee anything* we may hear Christ say to his Father, *put that on mine account*. And the Father did put the sins of Christ’s people on Christ’s account and Christ then paid the debt in the shedding of his blood.

So we find Christ’s intercession reflected by Paul’s intercession for Onesimus. Paul and Christ intercede for the same kind of people – those that have run away and are criminals. And we find them both grounding their intercession in the same thing – imputation, obligation, and love.

I’ll only have time to touch upon my third point of reflection between Paul’s intercession and Christ’s intercession which is:

III. The Fruits of Intercession – Reception, Exaltation and Transformation

What did Paul hope to gain by pleading to Philemon for Onesimus. Obviously he hoped that Philemon would receive Onesimus. *Whom I have sent again* Paul says in v. 12 *Thou therefore receive him* he goes on to write. *Perhaps he departed for a season* v. 15 *that thou shouldest receive him for ever*.

The aim is the same in Christ’s intercession. He prays for our reception in heaven. What assurance we can have of heaven, therefore, knowing as we know the grounds for Christ’s plea. But the fruit of Paul’s intercession to Philemon goes further. You see Paul didn’t merely want Philemon to receive Onesimus. Look again at vv. 15,16 *For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a*

servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved. You see the exaltation that would be gained for Onesimus through Paul's intercession for him? It's the same for you and me. The fruit of Christ's intercession for us is our sonship. We are brought into the family of God. Some time ago when we covered the subject of adoption throughout studies of Galatians I pointed out that adoption takes you even higher than justification.

Justification is forged out in the rather cold and formal and legal aspects of our salvation. Justification finds us vindicated in the courtroom. But adoption brings us (and I say it reverently) into the living room of God – the family room so to speak. But the fruit of intercession doesn't end there. Notice what Paul says in v. 21 *Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*

If Paul's intercession prevailed, then, with Philemon then what a warm and exalting and bountifully blessed reception Onesimus must have received. It reminds me of another place where Paul's intercession reflects Christ's intercession. I refer to it often – Paul's prayer for the saints at Ephesus that they would be able to comprehend the breadth and length and depth and height of Christ's love and that they might be filled with all the fullness of God. That sure is a lot but then Paul goes on to say that God is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think. The fruit of such intercession is that the people of God are bountifully blessed.

Could I just mention here the transforming effect of Christ's intercession? We're reminded of this in vv. 10,11 *I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me.*

Christ's intercession for us has transformed us in such a way that we've become profitable or valuable to God where, as rebels to God, we were good for nothing. It's no wonder, then, in Scripture, salvation is attributed to the intercession of Christ. *Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them* (Heb. 7:24).

As we partake of these elements this morning, let's affectionately meditate on the glorious truth of Christ's intercession for his people. He intercedes for those who own up to the truth of their sinfulness. He grounds his intercession in his atoning work and in the stipulations of the covenant of redemption and in he and his Father's love.

And the fruit of that intercession has been and continues to be and will ever be our acceptance, our exaltation, and our transformation. These are wonderful gospel-truths to contemplate around the Lord's table.