

September 8, 2019
The Business of Faith
Annette Hill Briggs
Philemon 1:1-21

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Few words have as much power to re-align a room full of perfectly politically correct progressive-white-people liberals talking about race in America as the word “reparations.” It’s one of those words that proves words don’t have meanings; they have usages.

The simple meaning of “reparations” is “the payment of a debt owed.” America has an unpaid debt for labor done, but not yet paid for. Labor for which everyone but the

laborers themselves were paid. In usage, it means so many things to so many people that bubble up in anger, shame, guilt, conflict.

Why bring it up here? Because Paul and Timothy's letter to Philemon has been used by the church in America to discuss slavery in various ways, but so far – in my experience – not with regard to debts owed. How these debts are resolved among the followers of Jesus, Paul writes, is not the business of business, but rather the business of faith.

Let us pray: *You have paid a debt you did not owe, O Christ, for a debt I could not pay – which is not to say there are debts outstanding that we cannot yet make right in this life by your grace and with the courage of this faith. “Let goods and kindred go,” we sing. May we hear in this text your call to let go our goods for the work of justice. Amen.*

Philemon is one of the leaders of a house church in an unnamed town. The church meets in his house. The letter, though addressed to the leadership and the congregation in verses two and three, shifts to speaking directly to Philemon in verse four – a shift we can't see in English, since “y-o-u” is both singular and plural. In Greek, verses two and three are second person plural, as in “y'all.” From verse four, Paul speaks to “you” – Philemon – with his colleagues, his congregation and us overhearing everything Paul has to say to Philemon. Not secretly, like eavesdropping, but on purpose. Paul means to add the pressure of being watched, as Philemon hears this letter about him, read to him.

I get the sense that Paul is bringing up old business here. After waxing on a bit about Philemon's good faith, Paul comes to the point, saying (and I paraphrase), *“My brother, I appeal to you to do your duty with regard to Onesimus.”* There is no introduction of the topic. It sounds mid-conversation. There are details we don't know, like how Philemon and the slave got separated; how Paul knows Philemon doesn't want it back. What has Philemon already said on the subject? What has Onesimus said? I would love to have been a prison mouse, listening to Paul and Onesimus talking together. All that is sure: Philemon doesn't want the slave back. Paul is determined to send him back.

The name Onesimus means *useful*. Paul's usage of the name is especially clever; he turns it around to point out Philemon's opposite conviction, that Onesimus is useless. *He is indeed both useful to us both*, Paul says, *and you have a duty to him. A duty I have the right to command you to do, but prefer to appeal that you do because it is the right thing to do.* That is classic Paul right there. He does it twice in the text, again when promising to pay whatever costs are associated with the return of Onesimus: *I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.*

I suspect two things with regard to Philemon's duty: if Philemon is the man of faith Paul said he was, I suspect he'd have already taken Onesimus back, if he thought it the right thing to do. And I suspect Philemon might have been offended at Paul's use of the word “*duty*” with regard to his property. Slaves were property, not persons. Plows were property. Buildings were property. Land was property. Slaves had duties.

Slave-owners, also known as property owners, had rights. And property owners, as we know from our own time and place, are generally resistant to being told what they can and cannot do with their own property. “Property rights” we call them.

As a property owner, Philemon had the right to keep his slaves and do with them as he saw fit. He had the right to sell them if he wanted. If a slave ran away, Philemon had the right to kill it – the legal right to prevent it from further devaluing his property. It sounds worse than it was to our ears, because we have trouble thinking of Onesimus as property.

Another way of listing Philemon’s rights as a property owner: he had the right to

- increase his costs by continuing to maintain a slave that has proven useless; (what do we call that? “Sunk cost fallacy”);
- cut his losses by selling the useless slave now instead of later;
- cut his losses AND avoid the hassle of a sale by exercising his legal right to put the useless slave down.

Now I realize how horrifically awful that sounds, but I want you to get a sense of how normal Philemon’s reality was, so as to hear how outrageous Paul sounds to Philemon and his congregation. *My brother I appeal to you to do your duty with regard to Onesimus.* What *duty* exactly? Philemon's duty as a business person? as a provider for his family and this church that meets in his house? as a recipient of God's grace in Christ Jesus? as a disciple of Jesus and a leader in his church? To which of those duties does Paul *appeal* but not *command*, as he says?

Seems that when he has his church groove on, Philemon knows what's what. But when he gets to his office Monday morning, he's all business and his faith doesn't come along. There is no more preachy thing to ask than “*does your faith go to work with you on Monday?*” and probably nothing more presumptuous by someone who works in a mostly empty church building several days a week. The text asks, all the same: will we do our duty, whatever business is at hand?

I can imagine Philemon thinking Paul has no idea what he deals with? ALL the duty to which he feels bound, the pressures of maintaining so much property, of trying to turn a profit when the margins are so thin, to have not just a family and a business but now a church too depending on him to keep everything afloat. And with regard to this Onesimus mess – why couldn't Paul understand that of his three choices none of them were good?

And Paul's offer of a fourth is so outrageous he would laugh or cuss if his whole congregation wasn't watching: *take him back and treat him like a brother.* Can you imagine a case competition at the Kelley School of Business for ANY business problem, to which students bring a presentation titled “*Take him home and treat him like a brother?*”? Their professor might – MIGHT – suggest they had misunderstood the problem from the

beginning. 2 x 7, 48 does not equal a bluebird. Ever. Is there even such a thing as multiple duties, conflicting duties, in the lives of believers – followers of Christ? Or are those conflicts simply the joints between the carefully constructed walls we've built between our faith lives and our real lives?

What Paul is actually doing here, is pounding away at the division between how we live and think and feel most of the time and how we live and feel and think when we revel in the sweetness of God's goodness to us in Christ Jesus and his grace, isn't it? Paul knows Philemon's good faith and does not hesitate to brag on it. He also knows that Philemon does not want Onesimus back and seems to feel no conflict there, no tugging at the edges of his heart or soul, where significant tugging ought to be.

Philemon had a business problem. Philemon's world agreed with him as to how to solve that problem. Philemon's church might also have agreed with him – cut his losses the least expensive way possible – while Paul's solution was a long-term, familial relationship. Paul is agreeing with the gospel. Relationships are the business of faith. Even the business of business, apparently. And unless we see this, friends, we aren't seeing the gospel yet. The gospel breaks down all those partitions with which we so carefully organize our lives, our rights and our responsibilities. At home and work and church, we have but one set of duties: to love God and to love our neighbors.

I'm not even sure it turns out to be bad business in business terms. Many businesses are testing it with good effect. Patagonia is one. But for those who call ourselves believers, it's the *good* that gets the accent when speaking of *good business*. It wasn't Philemon's fault he didn't know before, but it is his choice to learn and know now, to be not just changed, but utterly transformed. Now obviously I have no idea how Philemon reacted to this, but neither does anyone else. And it just makes sense to me that someone who considered his runaway slave useless, who didn't want him back, who was having to be talked into taking him back at all, would be gobsmacked at the idea of receiving him as a brother.

Paul might also have cut his losses in the least expensive way possible. He could easily enough have put Timothy and Onesimus on a bus to Philippi carrying a letter to Lydia, instructing her to take the boy in, treat him like a brother. Conflict avoided. And what else would be avoided? The stalling for another season, another generation the reconciliation, the transformation, the divine justice inherent to the gospel they all preached and professed to believe.

Which brings me back to the subject of reparations. For Philemon to do right by Onesimus, something has to give. And that *something* is sole ownership of the rights and privileges that belong to all God's daughters and sons: the right to be known and treated as a human being, a soul endowed with the image of God and possessed by the spirit of

Christ, someone useful and deserving of the same respect as any other human being, someone whose labor is valuable and deserving of just reward.

We aren't given to know what Philemon chose to do with Onesimus, only that he knew what the gospel asked of him: that he understand that his business – all his business – was now the business of faith, which made it the business of family and of justice in all his relationships, even relationships he'd never before recognized as relationships at all.

One beauty of the gospel, friends, is: it is never, never, never too late to do justice. Would you pray with me?