

- Today will be our 4th teaching in this letter, and I would say that we have extracted some (of what I would call) serious applications from the first 9 verses of this letter.
 - Last week we ended our teaching all the way through verse 9.
 - But as always, and in the “Spirit of Context”, I want to back up and re-read verses 1 through 9 as I bring us with to today’s set of focus verses – and here is what Paul wrote

[Philemon 1:1-9](#)

[Philemon 1:1](#) Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved *brother* and fellow worker,

[Philemon 1:2](#) and to Apphia (Aaa -fee- uh) our sister, and to Archippus (ahh-key-pus) our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

[Philemon 1:3](#) Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[Philemon 1:4](#) I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,

[Philemon 1:5](#) because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;

[Philemon 1:6](#) *and I pray* that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ’s sake.

[Philemon 1:7](#) For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

[Philemon 1:8](#) Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper,

[Philemon 1:9](#) yet for love’s sake I rather appeal *to you*—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

- So, the narrative is this: Paul led a man named Philemon to Christ while he was preaching and teaching in Ephesus.
 - And of course, what we learned about Philemon:
 - A man who owned slaves at that time, which was very common in those days.
 - Philemon also lived in the area known as Colossae.
 - At some point, one of Philemon’s slaves, a man named Onesimus, decided to run away.
 - And on his way out the door, he makes another decision to steal some money from his Master. Which sounds bad – but honestly makes sense seeing how I am sure Onesimus was broke.
 - So, Onesimus flees for Rome, which was some 1300 miles away, where he “coincidentally” runs into the Apostle Paul.
 - And by Paul’s own admission through his writings, he tells us that Onesimus had

become very useful to him, which is ironic – since Onesimus' name means “useful”

- Now the problem is, Paul (at some point) discovers that Onesimus is Philemon's slave, which is obviously a game changer, and it created an internal conflict inside Paul.
 - Maybe a better way to say it is – it created an internal conviction of the Holy Spirit with the Apostle Paul.
 - And so what is Paul to do?
 - Does he keep this new information to himself – keep it silent and press on like nothing has changed?
 - Or does he do the right thing and tell Onesimus that he must return to his Master?
 - The answer is – He does the right thing.
 - Another way to say it is that he does the God Honoring thing.
- And yes – even though it was Paul, and even though Onesimus was helping Paul with the work of ministry, the God honoring decision was to send Onesimus back to Philemon.
 - And why? Because it was the law and because the world was watching.
 - They were silently saying to themselves, is Paul going to honor Roman Law?
 - Or was he going to declare himself immune to Roman law – all in the name of Christianity?
 - You see – that is the question, and this story tells us something.
 - Which is, we cannot make decisions – based solely on the fact that we are doing something in the name of God.
 - A good example of this would be blowing up an abortion clinic simply because we know God is against the taking of innocent life.
 - I can tell you – with 100 percent certainty – that if someone does such a thing, they are not honoring the Lord!
 - And how do I know this to be the case?
 - I know it to be the case because that's exactly what Paul is modeling for us – in his decision to send Onesimus back to Philemon.
 - And that decision, is where we get the letter we are studying today.
 - A letter Paul wrote while in prison to this man Philemon on behalf of his runaway slave Onesimus.
 - And he writes this letter hoping that when Onesimus returns that he can hand deliver Paul's words to his Master, and do so with a few goals in mind.
 - And what were those goals?
 - A – at a minimum, Onesimus would not be severely punished.
 - And or B – Not be punished at all.
 - But honestly, Paul's goal is much loftier than that.
 - He not only wants Philemon to accept Onesimus back.

- He wants him to accept Onesimus back as an equal!
 - Not as a slave – but as a brother in Christ!
 - Which would be a long shot, but that was Paul’s goal.
- And so – it’s with that background in mind that we will proceed into our next set of focus verses, [Philemon 1:10-16](#), where the translators entitle this next section: Plea for Onesimus, a Free Man

[Philemon 1:10](#) I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

[Philemon 1:11](#) who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

[Philemon 1:12](#) I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart,

[Philemon 1:13](#) whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

[Philemon 1:14](#) but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

[Philemon 1:15](#) For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever,

[Philemon 1:16](#) no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

- Now, before digging too deep into this text, I want you to look at these verses – with somewhat of a “predisposed” set of eyes.
 - Meaning, I want you to read these verses while trying to place yourself in Paul’s position.
 - And my next statement may get me in a little trouble with the Theological or Doctrinal Police, but I’m going to say it anyways.
 - Paul words have an “air” or “spirit” of manipulation to them.
 - They really do – and there’s no way around it.
 - Which is okay, because Paul has something he is trying to accomplish in ministry, and he sees Onesimus as an asset in accomplishing that goal.
 - But there is a problem, he cannot move forward without Philemon’s blessing.
- Let me say it a different way – he could move forward, and as I stated earlier, no one would probably know. But guess who would know?
 - Paul would know. And possibly the unbelieving world around him might know.
 - And let me say something about all of this before moving forward.
 - Something – I think you may find profound:
 - “Right is right and wrong is wrong”

- And that statement does not change just because you are doing something wrong in the name of Jesus.
- I want you to think about what I am saying here. Paul – the greatest writer of the New Testament, the greatest evangelist of all time and by all accounts, and in my opinion, the greatest Apostle of all time. He has but one goal.
 - To further the work of ministry.
 - And in, and through Onesimus, he sees a way forward in accomplishing that goal.
 - But what does he do?
 - He does the right thing – he obeys the law and sends Onesimus back to Philemon.
 - Which tells us something about Paul and ultimately tells us something about God and His Character.
 - And that is: “Two wrongs don’t make a right”
- But it goes deeper than that. You see, even though Paul is working for God, he models for us a fundamental truth of our Lord.
 - Which is, just because we can justify our position by saying that we are doing God’s work, specifically, as it pertains to the church, ministry etc., we still must follow the laws of the land – and do what’s right – while we are living here on this planet.
 - And even more than that, I would tell you that God “expects” us to do the right thing here on earth.
 - And Paul’s reaction to Onesimus' situation establishes that truth for us.
 - It’s an example for what is – and what is not – the God honoring choice we should make.
 - So – let that that thought sink in for a minute.
- What Paul just did is answer a question for all believers, a question I have been asked many times throughout the years as it relates to what we should do when faced with a similar situation.
 - When we can clearly justify our choices all in the name of God or the church, but the reality is if we make a choice based on that logic, we are dishonoring our Lord all because (in this situation) the decision conflicts with the laws of the land.
 - And so – guess what? We just learned something.
 - That is just because we make a decision in the name of God, it does not mean it’s always the right thing to do.
 - And Paul (who by the way I assure you was pure in heart), who was a prisoner in Rome when he wrote this letter,
 - Who was using Onesimus to help him with the work of ministry while he was incarcerated.
 - He made a decision – opposite of what you might think he would have done.
 - As he sends Onesimus back to Philemon (his Master) knowing the entire time that

there was a chance that Onesimus might be killed or at a minimum severely punished.

- But even in the face of all of that, he still makes the right decision and sends Onesimus back to Philemon.
- But he doesn't send him back blind, rather, he sends him with a letter he hopes will soften the return for the runaway slave.
- He makes this decision – while using his words (if you will) as ammunition, hoping to influence Philemon's reaction.
- And it's for that reason, that I say you can feel Paul using a little “manipulation” in his words, which we will see even more clearly in next week's lesson.
- But regardless of how Paul feels about the situation, he still makes the right decision even though he does so with reluctance in his writings.
 - And his counterbalance or maybe better said, his way of trying to accomplish the same result – all while honoring God – is to remind Philemon of how he too must do the right thing as well.
- And so, through Paul's situation – the Bible teaches us something.
 - Which is no matter the situation we find ourselves in, and no matter the potential outcome, we must always make the God honoring decision and simply let God handle it from there.
- But why? Why does Paul make this decision?
 - It's simple – it's all for the sake of the Gospel.
 - Because the unbelieving world is watching.
 - Remember – it's not what you say that carries the most impact.
 - And it's not what you necessarily refrain from that grabs the unbelieving world's attention.
 - Your testimony to the unbelieving world around you is derived through Optics – not words!
 - Another way to say it is – talk is cheap!
- Now personally – as a business owner, I run into these situations all the time.
 - Where the choices I make on the surface seem harmless.
 - Where no one would ever seemingly know the difference.
 - But the reality is that there is always someone watching.
 - They may not necessarily care but my choices will leave an imprint on the minds of those around me.
 - Especially those who may not be believers.
 - You see – as believers we are all under a microscope.
 - And of course – as a Pastor I'm examined with an even higher level of scrutiny.
 - Which means our actions matter!

- And by the way on a side note, just in case you are wondering – when we are faced with a tough decision, we should never justify our actions based on what the other person may or may not do if they were in the same position.
 - That is not how you come to the God honoring conclusion!
 - Matter a fact, I would tell you (many times) what somewhat else would do when faced with the same set of circumstances would be the worst thing you could do.
 - And you know what I mean where we say, “Well, I will guarantee you that if the shoe were on the other foot, then they would do this or that. Therefore – that’s how I will make my choice.”
 - If that’s what motivates your decisions – you need to know (as I said), that is not how you make God honoring choices.
- Now why am I driving this point home so hard?
 - Because I see this happen all the time with Christian men and women, where a Christian person tries to anticipate how the other person would react if they were in the same position and then they let that drive their behavior.
 - I have seen this happen so many times – especially when dealing with the church.
 - Matter a fact, this just happened to me a few weeks ago in a discussion with another Pastor.
- I’m not going to get into all the details of it, just to say that this Pastor's basis for his situation drove his reaction when he tried to justify his response based squarely on the fact that he was a Pastor of church
 - And I will tell you that he was wrong.
 - He was right on the surface – but wrong – in the way he tried to justify his reaction.
 - Basically, he used the fact he was a Pastor – and had responsibilities to the church as the overseer/elder to justify his response.
 - At which point I quickly reminded him that he was missing the forest for the trees.
 - I will also tell you – in the moment it became intense and a little contentious.
 - But contentious as it was, a couple days later – the man apologized. Which was good!
 - You see, the situation this Pastor found himself defending was very similar to Paul’s response.
 - Where (unlike Paul) – the Pastor felt like, because he was the Pastor his position and intent justified his reaction.
 - But he was wrong!
 - And here is what I learned from my interaction with this man.
 - I learned that it is always best to state your case and to let God work it out!
 - And guess what! God did exactly that.
 - He worked it out – the man apologized for his reaction, and we are moving forward in peace – and we were able to avert all the ancillary damage that could have been

caused to those who were on the outside looking in, the unbelievers.

- So I would say, based on the way Paul handled this situation, he gave us a very powerful application.
 - And that is – making the God honoring decision doesn't always line up with the logic that says what I am doing, I am doing in the name of God.
 - Therefore I am justified in my position.
- Moving on, Paul says in Philemon verse 10:

[Philemon 1:10](#) I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

- Let me stop here for just a minute because I found it interesting that Paul called Onesimus his child
 - So – I did a deep dive into the Greek for further clarification.
 - The Greek word for child is “Tek’-non”
 - It is neuter – neutral in sex. Meaning can be either Male or Female
 - And it means properly, a child (figuratively) – anyone living in full dependence on the heavenly Father i.e. fully (willingly) relying upon the Lord in glad submission.
 - A commentary I read on this said, to be a child of God means we live our lives with our full dependence placed in Him, and that dependence is what prompts our Lord to transform us into His likeness.
- So basically, because Onesimus is now saved, (surrendered his life to Christ) – he is a child of God and by extension a child to Paul.
 - But not just any child – he was “Paul’s child”
 - And why – because Paul is the one who led him to Christ.
 - Next at the end of Philemon verse 10, Paul says:

[Philemon 1:10](#) I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

- Whom I have begotten in my imprisonment. What in the world does that mean?
 - Well the phrase in the Greek says, “I have begotten.”
 - Which answers a question I had – concerning where Paul was when he led Onesimus to Christ.
 - When we study the word begotten, it means – to beget, to bring forth, to give birth.
 - Meaning, when Paul says, whom I have begotten while in prison – it tells us that Onesimus was born again while Paul was in prison.

- That's what Paul means, when he says in verse 10

[Philemon 1:10](#) I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

- Next in verse 11, Paul makes another interesting and somewhat bizarre statement where he says the following:

[Philemon 1:11](#) who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

- As I previously stated, Onesimus' name means “useful.”
 - The sense here is that when Onesimus was a slave, he was not living up to the potential of his name.
 - Meaning, only now had he become truly useful – because now he was working for Christ.
 - Then he says, and this where we close:

[Philemon 1:12](#) I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart,

[Philemon 1:13](#) whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

[Philemon 1:14](#) but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

[Philemon 1:15](#) For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever,

- I want to finish today's lesson with a couple of final thoughts.
 - First – once again notice how Paul honors Philemon by asking his consent to do what it was that he was wanting him to do.
 - He didn't just do it.
 - Even though what Paul was doing was more important than anything else.
 - Because obviously the work of ministry trumps everything else – but Paul doesn't pull that card.
 - No – instead he honors God by asking Philemon's permission
 - But there is one more thing I want you to see.
 - Something very powerful – and it shows up in verse 15, and it gives another fundamental truth of God.
- God is always doing something inside his creation. And many times – we cannot see

what he is doing.

- Listen one more time to Philemon verse 15

[Philemon 1:15](#) For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever,

- Paul was saying, Hey Philemon – I hate that all this has happened, but perhaps it was for a reason.
 - All so that you might have him back forever.
 - What this tells us is that all progress is not forward.
 - All progress is not forward when you are faced with a tough decision, and you know in your heart what the right thing to do is.
 - Simply do it!
 - We have no clue how God is going to work it out.
 - Because we have no clue what God is doing in the moment – and remember [Romans 8:28](#), which lines up perfectly with Paul’s choice:

[Romans 8:28](#) And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose.

- Amen – Amen