

*The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 18 April 2021. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced, and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.*

## **Now Profitable**

### **Philemon 8-15**

We have come here this morning to study God's Word, the Bible. We do so because we believe that this Book is not the word of men, but the Word of God. If the Bible were merely the words of men, it would have no real relevance to our lives; and it certainly would have no meaningful theme. It would be nothing more than a haphazard collection of ancient books of poetry and questionable history, written by shepherds, herdsmen, priests, scribes, fishermen, and kings. However, such is not the case. From beginning to end, there is a consistent, divine message in the Bible. That is a common thread; and that thread is the precious, saving, atoning blood of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ, and the salvation that He purchased for us, is the theme of the Scriptures. The Bible is God's record of His plan to redeem mankind through His Son, Jesus Christ.

Should we be surprised, then, when certain men in the Bible bear a striking resemblance to the Lord Jesus Christ in some way or another? These likenesses are not coincidences! God raised up these men, and placed them in their various situations, in order to be types, or pictures, of His Son. **Joseph** was a type of Christ in that he was betrayed by his own brethren, but later became their Deliverer. **Moses** is also a type of Christ as Israel's Deliverer, and as the Mediator of the New Covenant. **Joshua** is a type of Christ in that he led Israel out of the wilderness into victory in the Promised Land--just as Christ leads His people to victory over sin. **David** is a type of Christ as our Good Shepherd, and as the Warrior-King who will one day put down all His enemies. **Solomon** is a type of Christ as the wise King whose reign will one day usher in peace and prosperity to the whole world. **Jonah** is a type of Christ in that he spent three days and three nights in the whale's belly--just as Christ spent three days and three nights in the grave. **Zerubbabel** is a type of Christ as the Temple-builder; and **Joshua** (as well as all the other high priests of the Old Testament) is a picture of Christ as our true High Priest. Of course, there are many more!

Now, as I mentioned last week, we are studying a short letter (the **Epistle of Philemon**), which the Apostle Paul wrote to a friend named Philemon, while he was a prisoner in Rome. Paul wrote this letter for the purpose of asking a request of an old friend; but in the process, Paul included some rich truth about salvation. In Paul's gracious words, we find striking pictures of God the Father, of His Son Jesus Christ, and of the salvation that Christ has purchased for us.

Did Paul *intend* to paint these type-pictures in his letter? Probably! I believe that Paul's mind was so full of the wonders of salvation, that types, pictures, and allusions to salvation flowed naturally from his tongue, and from his pen. However, whether Paul was conscious of it or not, I have no question that the Holy Spirit of God, who is the real Author of this letter, intended to paint these type-pictures of salvation for us. It is my hope that if *you* have not received the wonderful gift of salvation, you will do so this very day. It is also my prayer that if you be saved, you will learn even more about the depths of Christ's love for you. The title of this message is ***Now Profitable***.

**Read Philemon 8-16.**

As you may remember from last week's message, Paul's old friend, Philemon, had a servant named Onesimus; and this servant had stolen from his master, and run away. He had travelled hundreds of miles, from Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey) to the city of Rome. However, while Onesimus was in Rome, he "happened" to cross paths with the Apostle Paul--who was, at that time, a prisoner under house arrest. Not surprisingly, Paul (who was always concerned about people's souls) led Onesimus to the Lord; and Onesimus became a new creature in Christ. Now that he was a Christian, he knew that he needed to return to Colossi, repay his master for what he had stolen from him, and submit himself to him.

That is what this letter is all about. Paul was sending Onesimus back to Colossi (along with his missionary co-worker, Tychicus) for the purpose of making things right with Philemon; and he sent this letter along with him. In this letter, Paul was asking two things of Philemon.

First, Paul requested that he would forgive Onesimus for the wrong that he had done him, and receive him again--this time, not as a servant, but as a beloved brother. By the way, we know, from extra-biblical records, that that is exactly what Philemon did! This, in itself, is an amazing testimony to the way that Christ had changed Philemon's heart. Masters in those days *executed* runaway slaves, without the slightest hesitation! But not Philemon. Christ had filled his heart with love and forgiveness.

Paul's second request to Philemon was that that he would grant Onesimus freedom from his service, so that he might come back to Rome, and help him in his Gospel ministry. **(Read verses 12 and 13 again.)** Needless to say, it was not merely a "little favour" that Paul was asking of Philemon. This was a *huge* favour! Yet, Paul didn't have to bully Philemon. Paul didn't use his apostolic authority to *demand* this thing of Philemon. (You'll notice that Paul did *not* start off this letter by calling himself "Paul, an Apostle," as he often did in his letters.) Rather, Paul made this request for "*love's sake*."

With this background, let us get into the message. From the passage that we've read this morning, I would like to point out four beautiful pictures of salvation. First, this account of Onesimus teaches us that...

### **I. The Father makes unprofitable servants profitable (vv. 11)**

Interestingly enough, the name "Onesimus" literally means "profitable." Every time Philemon called Onesimus to do a task, he was literally saying, "Profitable, please do this task for me." Now, I don't know whether "Onesimus" was his actual birth name. Masters in those days often gave their servants names which they hoped they would live up to. Perhaps Philemon himself gave Onesimus this name at birth (if he was born into his household); or perhaps he gave it to him in adulthood, after he'd purchased him in the marketplace. Either way, it seems likely that Philemon was the one who gave him this name. He named his servant "Profitable" because he wanted him to be profitable in his service.

As you can see, there is an irony in what Paul is saying to Philemon. Onesimus, who was supposed to be profitable, had been unprofitable! By stealing from his master, and running away from him, he had made himself unprofitable to his master. **(Read verse 11 again.)**

My friend, if you are trusting in anything other than Christ alone to get you to heaven, there is something that you need to realise: **to God, you are just like Onesimus.** Just as Onesimus was a runaway servant who had made himself unprofitable to his master, so you have wandered away from God, and are "unprofitable" to Him. The Bible tells us that in the beginning, God created man to love and serve Him. However, when our father Adam sinned against God, he became unprofitable to God; and he passed that sinful nature down to all of

us. This means that *all of us*, in our natural state, is unprofitable to God. Whether we like to admit it or not, we have all, as a race, sinned in Adam; and we have chosen to sin against Him in our individual lives, as well. Allow me to make that even more personal. *You* have sinned against God. *You* have ceased to be profitable to Him.

The ugly, sobering reality is that every person that is born into this world has “turned aside” from God’s way, and is instead going his *own* way. **Isaiah 53:6** says, “***All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way.***” None of us was born into this world belonging to God. The Bible says that you and I are, by nature, children of wrath, living in disobedience to God; and therefore, we are “unprofitable” to Him.

**Read Romans 3:9-12.**

**Read Psalm 14:1-3.**

You may have noticed that when Paul quoted **Psalm 14**, he re-worded the phrase “*become filthy*” as “*become unprofitable.*” This wasn’t a slip of memory on Paul’s part; it was done by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. What God wants us to see is that our works are like a pile of infected, dirty rags. You don’t *save* putrid, filthy rags: you throw them away. They have become *unprofitable* and useless. Likewise, God created us for His glory and pleasure; but our sin changed all that. We have *all* gone aside, and become unprofitable to God.

By the way, this doesn’t mean that God cannot use a lost person at all. God uses lost people all the time. Pharaoh is a perfect example. Pharaoh hardened his heart against the LORD, and refused to let His people go; yet, God used Him anyway. By destroying Egypt with ten devastating plagues, and by drowning Pharaoh and his army in the Red Sea, and by delivering Israel from the most powerful nation in the world, God displayed His mighty, redeeming power to the whole world. God said to Pharaoh, “***Even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might shew my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth***” (**Romans 9:17**). The same is true of many other lost people in history. God used **King Nebuchadnezzar** to destroy Jerusalem and Judah, to punish them for their sins. He later used **King Cyrus** of Persia to punish Babylon for what they had done to Judah; and he also used him to free the Jews from captivity, and to give them permission to rebuild the Temple. God went so far as to call Cyrus His “shepherd”; yet, Cyrus never knew the Lord! **Judas Iscariot** is another example. God used Judas to betray the Son of God, so that He could die on the cross for our sins. God didn’t *make* Judas do this awful thing; but because Judas rejected the Lord, God used his very rebellion to accomplish His own plan.

God *can and does* use lost people to accomplish His plan. However, this is *not* the way that God wishes to use us. God doesn’t want to use us *in spite of* our rebellion. He doesn’t desire to get a few scraps of usefulness from us, and then cast us into the Lake of Fire. God wants us to surrender our hearts to Him *willingly*, and serve Him fully and freely, out of a heart of love; and He wants to use us to bring forth “***much fruit.***” He also wants to *reward* us for our service, with heavenly treasures that will never pass away. God *can* use lost people; but are they really “profitable”? They certainly won’t receive any reward for the little use that God gets out of them. Instead, they will hear, “***Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.***” They will be like chaff, which serves a purpose, but then is burned.

My friends, in order to be made truly profitable to God, a miracle of God's grace must take place. We must be *born again*! This is not something that man can do on his own. It is something that only God can do; and it is entirely His work, from beginning to end.

**Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-21.**

Have *you* been made a new creature in Christ Jesus? I'm not asking if you're religious. I'm not asking if you pray, or if you go to church. I'm asking, "Are you saved?" Being saved doesn't happen by turning over a new leaf, or by being religious. It can happen only by placing your complete trust in Jesus Christ. He died to pay a debt that you cannot pay. He willingly became your Substitute for sin. He allowed the Father to pour His wrath on Him instead of on you, so that you might be set free. If you will simply repent in your heart, and believe on Him, He will save you. Not only will He deliver you from sin's *penalty*, but He will break the *power* of sin in your life, so that you are no longer in bondage to it. He will enable you to live a life that is truly pleasing to Him, as you allow Christ to work His own righteousness in you. Then, on the Resurrection Day, He will give you a new body that is completely free of sin, so that you may serve Him in body, soul, and spirit, in His sin-free abode of Heaven, for eternity! The Bible says that in the New Jerusalem, "*his servants shall serve him.*" In the glories of Heaven for all eternity, you will be profitable to the Lord!

Should you be already saved, I would encourage you to ponder what God has done for you. Onesimus was once unprofitable to Philemon; yet, he became profitable to both Philemon *and* Paul through the change that took place in his life. Likewise, *you*, before you were saved, were unprofitable to God the Father; but then, He saved you, and reconciled you to Himself, and to His precious Son. He didn't save you so that you could pursue your *own* happiness; He saved you so that you might serve Him with all your heart and soul. Are you doing that?

Now, what else does this account of Onesimus teach us? It teaches us that...

**II. The Father receives sinners in the same way that He receives Christ (vv. 12, 17)**

(**Read verse 12 again.**) In this part of the letter, Paul urged Philemon to "*receive*" his runaway slave, Onesimus. That, in itself, was a tremendous act of mercy, in a world in which runaway slaves were beheaded. Yet, that is not all that Paul urged Philemon to do. You'll notice that Paul identified Onesimus as "*my own bowels.*" In our way of speaking, we might express this as "my heart," or "my soul." What Paul is saying is that his bond of Christian fellowship with Onesimus was so strong, that it was as though Onesimus were a part of him. It was as though a part of Paul were ripped away when Onesimus left to go back to Colossi!

Christian, on the day you were saved, you came into union with Jesus Christ. You belong to Him, and He belongs to you. He is the "*Friend that sticketh closer than a brother.*" His love for you is infinitely greater than you can even begin to conceive!

**Read Romans 8:35-39.**

This is a powerful description of Christ's love, is it not? But guess what? It gets even better! Let's look at Paul's words to Philemon again. (**Read Philemon 17 again.**) Not only did Paul refer to Onesimus as his "own bowels," but he instructed Philemon to receive Onesimus in the

exact same way that he would receive himself! He didn't say, "Now, I know how deeply Onesimus has wronged you. I know that he stole from you and ran away; so, if you feel that he should be put on probation, or imprisoned for a while, I totally understand." Instead, Paul said, "Give Onesimus the same warm, hearty reception that you would give to your old partner Paul. In fact, if you *count* me a partner, receive him the same way that you would receive me!"

Friends, that is exactly what God the Father does every single time he receives a sinner into His family. He doesn't put you on probation, and leave your eternal destiny in question until the Judgment Day. He doesn't send you to purgatory to burn for a few millennia before He finally receives you. He doesn't even put you into a lesser category of Christians based upon how "worthy" you are! He receives you fully, and immediately.

We are all unworthy, folks. We are all unprofitable to God. God the Father receives sinners not because they are worthy, nor because they have *become* worthy through self-improvement. Rather, He receives those who receive His *Son*. Why? Because *the Son* is worthy.

When a person receives God's gift of salvation, the Son of God becomes that man's "defence lawyer." The Law says that the sinner should perish. Yet, Jesus Christ took the curse of the Law upon Himself, in our place. If you have been saved, then Jesus Christ is before the Father right now, with the nail scars still in His hands, as the proof of what He did for you: and He is interceding on your behalf. The Father cannot turn you away, because you are in union with His Son; and He cannot turn His Son away! He has promised to receive all who will receive His Son. The Bible says, "***But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name***" (John 1:12). God does not lie, Christian. To turn you away, He would have to turn away His only begotten Son, who is equal with Himself; and **He will not do that!** You are in Christ, and Christ is in you; and Christ is in the Father. If you are *not* saved, this message is for you, too. If you will simply believe Christ's word, and trust in Him, He will receive you, and will never turn you away!

**Read Romans 8:31-34.**

Think it can't get better? Then try this. The account of Onesimus also teaches us that...

### **III. The Father and Christ have the same mind in saving sinners (vv. 13-14)**

(Read verse 13-14.) In Paul's plea to Philemon, we see another beautiful picture of salvation. Paul told Philemon that he would like to keep Onesimus with him there in Rome, to help him with the Gospel work. Of course, this meant that Philemon would have to grant Onesimus freedom, and not have him as a servant anymore. Yet, Paul assured Philemon that he would not do this without *his "mind"* (in other words, his full agreement). Furthermore, Paul wanted to be sure that Philemon agreed to it graciously. Paul didn't want Philemon's agreement to be "*of necessity*." He didn't want Philemon to agree to this reluctantly, because he felt that Paul was "twisting his arm," or because he felt that he "owed one" to Paul. Paul wanted to be sure that Philemon was doing this with his whole heart.

What does this agreement between Paul and Philemon picture? Simply this: **there is no disagreement between the Father and the Son.** There is no struggle whatsoever. They act

with the same mind, all the time. Jesus is our Defence Lawyer; but this does *not* mean that the Father would rather destroy us, and that the Son is struggling to stop Him from doing so. No, **the Father and the Son are in perfect agreement about our salvation.** The Father didn't have to *force* the Son to come to earth to die for our sins: Christ *willingly* came. Neither does the Son have to force the Father to forgive us: He does so willingly. In their infinite wisdom, they *both* knew the plan for our salvation. from eternity past; and they have been in complete, willing, cheerful agreement about it for countless ages.

As Jesus told the Jews in **John 5**, everything that the Father does, He does; and everything that the Son does, the Father does; and they both do it together! Both the Father and the Son are the righteous Judge of the Universe; and, as such, they both have the perfect right to carry out sin's penalty on every one of us. Yet, the Father and the Son, in their mercy and compassion, agreed together to make a way whereby their justice could be satisfied, and we could be spared sin's penalty. Their plan was that the Father would give up His Son, and that the Son would give up Himself to die for our sins. Let's take a look at how the Father views this plan.

**Read Isaiah 53:10-11.**

Think of this, folks! Isaiah says that the Father was "*pleased*" to see His Servant "*bruised.*" Furthermore, He is fully "*satisfied*" with His Son's offering for our sin. The Father is not merely "appeased" by His Son's sacrifice. If this verse had said that the LORD was "appeased" by His Servant's sacrifice, it would imply that God is some kind of whimsical, angry, hot-headed God, who must be calmed down. The Father wasn't "appeased" by His Son's sacrifice; rather, He was "satisfied." That means that His justice was perfectly fulfilled; and as the Judge, He can now legally grant forgiveness and pardon to sinners! Every sin that you and I have ever committed, or ever will commit, has been paid for, once for all; and the Father was pleased to give up His Son in order for this to happen!

Now, let's take a look at how the Son views His role in our salvation.

**Read Hebrews 10:5-7.**

**Read Psalm 40:6-8.**

The Son "delighted" to be cut to ribbons, marred beyond recognition, and to be nailed to a cross. He willingly laid down His life; and the Father was pleased to see His Son endure this. By the way, the third member of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, also delights in His part in our salvation. He delights to come into the hearts of those who place their trust in the Son, and to give them new life. Each member of the Trinity delights in His role in our salvation.

The entire Godhead is of one mind about this! There is no "power struggle" going on in heaven over your soul. **The Father and the Son have both conspired together to save you!** God certainly is against your *sin*; and as the just Judge, He must punish sinners. However, this is not what He desires to do. God is "*not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance*" (**2 Peter 3:9**). If you do not know Christ, there is nothing preventing you from receiving His full pardon—except your own pride. **If you are saved**, don't ever doubt God's love for you! Yes, there are many struggles in this life that we must go through: but do you think that the God who gave up His precious Son in order to save your soul is going to leave you high and dry in the trials of life? Of course not! He loves you.

Now, there is one more picture of salvation here. The account of Onesimus teaches us that...

#### IV. The Father receives sinners forever (vv. 15-16)

**(Read verses 15-16.)** I think it's pretty clear what the picture is here. Just as Onesimus ran away from his master, and went his own way, but was reconciled to him again, so those who are saved have been reconciled to God. **First Peter 2:25** says, *“For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.”*

However, there is a very important word that needs to be highlighted here. Paul said, *“that thou shouldest receive him forever.”* How could Philemon receive Onesimus *“forever,”* if they were both bound to die eventually? It's simple. Paul wasn't talking about receiving Onesimus as a *servant*, here on earth; he was talking about receiving him as a *brother in the Lord*. Onesimus is no longer a servant to Philemon; but they *are* still brothers in the Lord in heaven; and they will continue to be brothers in the Lord for the rest of eternity!

So, what's the point? The point is that **when the Father receives a sinner into His family, He receives Him forever.** The child of God doesn't need to fear that God will one day decide to cast him out of His family again. Yes, we are to fear God, and keep His commandments: and yes, He will chastise us when we sin, in order to restore us to right fellowship with Him. However, He will never condemn us to hell again. Why? Because the price for our sins is already paid in full! It isn't going to be paid again!

#### Read Hebrews 10:10-18.

For the last 2,000 years, countless people who had once trusted in their own good works for salvation, or who were trusting in a never-ending system of religious rituals, have been stopped dead in their tracks when they read these verses. You don't need to be a scholar to understand this! Jesus has paid salvation's price in full, one time forever, never to repeat it again. Our salvation is complete. It's done. Therefore, any man, woman, or child who places his trust in Christ, and receives His gift of salvation, will never be under God's condemnation again. God has received that soul *“forever.”*

If you could ever be condemned again, for even one sin, it would mean that Christ left that sin unpaid for on the cross—which means that He would have to die again to pay for it. Friend, Christ is not going to die again! Paul said in **Romans 6:10**, *“For in that he died, he died unto sin once: but in that he liveth, he liveth unto God.”* Christian, *rest* in this assurance! This is not an assurance that gives you licence to sin: it is an assurance that frees you to serve the living God, out of a heart of love for Him—just as Paul, and Philemon, and Onesimus did.

**Conclusion:** If you know Christ as Saviour, you were once an Onesimus. (And so was I!) Man was created for God's glory; but in Adam, we all went astray from Him. Yet, if you have received God's gift of salvation, God, in His mercy, has made you profitable to Him again! He has received you in the same way that He would receive His own Son. He has received you as though you had the perfect righteousness of His Son! The Father and the Son have done this together, with one mind; and you have been received as His servant and child--forever! Are you thankful for this? Are you serving Him with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength?

I would also ask, "Have you been reconciled to God?" If you have never received God's gift of salvation, God wants to make you profitable to Him. He wants to save you, set you apart for a life of service to Him, and reward you for it--all through His matchless grace. Won't you come to Christ and receive His gift of salvation today?