

## 21. Learning How to Help Others Become Useful

In our last topic, we saw that we want to help our physical and spiritual children learn to make requests instead of demands. We saw that Paul demonstrated that action by making an appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. We saw that Onesimus had been an unprofitable slave who had stolen money from Philemon and run away to the city of Rome. There, he somehow met Paul and became a Christian. We saw that Paul called Onesimus his spiritual son and appealed for Philemon to forgive him. Today, we are going to see how the Lord used Paul to change Onesimus from an unprofitable thief and slave to a full partner in ministry for the Lord. We also want to learn how to help our physical and spiritual children learn how to help others become useful.

We see that Paul had sent Onesimus back to Philemon along with Tychicus and this letter. In Philemon 1:12-14 we read, “I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.” Here, we see that Paul explained why he sent Onesimus back to Philemon. The word that is translated “to receive” *means to accept, to take as one’s companion or to take as a friend*. The word is used twice in Romans 15:7 where we read, “Therefore receive one another, just as Christ also received us, to the glory of God.” As a result, we see that Paul is asking Philemon to accept Onesimus in the same way that Christ accepted Philemon when he placed his faith in Christ.

In fact, Paul asked Philemon to receive or accept Onesimus just as he would accept Paul. Paul said that he actually wished that he could keep Onesimus with him. As we have mentioned, Paul was a prisoner in Rome for the sake of Gospel. In fact, we saw that he considered himself a prisoner of Christ. The Romans did not provide meals and other services for their prisoners. As a result, relatives or friends of a prisoner had to go to the marketplace each day, buy food and then prepare that food for the prisoner so that the prisoner would not starve to death. Onesimus could have stayed in Rome and continued to help Paul in this way but Paul did not want to force Philemon to help him in this way without his consent.

The word that is translated “good deed” *means that which is good, right and honorable*. It speaks of something that is good in its character and beneficial in its effects. Galatians 6:10 uses this word when it says, “Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.” Paul did not want Philemon to be forced to serve him by keeping Onesimus as a helper. Paul only wanted a person to help him because it was his own personal will. Here, we have an example for our children to follow as they do things to benefit others. We want to show them by our example that we look for opportunities to serve the Lord and others and that our service is voluntary.

Philemon 1:15-16 says, “For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever, 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.” The word that is translated “departed” *means to separate*. In several places in the New Testament, it is used to talk about a

husband and wife separating. 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 says, “Now to the married I command, *yet* not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from *her* husband. But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to *her* husband. And a husband is not to divorce *his* wife.” By running away, Onesimus had separated himself from his master for a period of time. Paul said that the purpose of this separation was so that Philemon could receive him forever. Here, we see that Paul was humbly requesting Philemon to fully forgive Onesimus and receive him forever. This gives us an example of the meaning of true forgiveness.

However, Paul said that there would be a change in the way that Philemon would receive Onesimus. He had left as a runaway slave. We see that he now returned as a beloved brother in Christ. Paul said that they now had a new relationship that was eternal. They were now fellow Christians and both now had eternal life. Paul had called Onesimus his son in the faith in verse ten. However, Paul said that Philemon had an even greater relationship with Onesimus than he did. In the flesh, Philemon and Onesimus had a master and slave relationship. In Christ, they also had a beloved brother relationship. As a result, Philemon and Onesimus had both a physical and a spiritual relationship.

Paul went on to say in Philemon 1:17-19, “If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would* me. But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay--not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.” The word that is translated “partner” means *a companion or one who shares together in anything*. In Luke 5:9-10 we read, “For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish which they had taken; and so also *were* James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, ‘Do not be afraid. From now on you will catch men.’” Here, we see that James and John were fishing partners of Peter. As a result, Paul was saying that he was a partner in ministry with Philemon. Since Onesimus was now a partner of Paul in Christ, Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul.

However, Paul did even more. Since Onesimus had stolen money when he ran away from Philemon, Paul told Philemon to put anything that Onesimus owed him on the account of Paul. Here, we see that Paul chose to follow the example of Christ. Christ took our sins on himself so that we could be reconciled and brought back to God. 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 says, “Now all things *are* of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.” God took our sins and put them on Christ so that Christ paid the price that made it possible for us to be reconciled to God. Here, Paul said to put the debt caused by the money that Onesimus stole on his account so that Philemon could be reconciled to Onesimus. Philemon understood what Paul meant because Paul had led him to faith in Christ and Philemon could never repay that debt.

Philemon 1:20-22 says, “Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.” Paul again referred to Philemon as a brother in Christ. He now

requested that Philemon would let him have joy from him in the Lord. In Philippians 2:2, we read, “Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind.” Philemon and Onesimus were going to be in the same church. As Christians, we do not need to feel guilty before God because our sins were placed on Christ. In the same way, Paul said to put the debt on his account. That way Onesimus would not have to feel guilty as he and Philemon served the Lord together because his account was paid in full. Paul said that his own heart would be refreshed also because of the unity that would be present in the church.

Paul could also say that he had great confidence that Philemon would obey and do what he requested. The word that is translated “obedience” is used twice in Romans 6:16 where we read, “Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness?” In this verse, we are reminded that we are all slaves to whatever we choose to obey. If we choose to obey sin, that choice leads to death. If we choose to obey the Lord, that choice produces righteousness. Paul had great confidence that Philemon would make the choice to show the love of Christ and establish a beloved brother relationship with Onesimus.

In fact, Paul said that he knew that Philemon would do more than he had requested. As fellow Christians, Philemon and Onesimus would now be able to serve the Lord together as a team. 1 Corinthians 7:20-22 says, “Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called *while* a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use *it*. For he who is called in the Lord *while* a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called *while* free is Christ's slave.” It did not matter if one was a slave and the other was the master. As brothers in Christ, they were now both servants of Christ and were able to serve him together. Here, we see an important lesson that we want to help our children understand. We do not need a title to serve the Lord. Those who do have titles are fellow servants with us of Christ. That also makes it possible for us to serve together as a team.

Paul also asked Philemon to prepare a room for him as he hoped to be released from prison by the Romans. If he were released, we see that Paul was going to use that freedom to visit the churches and Christians in the various places where he had ministered. Paul also sent greetings from the others who were in Rome with him. Philemon 1:23-25 says, “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ *be* with your spirit. Amen.” Paul began with Epaphras because he and Philemon were both from the city of Colosse. The name “Onesimus” actually means *useful*. Here, we see that Paul had taken a formerly useless slave and helped him develop into a useful servant for Christ. In the same way, we want to help each of our physical and spiritual children learn how to become useful for Christ and help others become useful. May the Lord richly bless you as you help your children learn to help others become useful.