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**Comments on
the Epistle to Philemon**

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By F.B. Hole

AFTER READING THIS short epistle it would be well to read the last twelve verses of the Epistle to the Colossians, especially noting the various names that are mentioned by Paul. No less than eight of those mentioned in Philemon are found in Colossians, and several of them in a way that throws light upon their history.

Philemon, a much loved friend and fellow-servant of the apostle, evidently lived at Colosse. Apphia would appear to have been his wife, and Archippus his son, who was also a gifted man with a very definite service committed to him from the Lord. Philemon's house was a meeting place for God's people, so that Paul could write of "the church in thy house."

Onesimus, with whom the Epistle is mainly concerned, had formerly been a servant or bond-slave of Philemon, as verse 16

shows. He had wronged his Christian master and then had run away (verses 15, 18). In God's great mercy however the run-away slave had been thrown into contact with Paul at Rome during his imprisonment and through his instrumentality converted (verse 10): converted so soundly that Paul could speak of him not long after as "a faithful and beloved brother" (Col. 4:9).

Tychicus was at that time leaving Rome for Colosse, bearing Paul's letter to that assembly and the Apostle seized this favourable occasion to send off Onesimus in his company back to his own people, so that again he might meet the master, whom once he had so wronged. It was no light matter for Onesimus to once more stand in the presence of Philemon, even though the grace of God had wrought in his conversion since the time of his wrong-doing, and Paul thoughtfully wrote an explanatory and intercessory letter to Philemon, making Onesimus the bearer of it. That short letter — the Epistle before us — God has seen fit to enshrine, as an inspired production, in His word. It fills its own niche in the scheme of truth, revealed to us in Scripture.

In the first place it shows us how the converted sinner has his feet turned into paths of practical righteousness. When Onesimus wronged his master, Philemon, he was an unconverted man. Now he has become a brother beloved, but this does not relieve him of obligations incurred by his former sin. As regards God that sin was forgiven amongst all his other sins, for he stood "justified from all things" (Acts 13:39); but as regards Philemon confession and some kind of restitution was needful. How restitution was made in this case the Epistle shows. Here at once there meets us an important lesson. If we have done some palpable wrong to another, no more effectual proof of our repentance can be given than that of confession and restitution, as far as that may be within our power. It is ever a trying process, but it is practical righteousness, most effective as a testimony and most glorifying to God.

Again, the Epistle endorses and emphasizes courtesy as being a grace that befits Christianity. It is very evident that the Christian is to be marked by an honesty, a candour, a transparency which is the very opposite of that hypocrisy and flattery which so greatly marks the world. Yet he is not to allow candour to degenerate into an unfeeling rudeness. He is to consider and

acknowledge the rights of others and express himself with refinement of feeling and courtesy. Notice the happy way in which Paul expresses in verse 7 his approbation of the grace and kindness that characterized Philemon.

Notice too the tactful and delicate way in which he introduces the subject of Onesimus, in verses 8 to 10; beseeching where he might have used apostolic authority and commanded; presenting Onesimus as his spiritual son, given to him during the time of his trial in his captivity — a consideration well calculated to move the heart of Philemon. Divinely given tact and courtesy is also seen in the verses from 13, and onwards. Paul would have liked to retain Onesimus as a helper in his time of trial, but to have done so without consulting Philemon would have been, he felt, an unwarranted liberty. His old master had certain rights which Paul scrupulously observed; acknowledging that for him to have the advantage of Onesimus' help would have been a "benefit" conferred by Philemon. This benefit he would not first appropriate leaving Philemon to learn of it afterwards when he could not do otherwise than acquiesce "of necessity." No: he sends Onesimus back, content to have the benefit, if ever, as the fruit of Philemon's action "willingly."

Perhaps however Onesimus was returning to the place where once he had served sin and to the master whom he had wronged that he might more fully and for ever be at his service — the New Translation renders the end of verse 15, "that thou mightest possess him fully for ever." But in any event all was now to be on a new footing. Notice again the courteous and tactful way in which the Apostle conveyed this fact to Philemon, pointing out that he is now to possess him not as a mere bondman but as a brother beloved. Under these new circumstances Philemon would get service of a far finer quality out of Onesimus, even if it were less in quantity or if he willingly yielded him up to go back to Rome to help the Apostle, or to go elsewhere in the service of Christ.

But apparently Onesimus had wronged Philemon in those earlier days when as yet he was unconverted. His old master had suffered loss through his unfaithful service or defalcations. Knowing or suspecting this, Paul assumes full responsibility for making proper restitution. The damage done is to be put down to Paul's account and he writes with his own hand a promissory note — "I will repay it." But what a master-stroke

are the succeeding words, "albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest to me even thine own self besides"!

So Philemon himself had been converted through Paul; and if he opened in his ledger an account with Paul's name at the head and debited him with the pecuniary loss suffered through Onesimus, he would have to credit him with the value of that devoted service, which had brought to him, through terrific opposition and suffering, life and salvation to eternal days.

We have but to ponder quietly to feel how irresistible must have been the effect of these words. If Philemon up to this point had been inclined to be righteous overmuch and harsh, what a melting must have supervened. What was his loss after all! How paltry it must all have seemed, even if it ran into thousands in the presence of the mighty debt of love he owed to the Apostle. The effect upon Philemon must have been simply overwhelming.

The Apostle was conscious that it would be so, as verses 20 and 21 disclose. Indeed such was his confidence in Philemon that he expected him to even go beyond what he was enjoining as to his treatment of Onesimus. A wonderful tribute to

Philemon this! No wonder Paul addressed him as "our dearly beloved"!

Knowing what fearful damage to the fair name of Christ is wrought amongst God's people in connection with similar episodes we feel as if we could not sufficiently stress this important Epistle. It inculcates:

As to the offending party, a return in all humility to the one offended with confession and an acknowledgement of his rights as to restitution.

As to the offended party, the reception of the repentant offender in grace with the fullest possible acknowledgement of all that God has wrought in him; whether it be through conversion as in the case of Onesimus, or through restoration as might be the case with many of ourselves.

As to the mediating party, an absence of anything approaching a dictatorial spirit, coupled with ardent love for both the offended and the offender, expressing itself in entreaties marked by courtesy and tact.

We must not leave this epistle without noticing the striking way in which the whole story illustrates what mediatorship means and involves; illustrating really the statement, "There is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the Man, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). God is the One offended by sin: man, the offender: the Man Christ Jesus, the Mediator.

We can see ourselves depicted in Onesimus and his sad history. We too were "unprofitable." We "wronged" God and consequently were His debtors, owing what we could not pay. We too "departed" from Him, since we feared Him and desired to be as far as possible removed from His presence. Our alienation was the fruit of sin.

Paul's mediation between Philemon and Onesimus illustrates, though only faintly, what Christ has done. Can we not almost hear the blessed Saviour so speaking when upon the cross He charged Himself with our iniquities and took up the judgment we deserved? Shall we not bless Him for ever that in regard to all that was due to us on account of our sins, He said to God, "Put that on Mine account."

There is this difference however, that whereas Paul had to write "I will repay it" our risen Saviour does not use the future tense. His word to us in the gospel as the fruit of His death and resurrection is, "I have repaid it." He has been delivered for our offences and has been raised again for our justification. Hence it is that, justified by faith, we have peace with God. In this point therefore the illustration falls far short of the reality illustrated.

Our illustration also fails in this, that God needs no such persuasion to the full exercise of grace as was needed in the case of Philemon. He is Himself the Source of grace. He does however need a righteous groundwork whereon to display His grace even as Paul provided Philemon with a righteous reason for grace in assuming all the liabilities of Onesimus. Mediatorship involves the acceptance of such liabilities if it is to be fully and effectively exercised, for only then can grace reign through righteousness.

Praise be to God for the effective mediatorship of our Lord Jesus, the results of which are eternal. As to these our illustration again helps us.

In the first place, Paul's word as to Onesimus is, "receive him" (verse 12). He was not to be ignored and much less to be rejected, but to be received. How fully and really has God received us who have believed.

In the second place, the word was, "receive him for ever." Formerly the relations between Onesimus and his master were of a sort that could be broken, and in fact were broken by the misconduct of Onesimus. Now there were to be new relations of an order that could not be broken. It is just thus in God's gracious dealings with us. As the fruit of Christ's work we stand before Him in relations that are indefectible and eternal.

In the third place we have Paul making a request of Philemon which might seem utterly beyond his powers to comply with. "If thou count me a partner," he says, "receive him as myself." Philemon might well have replied, "With all the good will in the world I simply cannot do it. Receive him, I will. Receive him for ever, I will. But it would be mere hypocrisy to pretend that I can bring myself to the point of receiving him as, my beloved Paul, I would receive you."

That which Philemon could hardly have done, as we venture to think, God has done. Every believer, from Paul himself down to ourselves, and down to the weakest of us and those most recently converted, has no other standing before God than "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6). We have been received in all the acceptance and favour of Christ Himself — a thing amazing beyond words, and utterly incredible were it not so stated in the Word of God.

In this the illustration is entirely to the point, as also in regard to the underlying facts which govern the whole. As before remarked, the link between Paul, the mediator, and Onesimus, the offender, was love. Between Paul and Philemon, the offended party, it was partnership.

As we look up by faith to the glorified Man Christ Jesus, the one Mediator, we adoringly acknowledge that His link with God is that of PARTNERSHIP, for He is God. He is great enough therefore to "lay his hand upon us both" (Job 9:33). He can lay His hand upon God Himself, being His "fellow" (Zech. 13:7). Yet He has laid His hand upon us to our eternal blessing. He has brought us into His own place and relationship, linking us up in the strength of His eternal LOVE.

Yet here again we need to note how the illustration falls short, for God the Father loves, equally with Christ the Son. The Father's love and the love of Christ are sweetly intertwined. We rightly sing: —

*"Father, Thy sovereign love has sought
Captives to sin, gone far from Thee.
The work which Thine own Son has wrought,
Has brought us back in peace and free."*