

How Christian Debt is Reconciled

13th Sun. after Pent. – 09/07/25 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Philemon 1-21 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 15-16 [Paul appeals to Philemon regarding his runaway slave Onesimus,] **“For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord.”**

v.20 [Paul appeals deeply to Philemon (literally from the original Greek),] **“Give rest to my bowels in Christ.”**

Introduction

- ✘ As I begin this message today, I owe a great debt of gratitude to our now fully-sainted brother in Christ, Allen Heitschmidt and our dear sister Kathy (Heitschmidt) as many of the thoughts that I will be sharing with you today have come from this book that once belonged to Allen.
 - ➔ It's volume 29 of *Luther's Works*, where we have, in part, a transcript of the three nights of lectures from Martin Luther, in 1527, on Paul's letter to Philemon.
- ✘ It is a very private and personal letter that Paul writes while he is in prison in Colossae, to a dear friend – a “fellow worker” in Christ, Paul calls him in verse one; to a man named Philemon regarding Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus whom Paul now considers to be “my child” (v.10).
- ✘ This letter can perhaps best be understood by us today as a case study; as a real-life example of how any and all of us can best reconcile, or make right the debts that we owe as Christians.
 - ➔ Debt is something that almost all of us as Americans understand all too well, isn't it? Not only is our U.S. government currently \$39.4 trillion in debt, but the average (which means many or most of us owe more); the average American has a personal debt of \$105,000.

I. A lot of Relational Debt

- ✘ Paul does address financial and/or property debt here in his letter to Philemon, mentioning the fact that Onesimus likely “wronged” Philemon when he ran away, not only by breaking his trust when he left without consent, but possibly even taking some of Philemon's belongings as well.
 - ➔ But the greater debt that Paul addresses in this letter is what I would call “relational debt”. And in that department, there is a whole lot of debt addressed in this one short letter.
- ✘ You may not call it “relational debt”, but friends, you and I have a whole lot of it in our lives as well. Relational debt refers to all of the little and big things that we have done, in all of our various relationships, that have caused hurt, offense, or a break in those relationships.
 - ➔ Think, for example, of the quick and thoughtless; yes that includes sarcastic, comments you have made to your spouse; your children; your brother or sister; your mom or dad; your friends or co-workers that hurt their feelings; that cut them down or where just plain mean. Each one of those is a “debt”; a mark in the “you-blew-it-with-that-one column”. And that debt has now caused a divide in that relationship so that you owe something to that person, whether it's a sincere confession of sin and an apology or a promise that you will seek to change the way you speak to him/her or some other way that you will work to repair and reconcile that relationship.
 - ➔ That's only one small example of “relational debt”. We have physical and material ways that we hurt or harm our various relationships as well. And yes, we are all guilty of adding to our relational debt load countless times each day.
- ✘ Paul refers to quite a lot of relational debt between Philemon, Onesimus and himself in his letter.

- ➔ Onesimus owes Philemon for deserting his legal duty as slave and possibly taking something that did not belong to him when he left (v.18). Onesimus also owes Paul his very life, not only for teaching him of Christ, but for loving him so undeservedly; as a father loves his own child.
- ➔ In verse 19 Paul says that Philemon owes Paul his “own self” since Philemon apparently came to be a forgiven and saved Christian through Paul’s teaching as well. And now, because of Christ’s work in those two men’s lives, Philemon now owes Onesimus the Christian responsibility of grace; that undeserved love from Jesus that Christian brothers and sisters owe each other as fellow believers in Christ’s Church.
- ✕ It’s a mutual understanding that Martin Luther taught even on his death bed, where moments after his death, a piece of paper was found in his pocket that read, “We all are beggars. This is true.” To be a beggar is to be the ultimate debtor; to acknowledge that we are entirely broke; that we must depend upon someone else for those things we need most to survive in this life and the next.

II. Leveling the Relational Field

- ✕ And that important lesson of humility; of the necessity of admitting, “I am a beggar”; a debtor before you as my fellow human being because of the things I have done to wrong you and perhaps because of the things you have taught me or given to me or the way that you have loved me when I have not deserved it ... that realization that I owe you or someone else the debt of gratitude or a confession that “I was wrong;” that “I am not as great as I was trying to make you think I was” – this is the first lesson that Paul is trying to teach Philemon, Onesimus and you and me in how we reconcile our enormous debt as Christians.
- ➔ We see Paul set the example of this humility at the beginning of his letter, where he spends a number of verses doing what I would call “leveling the relational field.” Luther called it “taking advantage of acute embarrassment...as a person of low estate.” In other words, Paul, even though he had the spiritual authority as an elder and an apostle of Christ to just come out and demand that Philemon forgive and take Onesimus back now as a Christian brother instead of a slave, Paul didn’t do that. Why? because, as he says in verse 14, “I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.”
- ➔ It reminds me of the saying, “you attract more flies with honey than with vinegar.” If I really want to make amends with you, or I want to convince you to make amends with someone else that has offended you, I’m going to have much more success if I appeal to you as an equal; as a friend, than if I just come in like a bull in a china closet and try to command that you and the other person “just stop it and get along.”
- ✕ So, Paul commends Philemon first as a “fellow worker” (v.1) in Christ. He compliments Philemon for his “love and the faith” that he has “toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints”, even calling him “my brother” in verse seven and saying literally in the Greek, “because the bowels of the saints have been put at rest through you.”
- ➔ Luther says of Paul’s example, “This is supreme art and an example for us to consider here, for we see how brethren are to be handled if they fall. ... It is our duty to encourage [our fellow Christians] this way in the church” (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 29, pg. 93-94). I know, it might seem strange to us, and Luther says it is even strange to Germans in his day, the way that Paul talks about the “bowels of the saints” being “put to rest” by the way that Philemon cared for and comforted those Christians that were apparently meeting for worship and ministry in his own home (vv.1-2). But you see, at the time of the New Testament, they understood that the seat of a person’s emotions and affections was found in their belly, because after all, that’s where we often feel things turning inside of us in both tender and stress-filled moments. And the Greek word that our

English translations have as “refreshed” (ἀναπαύω, “anapauo”) is more literally to be “put at rest.” It’s an agriculture term for when a farmer lets a piece of land rest from the stress of heavy growing for a season. This is the kind of relief that Philemon is providing to those he is ministering to in Jesus’ name.

➔ So, by complimenting him for this, Paul is leveling the field; saying that he and Philemon are equals, and he’s doing it in a very intimate; gut-felt way for that culture. In fact, Paul continues the sentiment in verse 12 when he tells Philemon of his deep love for Onesimus now that he has come to faith in Jesus and is serving Paul as a “prisoner for Christ” (v.1) at the time. Paul literally says in the Greek, “I am sending him to you as a higher authority, he is my bowels” (i.e. my inner being). There Paul both acknowledges Philemon’s legal authority over Onesimus and how deeply he has become connected to Onesimus during their time together.

- ✘ Luther says, “That is certainly a precious recommendation. This carries a great force of persuasion. If [Paul] had recommended his very [bowels] to me” (Luther), “I would have said: ‘Be free (Onesimus).’ I would want to open everything in the house to Paul’s [bowels]. It was impossible for Philemon not to accept him” (Ibid. pg. 101).

III. All Accounts Reconciled

- ✘ It’s then that Paul takes Philemon and the rest of us to the final and most crucial part of this relationship – to true Christian reconciliation. Paul sets the example in verses 17-19, “So,” he says to Philemon, “if you consider me your partner, receive [Onesimus] 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.”

➔ In essence, Paul says, “Consider me now to be your debtor instead of Onesimus, so that the relationship between you and him can be completely repaired and he will be to you 100% debt-free!”

- ✘ Paul is following the precedent here that Jesus taught; equating our sins and trespasses to that of debt. When Jesus taught us the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:12 and Luke 11:4, He used the Greek word “ὀφείλημα” (opheilāmā) which literally refers to a money “debt”. But in the next sentence in Luke He equates it to the Greek word “ἁμαρτία” (hamartia) which speaks of our sins or trespasses against God. “...and forgive us our sins for we also forgive all who are debtors to us” is the way that Luke 11:4 gives us the fifth petition of the Lord’s Prayer.

- ✘ This is Onesimus’ spiritual reality that Paul is seeking to get Philemon to recognize and embrace. Just as Paul promises to pay for all of Onesimus’ earthly debt, Jesus has paid “in full” for his spiritual debt; regarding his eternal relationship with God the Father!

➔ And it’s the same for every one of us here today. Jesus told the Father, “Consider Me now to Your debtor instead of Keith, Clint, Betty, Jean,” “I Jesus, not only promise to pay for all of their sin toward You and toward others, but I have already paid for it all in My sacrifice on the cross!” It is finished!

- ✘ This means that Onesimus’ reality has changed entirely, hasn’t it? No longer is he a “useless” (v.11) runaway slave, but now he is a “useful” “beloved brother” (v.16) in Christ! No longer a sinner, but now a saint in the Father’s eyes.

➔ And it was the same for Philemon when he heard the Gospel of Christ through Paul; the same for Paul when Christ came to Him on the Damascus road and converted him from being a persecutor of Christians into an apostle of Christ Himself.

- ✘ And guess what friends, it was the same for you and me when the full payment for our sins that Jesus earned at the cross was posted to our personal account in heaven at our baptism. Everything changed! You and I went from useless to useful; from sinner to saint; from slave-to-

sin to fellow worker in Christ's ministry; from adversary of Jesus to ambassador of Jesus and His saving work to all those around us who still resist the free gifts of salvation and eternal life by the blood of Jesus alone.

Conclusion

✕ “Thus we have a private epistle,” says Luther, “from which much should be learned how brethren are to be commended, that is that an example might be provided to the church how we ought to take care of those who fall and restore those who err; the kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of mercy and grace...” (ibid. pg. 105).

➔ Yes, it is only through the mercy and grace of Jesus that not only our relational debt here on earth, but even more our spiritual debt with the Father is now paid in full ... forever! Amen.