***OBLIGATION OR OPPORTUNITY?***

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Text: Philemon 1-25

The letter arrived by *Special Delivery*, so to speak. It was scrawled on a piece of parchment and was sealed with the wax and seal of a treasured friend, a mentor of sorts, a partner in ministry. That the letter was genuine, there was no doubt. That it was expected, would be a lie. That it was hand-delivered by the slave who had run away from my service, was surprising and a bit annoying. The joy of receiving a letter from a dear friend was tempered by the duty of dealing with the runaway messenger who delivered it. I would read the letter first and then deal with the messenger.

The letter began with a typical salutation. Letters weren’t signed at the end back then; they were signed at the beginning so you knew who was writing to you, in this instance, “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy, our brother.” Paul was a prisoner because of his faith in Jesus Christ – not the faith he held in his heart but the faith he wore on his sleeve and proclaimed with his lips. Had he just held his faith in his heart and kept his mouth shut, he could have been free. But he felt compelled to speak and to act and in so doing ruffled the feathers of people with power. Faith in Christ would not allow him to remain silent. Too bad! It seems to work for a lot of other folks! Lots of people call themselves Christian but don’t feel compelled to say or do anything overtly Christian – like love their neighbors or pray for their enemies or welcome strangers or do justice. They don’t have a problem with sitting in the pew, singing the hymns, staying awake for some of the sermon, and then going home without doing a Christian thing the rest of the week. ***They*** aren’t sitting in jail! Can’t the Christian faith just be a personal thing you hold in your heart and keep off your lips and out of the rest of your life? Paul didn’t think so, and neither did Jesus. They seemed to think you have to live it, even if that means taking risks and ruffling some feathers, including your own. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it *the cost of discipleship*. But I digress; back to the letter.

The letter was addressed to me – *To Philemon,* *dear friend and co-worker*. I like the way that sounds – not just *friend* but *dear* *friend*, not just *worker* but *co-worker*, someone sharing in Paul’s work which is continuing Christ’s work. Aren’t we all co-workers in the kingdom, working together to build up the body of Christ? It is not work limited to apostles, pastors and Presbyterian elders. We all are called to be co-workers in the kingdom; there are no excuses like *I’m too old* or *I’m too young* or *I’m too busy* – sound familiar? – because God knows us better than we know ourselves and God knows there is some thing we can do, some thing we can say, to further the work of the Lord. It is what we are called to do.Do you really want to stand before Christ who welcomes you with nail prints in his hands and explain that you were just too busy or too tired or too something to continue his work? But I digress; back to the letter.

The letter was addressed to me, and to Apphia, Archippus and the church in my house. The church met in my house which was smaller than this house in which you gather, you who are brothers and sisters in Christ. The Christian faith is passed on from house to house, from person to person, from generation to generation because people of faith share the good news of Christ with others and invite them into their homes and into their lives. That is how this Covenant church began. A group of Presbyterians began meeting over an auto body shop because no one’s home was large enough to hold all the people. Before they first met in that body and soul shop (auto body work downstairs, soul work upstairs) there were individuals who went door to door and person to person with an invitation to be part of a body of believers that would become this church. Over the years this church has grown because Covenant folks reached out to friends, neighbors and total strangers and invited them in. When is the last time you invited someone to church? But I digress; back to the letter.

Paul’s greeting is traditional, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” If you get a letter from a Christian friend in Ethiopia it sounds much the same. The opening words are expressions of grace and peace, like the opening of our worship. I wonder why we don’t follow that practice in correspondence among our Christian friends and family today. Grace and peace are wonderful words to offer in greeting and great gifts to share in relationships! Someone has even suggested that this letter of Paul was written “with a quill dipped in the inkwell of grace.”[[1]](#endnote-1) What a wonderful way to write! But the grace did not stop with the greeting. Paul went on to compliment me on my ministry, my faith in Christ, my love for the saints, and the joy I was bringing him in my faithful work. Humility prevents me from commenting further upon those gracious words, except to say that grace, faith and love are what being co-workers with Christ is all about – for me and for you, then and now. “Faith, hope, love abide – these three,” Paul says. “And the greatest of these is love.” If we were to look for signs of faith in our midst, signs of faith, hope and love would be a pretty good place to start! But I digress, back to this letter.

I was feeling pretty good about myself after Paul’s velvet-gloved compliments. Then Paul got to the point of his letter and I felt a little less good, for his message was about the messenger, and the messenger was my runaway slave. Somewhere in his journeys this slave found Paul and endeared himself to the apostle so that Paul refers to Onesimus as “my child”. Paul claims to be like a father to the runaway! As a runaway he was useless to me, but he had become useful to Paul, living up to his name – Onesimus which means *useful*. Paul asked that I set him free and give up any claim to this slave who was rightfully mine. Such a request was not unprecedented; Roman law permitted a friend of the master to advocate for the well-being of the runaway slave.[[2]](#endnote-2) But Paul’s request was not grounded in Roman law, nor in personal obligation, but in love. Paul asked me to set free this runaway slave as an act of love.

As I mentioned earlier, faith and love are required of all co-workers of Christ. They demand of us action even if it is something we would rather not do. I was being asked to set free a slave who had run away – in effect to reward him for his actions – simply because he was now a servant of Christ who might be useful in Paul’s ministry. Paul could have forced me to do it – I owed him – but he urged me to do what he asked for a more noble reason – out of love. To release Onesimus would be an act of love toward him and toward Paul and, to hear Paul tell it, toward God.

Love was not what I had in mind for that runaway slave unless it was the kind of love expressed by King George for the colonies in the musical *Hamilton* when he sings:

*You say the price of my love's not a price that you're willing to pay*

*You cry in your tea which you hurl in the sea when you see me go by  
 Why so sad?  
 Remember we made an arrangement when you went away  
 Now you're making me mad  
 Remember despite our estrangement, I'm your man*

*You'll be back  
 Soon you'll see  
 You'll remember you belong to me  
 You'll be back  
 Time will tell  
 You'll remember that I served you well  
  
 Oceans rise, empires fall  
 We have seen each other through it all  
 And when push comes to shove,  
 I will send a fully armed battalion to remind you of my love[[3]](#endnote-3)*

But Paul expected something more from me than that kind of love. He expected real love, real compassion, a change of heart for this slave whose life had been changed by Christ. How then could I refuse? To refuse would be an act of selfish ingratitude. To refuse would be to deny the work of the Spirit in Onesimus’ life, and who but the Spirit could bring a slave to Christ? How could I refuse Paul who had shaped my faith, who had invited me to act rather than ordering me to do so, who had come to love a slave who I had come to live without. To refuse would be to deny the infant church another hand in building up the body of Christ. If I was a co-worker, a partner in Paul’s work, then faithfulness demanded that I set Onesimus free and return him to Paul. He would be no longer my slave; he would be my brother in Christ, another co-worker in the kingdom. Christ manages to break down all the barriers among us – male and female, slave and free, servant and master, maybe even Republican and Democrat – for our fundamental identity is in him alone, or so Paul says.

It was a simple act, simply done, though perhaps not done purely out of love. Sometimes even our best actions have mixed motives. Perhaps Paul convinced me with his persuasive words, perhaps it was love for him that convinced me to free Onesimus, or perhaps it was love for Christ that guided my actions – God only knows for sure. But what I do know is this: Paul’s closing words have been true for me as well. As reluctant as I was to do it, releasing Onesimus was

a grace-filled opportunity to serve,

a grace-filled act of love for another and so for God,

a grace-filled moment to make a sacrifice for Christ who sacrificed his life for me,

a grace-filled time when the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ was with my spirit.

Such opportunities are abundant if you listen with your heart and ask

what faith demands of you,

what love demands of you,

what Christ demands of you.

For, the letter to me is a letter to you. You alone will know what act of love Christ may ask of you that will be for you an opportunity, not an obligation. God presents us with opportunities to be faithful; then we decide what to do with them – whether to act or not, whether to act out of love or out of obligation. Do it for love, says Paul, and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen

1. Cain Hope Felder, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol.XI, Abingdon Press: Nashville, 2000, p.895 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Id. at 898 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. *“You’ll Be Back” sung by King George in Hamilton* by Lin-Manuel Miranda [↑](#endnote-ref-3)