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**The Gift of God's Son** by Lucas DaCosta

**Read Philemon**

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon about his run-away slave Onesimus. We don't know how Onesimus became a Christian but he met Paul when Paul was a prisoner in Rome. There are three principles we can learn from this letter.

**1. God teaches us that church leaders should lead in love and God's people should obey voluntarily:** The striking difference between the society in which Paul lived and the one we live in is that Paul's society had a very strict hierarchical structure. Basically there were the elite, then the Roman citizens and then the poor, the disabled and the slaves. Our hierarchical structures are not as strictly enforced. Paul's letter was very counter-cultural. Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love when he could have commanded him. "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. ... But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favour you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. (v8-9 & 14). Christ Jesus said, "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ...and whoever wants to be first must be your slave just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.." (Matt 20:26-28) The kingdom of God is different from the Roman world where there was enforced rule, lording it over the people. In v9 Paul refers to himself as the 'old man'. He could be referring to his status as an elder and apostle referring to his office and authority in the church. Paul says the elders were not to lord it over the church but was to set an example to the flock guiding the people in love. An elder has authority to exclude a consistently impenitent sinner from the church with the hope that that person would repent and be restored and welcomed back into the church. (1Tim). Paul compares an elder with a father when he says in his letter to the church in Thessalonica that he encouraged, comforted and urged them to live a life worthy of God. Elders, like parents, have the God-given responsibility to love and encourage as well as to discipline disobedient children because voluntary obedience is pleasing to God.

**2. God teaches us that we should deny ourselves for the sake of others:** The three characters in this letter are called to deny themselves in order to do what is best for others. In the Roman world Onesimus' crimes were very serious. He was a run-away slave and he had stolen from his owner. Paul wants Onesimus to go back to his master. Paul does not cut corners. With Onesimus he wanted things done properly. He couldn't turn a blind eye to what was going on, it needed to be sorted. This was a big deal for Onesimus. Onesimus needed to deny himself, go back to his master and get the issues sorted.

Philemon had to deny himself too by receiving Onesimus, not as a slave but as a brother. (v16) Philemon would lose financially because of what Onesimus had stolen and Onesimus would no longer be an asset as a slave. Philemon would have to give up any desire for vengeance. He would have to forgive and to love. He was called to deny his own nature and submit to Christ.

It wasn't easy for Paul to deny himself. He appealed to Philemon for Onesimus whom he 'began' when in chains. (v10) Figuratively speaking Paul went into labour for Onesimus. He suffered pain so Onesimus would believe in the gospel. They had a unique connection of love. It was a father-son relationship and Paul had to give Onesimus, his 'very heart' back, to Philemon. (v112)

**3. God teaches us that he provides a substitute for the weak.** Paul believed Onesimus would be forgiven but payment still needed to be made so Paul became the substitute who would pay Onesimus' debts. Paul tells Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul and Paul would pay his debts (v17). Paul was taking the place of the lowest of the lowest. He sided with the one who could by no means pay his debt. Every bit of honour, worthiness and virtual righteousness that belonged to Paul now belonged to Onesimus. Philemon was to look at Onesimus and see Paul the one to whom he owed so much: 'his very being' (v19). Paul provided a substitute so the weak would be forgiven.

**Let me tell you of Jesus**, his mercy, kindness, glory and goodness, his voluntary obedience: who, being in the very form of God didn't hold equality with God as something to be grasped but he voluntarily took the form of a servant, submitted to the will of the Father in every aspect of his life, joyfully. (see Isaiah 6:8) Sometimes we see things in the Bible we don't like because we have a sinful nature that is contrary to the nature of God. When we find things in God that we don't like we should gladly and voluntarily obey it. When faced with things that would make our lives more difficult like offering hospitality or supporting God's work financially we should do it voluntarily. By doing this we are glorifying God and honouring his name.

Jesus, while he was in great anguish and knowing he was about to face God's wrath prays to the Father, 'If possible let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not as I will but as you will.' Jesus is our example of self-denial, but not only Jesus but God the Father as well. He gave up 'his only begotten son'. When Paul sent his very heart to Philemon he was doing nothing more than imitating God the Father. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." (John 3:16) God gave up his Son because he loves the world and we should imitate Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Sometimes we have to give up our small ambitions and say, "not my will but your will be done". Maybe I'm not called to live in an affluent area but to live in a deprived area where the people need to see the gospel being lived out. Maybe I'm not called to have the job of my dreams but to be a missionary. Maybe I am called to deny myself and look after my elderly parents. Or maybe I am called to provide my children with a Christian education so they will be trained as God commands me to do instead of sending them off to a more convenient school.

"You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly ...But God demonstrates his love for us in this while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (Romans 5:6) Paul took the place of a lowly slave; Jesus took the place of the worst 'while we were yet sinners'. He became our substitute. He took onto himself the debt we could not pay. Our debt to God the Father was so immense that only a perfect man could pay it. So Jesus the Son of God gave himself up as a substitute. He paid the debt we could not pay. Now our identity is no longer as a sinner. When God looks at us he sees Jesus and his righteousness. He sees the payment, the beauty and purity belongs to the Son of God. Jesus is our substitute and representative. The mystery of the gospel is that everything that Jesus is we are. No more blame, condemnation or debt. Jesus paid it all. We cannot pay the debt for others but we can embrace the despised, the poor, the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the neglected, the drug-addict in our society. We can act as someone's representative in prayer and intercede for them. Maybe they have no strength left to pray for themselves.

So let us join Paul, Philemon and Onesimus who have demonstrated to us what it is like to live like God.