

- So, this morning, please turn with me if you will – to the book or letter of Philemon and of course, as we know – this letter – is short. Consisting of only 1 chapter and 25 verses
 - Having said that, we have been in this letter for roughly a month, and we have extracted (including today) 5 teachings in total – with more to go.
 - And (as with all of God’s word), we have been able to redeem some serious application from our time in this letter.
- Now, just to bring you back up to speed on where we are, let me highlight the purpose of this letter one more time.
 - Remember, we ended our teaching last week by expounding on, or exegeting verses 10-16, where Paul, in this letter to Philemon, is asking Philemon to receive back – his runaway slave.
 - A man named Onesimus
 - Who – also as we’ve discovered – appears to have stolen money from his Master on his way out the door as he fled to Rome, some 1300 miles away.
 - The interesting part of all this is that Philemon owns Onesimus
 - Which means – Onesimus is in fact, Philemon’s property.
 - Even though – Philemon is a recent convert to Christianity, any master – saved or not saved – during this time in history, will find it hard to accept a slave back into the fold without at a minimum, punishing the slave in some sort of way.
 - That’s not the bigger issue; the bigger issue is that Paul doesn’t just want Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a slave.
 - That falls way short of Paul’s overall goal.
 - No – he wants Philemon to accept him back as an equal – a brother in Christ, not just as a slave.
 - Which – that decision in and of itself would have to be a God thing, because “no way” Philemon would do it on his own.
 - Why is this the case? Primarily because Onesimus is now a believer.
 - He was saved under Paul’s teaching.
 - That’s not the only reason; he also has found Onesimus to be very “useful” in helping him accomplish the work of ministry.
- And so, with that quick introduction behind us let’s back up and re-read [Philemon 1:10-16](#) – and here’s what Paul wrote, where the translators of my NASB Bible entitle this next section: Plea for Onesimus, a Free Man

[Philemon 1:10](#) I appeal to you (speaking to Philemon) 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.

- So, in verse 11 – Paul clearly points out how “useful” Onesimus had become to him.
 - What’s interesting is how Paul says in verse 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.
 - The sense here – is that when Onesimus was a slave working for Philemon, he was working on worldly things.
 - Things like tending to the land and making money for Philemon.
 - Which is “useless” as it pertains to the most important work.
 - Which is what? Doing the “Work of Ministry”.
 - But now, after becoming a Christian, he has in fact become very “useful.”
 - Not only to Paul but to Philemon as well, as it relates to ministry!
 - That’s the context of verse 11.
- So moving on, Paul has found Onesimus to be very “useful”, and he has done so – while being incarcerated.
 - Which was a familiar place for Paul to find himself.
 - And so, the sense of Paul’s writing is that, here is a man (Onesimus) who has come to faith.
 - Led there by Paul – all while Paul was in prison.
 - At some point he discovers that Onesimus is in fact a runaway slave of Philemon.
 - Another man whom Paul led to Christ some time ago, while Paul was preaching in Ephesus.
- So obviously, Paul has a deep connection to this Philemon, and he uses his connection and influence over him to compel him to do the right thing.
 - Now the question that looms in my head is, could there be anything wrong with what Paul is doing? Anything wrong with using his influence to persuade Philemon to do the right thing?
 - The answer is a resounding “No”
 - And why?
 - Well, it all boils down to a heart issue.
 - Paul is doing what he is doing for the right reasons.

- And based on Philemon verse 12, we can clearly see that is the case, when he says:

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

- So Paul's heart is pure in its intent.
 - Meaning, his motivation is not self-serving but rather clearly focused on furthering the work of ministry.
 - And so, for that reason there is nothing wrong with using his influence over Philemon to compel him to do the right thing!
 - But I want you to notice, he doesn't want to force Philemon to do something against his will, but rather he says:

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.

- I love verse 14 – and I will tell you why. It's because you can hear your mom or dad or grandparent or maybe even a teacher speaking to you in this way.
 - At one time you may have asked one of them a question about what to do, and they say to you – “You shouldn't do this or that, but I'll let you decide on your own what the is the right thing to do.”
 - Has that ever happened to you?
 - Where you ask your mom about maybe going somewhere with friends and she says, “I don't think that is a good idea but I'm going to let you decide.”
 - Now, obviously – when and if that ever happens, you and I both know what she meant.
 - She meant, don't do it!
 - But she said “I'll let you decide”
 - Which was just a way of making you think and then feel guilty as you processed through it.
- Well, Paul is doing the exact same thing, and we see that when we back up to Philemon verses 8-9:

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—

- And then – he keeps with that same theme in verse Philemon verse 14:

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.

- Now – let me ask you guys a question. Can you find any application for yourself inside this section of Philemon’s story?
 - The answer is “Yes.”
 - You see – as believers – it’s my belief, that for the most part, when faced with difficult decisions we intrinsically and internally (through conviction) know what decision to make.
 - Problem is that we get bogged down with all the “noise.”
 - Primarily the noise that comes from our fleshly desires.
- Follow me here and think about what Paul is saying.
 - Paul very much desires for Onesimus to stay with him.
 - Matter a fact, I would say if there were phones back then, Paul would have picked up the phone an called Philemon and said:
 - Hey brother – good to talk to you – I have led someone to Christ whom I believe belongs to you, and I would like to discuss what has been going on with him and myself.
 - You see Philemon – my friend, I did not know Onesimus was your slave, but I discovered it after leading him to Christ.
- So, because he belongs to you, and because it’s the law that he returns, I am sending him back – but would love it if you would consider allowing him to stay with me.
 - Matter of fact, he has become very “useful” person to me – and part of his “usefulness” includes ministering to me.
 - Therefore Philemon, would you consider allowing him to stay?
- Now, I want you to consider what is happening here.
 - Paul is the man!
 - I am not just saying this because he is Paul, and we have the benefit of hindsight.
 - Because we have the Bible it would be easy for us to say, Paul is the man!
 - And yes – he is the man – but I’m telling you that even before he wrote most of the New Testament, he was the man back then as well.
 - His reputation had proceeded him – and it did so because of who he was before he was saved.
 - Which was what? A Jew and Roman citizen and a well-trained Rabbinical Jew.

- And he passionately persecuted God's Church and more specifically the Christian people who made up God's Church.
 - But then God converted him, and now he has gained a reputation as the man who flipped sides - from persecuting Christians - to the man who leads men and women into Christianity.
- He was also well known for his conversion.
 - Matter of fact - his conversion was historic, and it reverberated throughout all the land. Even 1000's of miles away.
 - Therefore, if anyone had the right to put his foot down and say, Onesimus is staying with me!
- Paul would have earned that right, and to be honest with you, had Paul been able to make that phone call to Philemon, he probably would have said - no problem. Paul, do what you need to do!
- Now obviously - I am just making conjecture here, but I feel confident in that conjecture because Paul wasn't just a popular Apostle.
 - He was "The Apostle".
 - He was the man at that time with a big reputation that preceded him wherever he went!
 - And so, I could see Philemon telling Paul to keep Onesimus, but Paul doesn't assume that will be the case.
 - And he doesn't say, I'm Paul - I can do whatever I want to.
 - Even though as I said last week, no one would have probably known.
- But let's explore that theory for just a minute. Let's begin that exploration by asking ourselves the question - What might have happened if Paul would have chosen to keep Onesimus without Philemon's permission?
 - If he would have said to Onesimus - Don't worry, I led Philemon (your Master) to Christ, and therefore - he will be okay with this.
 - What might have been the outcome?
 - And am I going down this path for reason - so bear with me.
 - Inside this story lies a major application that all of us need to glean.
 - One that all Christians need to hear, especially as it relates to why Christians generally know the right thing to do, but they allow the noise of the flesh to get in the way.
 - You see - there is no doubt that Paul's flesh was screaming when speaking to him, helping him justify his position in telling Onesimus to stay.
 - But what would have happened if he made that choice?
 - What might have been the fall out, or result of that decision?
- Well first, let's think about it from Philemon's point of view.
 - What kind of effect might it have had on him?

- Let me ask it another way – Have you ever had a Pastor or Elder or someone in church authority let you down?
- Specifically, by something they said or did.
- Do you remember how you felt in that moment?
- Do you remember how it put a ding or nick maybe, in your faith?
- Over this past couple of weeks one of my all-time favorite Bible teachers did something that permanently disqualified him from ministry.
 - And I will tell you; it has taken its toll on me this week, and I have struggled mightily with what happened.
 - So much so, it caused me to question and rethink ministry all together.
 - Not my call to ministry, but rather it caused me to question and rethink some of the theories and beliefs I have developed over this past decade or so.
 - Beliefs that by the way found their basis and foundation in the scriptures I have taught.
 - In other words – what I am saying is that my belief system has evolved overtime as I have studied and taught the Bible.
 - And that evolution has helped establish (what I call) a “Biblically internal” and or “personal constitution” about Christianity and ministry as a whole.
 - That belief system is what guides my life.
 - And so, over this past couple of weeks, my personal and spiritual constitution has been disrupted.
 - It has been called into question if you will.
 - And it’s been hard to digest, causing my foundation to become a little shaken – not too much, but a little.
 - Which may not seem like a big a deal to you, but for me – it was a huge deal.
- And so, when we think through the situation and then reflect on what Paul did vs. what he probably wanted to do, how it would have affected Philemon if he found out that Paul told Onesimus to stay – it’s very sobering!
 - Remember – I have been a Christian for 35 years.
 - I have been preaching for roughly 33 of those years.
 - And I have been teaching the Bible, exegeting the scriptures in depth for almost 20 of those 33 years.
 - So – I would say – spiritually speaking, my maturity level is probably a little bit further along than Philemon – a man who was a new convert.
 - Which means, if what happened to me over these past few weeks shook me, then what do you think Paul’s decision to ignore doing the right thing could have possibly done to Philemon’s faith?
 - I promise you – it wouldn’t have been good.
 - But there’s more to it than that. What about other people?

- People who were associated with Paul in Rome.
- What would it have done to them?
- What about other Christians in other areas who heard about what he did?
 - And then of course, what about the people who were listening to Paul – those people who weren't saved – those non-believers.
 - What would it have done to them?
- So, do you see why it's so important – for us as believers to “pause” and think through our decisions?
 - And then to make the God honoring decision.
 - Not to try and rationalize our fleshly choices.
 - There is a whole lot at stake here folks – especially as it relates to Paul's usefulness to God and furthering the work of ministry.
 - To be honest, what Paul did all boils down to his words in [1 Corinthians 9:19-23](#)

[1 Cor. 9:19](#) For though I am free from all *men*, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more.

[1 Cor. 9:20](#) To the Jews I became as a Jew, so that I might win Jews; to those who are under the Law, as under the Law though not being myself under the Law, so that I might win those who are under the Law;

[1 Cor. 9:21](#) to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, so that I might win those who are without law.

[1 Cor. 9:22](#) To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some.

[1 Cor. 9:23](#) I do all things for the sake of the gospel, so that I may become a fellow partaker of it.

- Paraphrasing here: I will do whatever I need to do. I will become whatever I need to become – All for the sake of the Gospel.
 - And so – when you are faced with a tough decision, do the God honoring thing.
 - If you don't know how to determine what the God honoring thing is all you must do is ask yourself a simple, yet profound and important question.
- Here it is: Ask yourself, is what I am feeling in the moment satisfying me – by exciting my flesh?
 - Or is it honoring God?
 - And if you are still confused what the God honoring decision looks like, just refer to Paul's actions here in Philemon.
 - Look at what he did.
 - Think about it, if Paul had done what he wanted to do, he would have told Onesimus

to stay.

- But that's not what he did.
- He made a choice – that honored God, all for the sake of the Gospel.
- And so, once again, that is how you make decisions as a believer.
- Not by emotion and not by worldly logic.
- Wordly logic by the way, many times, is backed up by what my friends and or family says
- So Paul says in Philemon verses 14-16

[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**

- Then he moves into the next section – where he says:

[Philemon 1:17](#) **If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me.**

[Philemon 1:18](#) **But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;**

[Philemon 1:19](#) **I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).**

[Philemon 1:20](#) **Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.**

- Verses 17-20 – begins a new section of verses in my translation, and it too has some interesting insights into the mind of Paul and God.
 - Paul says and paraphrasing here – Hey Philemon, I am sending Onesimus back to you, and I would appreciate it if you would treat him the same way you treat me.
 - And that is as a “partner”
 - So, not only does Paul want Philemon to forgive Onesimus and skip over punishing him, but he wants him to receive him back as an equal.
 - But then he takes it a step further and says, “Treat him the way you treat me.”
 - And consider him a partner.
- Now, this scene got me to thinking about what it would be like for Philemon when he looked up and saw Onesimus coming home.
 - What emotions – he must have felt in the moment.

- I would say, whatever he felt, it would have probably began with his blood pressure rising.
- Then, in that moment, right when Philemon is about to give it to Onesimus, he walks up to his Master and hands him a letter – written by Paul.
- Now at that point, no doubt Philemon would have been shocked.
 - I mean, how in the world did his slave obtain a letter written by Paul.
- You see, the only way you and I can truly understand this moment, is to understand how a slave was viewed and treated in those times.
- If you can understand that, then you would understand what's being asked of Philemon.
- And let me say one more thing related to this story, Philemon would have experienced some social pressure from his friends and family in dealing with the Onesimus situation
 - I mean – what would the neighbors think?
 - Especially those who owned slaves themselves.
 - What precedent is Philemon setting for other slave owners – by flipping and accepting Onesimus as an equal and or a partner.
 - That would be unheard of, and by the way I am sure it would take Philemon a minute to process what was happening.
 - And so, just in case Philemon tries to justify his anger, and or disappointment with Onesimus by rationalizing what he wanted to do to this man.
 - Because, after all – Onesimus did steal money when he left.
- Well, Paul anticipates this and heads his thoughts off at the pass when he says the following in verses 18&19:

Philemon 1:18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

Philemon 1:19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

- So, what in the world is Paul talking about?
 - Did he loan Philemon money?
 - I highly doubt it – given the fact that Paul was (more than likely broke), and Philemon was wealthy.
 - Some commentators say Paul must have had some money.
 - Why else would he have offered to pay Onesimus debts?
 - But I question that – simply because when Paul took in money, he always gave it away to the poorer churches.
 - That doesn't mean he didn't have some money to live on.
 - But I highly doubt he was loaded.

- So, what else could it be when Paul says, “Charge that to my account”?
 - He means, impute whatever he owes you to me!
 - Another way to say it is – Whatever he owes you don’t worry about it; I will cover it!
- So, if Philemon had any animosity toward Onesimus in the moment and could justify his feelings by leaning in on the fact that Onesimus stole from him, Paul just eliminated that excuse.
 - Once again, what an interesting position Paul just put Philemon in.
 - I mean, we are talking about a real heart check here – and once again, I feel through the humanity of this situation.
 - Meaning, by humanizing this situation, we can learn a thing or two.
 - And what would that be?
 - It is that many times doing the God honoring thing will require you to feel like you’ve lost.
- One more time – many times, doing the God honoring thing will be tough because sometimes the God honoring decision will make you feel like you’ve lost.
 - All because you will not feel vindication or personal satisfaction in the moment.
 - You will often feel yourself saying, well – I guess I got messed over in this deal.
 - I guess everyone else gets what they want, and I get nothing.
 - Here’s how you cope with that feeling:
 - I want you to remember God is always doing something – working inside his creation – all for His Glory.
 - Many times, you will have no idea what he is doing in the moment, but you can find great peace and comfort when you give it to him and let it go!
 - Forget about it!
 - Say to yourself – Lord I have no idea what you are doing, but I am yours and you have got this.
 - That is the only way to get through a decision, and that (on the surface) seems simple enough.
 - And many times, it is, as it relates to satisfying our wants and desires.
 - But not so much when the God honoring choice runs counter to our fleshly desires an emotion.
- Let me say one final thing about this before moving on: On many occasions I have found myself in these types of situations, and when I made a choice based on honoring God (even though I did not feel like it) there have been times later down the road that God revealed to me the purpose of my decision.
 - Which always brought honor to Him.
 - It was in that moment that God gave me a little glimpse into why it is that we must stick with Him.

- We couldn't see when it was all happening, but later I was able to see and say to myself – Oh, now I see!
 - Guys, it really boils down to one thing:
 - Am I going to trust in the Lord?
 - Or am I going to trust in me and my wants and desires?
- Moving on, let's finish by expounding on verses 19-20, where Paul ends this section with the following words:

[Philemon 1:19](#) I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

[Philemon 1:20](#) Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

- Paul says, I am writing this with my own hand.
 - Now why is this significant?
 - Because Paul (for the most part) never wrote anything.
 - He would use a transcriptionist or secretary of some sort to write.
 - But in this case – He writes it himself.
- So, what's the deal with that?
 - Well obviously – by Paul writing this letter in his own handwriting (which probably included some handwritten guarantee) it shows us the importance of the situation.
 - No doubt that he wanted Philemon to feel the heat.
 - Then to really top it all off, just in case Philemon saw a way to get out of it or justify what he wanted to do to Onesimus in his flesh, Paul reminds him of something I think we must all remember.
 - Doing the God honoring thing brings with it a refreshing of sorts.
 - Maybe not for you, but many times for those watching you.
 - Look one final time at verse 20.

[Philemon 1:20](#) Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

- In other words, when you get mad, when you are disappointed in people, and even when you are 100 percent justified and no one would blame you for reacting a certain way, (which would be in your own self satisfying interest) remember – God (many times) will be most Glorified when we do the opposite of what everyone expects us to do.
 - Because – you see, with God – the God honoring choices and decisions almost always run contrary to the way we feel.

- And that my friends is one of the most frustrating things about living out our Christian lives here on earth.
 - I want to end today's teaching by telling you a story about something that happened to me just a few months back.
 - It's a story about a man who wronged me all the way back in 2002.
- Now, let me say this before proceeding forward. I am not a grudge holder. It's not that I am wonderful, it's just not in my DNA.
 - I can get mad or upset and be over it in 30 minutes.
 - That is just how God made me, but even though I don't struggle with grudge holding, trust me when I tell you, there are plenty of other things I deal with.
- Anyways, I had a man who wronged me over 20 years ago and I never forgot how he made me feel in front of an important person one day.
 - This was at a very low point in my life – financially speaking.
 - This man was trying to make a name for himself by placing his foot on my head as I was sinking!
 - The best way I can describe this individual is as arrogant and extremely prideful, and he made me feel about 2 inches tall that day as I was trying to humbly solve a financial situation in my life.
 - And solve it by the way, by doing the God honoring thing!
 - This man used that moment when I was at my lowest, to basically mash me into the ground.
 - I never forgot it until about a month ago when I encountered him once again, except this time I was in the right, and he was in the wrong.
- So, guess what I did? I prayed, kept my mouth shut, and dealt professionally with this man all while maintaining my witness.
 - While internally, I was exploding inside and wanting desperately to give him a piece of my mind!
 - Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?
 - Well – guess what church? That is not what I did!
- Instead of doing the God honoring thing, I allowed my flesh to come alive, and I fed it in my mind.
 - And let me say this, if I told you what happened you would say to me – good for you.
 - There would be no one who wouldn't have championed what I said to this man – I mean I was loaded for bear.
 - It had been 20 plus years and finally I get to say my peace. And I did.
 - I didn't get nasty – I didn't use foul language.
 - I just simply told this man – “How the Cow ate the Cabbage.”
 - And it was so good. But there was a problem.
 - The entire time I was taking a pound of flesh out of his backside, I felt convicted.

- I was totally justified, but I felt convicted.
- When I got through giving him the business, the man did something that I never would have imagined.
 - Matter of fact, he did something that made me kind of angry at God.
 - He said, I am sorry I did that to you. No one should ever be treated that way and I apologize.
 - I remember thinking to myself in that very moment, Lord seriously.
 - My anger turned to a little bit of shame.
 - Disappointment in myself.
 - I felt like I failed the test with God.
 - And with all that anxiety in the air – with the pressure at an all-time high, he said – I am sorry.
 - And I said, well – crap. (sorry for the language)
 - But I said – Lord you have got to be kidding me; I never get to indulge in my flesh.
 - Just this one time – I wanted to feel vindicated.
 - Even though I was 100 percent justified in what I said, I was 100 percent wrong in my reaction.
 - And God let me know that through this man's reaction!
- Here's my point – the God honoring decisions and choices we will be faced with in this life will often run counter to what excites our flesh.
 - Just remember that. If you don't know what to do, just know what we feel like doing in our flesh will almost always be the wrong decision.
 - Amen – Amen!