

5SEPT10 Text: Philemon 8-10 ***“Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.”***

The year is 60 A.D. The place is the city of Colossae in Asia Minor. A slave runs away from his master. We can picture him slipping away under the cover of darkness. He leaves with the thought of **freedom**: *freedom to do what he wants to do, freedom to live how he wants to live.* He also leaves with the knowledge that such an offense, the desertion of one’s master, is **punishable by death under Roman law!** The slave’s name is Onesimus. Onesimus runs west, following roads and sailing on boats until he finally gets to the great city of Rome. In this great metropolis, Onesimus could have easily blended into the sea of faces and most likely never have been found. But that’s not how the story ends.

St. Paul was also in Rome at this very same time. He was under **house arrest** for preaching the Gospel and he was awaiting his trial before Caesar. Paul actually had quite a bit of freedom under this arrangement and was able to receive any visitors who came to him and could even continue preaching the Gospel to the crowds that would gather around and in his house. God in this instance also caused all things to work together for good...Paul didn’t mope and moan about his circumstances but instead he transformed his place of confinement into a preaching station! Whether Onesimus sought Paul out or just happened upon the apostle by chance, we really don’t know, but we do know that **this runaway slave came into contact with Paul and the preaching of Jesus Christ and what He had done for all as Savior.** *Onesimus was converted to Christianity by the power of God’s Word and Onesimus, the runaway slave became Onesimus, the new Christian believer!*

We don’t know how the truth of who Onesimus really was finally came to light and yet in time Paul discovered that Onesimus was from the city of Colossae. Not only that, Paul learned that Onesimus **was a runaway slave from another convert with whom Paul was very familiar and fond of, a man named Philemon,** a man of some means in whose home the house church at Colossae met. **Now** what was Paul to do? Hand over Onesimus to the authorities? Ignore Philemon’s claim upon his slave and

instead retain Onesimus as his own personal assistant? Take the law into his own hands and pretend he had never met Onesimus? No, Paul knew such actions would be wrong and Onesimus himself even agreed that as a Christian believer his place was to stop running from the law and return to Philemon, his master. But Paul would not send Onesimus back to face Philemon alone. **Instead the inspired Paul wrote a short letter that we know as the book of Philemon.** Twenty-one of the twenty-four verses making up this short New Testament book were today's Epistle lesson! The letter to Philemon is nothing more than Paul's appeal to Philemon on behalf of his runaway slave, Onesimus. It is

AN APPEAL, ON THE BASIS OF LOVE

Paul's letter to Philemon is indeed AN APPEAL, ON THE BASIS OF LOVE. Paul had been an active missionary in Asia Minor in the decades following our Lord's ascension. God blessed his preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles in Asia Minor and as a result a number of congregations had been established in cities like Ephesus and Colossae. **Philemon's house was the place where the Colossian believers would gather for worship.** Think of dilemma Paul had in front of him: *Paul loved and felt a special responsibility and connection to both Philemon and Onesimus. Paul loved Philemon and viewed him as a dear friend and fellow worker,* a man whose Christian love and encouragement had refreshed not only Paul's heart, but the hearts of many of the believers in Colossae. (vs. 7) **Paul also loved the runaway slave, Onesimus, and viewed him as a spiritual son.** (vs. 10) The conversion of Onesimus placed Philemon, the master, and Onesimus, his slave, in a brand new relationship. They were now no longer just master and slave, they were Christian brothers! Just think of the adjustment Philemon had to make over this very point! Paul's letter to Philemon is his appeal that Philemon, the master, **receive back Onesimus, his slave, as a Christian brother** with the same type of love and forgiveness Philemon had come to know in Jesus Christ. In his letter to Philemon, Paul even offers to pay any debts or losses which Philemon might have incurred because his slave Onesimus ran away. What Christian love Paul exhibits! What a model for our own Christian love! **More than that, what a picture of the love God has shown each of us in Jesus Christ!**

In this letter to Philemon, we are given a wonderful picture of God's rich grace for all people, **Christ acting as our Intercessor and the One who has paid all of our**

debts. Think about Onesimus for a moment—he was guilty of a great offense, an offense, which under Roman law, was deserving of death! However, Paul’s love for Onesimus motivates him **to intercede on behalf of the runaway slave.** Paul sets aside his own rights and becomes Onesimus’ substitute by assuming all of his debt. We can also look to Philemon, by whose act of grace encouraged by Paul, **the guilty Onesimus will surely be forgiven and placed in a new relationship with his lord.** Do you see the parallels to our own situation? **We are like Onesimus, guilty of sin, in fact the Law places each of us under the sentence of death for them.** **Christ is like Paul...Christ stands as our Mediator, the One who stands between us and God the Father, and speaks to the Father on our behalf as the One who has paid all of our debts, atoning for all of our sins on the tree of the cross. He takes us from our slavery to sin and death and sets us completely free!** In fact, we are made His brothers and sisters in a new relationship with Him as our Lord and Savior! Luther writes about it this way: *“[what] St. Paul does...for Onesimus with Philemon, [that] Christ has done for us with God the Father. For Christ emptied Himself of His rights and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all Onesimuses if we believe.”* **Yes indeed, if not for Christ, we would all still be slaves of sin and under a sure sentence of death!**

Here, then, is the very strong mission encouragement from our text today, indeed **God’s APPEAL, ON THE BASIS OF LOVE.** No one is ever motivated to undertake mission work for Christ if it is not on the basis of love and love alone: God’s love we have come to know in Christ Jesus our Savior. God calls out to us from His Word to remind us that we are His ambassadors; **we are the very instruments through whom God seeks to make His appeal** of love to others so that they, like Onesimus, might also be reconciled to God, freed from sin’s slavery, and released from a sentence of death. **We will never understand the mind of the missionary unless we begin to see the world through his or her eyes: seeing all those who do not know Christ as those who are slaves of sin and sentenced to death.** The vision of the resurrected Lord and Savior who has atoned for sin and conquered death launched the apostle Paul on all of his missionary journeys recorded for us in the book of Acts. **The congregation of Colossae, Philemon’s conversion, and the conversion of Onesimus the runaway slave all took place because the appeal of the Gospel was preached by Paul: be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.** Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5: *“All this is from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the*

*ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And He has committed to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” (18-20a) That’s what mission work is all about: **spreading the message of reconciliation, this message that has been entrusted to us.** The reconciliation which Christ has won for us and for all is a reconciliation which breaks down all walls of hostility between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, and in our text today, even between slave and free! Paul was spurred onward by the full understanding of his own reconciliation through Christ. God took Saul, a hateful, murderous unbeliever—who was rounding up Christians for prison and execution—and converted him and transformed him into Paul, the greatest apostle to the Gentiles! So also in our lives, as we gain a fuller understanding and a greater appreciation of our own reconciliation in Christ Jesus, **we too can see the great privilege that is ours to reach out in love to all people with Gospel regardless of social status or racial background.** The reason for our mission work, whether done through the school or whatever mission project or mission trip helps to spread the Word of God must always be love—*love for those enslaved in sin who in Christ can become our brother or sister.**

Let us hear and heed the Word of God from our text from Philemon. **It is not a command.** **It is AN APPEAL** ON THE BASIS OF LOVE: God’s love is for all people and for each of us. God today appeals to us in love to be active in sharing our faith, looking for the opportunities He gives us to reach out in love to all who do not know Christ and are still enslaved by sin and death. What a miracle! God has chosen us, weak and common clay vessels that we are, so that others too might be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ as we speak the transforming word of the Gospel to them. God grant that we heed this appeal for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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