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Devoted to God**

Letters don't make sense unless you know who they're from, and sometimes, if you don't recognize the handwriting, you have to flip to the end of the letter to see who has actually sent it. The ancients did it a little differently: they put the author of the letter up front so you see it right at the very beginning of the letter. So, the Colossian church was started by Epaphras. Remember the guy who goes to Ephesus, follows Jesus, goes back home and starts the church? The church is started by Epaphras, but the Colossian letter is not to Epaphras because Epaphras is now in jail. He's in a jail in Rome with the apostle Paul, and so they don't know how things are going, they don't know how the leaders are doing there or in any of the new churches that they've started, so in the tradition of their time, they send out a group letter—a series of letters to be hand-delivered all the way around the Mediterranean up the Aegean into Turkey where these churches are located. They start at Ephesus, and so the first letter of this pack is hand-delivered to the people in Ephesus. Then they go inland about 50 miles to the town of Laodicea and there's a woman there named Nympha and the church meets in her house. They hand off another letter there and the party goes on another 50 miles inland to the very heart of Turkey to the town of Colossae. And in Colossae they go to the house of Philemon, this wealthy merchant that Paul probably met in Ephesus, and they give a letter to the church of the Colossians.

Unusually though, they have another letter—a private letter—a letter that is written only for Philemon—the host of this house church. And so you can imagine that they come to the door, one letter is for everybody and one is just for Philemon. Philemon, I'm sure, goes to his room and reads the letter. He comes out and looks troubled and puzzled. The next Sunday the whole group of Christ followers are excited because they are about to read the letter that Paul wrote to their whole church. So, they gather in Philemon's living room and they listen to this letter that we have been studying for the last month. Just like the kid's sermon had a message for the kids and a message for you that the kids wouldn't understand, the church hears the message, the church in Colossae hears the message, and Philemon, probably sitting toward the back, hears another message. There are hints of something different being said to the hosts than to the whole house. See if you can pick up what they might be. In chapter 3 Paul says,

¹¹ So now there is no longer Gentile or Jew, there is no more circumcised or uncircumcised, there are no more barbarians or Scythians, there's no more slaves or free people, but Christ is everything, and Christ is in everything.
[Colossians 3:11]

He goes on in chapter 3 and in the 22nd verse, he talks to slaves. Interesting, because it means there must have been slaves sitting next to masters inside this house. The

slaves somehow got an hour or two off from being slaves and they got to sit there and Paul says to them directly:

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. ²³ Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters. [Colossians 3:22-23]

And in the next chapter he turns from speaking to the slaves and talks to the masters.

¹ Masters (and using the plural there means that there must be several people in the congregation who do own slaves) provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven. [Colossians 4:1]

By now Philemon is squirming in the back. He is the owner, he is a wealthy merchant, he almost certainly has slaves himself. He's going, *Well Paul, you could have just said it to me. Oh wait, you did say it to me in that other letter.* And then the letter ends with Paul saying:

⁸ I am sending Tychicus to you for the express purpose that you may know about our circumstances. [Colossians 4:8]

Paul is saying, I cannot put in a letter that might be read by others or intercepted; I can't put how it's really going. I'll send Tychicus for that reason so you'll know how it's really going, and so Tychicus can encourage your hearts. This is like Martin Luther King *Letters from a Birmingham Jail*, or Solzhenitsyn writing from the Gulag, or Bonhoeffer writing in prison. *I'm sending Tychicus; he's coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you.*

And at that point in the letter, everybody turned and looked at Philemon. I'm sending Onesimus back to you—he's one of you. These two, Onesimus and Tychicus, they'll tell you everything that's happening here. Something big has happened in Colossae and there are ripples going out from the big thing that's happened, and we really don't know what he's talking about. That doesn't catch us by surprise as it did them.

Sometimes something big happens and it changes everything else. Nancy Ortberg was speaking at her daughter's college commencement at Azusa Pacific, and so her family was there in the back when the president was getting ready for the service to start. Right before everybody's about to go out, the president pulls three graduating seniors up in front of everybody and says, "I want you to congratulate these three, they have decided that they are being called to an inner-city ministry in Los Angeles to serve the poor. They are in the best tradition of Azusa Pacific." Polite applause, they'll probably say something in the service. And then the president turns to the three students with his back to the group and says, "You don't know this, but an anonymous, wealthy benefactor wants to make what you're doing possible, and so Louie, that benefactor has paid for \$130,000 of your student loans. You're debt free. And Phyllis, \$145,000 of your

student loans are gone, you are debt free. And Carmen, you have almost \$137,000 of debt. Considered it paid." Well the kids are totally freaked out and there isn't a dry eye in the place because they have just seen the power of an unexpected gift to change somebody's life. These kids would have spent decades paying off those student loans. Their lives have been changed in the twinkling of an eye by the extravagance of somebody they've never met, just like the Colossians. An unpayable debt, and an unseen giver—they never knew Paul. An unforgettable gift. The freedom of debtors becomes a blessing to the world. Debt free—the kids can go out and bless the world.

Now we all labor under a bigger debt. We give it labels, like regret, or guilt, or brokenness, or shame, or sin, and we cannot pay it off. But God was in Jesus Christ reconciling the world to Himself. We know what's coming, but we need to hear the words, "You are new just the same." That's what the apostle Paul is doing to the church in Colossae . . . *You used to be like this, you had huge debts, your debts are paid. Live like your debts are paid.* And so in this atmosphere, Philemon gets a private letter, a letter that nobody else gets to see, and frankly, he probably wouldn't have shown it to anybody when he first read it. This letter is about one of the slaves that Philemon owns. Philemon owns slaves, not unusual. According to Rodney Stark, 40% of all the people living in the Roman Empire were slaves. Of that 40% who were enslaved, probably 60% were what you and I would call peasants, or surfs, or indebted servants. That is, they were sold or they gave themselves up to be sold or they were captured in war and under the specific contract, they had to be enslaved to a person or to a household for a certain number or years and then they were set free. Maybe 60% of all the slaves in the Roman Empire were like that, and then there were the other 40% who were going to be slaves all of their lives, much more like the American experience with slavery.

Onesimus, the name we just heard, "I'm sending Onesimus to you", is apparently in the hardcore slave category with no hope. And what's happened is that Onesimus has run away from Colossae. He broke out of his master's household and he apparently stole enough money from his master or he was on a journey with some money, and he never came back. He has gone running like a runaway slave. Now he makes it. He gets out of Turkey, he crosses the Aegean Sea, he goes across Greece, and by then he has maybe stopped looking over his shoulder every minute so that he is just nervous instead of terrified. He keeps going west because he knows that the place for an escaped slave to go is Rome. Rome is the center of the world. It's so big, there must be forty thousand people living in Rome. Who could ever find you around that many people? And he goes to Rome probably so that he can sell the things that he stole from his master Philemon. If he did it close to home someone would recognize them and turn him in. Well, it's predictable. This person who has run away and doesn't know the customs or the language, gets all the way to the big city and ends up in jail. He is in prison in Rome and the only thing we're sure about is that he's not in prison for being an escaped slave. He is not in prison for being an escaped slave because if you are an escaped slave and you are caught, you're not put in prison, your arm is chopped off and you're sent back, or your forehead is branded so that everybody knows, and you're sent back. You don't get to stay in prison with just regular criminals. The Roman Empire could not afford to treat slaves that way. If they did, if they started to be soft on the

slaves, there would be an uprising that would ruin the whole empire. So, he's in a Roman jail and just when he thinks that things cannot possibly get worse, he looks across the jail and he sees somebody that he recognizes. He recognizes an old man and he ducks his head. And he ducks his head because this old man is a friend of his master Philemon. His name is Paul. Can you imagine the bad luck you've got? You go halfway around the world and all of a sudden, *oh geez*. And, the old man keeps looking at him with that, *don't I know you from somewhere* look? And they finally end up talking and he says, *you look remarkably like a young man that went with my friend Philemon in Ephesus. I think he was from Colossae, but I met him in Ephesus, was that you? No, no, never heard of him*. Eventually of course he admits who he is and they start to talk about what Paul does and about the God Paul loves and about how He speaks to both slaves and masters. Onesimus starts, even as a slave, to think he might have a chance to live, and all the time Paul is saying it worked for your master Philemon, it can work for you. And he says, *I don't want it to work like it does for my master Philemon. You think that Philemon is a great guy. You know why? Because you lived in the guest house. I lived in the slave house. You want to know what it's like being the slave of a Christian master? Look at my back. This is why I ran away*. The apostle Paul says, *I'm telling you he's changed, he's different. If you give him a chance, if you go back, you would be safe now*. And Onesimus says, *they would kill me*. But Onesimus comes to trust Paul and then he comes to trust Jesus. The apostle Paul says, *I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll write a letter. You're going to get out before I am. I'll write a letter to Philemon and I'll tell Philemon everything that has happened so you can go home, because otherwise Onesimus, otherwise you're going to spend the rest of life looking over your shoulder wondering if it's going to happen. You've probably left family and friends, maybe even children back in Colossae. But Onesimus is thinking, how can that work? How will Philemon respond? I mean if he takes me in maybe you're right, maybe he's gone soft, he's become a Christian, maybe he will forgive me and let me be a slave. Maybe even he'll free me, but if he frees me what about all his other slaves? This could ruin everything for Philemon. I can't go back. And he can't forgive me because it will ruin everything*. You can just imagine the hours and hours in a Roman jail, but finally Paul writes the letter to the Colossians that we have been studying and at the very same time he writes a personal letter. The only personal letter we have in the Bible and it's short enough, the letter to Philemon, that I can read the whole thing. I'd open the Bible, but the type is too small for me, so listen to this.

¹⁻³ I, Paul, am a prisoner for the sake of Christ, here with my brother Timothy. I write this letter to you, Philemon, my good friend and companion in this work—also to our sister Apphia, to Archippus, a real trooper, and to the church that meets in your house. God's best to you! Christ's blessings on you! ⁴⁻⁷ Every time your name comes up in my prayers, I say, "Oh, thank you, God!" I keep hearing of the love and faith you have for the Master Jesus, which brims over to other believers. And I keep praying that this faith we hold in common keeps showing up in the good things we do, and that people recognize Christ in all of it. Friend, you have no idea how good your love makes me feel, doubly so when I see your hospitality to fellow believers. ⁸⁻⁹ In line with all this I have a favor to ask of you.

As Christ's ambassador and now a prisoner for him, I wouldn't hesitate to command this if I thought it necessary, but I'd rather make it a personal request.¹⁰⁻¹⁴ While here in jail, I've fathered a child, so to speak. And here he is, hand-carrying this letter—Onesimus! He was useless to you before;

Let me stop there for a second because the word Onesimus means "useful" in Greek and he says Onesimus was useless to you. One of the indignities of the American slave trade was that they would take people whose name might have been Kuntakintay and turned them into a slave name like Fortunate, or Carpenter, or Sailor, or Hardworking. This slave's name was Useful—Onesimus. Here he is hand carrying this letter. Onesimus. He was useless to you before, he ran away.

Now he's useful to both of us. I'm sending him back to you, but it feels like I'm cutting off my right arm. I wanted in the worst way to keep him here as your stand-in to help out while I'm in jail for the Message. But I didn't want to do anything behind your back, make you do a good deed you hadn't already agreed to. ¹⁵⁻¹⁶ So, Maybe it's all for the best that you lost him for a while (diplomatic speak for maybe he ran away). You're getting him back now for good—not as a mere slave, but a true Christian brother! That's what he was to me—he'll be even more than that to you. And then Paul says, ¹⁷⁻²⁰ So if you still consider me a comrade-in-arms, welcome him back like you would welcome me. If he damaged anything (breaking out) or if he owes you anything (stealing money), chalk it up to my account. This is my personal signature—Paul—and I stand behind it.

Now that's important because Paul apparently has not written all the letters that we read in the Bible, he has dictated them to somebody because he has some maybe arthritic condition or some eye condition. He cannot write himself so occasionally at the end of a letter he will say, "See what big letters I make with my own hand" to validate the letter. He says right here *this is so important I'm signing it myself and I stand behind it*. Paul the diplomat. Then he becomes a little less diplomatic.

He says, I don't need to remind you, do I, that you owe your very life to me? Do me this big favor, friend. You'll be doing it for Christ, but it will do my heart good. I know you well enough to know you will. You'll probably go far beyond what I've written. By the way, get a room ready. Because of your prayers, I fully expect to be your guest again. ²³⁻²⁵ All the best to you from the Master, Jesus Christ.
[Philemon 1 (MSG)]

Today you've read a whole book of the Bible and you've heard the story beneath the story. It's the only personal letter of Paul's that survives. It somehow gets into the Bible's sixty-six stories and I think in part it gets in because we can see ourselves in this story because some of you are Onesimus. Something has gone wrong, maybe under the surface, but something has gone wrong and you have been branded by it; you can't get rid of it, you're hiding from it, it cripples your relationships, you can't go home. Even if you go home you can't go home because you cannot talk about this—you're

Onesimus. Some of you are Philemons today; basically good, but you have broken relationships. And even if those broken relationships are not your fault, there is the pain of not being able to forgive, and frankly it would not change everything if you just said, "That's okay." Somebody comes up to you and says, "I'm sorry", you say, "That's okay", that is not the end of the story, it's what happens next that's the end of the story. We don't know the end of Philemon and Onesimus's story. I'm sort of glad we don't know it, but we don't know it. But let me tell you that I know that saying "I'm sorry" and "That's okay" does not end the story. This is the one congregation that probably would.

How many of you were here when we had a missions pastor named Brad McNaught? Raise your hand. Okay, so maybe half of us. It was shortly after I came 22-23 years ago. We had a wonderfully gifted missions pastor. He was great with the poor, built all kinds of relationships, did things we still do, and over the course of it he got over his skiis and started to take the checks that we sent to mission partners, and if we sent \$10,000 to World Vision he would write a check for \$8,000. And if we sent a check to Feed My Starving Children for \$15,000 he'd send a check for \$12,000, so nobody knew. And that's how he kept a lifestyle afloat that we thought was a result of his wife's job, but it wasn't, it was him. And like all scams, finally Brad was caught, and we decided one of the things that would mark us as a community was to deal with this out in the open. And we decided as a group of elders that we would make this a public process and that we would not seek criminal charges against Brad because we were talking about restitution and reconciliation. Part of the process of reconciliation was that we brought in a mediator—someone who would stand between Brad and the congregation, who would help us learn to talk to each other with truth. And this mediator was skilled and I just distinctly remember one of the first things he said was, "We cannot have meetings at Christ Presbyterian Church because it's not neutral ground for Brad. He feels like he's walking into enemy territory." And some of you may even have been at the meeting that we had up at St. Stephens. It was one of the meetings where we had a big circle of people. Probably fifty people came; we were a much smaller church at the time. Fifty people came and they went around the circle and said, "Brad, I appreciate you coming, but I'm still confused." The next person, "Brad, I forgive you, I love you. Please, just let's forget this ever happened." The next person would say, "I'm not ready to forget. Am I telling my kids that if they steal something it's okay?" The next person would say, "Brad, I love you, but I don't understand." All the way around these different reactions would come—people being very honest, very un-Minnesotan. And I'm sitting next to Brad and he's sweating like crazy, and we're working around the circle and straight up from me at the other end of the circle is a retired Air Force officer with a back that was so stiff that it never bent. His name was Joe Stoutenberg. Many of you remember Joe. And I could see as it got closer and closer to Joe, he's leaning forward and he's looking grim, but they got to Joe and Joe leaned forward and said, "Brad, boy, Brad, I would've given you the blankety blank money, and I'm hurt that you didn't ask me." And I thought he was going to right there rip Brad a new one and he leans further forward and says, "Brad, the money is still yours—I'll give it to you anytime." And you could just see this knot in Brad's stomach unwind because he had expected justice and instead he received mercy.

I really don't know how the story of Philemon and Onesimus ended, but I'm sure there was a circle of the church when Onesimus the slave is at one end and Philemon is at the other. This story is told around . . . the letter is read around 60 AD. Within 25 or 30 years, these letters and the early accounts of the Gospels are being collected in different churches around the Roman Empire. What's happened is that they have elected regional leaders called bishops. That's where we get the bishop word. And the bishops say, "Well, Paul said that he sent a letter to Ephesus, and Laodicea, and Colossae. We ought to get those all in the same place because he said to share them." As a matter of fact at the end of Colossians it says:

15 "Please give my greetings to the brothers and sisters at Laodicea, to Nympha that's why the church meets in her house. 16 After you've read this letter pass it on to them so they can read it, too, and you should read the letter that I wrote to them. [Colossians 4:15-16]

So they start collecting the letters and the sayings of Jesus. One of the most important to them, the bishop of Ephesus takes all of his letters, copies them, and sends them to the most famous bishop, the bishop of Antioch. His name was Ignatius, out of which Ignatius of Loyola and the Ignatian movement comes. And he says, *when you have a chance have someone copy these, please send them all back.* Well, the response of the bishop of Antioch is interesting. Ignatius says, "To the bishop of Ephesus, my dear brother of Onesimus, I understand that once you were useless, but now God has made you useful." The former slave has now honored two of his spiritual fathers; the one that brought him to Christ in jail and the other one who received a letter that set a slave free and let him become bishop. It's a letter so precious that even though it's private he can't help slipping it in to the Bible. He slips it into the Bible right where it belongs because don't you covet that kind of freedom today? Don't you want that for people who walk through these doors? Can you imagine the first week that they read the letter that Paul wrote to the Colossians and at the end it says, "Greet Onesimus", and everyone turns to Philemon and they're going, *oh my, oh my, what's going to happen now?* And some of them know that Paul sent Philemon a special letter, a one-on-one letter, a private letter, and what did that say? Nobody knew what that letter said, but then as they did every week and we do sometimes, they gathered around the Lord's Table, and being the host, Onesimus probably would have done this: Onesimus probably would have said, "This is the Body of Christ broken for you and the Cup of Salvation, come and eat." And sooner or later Onesimus the slave would have come and knelt in front of Philemon the master, and one servant of God would have served another servant of God, the Bread of Life. That's what's here for you. Come on forward. These are the gifts of God for us, the children of God.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.