

The Cost of Discipleship

In the name of him who loved us and gave himself for us, dear friends in Christ: Today's epistle is the lion's share of St. Paul's letter to Philemon. The whole letter is very short: only 25 verses in all. We heard 21 of them. Among the books of the Bible, only Obadiah and Second and Third John are shorter than Philemon. But what really makes it unusual in the biblical canon is that the other books were all pretty much originally intended for public use, for teaching and proclaiming sacred truths to the *whole* people of God. But the letter to Philemon was intended for an audience of *one* – to address just one man in one particular circumstance. It's a personal letter; and yet, because this "particular circumstance" is one that we all find ourselves in from time to time, it's almost as if it's personally addressed to each one of us. And with that in mind, I'd like to highlight again just a small portion of it where St. Paul writes:

"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 a prisoner also for Christ Jesus, I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus ... So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I will repay it. Confident of your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say."

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks his followers to weigh the cost of discipleship. He's saying, *"You know what I have to offer. But make sure you understand what it's going to cost you."* And then he makes it absolutely clear that the cost is everything you have. You can hold nothing back, not your wealth, not your family relationships, not even your own life. All must be put behind you so that they don't stand between you and the Lord. But we need to understand that having done that, Jesus doesn't take those things away from you. Instead, he makes you the steward of those things so that you can use your time, your abilities, your relationships, and your material wealth in his service. But it often happens that because we still have these things within our control, we forget what the cost of discipleship really is: *everything*.

Today, we hear Paul reminding a fellow Christian named Philemon that part of the "everything" a follower of Jesus gives up is the right to hold anything against someone who has seriously wronged him. It's a reminder we all need to hear. We don't have too much trouble dispensing forgiveness when someone causes us a minor inconvenience. When that happens, none of us has any trouble saying, *"Forget about it! No harm done."* But when we are really hurt by someone, be it by their negligence or outright malice, then it's not so easy to forgive. Then it's, *"I'll never forget what he did to me"*, or *"I'll never speak to her again"*, or *"I don't care if he begs me – he can go to hell."* And if any of those sound like something you might have said or thought, I invite you to hear what Paul has to say about forgiving when it's not easy.

Onesimus was a slave – but he was a pathetic excuse for one. Though we find the concept of slavery to be offensive today, it was a basic fact of life in the ancient world. And most slaves were treated quite well. They were to a certain extent considered members of the households they served. The vast majority of them felt an obligation to uphold the honor of the families they served and they held their masters in love and respect. But whether they liked their situation or not, the economy and survival of the ancient world depended upon slavery. Law, order, and society would have collapsed if not held up by the labors of hardworking slaves. But Onesimus was not one of them. This is ironic, because the name "Onesimus" means *useful* – and he was anything but that. Paul doesn't go into great detail, but by his description it is safe

to say that Onesimus was more than just shiftless and lazy, he was actively detrimental to his master, Philemon, and to his estate. And to make matters worse, it seems that Onesimus robbed his master so that he could finance his escape. He fled to Rome and set himself up there as a free, and thanks to what he stole from Philemon, prosperous man. It happened that while he was in Rome, Onesimus came into contact with St. Paul and the Christian community there. By God's grace, he became a follower of the Lord Jesus. Knowing Onesimus' history and wanting to set things right, Paul sent him back to Colossae in Asia Minor, to his master, Philemon, with the letter which is the text.

It's hard for us in the twenty-first century to understand how unusual it would have been for an escaped slave to voluntarily go back to his master – especially a slave in Onesimus' circumstances. He had "made it", so to speak. He was free, and far enough away from his former life that there was no chance of his being captured and taken back. It must have been a changed and humbled man who made the trip back to Colossae to ask the forgiveness of the master he had wronged.

The law was very clear about how Philemon was authorized to deal with his returning slave. He had every right and good reason to put Onesimus to death. Because he had been robbed as well, he could have chosen a method of execution that was particularly slow and painful. And this was more than Philemon's legal right to receive satisfaction for the losses he suffered; he actually had a civic responsibility to treat Onesimus harshly to make an example of him. In a society that survives by slavery, you can't get soft on slaves. If you did, there soon would be dissatisfied servants escaping everywhere, and then total chaos would ensue. The law needs to be upheld.

And God's Law is equally clear about what to do with people whose violations cause others to suffer loss. In Exodus we read, "*An eye for and eye, a tooth for a tooth*" and "*if a man steals*" something of value, "*he shall pay back five times*" what was stolen. Equity and restitution are the standards of Divine Justice. If someone commits a crime, he ought to pay for it. And on a personal level, that means, "*If someone hurts me, he ought to pay for it! If I just let it go when people sin against me, soon everybody would be walking all over me.*"

But against this very logical, common sense way of thinking, Paul offers radically different counsel. "*Philemon, I know what the law says. I know what your rights are. But you and I are under a different law now, and that's the Law of Love. Now look, I could use my authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ to command you to forgive Onesimus – but I'm not going to do that. I would much rather that you forgive him on your own, willingly from your own heart which has been filled with the love of Christ.*"

"You see, Philemon, the situation has changed. Onesimus is no longer the worthless slave who ran away from you. He has become one of us, a fellow soldier of Christ. He too is under the Law of Love. He's been a great help to me here in Rome while I have been in prison because of our faith. I wanted to keep him here so he could continue to help me in my important work for the Gospel, but I didn't want to do that without your approval – after all, he does belong to you. You know, it could be that this is the reason all of this has happened, so that you might have Onesimus return to you, no longer as a worthless slave, but now as a beloved brother in Christ."

And then, as if his appeal to Philemon's Christian love were not enough, Paul goes on, substituting himself for Onesimus. "*Philemon, treat Onesimus as you would treat me. Whatever he owes you, whatever damage he may have done, I'll take care of myself. You have*

my word on it.” As Paul goes on, you can see him anticipating the arguments Philemon might make, and trying to respond to them in advance. His last point is a strong one: “You lost a bad slave. You’re getting back a helpful brother, and if you ask, complete compensation for the damage he did you.” How could Philemon say, “No”?

And yet, how many times have you personally stood in Philemon’s shoes? Someone sinned against you so that it really hurt, physically, emotionally, or financially. And no question about it, they were 100% in the wrong. You were furious with them. Perhaps you are holding on to a grudge like that right now. And here the Savior himself comes to you on behalf of this brother or sister, making the same appeals that Paul did for Onesimus. How many times have you turned your back on your Lord and said, “I’ll never forgive them for what they did”? Jesus tells us, “I have a new law for you: love one another.” He knows what your rights are. He knows what you’ve suffered. And he says, “It’s part of the cost of discipleship. Leave it behind and follow me. I could command you to do this, but I really prefer that you respond out of love. Because you want to. Because this person is a part of my own body, just like you are. Because I have forgiven this person just like I forgave you. So now, treat him as you would treat me. And if I can’t pay you back for what you’ve suffered, who can?”

But forgiveness doesn’t come easily, does it? We want justice. We want to insist upon our rights. We want people to pay. And if we’re shamed into shaking hands and making up, our attitude is likely to be, “Well, I’ll forgive ... but I won’t forget”—which is really no forgiveness at all. It’s so much easier to harbor animosity, brood over our hurts, and store up bitterness in our hearts until we are exactly the opposite of what Christ wants us to be.

There’s a reason we behave that way. It’s because we are pathetic excuses for disciples. We’ve been given some very simple commands to follow, and we’ve broken every one. God wants us to be useful servants, upholding the honor of his household; but we are shiftless and lazy. And when we withhold forgiveness from one another, we actively undermine the Kingdom of our Lord. And then we take the good things he has entrusted to our care, our time, wealth, and skills, and we use them to buy our escape from him. From God’s point of view, we are Onesimus.

And the law is very clear about what the penalty should be: Death – eternal separation from God our Father and his goodness. But we have *Someone* who speaks up for us. Just as Paul appealed for Onesimus, our Lord Jesus appeals to the Father on our behalf. “Father, I know what the law says. I know you have an obligation to punish them for what they’ve done. But treat them with the love that you have for me. Charge their debt to me. I’ll pay what they owe.” And that’s precisely what happened when our Savior was nailed to the cross and died for our crimes.

That means for us the situation has changed. When Christ rose, we who are baptized into Christ rose with him. Now we live in him. Each of us is a part of his body that we call the church. And when we live in Christ, he lives in us, conforming us to be like him. His own Holy Spirit guides our thoughts and actions, giving us the ability to behave in a Christ-like way. So we do not have to behave like worthless disciples. When Christ lives in us we can forgive people who hurt us, because Christ in us already has forgiven them.

The cost of discipleship is high. Like Philemon, we are continuously being asked to surrender all charges we hold against our brothers and sisters in Christ. But when that seems a high price to pay, we should redirect our attention to the cost Christ paid to make us disciples.

When we see ourselves as Onesimus before God, it's much easier to take the role of the forgiving Philemon to our fellow Christians.

And when we do and so uncover the joys of *really* forgiving others, we will find ourselves taking on another role: that of the intercessor. When we see conflicts between other Christians, we will step in to reconcile them – just like Paul is doing by writing this letter. To bring peace between brothers, he offers to be responsible himself for the damage done by the offender. This is the most Christ-like of all roles, because it is what Jesus did to reconcile you to God. And you can do the same thing. But understand it's another cost of discipleship. When you step in between others who are embroiled in a fight, you may get hurt – taking fire from both sides. You can open yourself up for all kinds of potential liabilities, not to mention the contempt and rejection of those involved in the conflict. I don't need to remind you what it cost Christ when he did it for you.

Yes, the cost of discipleship is high. But if the cost is high, remember the rewards far outweigh them, as our Lord himself said, "*The man who loses his life for my sake shall gain it.*" So we can thank him that he has given us the humility of Onesimus to confess our sins and receive his forgiveness, "*for the meek shall inherit the earth.*" We can thank him that he has given us the ability to forgive others like he did for Philemon, "*for the merciful shall obtain mercy.*" And we can thank him that he has given us a heart to intercede for others, like he did for Paul, "*for the peacemakers shall be called the sons of God.*" May he give us grace to gladly bear these costs so that we may also share in the rewards. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!