

THE WORD THAT SETS YOU FREE

Onesimus was a runaway slave. He had belonged to a man named Philemon, who was a leader of the church at Colosse and a friend of Paul's. Onesimus had stolen money from his master Philemon and run away to Rome. While he was there he met Paul and became a Christian. Paul, knowing that Onesimus had broken at least two civil laws, sent him back to his master along with a letter appealing to Philemon to forgive Onesimus, free him from slavery, and receive him as a brother in Christ. Paul also offered to personally make good whatever money Onesimus had stolen from Philemon.

Paul's letter is a beautiful example of forgiveness in action. He sees in every aspect of the situation the potential for showing Christian love. He suggests to Philemon that whereas Onesimus was useless to him as a runaway slave, as a Christian brother he has acquired great value. First of all, he has been a great comfort to Paul, who calls him his "son" and his "very heart." Second, he is returning willingly to the man against whom he had sinned, and offering him the opportunity to show the same mercy to others that he had been shown by God through Christ Jesus. Third, although he will lose a slave, Philemon will gain a dear brother, a friend, and a partner in the Gospel. And finally, through Paul's charity, he will regain whatever money Onesimus had stolen from him. Through "forgiveness in action," everybody involved will be blessed.

This is a beautiful example of how grace can replace the due process of law in a Christian's life. Paul has written: "You are not under law, but under grace." I think we Lutherans have a pretty good understanding of God's grace—his unconditional love and mercy for us. But how can we "get it into our lives" as a living and vital part of our thinking and speaking and doing?

Well, at the risk of making this sound like a Lutheran "how-to-do-it" hour, it's really a two-step process. And you can master the two steps in one easy lesson! If you don't, you can deduct ten percent of whatever you were planning to give today.

Step One is to be sure that you understand exactly **when** and **where and how** you were saved. First of all, it had nothing to do with anything you did or didn't do or could have done. Your salvation didn't take place in your heart or in your mind or in your soul; your salvation took place on a wooden cross halfway around the world. That's where the debt for sin was paid and that's where forgiveness of sins for all mankind was earned. That is where the punishment for all of mankind's sins fell upon a lonely figure hanging on a cross on a small hill called Golgotha: the place of the skull. That is how and when and where you were saved.

Several years ago Karen and I were in Toronto and while we were there we went up into the famous CN Tower. At that time it was the tallest freestanding structure in the world—almost 2000 feet high. Among other things I learned about the tower is that it gets hit by lightning on an average of 78 times a year. The lightning is transmitted through large conductor cables which act as lightning rods, down into the ground where it dissipates into the earth. It struck me that in the same way, the cross served as a lightning rod that

drew all of God's wrath over sin down upon His own Son so that it would not strike you or me. And that is where you and I were saved. Not during some vision you experienced here in church or at the moment you decided to give your heart to Jesus. You are saved now because of what Jesus did 10,000 miles away nearly 2000 years ago.

Why is this important to understand? Because the devil is very good at drawing our attention away from the cross and persuading us to fix our hopes on something else. Our good deeds, perhaps. Or the fact that we're not nearly as bad as other people. Or our increasingly righteous way of life? Sometimes I fall into a way of thinking that goes like this: "Thirty years ago I was a mess. But now I'm better. In another twenty years I'll be a lot better. Someday, maybe I'll be righteous enough to get into heaven. In other words, someday I'll be so good I won't **need** a Savior! Unhuh! You bet. Meanwhile, I sure thank you Lord that I'm not like this miserable tax collector...."

Well, if you think that good works OR an increase in righteousness is going to get you into heaven, you might want to read the diaries of Mother Theresa of Calcutta. Perhaps no one in the last century surpassed Mother Theresa in good deeds; she has already been beatified by the Church of Rome and she is scheduled to be canonized as a saint on September 4th of this year to stand alongside St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Joan of Arc. But Mother Theresa's personal diaries reveal that for the last 66 years of her life, she experienced increasing personal despair over her own spiritual condition. In her own words, when she looked inside herself she felt (and I quote): "...no presence of God whatsoever, only dryness, darkness, loneliness and torture." She confesses that at many points in her later life she doubted the existence of heaven and of God. **Mother Theresa!** Thus can the devil divert our faith from its proper object—Jesus Christ and the cross—and persuade us to fix it on something in or about ourselves—our faith or our good deeds or our "spiritual condition." There is only one basis for our faith and our hope and that is Jesus' blood and righteousness—not our own. Step one is to always keep your eyes focused firmly on the cross.

Step Two is to know that there is a gift God has given us which will help us keep our gaze firmly fixed on Jesus Christ and the cross. This gift will also help us grow and flourish in the knowledge of the truth so that we don't fall into the snares and pitfalls the prince of this world sets to entrap us. That gift, quite simply is God's word. "*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*" Paul explains how this works in the *Book of Romans*. He writes: "*But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted. You have been set free from sin and become slaves of righteousness.*" What does this mean?

I think that what Paul is saying is that when you were baptized and the Holy Spirit of God came to live in you, He counseled you to accept the teaching of God's word as the truth. He opened up the Holy Scriptures to you and he opened your mind up to the Holy Scriptures. For the first time, you were able to believe the truth when you heard it. God had entrusted you to his teaching, to his divine words, and they began to change you—you might even say, to fill you up. Imagine the mold of a small statue which is having hot molten lead poured into it. The molten lead assumes the shape of the statue; it takes on its exact form and contours. After it has cooled, the mold is removed and the leaden statue is identical with the original statue. Well, God's word is the hot molten lead and the mold is Christ, or maybe we should say, the mind, the spirit of Christ. As God's word is poured

into us—through our eyes as we read it, through our ears as we hear it, through our mouths as we eat and drink the body and blood—we are changed, we are re-formed into the image of Christ. The fact that we ARE what we EAT was never more true than it is here. Jesus said this in the most emphatic possible terms: *“I am the bread of life...the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”* The word of God—in Scripture and in body and in blood—is the bread of eternal life. He who entrusts himself to that form of teaching, will be filled with God’s Word and Spirit until he is finally re-formed in the image of Christ. This is not what gets us into heaven; remember, that happened a long time ago in a place very far away, and you can’t add a thing to it. This is what happens as a result of our having entered the Kingdom of Heaven by faith here on earth. Growing and becoming Christlike is the **result** of being filled with His word, not the **cause**. It’s a reward, not a requirement.

All three readings today deal with the subject of slavery and freedom from slavery. Slavery is a difficult concept for us to understand. We know it’s wrong, of course, and rejoice in the fact that in our country—and all other countries where Christianity has flourished—slavery has been abolished. But it’s still a problematic idea for us because it seems remote, almost unreal. We haven’t had slavery in the United States for a century and a half. It’s almost impossible for us to imagine what Onesimus experienced in his life as a slave—the mixture of fear and guilt and elation he must have felt when he seized his freedom by running away. But even more--what he felt when he experienced Christian freedom from sin and agreed to return and repent before his former owner. You and I have never felt like property in the hands of another human being. It’s impossible for us to feel the degradation, the loss of dignity, the complete lack of control that a slave must feel.

Or can we?

Oh, I think we know what it means to be a slave. We were born in slavery, you know—not to a human master, but to sin. We all know what it means to be mastered by some sin. So we know what it means to be a slave. But Paul writes, *“You have been set free from sin...”* and Jesus says, *“Everyone who sins is a slave to sin...but if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”*

Christ has burst the bonds of our slavery to sin; he has set us free by purchasing forgiveness with his own blood, and he has given us His Word to help us grow in our newfound freedom and one day, to make us exactly like Him.

Step One tells us how we were saved. Step Two tells us what to do with our salvation. Pray God we will take both steps!

Amen.

Philemon 1-21

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

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as 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, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

Romans 6:15-18 Slaves to Righteousness

¹⁵ What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, ¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

John 8:31-32 The Truth Will Set You Free

³¹ So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, ³² and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”