

March 11, 2007 by Steve Brandon



Pictures of the Cross

Philemon 16-19

1. Substitution (verse 17)
2. Justification (verse 18)
3. Redemption (verse 19)
4. Reconciliation (verse 16)

In John 15:13, Jesus said, "Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Indeed, that's what Jesus did with His earthly life. He "laid down His life for His friends." He willingly chose to die upon the cross in the place of His friends -- those who would believe in Him. And in so doing, Jesus demonstrated His great love for us. In fact, this is the reason why we gather together each Sunday morning: because Jesus laid down His life for us.

But now, listen to what Jesus calls us to do in the previous verse. John 15:12 reads like this: "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you" (John 15:12). This is amazing if you would think about it for a bit. The life of Jesus is our model of love we are called to imitate. We ought to give ourselves completely for others. As Christ Jesus has loved us, we are called to love others with a similar love. Paul wrote, "He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf." The idea here is simple. Christ Jesus died for us, so that we might live in a new way. We don't live for ourselves. Rather, we live for God. We demonstrate this by loving others with the same sacrificial love that Jesus demonstrated for us.

In our text this morning, we will see an example of one who gave himself in sacrificial love to another. This is what Paul did for Onesimus. Paul gave himself for the life of Onesimus. He put himself on this line for the benefit of Onesimus. As we have seen these past few weeks, Paul is urging Philemon to receive back Onesimus, his runaway slave. Paul begun by encouraging Philemon for the way in which God is working in his life (verses 4-7). Paul has spoken about what forgiveness entails (verses 8-9). Paul told of the way in which Onesimus is a changed man (verses 10-13). Beginning in verse 17, Paul puts his life on the line, giving himself completely for Onesimus.

For my outline this morning, I want to show you some of the ways in which Paul gave himself for Onesimus. But, in so doing, I want to point out to you the great parallels that exist between Paul's commitment to give himself for Onesimus and between Christ's commitment to give Himself for us. In this way, Paul is a great picture of what Jesus accomplished for us on the cross. In fact, you can take the different subjects (Onesimus and Philemon and Paul) of this letter and use them as illustrative of the different subjects involved in our own salvation.

Onesimus is like each one of us. Onesimus was born a slave. We too were born slaves to our sin. Romans 6:20 says, "You were slaves to sin." Onesimus became a transgressor. He ran away from Philemon and wronged his master. We too have become transgressors. Romans 3:23 says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." We can only assume that Onesimus didn't have the means to repay Philemon. We too don't have the means to pay back God for the wrong that we have done him. Our only resource within ourselves is to try to work it off. But, the Bible is clear, "by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Romans 3:20). Onesimus was destined to death. This was the typical punishment for a runaway slave. We too are deserving of death. Romans 6:23 says, "The wages of sin is death." We deserve to die for our sins. Onesimus is like us. Luther summed up the application well, saying that "we are the Lord's Onesimee." [\[1\]](#)

Philemon is like God. He is the master over Onesimus. We stand before God like Onesimus stood before Philemon. He is the one whom Onesimus wronged in running away. He owns Onesimus. He has the authority to inflict the death sentence upon Onesimus. He is the one that holds the key of forgiveness and reconciliation. The third player in the drama of this letter is Paul. **Paul illustrates the life of Christ.** Paul pleads before Philemon on behalf of one of his children, just as Jesus does. "My little children, ... if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:2). Paul gives his own life to Philemon as surety that the debts will be paid and the wrongs will be made right. This is exactly what Jesus did in his death.

In our text this morning, we will see Paul pleading Philemon for the life of Onesimus in a similar way that Jesus pleads before God, the Father, for our lives. In my message, I want to pick up on the similarities and use them to press home the realities of our salvation in Christ. In this way, my message will be a bit allegorical. Obviously, this isn't the way that I normally preach. But, as I looked at the text, these things came clear in the text. And other theologians pointed this out as well. And, any way in which we can dig deeper into our understanding of the cross of Christ will be of benefit to us. The application will be clear, as Paul was a great model of loving others as Christ loved. He was laying down his life for his friend (John 15:13).

Let's first consider verse 17. Paul writes, "If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me." This is the concept of ...

1. Substitution (verse 17)

Paul is telling Philemon, "When Onesimus returns to you, consider it to be me who is returning to you. I know full well that Onesimus has done you wrong. I'm not denying the wrong that he has done. But, listen, I've done you no wrong. I know that you would accept me when I return. Onesimus is so dear to me that I'm asking you, Philemon, please accept Onesimus in the same way as you would accept me."

This is really a picture of what Christ Jesus does for those who believe in Him. Jesus pleads before the Father, "Father, this is one of my loved ones. I know that he has wronged you through his sins in many ways. I'm not denying the wrong that he has done. But, I'm making a plea to you. I know that you accept Me into your presence. He is one of my loved ones. When he comes into Your presence, accept him as you would Me."

We often sing the words, ...

Because the sinless Savior died,
My sinful soul is counted free,
For God the Just is satisfied,
To look on Him and pardon me. [\[2\]](#)

In the cross, Jesus became our substitute. This is taught in verses such as 2 Corinthians 5:21, "[God, the Father] made [Jesus], who knew no sin [to be] sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." Jesus took our place, (as our substitute), bearing the punishment that we deserved. We are privileged, then, to take the place of Jesus, (as our substitute), receiving the righteousness that He earned. The result is that God will accept us as he would accept Jesus, Himself.

This is often called, "the substitutionary atonement" of Christ. When Jesus died upon the cross, it was for our sins. He died in our place. This concept is all over the Bible. Let me give you only a few verses. Isaiah 53:5, "He was pierced through **for** our transgressions. He was crushed **for** our iniquities. The chastening **for** our well-being fell upon Him." Each of the phrases here speak about Jesus taking the punishment Himself for what our sins deserved. It was Him **for** us. Isaiah 53:6, "The LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him." Again, the same idea is present. Our iniquity fell on Jesus. Consider these other verses that speak of the same concept:

1 Corinthians 15:3, "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins."

Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us."

1 Peter 2:24, "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross."

1 John 3:16, "We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren."

All of these verses allude to the one side of the equation, that Jesus bore the punishment that we deserved upon the cross. But, there is the other side of this substitution as well. We receive the righteousness that He earned with his life. Just as Jesus took our sins in His body on the cross, so also does He give us His righteousness. Ultimately, this is what allows us to stand before God: the righteousness of Christ imputed to us through faith.

In Philippians 3:9, Paul spoke about how he stands before the Lord, "not having a righteousness of my own derived from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith" (Phil. 3:9). Paul's hope and trust before the Lord wasn't a righteousness that was of his own working. Rather, it was the righteousness that comes as a result of the working of God through faith. With this righteousness, there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1), because those who are in Christ have received His righteousness. "Christ died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, so that He might bring us to God" (1 Peter 3:18). His death gives Jesus the authority to bring us to God, clean in His sight. It is through the sacrifice of Jesus that "we have been sanctified" (Heb. 10:10). It is in Christ Jesus that we are "made complete" (Col. 2:10).

This is what substitution is. Christ took what we deserved. We received what Christ earned. This the foundation of the gospel of Christ. This is the core of the gospel. Charles Spurgeon once said, "There are in the world many theories of atonement; but I cannot see any atonement in any one, except in this doctrine of substitution." [\[3\]](#) This is what Paul was modeling for us in our text this morning. To Philemon, he said, "Accept [Onesimus] as you would me."

Let's look at our next picture. This is the picture of ...

2. Justification (verse 18)

It comes in verse 18. Paul writes, "But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account." Here, we enter into the legal realm.

Paul was telling Philemon, "If Onesimus has wronged you in any way, charge it to my account. If Onesimus took any money when he ran away, transfer the charges to my bank account. If Onesimus stole anything when he left, estimate the price of the stolen goods and put it on my tab. If you spent any money in searching for Onesimus, (paying a search committee, advertising with posters, putting it in the local news, etc., ...) just tell me how much you spent. If Onesimus has caused you any stress that has caused you financial loss in your business, estimate your costs and put them on my account. I want you to consider Onesimus free from any legal, financial, or personal obligation. In whatever way he has wronged you, take it off of him and place it upon me. Let Onesimus go free. You can deal with me regarding the repayment of these things."

This is what Paul was saying. "I don't want Onesimus to pay for the wrong that he has done. Let him go free. Charge it all to me and to my account. No payment is necessary for Onesimus to make."

My father was a physician. At one point, he was taken to court for malpractice. (Ultimately, he was found not-guilty). I remember being in the courtroom as the accuser's lawyer detailed all of the charges that they were seeking in this lawsuit. The lawyer said something like this (though certainly, the details and the dollar figures are all wrong), "Ambulance trip to the hospital: \$500." Upon stating this fact, the lawyer placed a sheet of paper on the table before the jury, which detailed the charges. The lawyer continued, "Paramedic's bill: \$450." Again, it was accompanied by a sheet of paper laid upon the table with a copy of the bill the client had received. The same thing was repeated several

more times, "Emergency room bill: \$2500. Doctor's fees: \$400. Radiology fees: \$200. X-ray costs: \$250. Surgery bill: \$13,000. Costs of stay in hospital after surgery: \$5,000. Follow-up office visits: \$3,500. Rehabilitation costs: \$10,500. Lawyer's fees: \$20,000. Increased insurance premiums over a lifetime: \$50,000. Loss of work due to injury: \$30,000. Loss of work over one's lifetime due to injury: \$350,000. Pain and suffering over one's lifetime: \$500,000." I remember the lawyer went on for about 15 minutes detailing each charge, and placing the proof for each of these charges upon a table to make a dramatic effect for the jury.

At the break, I spoke with one of my father's lawyers. He said, "Boy did they make a mistake. They only took about 15 minutes. Normally, in malpractice suits, the prosecuting attorneys will often go for an hour or two or three, racking up the charges with as much detail as possible. They want to leave the impression upon the jury of the extent to which the patient was wronged. Fifteen minutes was hardly anything compared with what they might have done."

This is what Paul was asking Philemon to do. "Detail the charges, Philemon. Let me know exactly how much they are. And then, release Onesimus of all responsibility of them. Forgive Onesimus completely. Charge them to my account."

This is exactly what God does in our justification. All of our sins mount a debt that we owe to God. The Old Testament was very clear on these things. Every sin required a price to be paid. The New Testament is just as clear as well. Each of our sins mount a debt that we owe to God. Were a lawyer to come and prosecute us by detailing all of our sins before a jury, it wouldn't merely take 15 minutes. It wouldn't take a few hours. It very well could take a few days! For some of us, it could take a few weeks! The older we live, the longer it will take! But, Jesus Christ arises before the throne as our defense attorney. He is our advocate. He pleads our case by saying, "Father, if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (Philemon 18).

A few months back, we looked at a passage in Colossians that explains what took place in our justification. Colossians 2:13, 14, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross." With these words, Paul is describing how the decrees and righteous demands of the law are against us. These decrees tell us what to do. (For instance, ... you shall have no other gods before me. Do not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. Honor your father and mother. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Do not covet.) But, these decrees give no power to accomplish them. They merely point out when we are wrong. They give us no commendation when we are in the right. They only condemn. And the condemnation comes hard upon us when the law does its work on our souls. And so, at the end of the day, the law has an entire list of sins that are against us.

But then, the good news comes: through the work of Jesus Christ, they are taken away from us. And so, as the prosecuting attorney goes after us, he finds that all of the charges have been dismissed. We go free, because the charges have been transferred to another account. In actuality, they have been nailed to a cross. God will no longer come after us for payback as our sins deserve. Rather, he will go to Jesus Christ.

This is what justification is. We are declared righteous by the divine court of law. When the accusers (Satan and his angels) come against us to judge us, they find nothing. When God, the Father asks them, "Which of you convicts this believer of sin?" they are forced to say, "We have no charges to press, your honor." And then, the Father slams his gavel upon the bench and says, "Not guilty." This is justification. In the divine court of heaven, God makes the declaration, "Not guilty."

Now, some have defined justification with these words. Justification: "Just as if I had never sinned." There is some truth in this. When we are justified, we stand before God completely innocent. We are as innocent as we would be if we had never sinned. But, that's not the entire story of justification. Because, in justification, it's not merely that our sins are imagined never to have existed. Rather, justification acknowledges the sin, but also declares that the sin will no longer be held against us. The debt we owe is no longer on our account. God will go elsewhere to get the payment that He demands. This is what Paul wanted of Philemon. "Don't go to Onesimus to get the payment of the wrongs he has committed. Rather, come to me. I'll take care of your bill."

In verse 19, Paul shows how he will handle the account. It's the back side of justification. It's called, ...

3. Redemption (verse 19)

Justification deals in the legal realm with guilt and innocence. At this point, we are leaving the legal world to enter the market place, where we will deal with the actual payment being made. Paul says, "I, Paul am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it" (verse 19). Paul is putting down his guarantee to make the payment. He will guarantee the redemption price for Onesimus, the runaway slave. Paul was going to pay the price.

I remember going to the closing of our house here in Rockford. Before we moved here to Rockford, we were in contact with our local bank in DeKalb, where we used to live. When we got our financial details together, the bank in DeKalb issued a cashier's check for us to bring to the closing. In effect, it became the guarantee that we had enough money to purchase the home. If there were any problems with that check or with the funds available, it wasn't our problem. It was the bank's problem, because they are the ones who guaranteed the funds.

This is what Paul was saying to Philemon. "I'm giving you a blank cashier's check. You fill it out with the amount of the wrong that Onesimus has caused you. I will guarantee it for you. I will come up with the funds. If, for whatever reason, the payment can't be made, don't go after Onesimus, but go after me! I'm taking full responsibility for the injustices that he has done. I have signed my name to this letter. I will repay it."

This is exactly what Jesus did for us upon the cross. Upon the cross, Jesus paid for our sins! We were held captive by our sins, but Jesus has paid the ransom price. Again, this thought is all over Scripture. Galatians 4:4-5, "When the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that we might redeem those who were under the law." Titus 2:14, Christ Jesus "gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed."

Before Jesus was ever nailed to the cross, He anticipated His work. Mark 10:45, "Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." After the cross, Jesus explained His work. Luke 24:46-47, "Thus it is written, that the Christ would suffer and rise again from the dead the third day, and that repentance for forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." In eternity, the worship in heaven will forever be about the slaughtered lamb who purchased redemption for His people. Revelation 5:9, "Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation."

In the market place, everything has its price. Apples go for a bit more than a dollar per pound. You can get three oranges for a dollar. Two bucks will get you a gallon of milk. For two hundred dollars you can purchase a nice digital camera. A thousand dollars will get you a nice computer. Now, for sin, the price is death. When someone sins, a sacrifice is necessary. Hebrews 9:22, "According to the law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness." This is why Jesus died! He had to pay the price for sin. Upon the cross, Jesus paid the price. In paying the price, Jesus set the captives free. 1 Peter 1:18-19, "You were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ."

The blood of Christ is precious to us. Apart from the blood of Christ, we are enslaved to our sin. Apart from the blood of Christ, we are under the wrath of God. Apart from the blood of Christ, we will spend a Christless eternity in endless punishment (Matt. 25:46). But, the blood that Jesus spilt upon the cross changes all of that. We now are free! Our freedom came with a great cost.

Picture yourself an American soldier in Iraq. One day, you find yourself captured in Baghdad. You are being held captive behind enemy lines, by those hostile toward our government. They force you to make a video telling of your situation to the entire world. They force you to demand a \$5 million ransom price for your release. Now, what hope do you have? The only hope that you have is that the ransom price would be paid. If not, you will meet your certain death. This is very parallel to the state of our souls before Christ. We have been held hostage under the grip of sin and Satan. The ransom price needed to be paid for us to be set free.

The good news is that Jesus paid the ransom. We simply need to believe and we will be set free from the sin's grasp on us. The cost was great! The eternal Son of God gave His life to free us from our sins. In giving His life, He purchased the church. In Acts 20:28, we read that "God ... purchased [the church] with His own blood." This is redemption. For the freedom of Onesimus, Paul was willing to pay the redemption price. "I will repay it" (verse 19).

Now, I love the way in which Paul seeks to remind Philemon of how much he owed Paul. Verse 19, "(Not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well)." At some point, the lives of Paul and Philemon had crossed paths. During their interaction, Paul had shared the good news of life in Christ Jesus with Philemon, who believed. And in a very real way, Philemon owed a great debt to Paul for sharing this news with him. With these words, Paul was certainly wishing to get out of paying the full price it would cost (unlike Jesus ever did). Nevertheless, Paul was willing to pay the price.

We have seen three pictures of the cross: (1) Substitution (verse 17); (2) Justification (verse 18); (3) Redemption (verse 19). Let us turn to a fourth.

4. Reconciliation (verse 16)

With this point, we move out of the marketplace, where redemption focused its attention. We move into the home with our family and friends. We move into the area of relationships. For this point, I want to go back to verse 16, where Paul wrote of how Philemon would now have Onesimus back forever, "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." With these words, Paul is putting forth the idea into Philemon's mind of the reconciliation that the cross brings.

Onesimus was a slave of Philemon. But, in coming to faith, Onesimus became "more than a slave." He became "a beloved brother." This is the great reality of Christianity. There are no class distinctions among us. Now certainly, each of us fulfill a different role. Each of us stand differently in society. Some of us are rich. Some of us are poor. Some are old. Some are young. Some of us hold positions of prominence and authority and leadership. Some of us hold very little by way of leadership in this life. We come from different nationalities. But, at the cross of Christ, we are all family. We are brothers and sisters in Jesus.

The Bible frequently uses these terms to describe fellow believers. In verse 1, Paul called Timothy, "Our brother." There was no flesh and blood relationship with him. The relationship was all spiritual. In verse 2, we see Aphia being called, "Our sister." In verse 20, Philemon is addressed as "brother." And in verse 16 (as we saw a bit earlier), Onesimus is identified as "a beloved brother." Indeed, the church is a family. In 1 Timothy 3:15, we hear the church being called, "The household of God."

This reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon is the theme of the book of Philemon. Onesimus sinned against Philemon and thus, was estranged from him. Paul's goal of this letter was to bring them back together.

But again, as has been the thrust of my message this morning, we can take these things and equally apply them to our salvation in Christ. Onesimus and Philemon were at odds with each other. Paul was calling them to be reconciled to each other. So also were we at odds with God. But Christ has called us to be reconciled to God. Through Christ Jesus, we are reconciled to God.

The Bible speaks about this in various ways. It uses the term, "reconciliation." "God ... reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Cor. 5:18, 19). God reconciles us by not holding our sins against us, but by removing them in the cross, through substitution and justification, and redemption. Whereas once we were at enmity with God, now we have peace with God. "If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:10). Reconciliation takes

place when hostile parties are brought near to each other.

The Bible also speaks about our reconciliation to God in terms of adoption into the family of God. Romans 8:15, "You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father!'" We have been adopted into the family of God. Through faith in Christ, we are now called children of God. As children, we can now address God as our "daddy," which is what "Abba!" means. These words are describing an intimate relationship, in which we have access to the Lord.

You all know of how much greater the intimacy of a child is with his parents, rather than with a stranger. I think about my 3½ year-old daughter. There are time when I sit her in my lap. Her face is two inches from mine. She is examining my face closely. She is pointing out all of my blemishes. She is sticking her finger up my nose. She is looking in my mouth, touching my teeth. She does this without reservation at all, because, I'm her "daddy." This is the closeness of reconciliation.

I remember doing the same with my father. I remember sitting in his lap. We kids would press his nose, and dad would say, "Ding-dong." We would pry open his mouth wide and he would say, "Hello!" We would shout down his moth, "Anybody there?" We would then carry on a conversation with this man in my father's throat. This describes the intimacy of a family relationship. There is total access.

As children of God, we have access to His throne "by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19). The writer to the Hebrews well outlines the implications for us in chapter 10, verse 22. "Let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22). And this fact ought always to blow your mind, ... that we, mere mortals can be a part of the family of God! And yet, this is what Scripture says. "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and such we are!" (1 John 3:1).

This is what it means to be reconciled to God. We are now on intimate terms with God. There is no barrier between us and God. We have been adopted into His family. We can come to God "in full assurance of faith" (Heb. 10:22).

We have seen four pictures of the cross: (1) Substitution (verse 17); (2) Justification (verse 18); (3) Redemption (verse 19); and (4) Reconciliation (verse 16). Each of them give us an image of the cross that helps to complete the entire picture of what took place on the cross. May we study and know and cherish the pictures.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on March 11, 2007 by Steve Brandon.
For more information see www.rvbc.cc.

[1] Quoted by S. Lewis Johnson in his message on Philemon, which can be found at <http://www.believerschapeldallas.org>. At this point, I need to acknowledge my indebtedness to S. Lewis Johnson for the seed of my message. During the last half of his message, he put forth Paul as a picture of the sacrifice of Christ (much like I have done in this message).

[2] Charitie Lees Bancroft, 1841-1923.

[3] Charles Spurgeon, Sermon #173, delivered on Sabbath Morning, January 24, 1858, at the Music Hall, Royal Surrey Gardens. It can be found here: www.spurgeon.org.