

Onesimus – A Trophy of Grace

Philemon is the last and shortest of all of Paul’s epistles. Philemon is also one of only three individuals to whom Paul wrote inspired letters, the others being Timothy and Titus. In each of these letters Paul is instructing the recipient in the details of how the principles of grace can be put into practice in our lives.

Philemon – The Capstone of Grace

We must first identify the characters in Philemon. The writer of the book is Paul.

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, Philemon 1

Paul is the apostle of the Gentiles and the dispenser of God’s grace.

For I [Paul] speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify mine office: Romans 11:13

If ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me [Paul] to you-ward: Ephesians 3:2

As such he is eminently and uniquely qualified to instruct Philemon on implementing God’s grace in his life.

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: . . . I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Philemon 1:1,2,10

All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and fellowservant in the Lord: Whom I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here. . . . And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfil it. Colossians 4:7-9,17

The household of Philemon included Apphia and Archippus, perhaps his wife and son respectively. The other member of the household mentioned in this account is Onesimus (more on him later). The local assembly met in their home. Comparing passages from Philemon and Colossians we learn that Philemon’s home was located in Colosse. In Colossians Paul refers to Onesimus as “one of you” and gives instructions to Archippus who was probably Philemon’s son.

Philemon, a believer in Colosse was very involved in the work of the ministry in the local church. The local assembly met in his house. Paul considered him a “partner” in ministry.

Onesimus was Philemon’s servant.

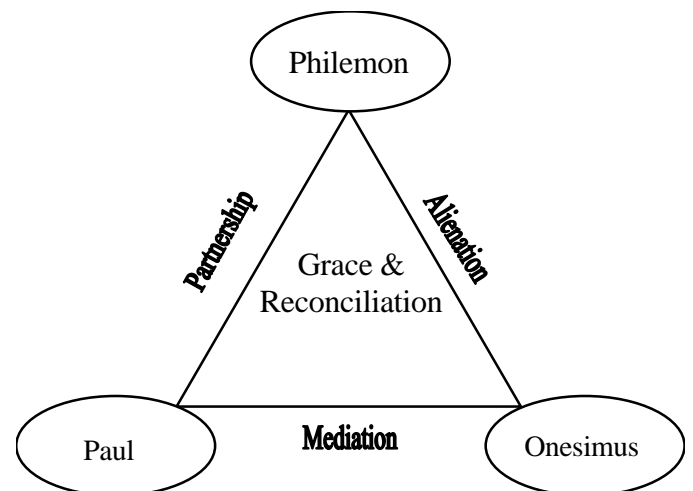
For perhaps he [Onesimus] therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? Philemon 15,16

Onesimus, a servant of Philemon, had been with Paul in Rome and was now returning to Colosse with Tychicus (See Colossians 4:7-9, quoted above).

There are many details about this situation that we are not told and it is unwise to speculate where the Scriptures are silent. However, there is enough information about Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus, and their relationships to each other to teach us the application of grace in our relationships.

In order to better understand these men and their relationships we will express them graphically. In our picture the point of each triangle will represent one of the men involved. The line between the points will represent the relationship between the men.

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus



We begin with the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Their relationship was one of *enmity and alienation*. This alienation existed because Onesimus, a servant of Philemon, departed from his master.

I [Paul] beseech thee [Philemon] for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee

unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me: . . . For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? Philemon 10,11,15,16

The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus broke down because of the actions of Onesimus. He left his master's service and fled. This placed a strain on the relationship and resulted in alienation.

The relationship between Philemon and Paul was the opposite of that between Philemon and Onesimus. Theirs was a bond of *partnership and fellowship*.

Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, . . . Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. . . . If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. Philemon 1,8,9,17

There was a bond of friendship and love between Philemon and Paul. This bond arose from the fact that Paul lead him to salvation.

I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. Philemon 19

Paul wrote to Philemon with great affection that resulted from the close spiritual fellowship between these two saints.

The relationship between Paul and Onesimus was one of *mediation*.

If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: Philemon 18,19a

In his flight from Philemon, Onesimus eventually found himself in Rome and in contact with Paul who was imprisoned there. We are not told whether their meeting was by chance or if Onesimus sought out Paul. Whatever the circumstances, it resulted in Onesimus' salvation.

I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: . . . Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord? Philemon 10,16

Paul refers to Onesimus as his own son in the faith and Philemon's brother in Christ.

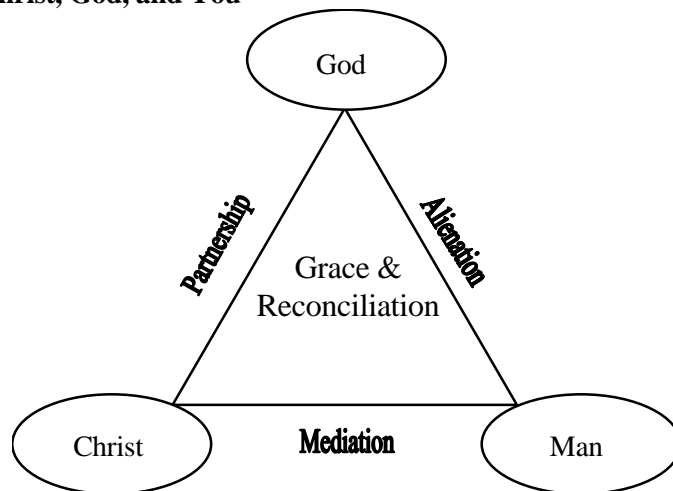
Because of Paul's long-standing relationship with Philemon and his newfound relationship with Onesimus, he acted as a mediator between the two.

If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: Philemon 17-19a

Paul offered to pay the debts of Onesimus. He stood before Philemon in Onesimus' place and offered himself as a substitute or a satisfaction, for Onesimus. Any debt that Onesimus owed would become Paul's. Paul's plea to Philemon was to receive Onesimus "as myself."

The story of Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus is a story grace and reconciliation. Paul was able to extend a hand to Philemon while at the same time extending a hand to Onesimus, his estranged servant. This brought reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. This message of reconciliation is what Paul teaches in his letter to Philemon.

Christ, God, and You



Now the identity of the people represented by the points of the triangle are changed while maintaining the relationships represented by the lines.

Like the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, the relationship between God and man is one of enmity and alienation. This alienation resulted when man turned away from God and disobeyed His commandments.

And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat. And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden. Genesis 3:6-8

This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart: Ephesians 4:17,18

The relationship between God and man was broken because of man's actions. Man was created to serve God and obey His commandments. Like Onesimus, mankind left his master's service and fled and became his enemy. From the day that Adam and Eve hid themselves from God's presence in the Garden of Eden until now mankind has run from God.

As the relationship between Philemon and Paul is the opposite of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, the relationship between God and Christ is the opposite of the relationship between God and man. God the Father and Jesus Christ have a relationship of eternal partnership and fellowship.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. John 1:1-3

I [Jesus Christ] have glorified thee [the Father] on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do. And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was. John 17:4,5

Before the foundation of the world the Father and the Son had a relationship of perfect love and fellowship. This partnership is evidenced in the work of creation.

Paul served as a mediator for Onesimus before Philemon

and Christ serves as a mediator for mankind before God.

For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; I Timothy 2:5

Christ had an eternal relationship with His Father. When he came to earth in a body of flesh he established a relationship with fallen man. Paul used his relationships with Philemon and Onesimus to act as a mediator and bring reconciliation between them. Christ uses his relationship with God and man to bring reconciliation between them.

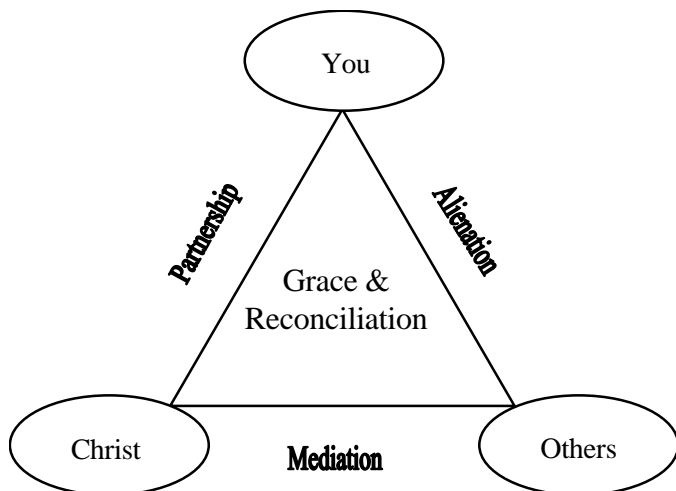
Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Philippians 2:5-8

Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new. And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation II Corinthians 5:17-19

The mediation of Christ was accomplished by His death on the cross. When Christ died on the cross he paid our sin debt. He died the death that we deserved. Christ took our sin and gave us His righteousness. God now receives us as He does Christ.

The story of Christ, God, and man is a story grace and reconciliation. Christ's standing with the Father enabled him to extend a hand to the Father while extending a hand to mankind, his estranged servant. He became the means of reconciling God and man. This message of reconciliation is illustrated in Paul's letter to Philemon.

Christ, You, and Others



Again the identities of the people represented by the points of the triangle are changed while maintaining the relationships represented by the lines.

We often encounter situations that cause enmity and alienation with others. This is illustrated by the enmity between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul experienced many such situations in his ministry with unbelievers and believers.

Are they ministers of Christ? (I speak as a fool) I am more; in labours more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I

stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; In journeyings often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the heathen, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; In weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness. Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? who is offended, and I burn not? II Corinthians 11:23-29

Because of our fallen sin nature we are destined to offend and be offended by, others. This offense causes strained relationships and produces alienation and enmity.

Although at times you are at enmity with your fellow man, as a believer you are never at enmity with Christ.

Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellowcitizens with the saints, and of the household of God; . . . That the Gentiles should be fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel: Ephesians 2:19,3:6

In the Age of Grace believers are fellowheirs with Christ. We are eternally united to Him as a part of His Body. Paul considered Philemon to be his partner and Christ made us His partners by placing us in His Body.

Christ has a relationship with the saved and reaches out to the lost with an offer of reconciliation. He died for those that are alienated from Him. He died for His enemies.

For when we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. . . . But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. . . . For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. Romans 5:6,8,10

Just as Christ mediated between the Father and mankind He is also able to mediate between you and others. As Paul encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus "as myself" so Christ desires that we receive others both saved and lost for His sake.

Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was let hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles. I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also. Romans 1:13-15

Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. Romans 12:16-18

But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died. Romans 14:15

The story of Christ, you, and others is a story of grace and reconciliation. Because of Christ's relationship with you he extends a hand to you while at the same time he extends a hand to others who are alienated from you. With that he gives the opportunity to receive others as you receive Christ. This message of reconciliation is illustrated by the situation that Paul discussed in his letter to Philemon.

Grace and Reconciliation

The account of Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul teaches much about our relationship to God and others. Because of Christ and His work at Calvary we are reconciled to God and to our fellow men. This is the lesson of grace and reconciliation found in Paul's letter to Philemon.

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