

¹ ***Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker...***

¹⁰ ***I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.***

¹² ***I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— ¹⁶ no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.***

¹⁷ ***So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰ I do wish, brother, that I may have 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 ask.*** (NIV84)

A CHRISTIAN COUNTS COSTS DIFFERENTLY

“I have rights.” “I know my rights.” “This is my right!” Rights - things that are due us, things we deserve, things that have been promised to us. We are thankful for the rights we have in our country. We have the right to a fair trial, the right to bear arms, the freedom to speak at will. We have the right to worship how we see fit and what a blessing that is! The same constitution that guarantees rights and freedom to us also guarantees the rights to those with whom we disagree or even to those anger us. Sometimes the exercise of rights goes too far – and turns into a display of self-interest, even selfishness.

But a Christian looks at these things from a different point of view. Christians understand with rights comes responsibility, not just to ourselves or our country but to God! They recognize that exercising rights comes with consequences, even costs. That means Christians will exercise their rights differently than the world because, as Jesus makes very clear, **a Christian Counts Costs Differently.**

We see an example of that principle from Paul’s letter to Philemon. Most of Paul’s letters were sent to churches, but he wrote this letter to an individual. Paul was in Rome under house arrest. As a Roman citizen, he used a right that he was born with – the right to appeal to Caesar. Now “***in chains for the gospel,***” he waited to be able to exercise that right.

Paul continued his work as missionary to the best of his ability. He continued to preach the Gospel, sent letters, and “***welcomed all who came to see him***” (Acts 28:30). During this time, he met a man named Onesimus. To understand the significance of this meeting, we have to visit Paul’s past. He had spent a large amount of time in Ephesus during two of his journeys. While he was there, he became good friends with Philemon. Philemon was a devout and generous man who became a leader in the church at Colosse. In this letter, Paul does not just send greetings to him but also ***to the church that meets in your home*** (Philemon 1:2). Paul says to him, ***I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints...Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints*** (Philemon 1:5-7). What a fine Christian man!

Philemon 1:1, 10-21

So why does Paul take time to write to this Colossian leader about this man he met in Rome? Onesimus had come to Rome as an unbeliever. When he met Paul, he became a Christian by God's grace and the Spirit's power. He had also become a big help to Paul. He was free to move about the city while Paul remained "*in chains for the gospel.*"

As their friendship grew, Paul learned a few things. Onesimus had been a slave. He had escaped from Colosse, and his master there was Philemon. He confessed he had not served faithfully in his pagan past. Although his name meant "useful," his service had been useless. And it was most likely an unknowing donation from his master's treasury that financed his trip to Rome. Now things had changed. Onesimus had become a faithful, repentant Christian and a big help to prison-bound Paul.

Where does that leave us? Paul is still bound in prison. Onesimus is still a slave who could be caught and forced to face the consequences. Philemon had every right to demand him back and expect future faithful service or exact appropriate punishment. Paul wants to help set things right. He is sending Onesimus back to Philemon under the escort of his friend, Tychicus, with this letter. His message: how are we, as children of God, going to resolve this situation? All involved could demand their rights, but how are we going to proceed? Christians handle these situations differently. Christian love often comes with a cost, but **A Christian Counts Costs Differently.**

A Christian Counts Costs Differently. Their wealth and purpose come from the Lord. That idea runs completely contrary to what our sinful nature wants. Let's explore that for a minute.

What would Onesimus have wanted? What would he desire with every fiber of his being? It was not a return to slavery. Although slavery was legal, he wanted his freedom. Who wouldn't? Think of the great lengths he took to get it. He had every right to demand it. We see freedom today as one of the most fundamental human rights. Why would he even consider going back? Why would he give up his freedom? Why would he give up this right?

But then what would Philemon want? Onesimus had wronged him in any number of ways. The slave ran away and had stolen from him to finance his escape and by doing his job poorly when he was there. Now he was returning to Philemon. What would you do? How would you treat someone who had wronged you so thoroughly? The law allowed the death penalty in such a case, would you exercise this right? How would the rest of the servants and slaves respond if Philemon did not make an example of him? And how would he ever recoup the losses he suffered?

These events did not leave Paul untouched either. What would he have wanted? He had a profitable helper in Onesimus. His work in prison would become much more difficult. Why should he give up his great help? Wouldn't he also be seen as truly loving and forgiving by helping Onesimus? Wouldn't history praise him as a social liberator? He had the rights of the apostolic office. Why couldn't he just order Philemon to do the right thing, swallow his losses, and maybe even free Onesimus? Then again, would he even have to tell Philemon about Onesimus?

What about us? If you were faced with a choice between loss or gain, what would you choose? If you could choose the easy path or one significantly more difficult, which would it be? But what happens when the easy path departs from God's Word? What happens when my gain comes at the

Philemon 1:1, 10-21

expense of others? What if my ease comes from shirking my responsibilities? What if my gain comes from seeking revenge or demanding my rights at another's expense? We may struggle with our choice. We may be unhappy with our decision. But so often, we would still pick what is best for me! Selfishness reigns. It so often remains all about me.

But maybe the best question to ask is what about Jesus? What did he do? (Pause) He didn't stand on his rights. He didn't demand fairness. He didn't take the easy path! And praise God he didn't. He did the hard thing, the thing that was against what he had earned. In fact he gave up the path to glory that he had earned to walk the path to death and destruction that we had earned. He had the right to life in heaven, but he came and suffered hell so that we could be forgiven. He stepped out in love, even though it cost him dearly. He counted you and me to be worth the cost. He saw the plan of salvation as a worthy goal and his love motivated him to take every step and drip every drop of blood for our forgiveness. He paid with his life and died to take away our sins. He allowed himself to be bound so that we could be set free – free from death, free from bondage, free from the threats of hell forever.

And now we can live a different life. We don't have to serve just ourselves like the rest of the world. We can seek to help others, even when it comes at great cost to us. We can walk the walk of faith, and consider the cost of following Christ. ***“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”*** (Romans 8:18) No matter what the cost of the Christian life is, it's worth paying. Not matter what we might lose in following Jesus, to gain him and his love and his heaven is better by far.

Philemon and Onesimus shared that confidence. As Christian brothers they could take the risks that doing the right thing presented. So Onesimus returned home to Philemon and Philemon welcomed him back and forgave him. They lived as brothers in Christ and enjoyed that common bond as they together aimed to please the Lord in all that they did.

And that can be our aim, too. To serve the Lord in all that we do. Even when it's hard to do the right thing, He strengthens us. Even when the world is screaming that we deserve revenge, remember **A Christian Counts Costs Differently**. For us who have been set free, we joy in opportunity to express kindness and forgiveness and love. Go and serve. Count the Costs of discipleship – not the way the world does but the way Christ and his followers do. And if that costs you, so be it – Serve the Lord with gladness and remember your reward is in heaven. Amen.