

Title: “When a Thief Joins our Family”

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Text: Philemon 1:10-17

Place: DCOG

Theme: Authentic Christianity

The saying, “Birds of a feather flock together”, seems to accurately reflect many churches of today who tend to congregate along the lines of similarity. Those who do not reflect the demographic trend of the church generally shy away due to a sense of rejection.

Kim Jong-un of North Korea is viewed as the madman of the Far East. Should he convert to faith in Christ and walk down the aisle of one of our churches, our true understanding and view of the doctrine of forgiveness would surface quickly.

Paul introduces us to Onesimus, the slave who was apparently guilty of robbery and who, according to the law of the land, could have been given the death sentence. He was one of 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire. Onesimus sought a way to shed his status and start over.

We are unsure of the details, but Onesimus encountered Paul on his flight away from the scene of his crime. Evidently Paul ministered the gospel to him and told him in no uncertain terms that he had to face the music regarding his crime.

Herein is a reminder of the necessity of authenticity in church life and heavy doses of grace. It is also a lesson that true spiritual knowledge is learned in the laboratory of life. Third, we may learn that the uneducated man who is generous with the love of Jesus far exceeds in spirituality the man with a graduate degree in religion.

When a thief joins our family...

I. WE ARE EYEWITNESSES TO THE MIRACLE OF RE-CREATION.

* From Victor Hugo's novel *Les Misérables* we encounter a thief.

After serving a prison sentence for stealing bread to feed his sister's children during a time of economic depression and various attempts to escape from prison, Jean Valjean, as a parolee, is issued a yellow passport for travel to a place where he will be forced to live under severe restrictions. This document identifies him to all as a former convict and brands Valjean an outcast. A priest, from whom he steals valuable silverware, tells the police that he has given the treasure to Valjean. Out of this encounter, Valjean becomes a repentant, honorable, dignified man. He is kind to all he encounters, a devoted substitute father to a girl who loses her mother and a benefactor to those in need.

Philemon 1:10-11

I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. [11] Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

- A. The townsfolk of Colosse knew the slave Onesimus.
 - 1. Word spread quickly that Onesimus had vanished as had some of Philemon's money.
- B. Paul writes of Onesimus as a slave whom he had "received as his son" (gennao – imparted spiritual life into) while in prison.
 - 2. Onesimus had been saved and had seen his empty heart filled with the grace and forgiveness of Jesus.
- C. The name, Onesimus, had its origin in a play on words. It translates "profitable".

II. PAUL SAYS THAT ONESIMUS WAS FORMERLY "USELESS" BUT NOW WOULD BE "USEFUL" TO PHILEMON.

* Back to Jean Valjean. Though a known criminal and a parolee, Valjean grows morally to represent the best traits of humanity. Valjean occupies a place on the wrong side of the law, but the right side of human virtues and ethics.

- A. Useless but now useful was a gently nudge in the heart of Philemon to see his rebellious slave for what he is now rather than for what he had been – the miracle of re-creation in Jesus in action!

III. WE ARE COMPELLED BY THE SPIRIT TO DEMOLISH SUPERFICIAL BARRIERS IN RELATIONSHIPS.

Philemon 1:12-16

I am sending him--who is my very heart--back to you. [13] I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. [14] But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. [15] Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good-- [16] no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

- A. Paul told Philemon that he was “sending him” (anapempein – to refer a case to) meaning that Onesimus was being thrown on the altar, so to speak, and was in dire need of the grace of the church and of Philemon.
1. Consistent with the Law regarding fugitives in Deuteronomy 23, the thief was being returned – but with an ulterior motive in mind.
- B. Paul appeals to the “goodness” of Philemon and tells him that he wanted his act of kindness toward Onesimus to come solely from the love in his heart (not from “compulsion” – v 14).

Philemon 1:14

But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

- C. The barrier between employer – employee and slave — master was about to be shattered into oblivion.

1. Slave and owner could now sit on the same pew in the church. What a sight to see!

* Victor Hugo's character Valjean has an opposite in Javert, a dedicated and capable police officer that occupies a place of honor in society. The relationship of Valjean and Javert is a binary opposition between law and love. Javert sees Valjean only as the convict he once was, rather than the benefactor of humanity he has become. Javert's struggle to accept the ways that the laws he spent his life upholding might be unjust is what leads to his eventual suicide.

IV. WE ARE FORCED TO SEE THE EQUALITY OF MEN IN THE EYES OF JESUS.

Philemon 1:16-17

No longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

[17] So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

- A. The new convert, Onesimus, would now be viewed as not merely a slave for the purpose of economic benefit to the owner, but much more as a brother in the Lord.
 1. The thief was to become the carrier and living example of the power of the gospel to equalize men spiritually.
- B. Paul's appeal to Philemon reveals his willingness to stand for Onesimus with his own life and identity.
 1. Paul appeals to the fact that he and Philemon are "partners".

Philemon 1:17

So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

- C. And as such he pleads that Philemon accepts the confession of Onesimus as if Paul himself were the guilty party.

Conclusion: In “Les Miserables” Valjean finds vindication at the close of his life while Javert discovers only disappointment and loss.

Until the church sees men as equally accepted by a loving Lord Jesus we will never know the true power of the gospel and its ability to shatter the barriers which jealous men erect.

Jesus sees only the heart!

Who needs to know Jesus that you and I would tend to shun? What will you do about it?

Have you a forgiving heart that would restore Onesimus or a Jean Valjean, or are you a Javert, bent on your own destruction?