

"Him who is my very heart" – Paul is not just an advocate for Onesimus, but is speaking out of fond and personal affection.

15-16 Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever – 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 fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.

"Better than a slave" – Paul neither condoned nor condemned slavery but highlighted hearts and relationships radically changed in Christ. When a master and a slave share a bond in which they belong to each other, slavery itself is transformed.

17-18 So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.

"Owes you... charge it to me" – the baseline of the gospel is that we have all done wrong, but the debt we owe, and cannot pay, has been picked up by

IN PRACTICE Now in a post-resurrection Holy Spirit-enabled church of believers, the high call of commitment we have heard from Moses and from Jesus becomes something different. It has moved from being *commanded* to *enabled* – now part of the Holy Spirit experience of *koinonia*, or fellowship, a mutual belonging to Christ and to each other. In one sense, Paul's request is a big ask – Philemon had the right to put Onesimus to death. In another sense, it is coming out of the flow of grace that knits together believers of different social strata and levels of maturity, as part of Christ's body. Onesimus had accepted Christ and become spiritually reborn as a new person. How would the owner/slave relationship work now? Like Philemon, we are called to see people differently – not as we judge them, but as the Lord sees them. Most will not share our values, but we have the capacity to see, with the Lord's eyes, what they can become. Similarly, when relationships go a bit wrong, as they do, our high call to love God and to love others with His love, will steer us into the Holy Spirit's way of forgiveness and reconciliation. *Christians that love each other without condition are a powerful witness for Christ in an increasingly abrasive and judgmental world.*

QUESTION *When have you been challenged to treat someone differently from the way you consider they deserve?*

PRAYER Lord, I confess that obedience is not my strong suit, yet as I behold You, I know that is the only response to Your love and holiness. As Your word through Moses was a call to keep Your commands, as Jesus told the crowd to be ready to carry their cross, as Paul reminded his readers of the commitment to each other which is the fellowship of faith, I seek to be true to You. Help me, Holy Spirit, to live above my limitations as I seek Your guiding and enabling power. To the glory of Jesus, Amen.

TLW36 The Bible version is the 2011 revision of the New International Version © Biblica, which was a completely new translation in 1978

another i.e. Christ. Paul is modelling the gracious generosity of the gospel to Philemon.

19-21 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back – not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

"Writing this with my own hand" – making this a promissory note signed by Paul which legally covers the debt.

"You owe me your very self" – Paul had probably led Philemon to faith in Christ.

"Confident... you will do even more" – Paul is certain Philemon will respond favourably and perhaps even free Onesimus to return and help Paul. This is because he is more than a good man, he is in the Lord: the Spirit of the Lord produces obedience. He will do what is right.

The Living Word

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Bible readings for Sunday, September 8, 2019, with commentary notes

A Bible study on Revised Common Lectionary passages for **Sunday, Sept 8**
Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand – read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: Called into a partnership of unswerving commitment

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – Choosing obedience is a choice for blessing and life

Luke 14:25-33 – Jesus spells out the cost of following Him

Philemon 1-21 – Fellowship in the faith is reason for an appeal

And also: Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18, Psalm 1

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 – Choose obedience, choose God's blessing

Love God, listen to His voice and hold fast to Him

15-16 See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to Him, and to keep His commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

"See, I set before you..." – Moses continues a speech begun in v.11, "Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult..." which is in the context of the Israelites obeying the Lord by preparing to take possession of the land promised to them.

"Life and prosperity, death and destruction" – to walk in obedience to God and to live, is to receive what is life-giving i.e. blessing; by contrast, to disobey is to come under what is not life-giving. This choice is set out in detail in Deut. 28.

17-18 But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and

worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

"I declare to you this day" – an important emphasis, here and in v.19. When God speaks, response is called for; delay is a form of refusal.

19-20 This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to His voice, and hold fast to Him. For the LORD is your life, and He will give you many years in the land He swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

"The heavens... as witnesses" – covenant language conveying the gravity of what is being decreed. Other ancient covenants called on a number of gods who served as witnesses to its provisions. The One true God also called for witness to His provision, not by "gods" but by the whole of creation.

IN PRACTICE Moses is nearing the end of his long life and the Nation of Israel is now, after the prevarication of a whole generation, preparing to enter the territory God has promised them. But they will not bring it off by themselves. Every other tribe living there has a vested interest in keeping them out. This is a rallying speech: it is God's way, or no way. In our age 'everything is relative' and we don't warm to such black and white pronouncements. Perhaps we should reconsider.

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God speaks today, in various ways, and He looks for our willing response, not delaying tactics. *He is calling men and women of faith to stand up and be counted, and to be available. Are we?*

QUESTION *God doesn't force His will on anyone but instead brings us new choices every day, whether to follow God's ways or reject them. What choices have you made for Him?*

Luke 14:25-33 – Jesus spells out the true cost of following Him

Becoming His disciple requires our complete surrender

25 Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them He said:

"Large crowds" – at this point in His ministry Jesus' popularity was high, but He was about to set out how the cost of following Him was also high.

26-27 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters – yes, even their own life – such a person cannot be my disciple. And whoever does not carry their cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple.

"Hate... even their own life" – shocking words in a culture with such a high view of family values, but hearers would have recognised the Jewish rhetoric where "hate" is a dramatic expression for loving less. Jesus was seeking a devotion that made everything else seem like hatred by comparison.

• **For further study,** see Genesis 29:30-31; Deut. 21:15-17; Matt. 10:37.

28-30 "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'

IN PRACTICE Following Jesus has a cost – in fact, in the terms of this passage it costs us everything. It is a test of trust as to what He will assign back to us for us to look after. It is a surrender of our pride and self-determination, to be willing to defer to someone else, another test to hold possessions lightly and a further test to shoulder willingly the shameful cross of being mocked and vilified, or worse. Against this, the path of seeking to please God through performing the prescribed rituals of religion seems much more attractive. Too bad it is far from what Jesus

"Build a tower" – initiating or supporting public works was a way of gaining honour, but a building incomplete through lack of money became a monument of shame. Jesus did not want supposed followers who lacked the resolve to persist through challenges.

31 "Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?"

"Consider" – another parable illustration about counting the cost, but here the consideration is how and when to surrender.

32 If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be My disciples.

"Give up everything" – the cost that Jesus sets out, building on vv.26-27 above, is complete and unconditional surrender. Entering the kingdom as a disciple of Jesus is a spiritual rebirth and this happens only when we surrender all we are and all we have to Him, and invite Him to be our Lord.

• **For further study,** see the loss that is gain, Phil. 3:7-11; John 3:5-8 and 16-21.

had in mind. *What is truly lifegiving comes at a cost, but no one ever regrets coming into the personal relationship with God that results.*

QUESTION *How then are we to encourage others to accept Jesus, knowing that He sets the bar high?*

Philemon 1-21 – Fellowship in the faith is reason for an appeal

Paul makes a heartfelt plea for a brother in Christ

1-3 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker – also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier – and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Paul, a prisoner" – if he was a literal prisoner, he was later released for a time, but Paul considered himself as Christ's captive long before he became a captive of Rome.

Philemon... Apphia... Archippus – Philemon was a comparatively wealthy homeowner in Colossae who hosted and probably led the church there, with Apphia his wife, and Archippus who may have been their son. Churches met in homes and were led by regular people whose gifting and maturity was recognised. Church buildings and clerical leaders after the Roman temple model came centuries later.

4-5 I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all His holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus.

"Thank my God" – Paul usually thanks God for his readers' faith and love, following the opening greeting, see Romans 1:8-12; 1 Cor. 1:4-9; 2 Cor. 1:3-11. His letter to the Galatians, who had swerved back to Jewish legalism, was a marked exception.

6 I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ.

"Your partnership with us" – koinonia, fellowship, a word with a wide range of 'together' meanings and a key attribute of the common life that believers have in Christ. Paul is laying foundations for the appeal he will make to Philemon concerning Onesimus.

"Every good thing we share" – Paul hints that Philemon, having himself experienced God's goodness, should be graciously disposed towards his errant slave.

7 Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

"Your love" – Philemon was known for his love in encouraging the other believers..

8-10 Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul – an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus – that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains.

"I could be bold... yet I appeal to you" – Paul is not being the apostle but rather appealing to his friend on the basis of love and Philemon's reputation as a gracious, loving person, vv. 5 and 7. The expectation of a slave recaptured was brutal punishment, but Onesimus was now a Christian brother and not a mere possession.

11 Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

"Useless... useful" – a wordplay on the name Onesimus which means 'useful' in Greek. Paul's point is that the formerly unreliable bondservant had been radically transformed by God's grace.

12-14 I am sending him – who is my very heart – back to you. 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary.