

Who's Counting?

Philemon 1, 7-21 (NIV)

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people. ⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ that 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 would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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 fellow 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.

Did you know that the average cost of giving birth in a Utah hospital is \$11,602? And that doesn't factor in any of the costs during pregnancy, any of the costs of getting the home ready with clothes, a crib, diapers, etc., the cost of time taking time off work and going to appointments and setting things up, let alone the incalculable mental and emotional cost. Life has a cost. Someone counts it.

Life with Jesus also has a cost. Jesus counted it in the cost of relationships, that following him means that he comes first over father, mother, wife, children, brothers or sisters – even your own life. The cost was all consuming when he said, “Those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.” (Luke 14:33) Does this mean that we have to become isolated, poverty-stricken ascetics in order to be Jesus' followers? No, but God does what us thinking about what costs we are willing to “pay” to be his follower. This is the thought that runs through Paul's letter to Philemon.

We don't know a ton about this man Philemon. From the context of this letter, we know that he is a part of a church that meets in his home. Paul calls him a fellow worker and friend, commended for this partnership in the faith with him and Timothy, a man whose love has given Paul great joy and encouragement because he has “refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.” (verse 7) We can gather also that Philemon is a man of means because a church meets in his home and he has a guest room that he can offer Paul and he has owned at least one slave – a man by the name of Onesimus.

We don't really know what kind of relationship Philemon and Onesimus had. Slavery was common in the Roman Empire of the 1st century AD. Although it had little to do with race, it was still the buying and selling of humans as property, typically costing 2 years' salary. Some slaves were prisoners of war. Others were captured and sold by pirates. Some voluntarily sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off their debts. For them, it was a job. Masters could be cruel, as cruel as some of the horrific stories we've heard. Others could have a very genial, caring, respectful, family-like relationship with their slaves.

Paul give hints at what the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was. He wrote that “formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you.” (verse 11) Maybe this was because Onesimus had run away or because he had been a bad worker. Maybe Onesimus had stolen from Philemon to pay for his new life as a runaway. Undoubtedly Philemon had counted the cost Onesimus had incurred.

But now a different cost was being counted. It was the main topic of this letter from Paul. “I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. 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.” (verses 10-13) Onesimus had changed, and had become very dear to Paul. Paul calls him “useful,” “my son,” “my very heart,” “a dear brother.” So Paul appealed to Philemon to count the cost of Onesimus differently.

Onesimus had violated his contract, not given a good return on Philemon's investment. He was a lawbreaker, a fugitive on the run. Somehow he came to know Paul, heard Paul preach of a God who shows no favoritism, a God who took on human flesh in order to chain himself to obedience to God's law, to complete it for us, to free every single person – no matter their status or occupation or

ethnicity – from the obligations and punishment of the law. Christ took the penalty on himself. He paid the price to free Onesimus in a greater way than he had accomplished by running away from Philemon.

Through Christ and what he paid for Onesimus, he was now free from the chains of sin, the sentence of eternal imprisonment in hell. Satan would still accuse Onesimus as a lawbreaker, but God the Father declared that Onesimus was cleared of all charges since Christ paid the penalty. Satan's accusations fell flat, charges and punishments dismissed. Onesimus was justified, forgiven. What's more is that he was elevated in status now as one being clothed with all of Christ's perfect obedience to the law. Onesimus was no longer a lawbreaker but a lawkeeper. He was adopted into God's family, just in the same way that Philemon had been, as Paul had been. Christ paid the total cost to change them, forgive them, justify them, bring them into his family.

With this new status in Christ, count Onesimus not as a piece of property who owes you for what you expended on him, but as a brother in the Lord. "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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 fellow man and as a brother in the Lord." (verses 15-16) Paul was urging Philemon to count Onesimus by their relationship in Christ.

This is the same that Christ has done for us. Every single one of us here are lawbreakers, and we can undoubtedly relate that to work. By failing to deliver on one contract at work, by slacking off at work for just a moment, by helping ourselves to something that's not ours, by blowing off our homework or forgetting to do an assignment, we are guilty of at times being useless, of robbing others of services owed to them. We have not always obeyed the people in authority over us here on earth, let alone our heavenly Master, God himself. Who's counting these costs?

Yet, for everything we've stolen – time, materials, people – Christ paid that debt. He paid it with his holy, precious blood shed on the cross for us. He paid for a perfect life filled with perfect deeds with his life lived for us. We too have been brought into God's family by the price Christ paid. And God does not bill us. He's not counting the cost. He's instead always reminding us that it has been paid in full and that we get to reap the riches of his mercy.

Knowing how Christ has paid our debt of sins and paid for us to be filled with perfection, our relationships change. We count them differently, just like Paul was showing Philemon: "So if you consider me a partner, welcome [Onesimus] as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self." (verses 17-19) Whatever the cost Onesimus incurred to Philemon, Paul will pay it. Why? Because Christ had already paid Paul's debt of sin as well as Onesimus' and Philemon's. They weren't going to count the debt any longer. Instead, they would count their relationships as ones that held on to no debt, as brothers in Christ.

No doubt we have robbed others – even if we try to down play it, but we have also had people steal things from us. Maybe they literally stole money from us. Maybe they stole time from us, demanding that we do things for them that we're not obligated to do. Maybe they stole our reputation with hurtful, hateful words. People have incurred a debt of sin against us. It's tempting to count those costs.

However, when we remember that Christ has paid that entire debt owed against us, we no longer have any right to count that debt against that person. Instead, we count our relationships on the basis of Christ's love for us and them. This is the attitude that Paul is writing to Philemon about. "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." (verses 8-9a)

Love cannot be demanded but can only be freely given. God has freely loved us without favoritism, no matter what laws we have broken, no matter what we've stolen. So we show that same love with people who have wronged us, robbed us. We forgive with the same love with which God has forgiven us. This is why Paul doesn't demand action from Philemon. Instead, he trusts that Philemon will welcome and love Onesimus as a brother in the Lord because they have been freely loved by God. "I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary." (verse 14) We carry this same gospel motivation into our relationships. We count our relationships based on God's love and forgiveness, not keeping a record of the debt of sin against us.

Life has a cost, and someone is counting it. Life with Christ also has a cost. God counted it up, but he also paid it himself - with Christ and his life. With that same payment of total forgiveness, we count our relationships differently. We don't count the debt anymore. We freely and voluntarily love as God loved us. Amen.