

# A Humble, Heartfelt Appeal

By Jeff Noblit

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**Bible Text:** Philemon 1:10-14  
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## **Anchored in Truth Ministries**

1915 Avalon Ave.  
Muscle Shoals, AL 35661

**Website:** [www.anchoredintruth.org](http://www.anchoredintruth.org)  
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Grab your Bibles and let's go back to the book of Philemon. I'll do a brief review for those who may be new to us this morning or just visiting today. Philemon is a book written by the Apostle Paul while he is incarcerated in a Roman prison. Actually, it was one of the shanty huts, numerous of them surrounding Nero's Imperial Palace, and Paul was housed in there, most likely locked up, chained up to a praetorian guardsman and there he could receive visitors; many people came and went. He, from all that we can surmise, in effect held church services there, Bible studies, preached the word, and while he was there, a runaway slave who had run away from his master, a master by the name of Philemon, appeared to Paul. I don't know how, we don't know how but somehow he came into contact with the Apostle Paul and through Paul's preaching and teaching, he came to faith in Christ, and not just that, he became a wonderful help and aid and blessing to the apostle there as he was incarcerated and still carrying on his ministry.

Well, Paul knew this master Philemon. Paul knew him very well. Philemon was a wealthy man who lived in Ephesus and Philemon, like the rest of his family and many people Philemon knew, they had come to faith in Christ when Paul was preaching and ministering on his missionary journey there in Ephesus. As a matter of fact, Philemon and Paul were very close. They had a lot of confidence, a lot of trust in each other. Paul lets it out very clearly that Philemon was a guy he could count on. He was devoted to Christ. He was devoted to his minister. He was devoted to his church. He was a true churchman. So that's a unique situation and only the providence of God could have worked that out. Here Onesimus has run away from his master Philemon. He runs into the Apostle Paul. He is gloriously converted. He becomes a great help and assistant to the Apostle Paul, but Paul knows he has to send him back to Philemon and get all of this fixed and straightened out because in this day and time, Philemon could have actually had Onesimus put to death as a runaway slave. So Paul has this letter penned. By this time he is too feeble to write so he is letting Luke, his assistant, transcribe his letters, and so Luke transcribes this letter from the lips of Paul. Paul gives it to Onesimus and Onesimus arrives back at Philemon's house. Can you imagine that day when Onesimus knocks on his master's door and Philemon opens the door. I don't know what Onesimus said. I think I'd have been prone to say, "Here, read this. Before you do anything, read this," because Philemon had no way to know Onesimus had met Paul. Philemon had no way to know what was in the letter or what this was all about.

So that's the letter we have. The letter, the runaway slave returning back to his master who happens to be a godly man and a close associate of the Apostle Paul, and it's a letter that was sent to him from the Apostle Paul. Now, we'll continue on this morning beginning in verse 10 and go through verse 14. Here's how the letter begins to unfold. Verse 10, writing to Philemon, Paul says,

10 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, 11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. 12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, 13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; 14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

I've entitled this section of the exposition "A Humble and Heartfelt Appeal." Here we find the apostle with deep emotion appealing to Philemon about receiving Onesimus back. Now keep this in the forefront of your mind: Paul is aiming toward a glorious forgiveness and reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus, and not just a reconciliation as master and slave, but a new type of work arrangement where it is one brother working for another brother in Christ. Let me say this at the upfront: true Christianity always exposes and removes forced slavery. Paul is just wanting this to work on out. But another thing and I think the most important thing that is here, that when Paul wrote this, he didn't just address it to Philemon and the members of Philemon's household, he addressed it to the church that met in Philemon's house. In other words, the apostle wanted all of this to play out in front of the church so that the church could see afresh and anew the glorious power of the Gospel and the wondrous power of Christian love to bring about forgiveness, reconciliation, and the establishing of new relationships; a glory and a power the world knows nothing of. So this is for a reconciliation between two people, yes, but more so it's to show the church, "Here's how Christians function together. Here's how God's glory is seen through us and out to the rest of the world."

Now, let's get to the outline of this section. I. This is a humble and heartfelt appeal based on the genuineness of Onesimus' faith and Paul's dependence upon him. That's the first thing he says here. He talks about how true and genuine Onesimus is, and he talks about how he has become so dear to him. As a matter of fact, as Paul begins in verse 10 and he says to Philemon, "I appeal to you," the very word "appeal" denotes deep emotion and this builds on the earlier verse where Paul is writing to Philemon and he says, "I'm Paul. You know me. You know my reputation. You know my credibility. You know how we love each other. You know how many years you and I have got together already. I'm Paul." Then he says, "I'm the aged. I've grown old, weak and weary faithfully serving the Lord. And not only that, in these old and feeble years, I'm even incarcerated in Nero's prison for the Gospel. So I appeal to you." So deep emotion is coming out of this. All of this, no doubt, touched Philemon's heart. All of this, no doubt, brought him to compassion and concern for his dear friend and minister, the Apostle Paul. Paul, after all, is Philemon's spiritual father but he is now growing old, incarcerated in a Roman prison in the Master's service. This likely brought Philemon to tears. Inwardly Philemon must

have been thinking, "Whatever my dear brother needs, whatever he asks for, whatever he wants, I will do it. Just speak the word, I will fulfill it." But there is something else going on here: the first time in the letter, Paul mentions to Philemon the name Onesimus. Wow, what a shift of emotions that may have caused. I mean, Philemon may have gone from a sweet and tender, humbled heart of compassion for Paul to maybe a stern and bitter countenance when he thinks about Onesimus who is standing right before him now.

Notice what Paul says here as he continues in verse 10, he says, "I appeal to you," that's Philemon, "for my child Onesimus," but notice he does not say, "I appeal to you, Philemon, for your slave Onesimus." That may have been accurate but he clearly doesn't say that. He doesn't say, "I appeal to you, Philemon, for this new convert named Onesimus." No, something with much more passion and emotion, he says, "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus." The word here for "child" is an interesting word. It's not the word you would often use for just generically talking about a child. There is another Greek word that can be translated "child or servant or slave." That's not used here. This is the very word you would use when you want to denote the tenderness, the sweetness, the specialness, and the bond of a mother with her newborn. No bond on earth that we know of is like that bond, and that's the word Paul uses. "Onesimus is my precious newborn child," of course in the faith, spiritually speaking.

He says, "I have begotten him," verse 10, "I have begotten him in my imprisonment. He's my begotten son and he was born to me in this hour of deepest need and even suffering. So he has become a great blessing and a great help to me. I appeal, Paul, for my child Onesimus." Paul, in effect, bears upon Philemon that, "Onesimus may be your runaway slave but due to the power of the Gospel he is now my child in the faith." That's what he's saying. "And Philemon, he's my son in the faith just like, Philemon, you are my son in the faith." Do you see how Paul keeps building this thing? Do you see how wise and tactful and persuasive he is? How much we can learn about reconciliation and how much we can learn about forgiveness and how much we can learn about winning people over when it is proper to win them over by looking at Paul's example here. All that Paul is doing here, he's doing to the end of winning Philemon over to his request. Now, he's going to be more specific about his request in a few moments, well, I say a few moments, in a few weeks, I should say. He'll give one aspect of what he's asking in this text but more aspects of what he's asking Philemon actually to do will come out later. What Paul is working to do is soothe Philemon's ruffled mind to root out any suspicions, anger and bitterness that he may have.

In verse 11, he continues on and he said, this Onesimus was "formally useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me." This is an interesting play on words. Onesimus was useless to anyone. He was a runaway slave. He wasn't even converted to Christ. He was AWOL on God and to his master, but Onesimus is now a new man with a new heart and a new humility. He's now a believer. He has officially signed on to the ranks of the redeemed army. He is officially one of the ekklesia, the word we translate "church," which means he is one of God's called out ones. Now Onesimus can be truly useful from the only perspective that matters, from the divine perspective. "He can be truly useful," Paul is saying. "Now he is useful to you. He's been useful to me and he's useful in the

Lord's work." Do you see what he's doing? He's trying to say, "Philemon, get over the ill feeling. Get over the ill will. Yes, you were wronged but look what good God has done. Get beyond just looking at what has happened to yourself and think about the kingdom of God." You see, if Paul can just get Philemon to relax the severity of his countenance and replace it with the brightness of a smile, that would be wonderful. In verse 12, we'll just jump there for a moment when Paul says to Philemon, "I have sent him," that's Onesimus, "back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart." Again, deep emotion. It just flows with depths of heartfelt humility and emotion.

"So here Onesimus stands before you," Paul is implying. "Humbly he stands there to yield to you, his master, whatever you desire and whatever you think is required to make things right. He is returning to you, though now, Philemon, not as just a slave but as your brother in Christ. He has returned to you as a new man with a new heart." I'm convinced as Philemon left that prison hut there by Nero's palace and traveled all the way to Ephesus and knocked on Philemon's door and stood there and said, "This is from the Apostle Paul," which must have shocked Philemon, and then Philemon begins to read that, I believe Onesimus stood there with the truths of Colossians 3:22 through 24 in his heart. What are the truths of Colossians 3:22 through 24? "Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve." And I believe that was on Onesimus' heart standing before his master. "I'm here to serve you and by serving you, serve my Lord."

Here's an insight for us about the culture of slavery. The culture of forced labor or slavery is flawed in every dimension. You see, every culture, every society must have faithful workers to exist, but a person who is forced into slavery, who is crushed in spirit, who is demeaned of human dignity, is not a good worker at all. He's what Paul says Onesimus used to be, he's useless in an ultimate sense. This system that is flawed to its core, given some time under Christian influences, is both exposed and eventually expelled, and this is Paul's destination. As his letter unfolds, he's going to bring us to that conclusion, that Christianity in a backdoor way, at least the way men would look at it, in a backdoor way removes and obliterates the whole concept of forced labor and of slavery.

So Onesimus comes back to Philemon not just as his slave but as a brother, a brother humble and grateful for the love and forgiveness he has found in Christ, and now Onesimus sees his service to others as service to Christ. I've read many testimonies during the horrors of the slave practice in our own country where Africans brought here in slavery found Jesus Christ and wrote and sang about how they may be a slave to man that they were free in Christ. That's what the Bible teaches. The Bible doesn't teach that always we are to have outward revolutions, though that is probable that God would lead men to lead those, but nevertheless, we find ourselves in all kinds of situations: in marriage relationships that are not ideal; in work relationships that are not ideal. But Christ is our Lord and he tells us how to conduct ourselves. The external world may say you're in bondage, but Christ says, "I've set you free." But the old system as far as culture

is concerned is a failed system. It makes useless workers. The old system of slavery only produced poor workers and it eventually poisons and corrupts all that are involved.

But how much better in this situation are things now that Onesimus has become a Christian? And what is implied here? I think what's implied here is that if the Lord has forgiven Onesimus, Philemon, shouldn't you forgive Onesimus? And of course, if Onesimus has become the Apostle Paul's son, Philemon, shouldn't he be just as dear to you? It's like the prodigal son in the Gospels, when he returns to the father in Luke 15:24, the father said, "for this my son was dead and is alive again; he is lost and is found." The point is Philemon must have a whole new disposition about Onesimus. He should be rejoicing that he is gaining a new spiritual son, which I am convinced is exactly what happens as this whole thing plays out.

There is another insight here that shows you the length Paul goes to, I don't want to use words that have a derogatory connotation, I would say manipulate but Paul is not manipulating in an evil way, he's appealing in righteousness and with heartfelt humility. Notice how he says it here in verse 11. He says, "Onesimus who was formerly useless to you, but now is useful to you and to me." The great scholars tell us that last phrase is reversed from what the way an ancient Greek would normally write. The ancient Greek would normally write, "He's now useful to me and to you," but Paul reverses that and says, "No, he's useful to you and to me." He wanted to put the emphasis on, "Philemon, Onesimus is better for you now than he ever ever was. He's useful to you." You can almost see it in Philemon's eyes as the Holy Spirit begins to work, taking these penetrating words of Paul, tenderizing Philemon's heart, and you would at this point expect to hear Philemon say, "Any child of God is a child of mine. Any son of Paul is a son to me." This whole thing has changed. Our whole relationship is turned right side up for the glory of God.

Two conclusions I want to draw from this that just jump out of this. A is the first one: the human instrument in ministering or preaching the Gospel is to be honored. Notice Paul is emphasizing to Philemon a right, a control, as such, that he has over those saved under his ministry. He says, "Onesimus is my child," personal pronoun. "My child. I have begotten him in my imprisonment." In any father/son relationship, there is supposed to be honor from the son to the father. He's saying, "It's right and it's good for those under my ministry to honor me. It's right and it's good for those under my ministry to respect me." So he's playing on Philemon here to bring him to the point, "If Paul asks me something difficult, I need to respect and honor him if I possibly can."

You're a church that lives that very truth and you're a church that I think wrestles with that balance and gets the balance as good as anybody I know of, and that is you know that when your pastor or your ministers minister, whatever God does, God does and God gets the glory. The Scriptures do not allow you to end there. Though God gets the glory, he requires that you give the instrument God uses respect and honor, and that's what Paul is showing here. He just makes no second thought about it. "He is my child. He is the one I have begotten." Now he wasn't begotten any more by Paul than anyone is begotten under

a man's ministry. It wasn't because Paul was an apostle, he's just saying, "I'm the human instrument God used. I'm his spiritual father."

I think another thing that's coming out in this is that he's reminding Philemon, "Onesimus is my son in the ministry and ought to honor and respect me and, Philemon, you're my son in the ministry and you ought to love and respect me." Now listen, hang tight with me. If you don't hang tight and listen, you're going to miss everything because there are some other truths that you've got to add to this, but another subpoint here for where we are right now, and that's a practical application for us in that when making an appeal, heartfelt humble persuasion is almost always the right course. Humble heartfelt persuasion is almost always best. The writer of Proverbs reminds us in Proverbs 15:1, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, But a harsh word stirs up anger."

Now, there is balance here. You moms and dads, as your children get in probably teenage years, maybe a little before that but teenage years and older, you begin to appeal to them about the truth and you will often say something like Paul says, "You are my child. I bore you. I paid for your college. I bought your first car." That's what Paul is saying here, "He's my child, Philemon. He's the one I have begotten, therefore he ought to honor me, but," implied, "Philemon, you need to honor me too." But he does it with such a soft appeal and that's always the best course.

Now, sometimes you can't do that. The Bible does teach and illustrate there are times for firm rebuke. That's just a part of it. And moms and dads, you don't sit your 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, whatever, your child down and appeal to them the way Paul is appealing to Philemon. There are times to say, "I'm your father. Shut up." There is a time for that. Now look, that is balanced with the love and the tenderness you surround them with, of course. You've got to be more than just that, obviously. I'm just saying this doesn't apply in every circumstance but in this circumstance, Philemon is a man that Paul has known, it's two brothers working together. Though Paul has the authority, he comes with such a humble heartfelt appeal and that kind of persuasion is always the best course if at all possible. A good cross-reference here is 1 Timothy 5:1 through 3, "Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity." You wouldn't harshly and firmly rebuke your mother. Of course not. You would appeal with sweetness and heartfelt humility the way Paul is appealing to Philemon.

Well, this is a heartfelt and humble appeal, II, asserting that we owe the servants of the Lord a debt. Paul unashamedly straightforwardly teaches here that if you have been blessed, converted, saved, grown in Christ under a faithful minister, you have a debt to that minister. Look what he says in verse 13, "whom," that's Onesimus, "I wished to keep with me." Now, why does Paul wish to keep Onesimus with him? Well, his first reason as he continues in verse 13, "so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel." Now, everyone agreed that Onesimus was Philemon's servant and Onesimus ran away and had a debt to repay to his master, Philemon, yet here Paul in gentleness, yet with clarity, lays out to Philemon that Philemon being one under Paul's ministry, has a debt to him. Paul is so wise here. It's just a subtle way for Paul to

say, "Yes, it's true, Onesimus owes you a debt. That's why I sent him back. But it's also true you owe a debt to me." Are we not all indebted to someone in the ministry? I mean, I am. How indebted I am to the men who mentored me, who preached to me, who rebuked me, who corrected me, who taught me, and how indebted you are to faithful ministers in your church.

Paul loved Philemon. Philemon loved Paul, but Paul deemed it was necessary to remind him of some things. Grace Life Church of the Shoals, do you need to be reminded today that if you are saved, you have a debt to God that ought to be expressed by living with an indebtedness to those God used to bless you. I know I'm talking about me to a great extent but I always lay it out hard and strong to our church plant guys and our church partner guys that they need to teach these truths so I've got to teach it to you or I'm a hypocrite. But I teach it anyway.

So note Paul's wording here. Paul is not ordering Philemon to let Onesimus come and work with Paul. He is not ordering. Now he could do that. He said earlier in the letter, "I have confidence. I'm God's apostle. I could order you to do what's right and you would have to do it but," he said, "I'm not doing that. I'm not doing that. I'm not ordering you to do that at all though I could. I'm deferring the conclusion of the matter to you, Philemon. I wish Onesimus could stay with me. He is a proven and valuable help to this old feeble servant of God." But Paul assumes with no hesitancy or doubt that Philemon owed Paul support and that allowing Onesimus to stay and help Paul would be credited to Philemon's account. That's why he says here, "I wish he could stay so that on your behalf, you'll be serving me."

Could you listen real clearly for just a moment? This is a good and healthy spiritual attitude to maintain. When you support your local church and when you support its ministers, you are not doing a benevolent favor to support a charity. Did you hear that? When you support the local church and when you support the ministers of that church, you are not doing a benevolent favor to your charity of choice. This church is not a charity. It's not a charity organization. No. You are one of God's captured slaves. You have no rights. Through the means of the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, you have been apprehended by God. You are one of his called out ones. He called you out of the world's association and brought you into the fellowship of his church. You have been added to the team by God. You have been fully forgiven, guilt removed, imparted with the righteousness of Christ with progressive sanctification and final glorification fully assured. You have been given more than you could repay in a thousand lifetimes. So now you are obligated, you are indebted, you owe a debt to God which is to be expressed in many faithful ways, none of the least of which is your faithful support of God's ministry and God's minister. Paul strongly taught this doctrine of spiritual debt and obligation and he taught it with no apology. He's going to say it again at the end of the letter. He's going to come right out and say it again, and here he suddenly brings this truth out as a persuasion to Philemon to forgive Onesimus, to be reconciled with Onesimus now as a brother, and even he is suggesting that Philemon release Onesimus to serve Paul in prison and this would be credited to Philemon's account for the debt he owes to support the Apostle Paul's ministry.

III. This is a humble and heartfelt appeal that recognizes the motive to comply must be from the heart and from love and not from coercion. You see, here's the balance. If you don't get III, forget everything I told you in I and II. No, don't do that. Don't forget I and II, just get III. You've got to get III to get it all. If you don't get III, you don't get anything. It balances it out. This appeal of Paul to Philemon recognizes the motive to comply. He wants Philemon's motive to comply with his request to be out of a willful joyous heart of love and never ever from coercion.

Look at how he says it there in verse 14, "but without your consent I did not want to do anything," I'm not telling Onesimus to go back and be your servant, I'm not telling Onesimus to stay here on your behalf and serve me, I'm not doing anything, "without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will." Now Paul and Philemon had a long and close bond in the Lord's work, this is obvious, and Paul knew Philemon's heart and devotion to Christ was true, and Paul knew Philemon would do anything for him if he just asked him, but he didn't want to order him to do it, he wanted Philemon out of a regenerated new heart Christ gave him to desire to do it.

He's playing on, "Philemon, you know that I need men to help me in the ministry and I really need men to help me now that I'm weak and I'm old and I'm feeble." It reminds me of Moses standing over the battle when Joshua was battling the Amalekites, remember the story? Moses picked up the staff and he held the staff over his head symbolizing, "God's power is with you and you are depending on God, not yourselves." But Moses was older and his arms were weak and as his arms would give way and his strength would fail, the staff would come down and the Amalekites would begin to prevail but then Aaron and Hur went to the sides of Moses and lifted his hands back up and Joshua prevailed in the battle. Paul is saying not in a harsh, not in a self-exalting or selfish sense but for the sake of the Gospel and the sake of the kingdom, Paul is suggesting to Philemon, "I need your help and the best way you could help me is let me have Onesimus and he'll labor with me on your behalf because you owe me that."

I can tell you something that you don't ever need to hear me say. You don't ever need to hear me say, "I've done enough for the Lord. I've fulfilled." Now if you're just worn out and dying, that's different. And I don't ever need to hear you say, "I don't owe y'all anything." You absolutely do, your very life. But I will never force you, I will never coerce you, I want it to be out of hearts that willingly want to serve the Lord in his church. And I experience that here, a lot of that, and it's a great great blessing but it's very rare.

Paul, like every true Gospel minister, abhors the idea of forced or constrained service in Christ's church. Have I not told you 101 times, perhaps when we are taking up an offering, give it of your heart. If you don't have joy in your heart to give it, then don't give it. I don't want it to be out of coercion. Now there is balance here because there was a time when Paul told the Corinthians, "Am I going to have to come and bring a rod and get this straightened out?" He told the Corinthians that. This same Paul told them. So



there is a time for a firm pastoral rebuke but what a pastor longs for, what a parent longs for in their children, is honor and respect out of a heart that loves the God who set up the system. They don't see Jeff Noblit. They don't see Matt Fowler or Steve McAllister. They say with all of his weaknesses, with all his peculiarities, with all of his flaws, that's God's man and I owe God and I'll show it partly by honoring God's man.

That's where Paul is coming to with Philemon but he wants it to be out of a free heart, never coercion, never manipulation but just out of true devoted love and service. Now, false counterfeit churches, false Christianity in general, and false teachers prey on men with threats and coercion. The Roman Catholic system has made untold hundreds of millions of dollars with threats and coercion to their members but I'm here to tell you, if it's not from your heart, then do what you want to do. I just long for you to want to do what God wants you to do. You don't have anything any other way.

Summarizing this whole thing, do you know what you get down to? The Gospel is everything and love is everything because if the Gospel hadn't changed Paul, he wouldn't be preaching. If the Gospel hadn't changed Philemon, there would be no hope for Philemon understanding what Paul is saying. He wouldn't have the spiritual mind to get. He would reject it like some of you are rejecting it because the Spirit is not showing it to you. But I pray that he will. If the Gospel hadn't changed Onesimus, he wouldn't go back to Philemon and say, "Here I am. It's up to you. Your choice. I will serve you as under the Lord. Or I'll go back to Paul if you honor his wishes. Whatever it is, I'm committed to do what Jesus Christ has told me to do." And back of all of that, Paul winning Onesimus was a motive of love for lost souls in the glory of God. Onesimus obeying Paul's instruction and going back to his master Philemon and yielding himself to Philemon's dictate was love for God and love for his master.

Philemon, who I believe obviously forgave Onesimus, let Onesimus go back and serve Paul, that only could come about by love. It's not just any love, it's not human love, it's not emotionalism and sentimentality that's ruling the world right now. We have silly emotionalism ruling the world right now. That's why as flawed as he is and as so many things that I don't like about our President, in some ways he is firm and principled and manly and we need a little of that. No, we need a lot of that. We don't need anymore whiny, excusing, faultfinding, blame-shifting, emotional sissies running things anymore. That's not the love, that's not the kind of love. This is not emotional based love, this is truth based love. It's called agape. The New Testament writers invented a word because the love God puts in us when we are saved is different from any other love. It's that love that makes all this work. Love is everything. When you come to know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, the Spirit of God imparts this Christian love in your life. Romans 5:5 reminds us that the Holy Spirit has shed abroad this love in our hearts.

Do you know what the word, the name Onesimus means? Do you know what the word, the name Onesimus means? It means useful. Useful. Isn't that interesting because Paul just said a moment ago, "Onesimus was useless. He was useless but now he's become useful both to you and to me. Most importantly, he's become useful to God." He was a runaway slave, a thieving runaway slave. He was useless. You might say, "Well, he's a

thieving runaway slave, he should have changed his name from Onesimus, useful, to something else." No, he didn't need to change his name, he just needed a change of heart and then live up to his name which is what has happened.

You see, my friend, in closing, listen to me now: there was hope for Onesimus the runaway slave, he became a new man with a new heart under the Gospel, and there is hope for you and there is hope for me. As a matter of fact, you may be the lowest of the low, you might be what you feel like is the scum of the earth, you might be in the gutter of the world and you feel totally un-Onesimus, you don't feel useful, you feel useless, but not to us. You see, to us we see inestimable potential because God can save the worst, God can save the rotteness, God can save the lowliest, the vilest, the most corrupt, God can save them and make them truly from a godly perspective useful, an Onesimus.

You know, you could have looked at my life almost 40 years ago and said, "He's useless. He loves sin. He loves himself. He's arrogant. Given to his lusts. Jeff Noblit is useless." From a divine perspective that would have been accurate. You could have looked at me as a son full of self, full of love of sin in the world, and you could say, "He was a useless son." But then one night driving my car back to Middle Tennessee State University, a 19-year-old college freshman, I turned on the radio and I heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ and God's love and God's grace invaded that car and I became a believer in Christ, deeply aware of my sinfulness and my wretchedness and how unworthy I was, but gloriously satisfied in the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. And I remember so distinctly in the next few days going to my mom and going to my dad, hugging them, which was a shock, and saying, "I love you." I meant it because the Gospel changes everything. And there was a sweet reconciliation between me and my parents. I didn't turn over a new leaf, God created a new Jeff and finally made me useful. You had no idea but he was preparing me to be your pastor and I hope in his grace I have been useful here, though I am vitally aware that on my own I am useless.

What about you? Have you truly come to Christ? Do you know him as Lord and Savior? O, come ye sinners. Seek his grace whose wrath you cannot bear. Flee to the shelter of the cross and find salvation there. Jesus only saves useless ones. If you realize that's what you are, then you are savable and God will save you.