

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. The title for today’s sermon is “*You have been bought*” and is taken from Paul’s letter to Philemon. Let us pray... Amen.

Today’s Epistle lesson is a beautiful letter from Paul to a member of the Colossian church named Philemon. Paul writes to Philemon to receive back one of his servants, Onesimus and Paul’s letter follows a similar style to his other writings.

First Paul identifies himself as a prisoner for Christ Jesus and indicates to whom he is writing; Philemon and the other Christians gathered in Philemon’s house. Paul greets and blesses them saying; “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Since we all live, move, and have our being in Christ so begins Paul’s letter. Grace to you, because it is God’s grace which brings the forgiveness of sins, and peace, which is the joy of a forgiven conscience; but this grace and peace do not come from the world, but only from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul gives thanks to God for all the Colossian church has done and specifically for Philemon, Apphia, and Archippus. Paul recognizes the good works which God has worked through them. Paul praises them very highly, but it is in Christ he attributes faith and love to them, as though he were saying: “I thank God that you have faith and love toward God and the saints.” Hearing of their faith in Jesus Christ being shared in love towards their fellow saints refreshes Paul. Paul gives thanks for their faith and for their sharing of the faith given them through the hearing of God’s Word. Paul gives thanks to God because through Philemon and company’s work the hearts of the saints in other places are also being refreshed.

After giving thanks, Paul makes his plea for Onesimus. Onesimus, Philemon’s servant, ran away from Philemon. If found, Philemon was fully in his right to thoroughly punish Onesimus for this crime, and yet it is the same Onesimus returned to Philemon with Paul’s letter of reconciliation in hand. Now, exactly why Onesimus left is not known. Perhaps he stole from Philemon and fled the city, perhaps he was sent out on an errand and decided to never return, but what is known from Paul’s letter is Onesimus left his master and Onesimus owed Philemon a huge debt. The punishment for such actions debt would have been severe.

Before we get too far, it is important to understand that being a servant or slave at this time was greatly different than it was in colonial times in United States. Slavery in the Roman Empire was not associated with the oppression of any particular race or people. In the Roman world slaves could serve in a variety of positions from chain gang labourer to Obstetrician. Slaves could hold high and respectable offices. Slaves could buy and own property and enter into contracts. Roman free persons sometimes sold themselves into slavery to pay debts and non-roman persons sold themselves to eventually obtain Roman citizenship. Typically slaves hoped to be released at age 30, the usual age of discharge, or they could even buy their freedom.(LSB, p.101) But they could not just leave, as Onesimus did.

But since Onesimus’ departure, Paul told Philemon, Onesimus was converted to Christianity and is now is useful to both Paul and Philemon. On top of that Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus back and to no longer consider Onesimus a servant but a brother. This had huge implications. As Onesimus was bound to Philemon as his rightful property under Roman

law, Paul requests Philemon to grant freedom to Onesimus and to receive him back as a brother and equal.

But how did Philemon respond? Officially we do not know, but since we have this letter and since it was included as part of the New Testament canon it implies Philemon followed Paul’s request. Also, it is most likely Philemon didn’t take Paul up on his offer to re-pay the damages from Onesimus’ abandonment.

And here lies one problem with this letter; too often we get caught up with the idea of slavery and miss Paul’s message. This letter is less about the release of one slave in bondage to an earthly master, and more about the One who came and released all of us from our earthly master. It is less about Paul’s interceding for Onesimus’ release, and more about Christ’s intercession for each and every one person, how Jesus “**made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.** ⁸ **And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.**”(Phil 2:7-8)

Paul points to Christ’s redemption and reconciliation. Because Philemon owes Paul, but even more so Jesus for his eternal life, Paul is able to make this appeal to Philemon. Christ’s forgiveness is only found at the foot of the cross and with Jesus’ proclamation of reconciliation to the Father from the empty tomb. In Christ Philemon, Onesimus, and each of us have life. Jesus bought you. Christ redeemed all men from the power of sin, death, and the devil through His sacrifice and resurrection. This is the message too often overlooked.

Paul’s message to Philemon and the church gathered at his house is a message of faith working itself out in the day to day life of the Christian. Being a Christian is easy on Sunday mornings, but it become more difficult during the rest of the week, mainly when dealing with people or our property and possessions (slaves?). What is easy to say with the congregation is more difficult to do apart from the congregation.

So, what does Paul ask of Philemon? Simply take the loss, Freely release Onesimus from his slavery, and treat and consider him as a brother in Christ. Paul requests this as he writes, “I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.”(v.19) Philemon owes Paul his eternal life. God’s Word was shared with Philemon and released him from the bondage he was in to sin, delivered him from the power of the devil, and saved him from the certain and eternal death he rightly deserved for his sins against God. Comparatively, what was the debt of a servant to the debt of his sins to God.

Paul concluded his letter reflecting (*verse 21*) back on the beginning. He tells Philemon; “²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.” Paul wrote this letter to Philemon, not to force his hand with the law but as encouragement to continue to proclamation of the Gospel first given to him and as a testimony to all of the deliverance He first received because of Christ. Paul heard of Philemon’s life in Christ and his Good Works done in Christ for the greater Christian community.

At the beginning of his letter Paul said “⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full

knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

The Holy Spirit had been working through Philemon. Paul was aware of Philemon’s faith in Christ Jesus and his love for all the saints(v.5). Yes, Philemon could have been rightfully upset about the financial loss from this servant, yet, Paul informs Philemon that now he has regained something, or better said, someone better. Paul “prayed that the sharing (*or continued sharing*) would become effective (and evident) of the good in ‘them’ and for the sake of Christ.”(v.6) How? Through Philemon’s words and actions. As he had received from Christ, he too could share. Forgive as forgiven. Deliver as delivered. Redeem as redeemed by Christ. And he did. Philemon freely gave Onesimus, his undeserving slave, forgiveness, deliverance from slavery, and reconciliation.

But you likely ask, ‘How does this work in my life?’ I don’t have slaves or servants. Very true, but who are you in Paul’s letter? Philemon or Onesimus? (*pause*) Before God, we are all Onesimus’s if we believe the Word of God. Before God, we are first and foremost offenders against His commands, deserters, cowards, law breakers, and deserving of nothing more than God’s full wrath and punishment for all of our sins and shortcomings. But we have a gracious God, One who willingly took all our sins and bought us back by grace through the death of Jesus, our Lord, our Saviour, and our God. Christ bought you and reconciled you through Holy Baptism and He continues to forgive and restore you through His Word and Sacrament. As a result, all you have in this life; all your time, all your talents, and all your treasures are God’s first. On top of that, in Christ you are forgiven; in His flesh he took on our weakness, and sins and exchanged His life for all on Calvary so He could give the gift of reconciliation and eternal life. He gives this gift, not because you earned it or because of what you have done, quite the contrary, God gives His gifts strictly because of Christ.

You were bought at a price, you were set free from the power of sin, you are delivered from the control of Satan, and you have been redeemed from the eternal torment of hell. There is nothing left for you to do. No 12 step program. Christ’s sacrifice did it all. The best part is He didn’t just do it for you and me, Christ died and rose to save all people, every single one. His gift of redemption and freedom is for everyone who Hears His Word and receives His Sacraments. In the words of Peter, you have the freedom to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”(2 Peter 3:18) You and I have the honour, pleasure, and joy of being able to regularly hear the good news of Jesus. We also have the right and privilege to share Christ’s gifts with everyone around us. In Christ we are all brothers and sister. Christ redeems us equally and forgives us all more than we could ever deserve. Christ has bought you, your freedom, and your salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen!

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