As you all are aware- if you’ve been paying attention at all over the last year- this letter Paul wrote to the Colossians was to deal with **a real problem in the church**. Some within this new-ish church were promoting human traditions and principles [Torah obedience and asceticism] that are superfluous to the Gospel- unnecessary add-ons. Paul wants them to understand that **Jesus** “is all and in all,” that “in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells and in Him you have been made complete.” Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the Lord of Creation and the New Creation. He is all you need to be “rescued from the domain of darkness.”

*But Paul has another Colossian issue he’s dealing with at the same time.* This situation will test the church’s identity as those who have “put off the old self” and “put on the new.” It will test the **Peace** of the Body and the **Agape** that binds them together because it will reveal the *profoundly radical recon-ciliation* King Jesus expects to characterize the Church. **3:11** *…*there is no *distinction between* Greek and Jew,circumcised and uncircumcised,barbarian, Scythian,slave and freeman, but **Christ is all, and in all.** [Gal 3:28 and Eph 2:11ff]

*Here’s the deal shared Faith in Christ* ***must*** *abolish all enmity between peoples regardless of race, class, economic, or educational status or the enmity that comes from day to day feelings of betrayal, hurt feelings, or offense.*And all of this comes into play in the **Paul, Onesimus, Philemon triangle.**

But first some background: **Rome** had a complex class society. *Political and Economic power* belonged to the few who owned the farms or controlled civil bureaucracy or the military. The largest class in Roman society was the **“working class.”** They eked out a hand to mouth existence. With little social influence they lived a hard and short life. A subset of that working class was **the slaves.** Generally about 1/3 of the population was **“owned”** by another human. Another third had been owned at some point.

It was against Roman law for a slave to own property- but the fact is some still did and had some income. Thus, in dire circumstances, free people might sell themselves into slavery for the sake of having work, housing, and food. But in doing so they were STILL SLAVES, meaning they had **no legal right to any of the basic human freedoms that belonged to citizens**. So they were exploited and abused in every way you can imagine. To run away from your Master was a capital offense. It was legal, if not customary to execute the slave

**Jesus’ care and acceptance of the least** and the last, and the disciples realization that Christ’s salvation was for EVERYONE- Jew & Gentile- led the church to understand that **in Christ all social barriers are destroyed** [Col 3:11, Gal 3:28, Eph2:11-22] and “God’s salvation is offered to every person through Christ without prejudice” [Wall]. The Church became the one place in Roman society where **equality was the rule**- and the slave was as likely to be leading worship as the Master.

**Philemon** was a man of some influence and means in Colossae- he obviously has a house where the Colossian church is meeting. He has a wife, **Apphia**. And **Archippus** is

probably an adult son. We know that Paul has never visited Colossae but his letter to Philemon is so intimate and personal that they must have met at some point. We speculate that, perhaps on business, **Philemon** [and possibly his family] traveled the hundred miles overland to the Bustling metropolis of **Ephesus-** most likely during Paul’s second visit to Ephesus [3 years]. In Acts 19 Luke says: …so all who lived in Asia heardthe word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.

So **Philemon** was one of those who “heard the word of the Lord.” Philemon believed and so did his wife [Apphia-Paul calls her “sister”] and son [Archippus- Paul calls him “fellow soldier.”] And after their time with Paul they went back to Colossae and their home became a place of love and hospitality where the few Christians in the area began to meet. In V2 Paul greets “the church in your house” and says Philemon is a comfort… “because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother,” [v7]. That’s about Philemon’s home and hospitality blessing the saints.

Time passes. **Epaphras,** another Colossian native, hears Paul and is convinced Jesus is Lord and Savior and feels led to go back home and evangelize his hometown. At some point Paul is arrested and imprisoned [maybe in Ephesus, maybe in Rome]. And somewhere in this **wibbly wobbly timeline** Epaphras worries **his converts are straying off the path** and so he goes to seek help from Paul.

**Now, Philemon, like most well-to-do Romans owned slaves**. The very idea is abhorrent to us. But for Rome slavery was like the air they breathed- *as normal and natural and expected as electricity in your house.*

[Sidebar: That, of course doesn’t make it okay. **All slavery is bad.** It is a “human tradition” a “principle of the world.” It is arrogant superiority and bullying at a “Masters” level. It is a *sinful product of the Fall of Humanity and the resulting inequality and abuse*- and those who engaged in it then and do so now WILL be held accountable by the God who truly owns us all. If slavery wasn’t evil, God would not have sent Moses to say “Let My people go!”- and Paul wouldn’t have told Corinthian slaves: “…if you are able also to become free, rather do that.” [1Cor 7:21].]

One of the slaves owned by **Philemon** was named **Onesimus.** Interestingly enough his name means **“profitable or useful.** So Paul may be making a friendly joke when after mentioning Onesimus the first time he says **11** who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.]

**Onesimus ran away from Philemon’s household.** We’re not told why- other than Paul’s vague reference that Philemon probably thought of Onesimus as l**ess than productive.** Maybe Onesimus was pegged as lazy and punished by Philemon and he decided: “Forget this, I’m outa here!” **There’s a hint** in the letter that *our runaway slave may have helped himself to some money* on the way out the door; in that Paul- in making his final plea- says: **18** But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; **19** *I*, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it…

Now, as I said, any slave that ran away from their master earned themselves the **death sentence**.

The best thing to do was to get outa dodge and get some distance between you and the Master and, better yet, **get lost in a big city**. As I said when we began this study there is no certainty as to whether Paul is writing from a cell in the **Roman Garrison in Ephesus** [100 miles overland from Colossae] between 52 & 55, or is he writing from a **prison cell in Rome** [1280 miles over land and sea from Colossae] between 60-62. Which city remains unknown. Regardless, Onesimus- whether intentional or accidental- *ended up in the company of Paul.*

*And in Paul’s company our useless, pilfering, runaway slave made the choice to give his life to King Jesus.* Paul writes in Philemon **10** I *appeal* to you for my *child* Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, *Paul introduced Onesimus to Jesus from his prison cell*. And Onesimus gave his life to Jesus and was **born again.** He was so taken by Christ, and grateful to Paul, that he took on the role of Paul’s servant- caring for the apostle’s personal needs while in prison. And doing so “with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord” [3:22]. **With Christ in his life Onesimus was changed from the inside out.**

Onesimus is so helpful that Paul would like to be able to stay and work with him[v13] **But he can’t.** Onesimus is a runaway slave with a price on his head. And Paul is now harboring a runaway slave. **AND** Onesimus isn’t just any, random, runaway slave but he’s a runaway slave who is the property of a “beloved brother and fellow worker” in the Church! **AND** Onesimus is now a follower of Jesus as well. Philemon & Onesimus are BOTH Paul’s spiritual children, brothers in Christ: **reconciliation is not OPTIONAL.** It’s a requirement. **Paul is going to require much from both of them.**

He’s going to require **Onesimus** to risk his life by returning to Colossae and his Master to seek forgiveness. And he’s going to –by the power of the Gospel- encourage **Philemon** to receive Onesimus back without penalty- and perhaps even set him free. *EVERYTHING in that society would be against this.* Slaves had to be kept in their place. To reward them for running away was to invite more runaways. The society as a whole is dependent on slaves being slaves. And Philemon would be a target for wrath and derision from his neighbors. He would look the fool in front of his fellow-citizens. And it would call his faith out into the open.

But the gospel, to which, both Philemon and Onesimus, have given their lives isn’t only about *how to “get saved” spiritually*. It’s also about **the Lordship of Christ** in life here and now. Jesus has- in his sacrifice- **reconciled** us to God. **And He expects his people to die to themselves and be reconciled to one another.** This horizontal reconciliation is why we are called to **Mutual Submission**, as Paul tells the Ephesians: **Eph. 5:21** Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

That “submission” is fleshed out in our fellowship. The typical Greek word for fellowship is *koinonia*- But *koinonia* also means: contribution, participation and **PARTNERSHIP.** As in Phil 1:5 where Paul prays with Joy because of the Philippians Partnership in the gospel. Back in Philemon v17 Paul will lean on the gospel partnership *[koinonos]*  that exists between him and Philemon.

And both Wright and Wall agree that Philemon v6 would better be translated: **6** *and I pray* that the **PARTNERSHIP** [fellowship] of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake.

The picture here is that all that have given our lives over to King Jesus are **partners in the gospel**- equal participants, with various gifts, submitted to one another out of reverence for our King. Our working together in this Jesus-empowered partnership should have **a powerful effect.** There are “good things” to be accomplished for the sake of King Jesus. And they can only be accomplished if WE will embrace the **reconciliation** [mutual submission] that this “partnership” requires. **This is Paul’s expectation of Philemon.**

So Paul & Timothy having heard from *Epaphras* about the issues in the Colossian church write the letter we call **Colossians.** AND with the *Onesimus/Philemon* situation in mind Paul and Timothy write the letter to **Philemon.** These letters are carried to Colossae by **Tychicus** –a respected associate evangelist of Paul-who is accompanied by **Onesimus.**

Just the arrival of Onesimus and Tychicus at Colossae would have raised eyebrows. When the Christians heard there was a letter from **THE Apostle Paul** addressed directly to them every church member would have been excited. Imagine **the gathering in Philemon’s home** to hear the letter read by Tychicus with Onesimus standing by. Everyone’s on pins and needles as Tychicus reads:

3:11 …there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, **slave and freeman,** but Christ is all, and in all.

Col. 3:12   … put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you. 14 Beyond all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity.

Col. 4:1  Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

And this little bombshell in 4:7: Paul has commissioned Tychicus to inform them about Paul’s personal circumstances and encourage them, but Onesimus is commissioned as well. 4:9 and with him **Onesimus**, **our faithful and beloved brother,** who is one of your number. **They** will inform you about the whole situation here. Onesimus, the thieving, runaway, slave from Philemon’s house- this house that we’re meeting in- is back and **he’s a commissioned minister of the Apostle Paul!?** How is this possible?

The answer lies in the letter that is meant for **Philemon.** Col 4:9 makes little sense if Tychicus is not **carrying both letters**. There’s no reason for Onesimus to be there if Paul’s letter to Philemon isn’t arriving with them. The big question to my mind is in what order were the letters delivered? Both together to Philemon? Colossians first- read publicly and then Tychicus passes Philemon the letter addressed to him and his family [& the church, but that’s for after Philemon has acted]? Or did Philemon get his letter first so the situation could be addressed before the public reading? I don’t know. Nobody knows. To my mind Paul’s statement in 4:9 is intended to shock and surprise- especially with Onesimus present. If Philemon gets his letter first, and the rumor mill starts working 4:9 kind of loses its power. But again, there’s no way to know.

**But here’s what we do know:** From statements in Philemon’s letter it’s clear *Paul led both men to a relationship with King Jesus* [v10 & v19]. Both men were loyal to King Jesus [Philemon v5, Col 4:9]

Paul considered both to be his **“beloved brothers”** in Christ [Phile v1 & Col 4:9]. And, in another sense Paul understood himself to be **a “Father” figure** to each of them [Phile 10 & 19]. So it makes sense that in Philemon, Paul is engaged in a fatherly sort of persuasion*- the sort of loving, gentle, even playful persuasion a parent might use with an adult child.* *You know what I mean: They have to make their own decision, but you know, from your own experience, what the best choice is. And you also know you can’t tell them what to do.*

In this process, Paul makes sure Philemon knows how much he values and admires him because of his love and faith and service to King Jesus and the Church that is His body. It’s neither flattery or manipulation. ***It’s pure encouragement in a setting of genuine love and a true knowledge of the Gospel.***

In V8 we see Paul is aware of his authority as an Apostle and certainly as a Pastor and spiritual father to Philemon as well as to Onesimus. **Phile. 8**   Therefore,though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper, **9** yet for love’s sake I rather appeal *to you…* He has an authority from God **to “command” him** to act *but the point of the reconciliation is as much about* ***Philemon’s heart*** *as* ***Onesimus’ future****.*

It is **the same with God** who knows the agape-driven choices for reconciliation he would like us to make, but **He will not force you to obey.** The choice has to come *from your heart and mind* so the renewing power of the Gospel can have its effect on you and the world.

Paul makes sure Philemon understands how much he loves Onesimus and values him- just as he loves and values Philemon. Onesimus good service to Paul and for the gospel makes Paul wish he could keep him around*.* **But that’s not right.** *Philemon and Onesimus are equals in Paul’s heart.* Like Jesus, Paul loves them both; and he knows that **the necessary thing is that these Christian brothers be reconciled in Christ.**

But while Paul is confident of the “right action” in this situation and though he gently presses loving persuasion, he is not so arrogant as to **TELL Philemon what he SHOULD do**. Instead [in v15-16] he tries to help Philemon **see a bigger picture of more important things**- more important than broken laws or lost money or reputation with the neighbors. *Paul says* ***“what if” this all happened*** *just so Onesimus could come to faith and return to you as your brother in the Lord? Think about it that way.*

Paul says [V17-18] “accept him as you would me.” And Paul backs that up saying: however he’s wronged you, whatever he owes you, charge it to me and I’ll pay the price. Here Paul is imitating Jesus who paid the price for our sins so we could be set free!

Then Paul says: Phil. 21 …I know that you will do even more than what I say. Which is a gentle appeal for **Onesimus’ freedom** [A sinner’s price paid by another so he can be free!]

**As God worked through the cross to redeem the world,** perhaps God worked through Philemon’s loss to redeem Onesimus and give the entire church at Colossae a living object lesson on reconciliation in the Kingdom of God. [powerful and costly]

Paul is asking Philemon to play the role of **the Father** to Onesimus’ **prodigal son**. He is asking him to follow Jesus pattern of self-sacrifice by dying to himself for the sake of reconciliation.

The fact that **Colossians and Philemon** are part of our NT scriptures indicates the interplay between them is meant to help us see the **radical reconciliation that should be the norm within the body of Christ.** No offense, no slight, no intentional hurt is beyond the reconciling power of Jesus Christ - unless we choose to refuse it in favor of our own pride. *[That’s the challenge for both Philemon & Onesimus]*

*Wright says: “When people allow the cross to shape their own lives, the love of God is set free to change and heal in ways we cannot at the moment even imagine.”* The reconciliation available in Christ is costly, shocking and powerful. The question for us all is where in our lives is it needed, where in the Church, where in our community should its power be released.? And how can we, as Jesus’ people make it so?