

MAKING PERSONALITY PROFITABLE

"I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me." Philemon 10-11.

This little letter of Paul to Philemon, short and simple as it is, abounds with beauties peculiarly its own, and which have proved a rich mental and spiritual repast to thoughtful students of God's Word in every age. It tells in its own artless way how Christ comes into a man's life, not merely to answer his problems and settle his doubts, but also how Christianity sweetens the relations between man and man, how Christ steps in to dissolve the bitterness, to soften the misunderstandings, and to put us right with one another in the little things in which we often go wrong. The book tells us how an unprofitable young man became profitable.

In it three persons stand out in clear outline---Paul, the preacher, who was a prisoner at the time he wrote it; Philemon, a prominent citizen and Christian of Colosse, and a church member who had been won to Christ by Paul; and Onesimus, a runaway slave whose contact with Paul in Rome resulted in his conversion and salvation, and whom Paul returned to Philemon bearing this letter.

Philemon was a rich and prosperous citizen of Colosse, where he dwelt with Apphia, his wife, and Archippus, their son. When Paul was preaching in that district, Philemon was converted, and his wife and son as well. Thereafter he became, like many of Paul's converts, a firm friend of the apostle. Moreover, he was a leader in the little church. He was of sufficient importance and influence to cause his home to be the meeting place of the church. Like most well-to-do citizens, Philemon kept slaves. They did not know any better until the leaven of Christianity began to work in their lives and show them that slavery was wrong.

One of Philemon's slaves was named Onesimus. For some cause Onesimus deserted his master and ran away. While the details of his flight are lacking, we can imagine that he went away by night and by stealth. Apparently he had stolen a share of his master's possessions and had taken with him that which was not his own in order that he might squander it upon himself. Driven by a guilty conscience and the desire to hide himself, Onesimus went to Rome, where the criminals and worst characters of the land went, in order to be lost in the crowd. There, amid the multitudes of the great and wicked city, Onesimus felt secure from the sleuths of the law.

In the very place where he had fled to hide himself, Onesimus was discovered, not by Philemon nor the trackers of runaway slaves, but by a greater pursuer. The Divine love followed Onesimus. Conscience pursued him. The Spirit of God sought him out. So it is in every life. There is no use in trying to get away from God, for the very things we do to get away from Him are playing their part in bringing us back to Him. Through the intervention of divine providence, Onesimus made his way to Paul who was a prisoner in the city of Rome. When he stepped out of the coarse debauchery and profanity of the crowded resorts of the metropolis into the presence of Paul, Onesimus saw the foulness of the one life and the beauty of the other, and was persuaded to accept the Gospel which he had probably heard frequently in the house of his master.

It is rather interesting to note the condition of Onesimus before he went to hear Paul preach in Rome. Primarily he was a slave. As such he perfectly illustrated the spiritual condition of all who are without Christ. Every one who has not been saved by the Lord Jesus is a servant of sin and a slave of Satan. Onesimus was both a slave to his master Philemon and to Satan. His was a double servitude. The labor and the energy of his body belonged to Philemon, and, the devil. Onesimus was also an unprofitable sinner. No one can please the Lord until he is saved. Onesimus was unprofitable to his master, and every unsaved person is unprofitable to God. He was a runaway sinner also. Each sinner is a runaway from God. Although he ran away from his master, Onesimus could not get away from God. It is impossible for man to hide from God. The psalmist said, "Whither shall I go from Thy spirit? Or whither shall I flee from Thy presence?" When Onesimus went into the presence of Paul, the apostle, with great tact, pointed him to Christ. He accepted Christ as his Saviour and was gloriously saved.

After Onesimus was saved Paul wrote to Philemon concerning him in this fashion, "Formerly he was useless to you, but now--true to his name--he is of great use to you and to me." Paul wanted and needed this slave, but he felt that to retain him would deprive Philemon of the pleasure of cheerfully sending Onesimus back to minister to him, and it would encourage Onesimus to sin in disregarding his obligation to return to his owner. Paul sent him back with this letter, so exquisitely worded that it no doubt secured forgiveness and a cordial reception for Onesimus, who later appears to have been a prominent member of the church at Colosse.

Onesimus had to go back to Philemon and ask forgiveness for the theft, and risk the probability of the sneers of the community. He had to learn that the forgiveness of God does not mean the cancelling of consequences. Where it is possible for us to make amends, it is our business to do it. Christianity holds out for absolute straightness of dealing between man and man. Onesimus had grace enough to know that he could never look Christ in the face without sorrow until he could look his fellow-man in the face without shame. That truth lies at the very heart of Christianity. Christ came to make us sensitive in our dealings with our fellows, demanding straightness, fairness, and honesty. When Onesimus set his face towards Colosse he was at peace with God, his life was changed--he was on his way to make restitution to his master, Philemon, he was his brother in the Lord, and he was profitable to his master. That is what Christ does with our social differences. He brings in a love, a sympathy, and a kinship which transcend them.

From this brief and exceedingly significant letter there emerges a lesson on the profitableness of consecrated personality. Whatever may have been the dark past in the life of Onesimus, he is here presented by Paul as a man who is glorifying God by using every power of his redeemed personality in profitable service for others. With master strokes of his pen Paul frames him in this picture as an illustration and shining example of one whose whole life was dedicated to the task of making his personality profitable.

I. What is Personality?

The word personality is of modern origin. Shakespeare was a versatile writer, but he never heard of this word. Personality is that indefinable something which is referred to as the "it" of life. It is the atmosphere you create by what you read, by what you think, by what you eat, by the associates you have, and by the investments you make. It is what distinguishes you from all the rest of mankind.

Personality is the trade-mark which God has engraved on you. You can mar it, or you can develop it. It is the differential which sets you apart from everyone else in the universe, not only in your own generation, but in all ages. There never will be another on just like you, and never has there been one just like you. If personality is a gift of God, can we do anything about it? We certainly can do something about it. While we know very little more about personality than we know about electricity, yet we can make electricity profitable. This poor slave surely faced many adverse circumstances, yet he is a shining example of one who made personality profitable.

II. What Made The Personality of Onesimus Profitable?

1. His associations.

He belonged in the household of Philemon, a devout Christian believer. Onesimus probably heard Paul preach in the home of his master. He saw the life and walk of Philemon day by day. There were likely many other Christian guests in the home. His life was profoundly influenced by these great personalities.

2. His acceptance of Christ as his personal Saviour.

Personality becomes really and eternally profitable only when Christ is accepted as the Saviour and enthroned as the Lord of the life. How could personality be profitable if Christ was left out? Onesimus became profitable when he was saved.

3. His vision.

He evidently had a vision of his need, for he came to Paul. He certainly realized his need of a Saviour, for he accepted Christ and became His disciple. He surely had a vision of helpful service, for he saw where he could invest his life in helpful ministry to the aged and weary apostle. He also had a vision of duty and obligation to Philemon and went back to take up again the menial tasks of a slave. He rose above circumstances and made his personality profitable.

III. How Can We Make Our Personalities Profitable?

There is no tragedy comparable to the tragedy of a wasted life. It is bad to waste money, or time, or talent, or anything that is worth while, but the greatest waste of all is the waste of life. Life is wasted when its powers and influences are hoarded and not used. Life is wasted when its priceless treasures are invested in the things that are wrong. What shall we do, each of us, all of us, with our personalities? Someone has said:

"God has His best things for the few,
Who dare to stand the test;
God has His second best for those
Who will not have His best."

If we could make life profitable we must make careful investments. All that we have is to be invested--our bodies, our minds, our time, our talents, our souls, our property, and our possessions. To invest our capital most wisely we should:

1. Study the example of others.

(1) The rich fool.

He kept all he had and lived for himself. Every decision as to his possessions was motivated by selfishness.

(2) The prodigal son.

He wasted all that he had and came to want.

(3) Paul.

He invested his mighty personality in service for Christ and for others. No man ever lived more unselfishly, more nobly, or more usefully for Christ than Paul.

2. Raise these questions.

(1) Is it right?

Is it right to invest our precious treasures of personality in this venture? After the Civil War, General Robert E. Lee was offered a large sum of money for the use of his name in promotion a questionable enterprise. He replied: "My name is all that I have left, and it is not for sale." One's name is the label of personality. No one has the right to waste his life. It is never right to do wrong.

(2) Does it conform to the will of God?

The greatest thing in the universe is the will of God. Harmony with His will is the believer's pathway of blessedness. We should never begin anything in life without God.

(3) Is it capable of developing the best there is in you?

Some students once asked John Greenleaf Whittier how to make the most of life. He replied: "Live up to the best there is in you." We should always seek to invest our lives in the field that offers the greatest opportunity for calling out the best there is in us.

(4) Will it be of greatest service to others?

The crowning glory of one's life is to invest it for others. The self-centered life is doomed. The example of Jesus points the royal way for the investment of personality.

There was a time when Onesimus was not profitable. But another day dawned when he became a different man. The change was so great that Paul described him as profitable, serviceable, and helpful. He became a new man when he surrendered to the Lord Jesus. Christ enthroned within him is the secret of his change. It was Christ that made the difference in his personality. Christ always makes personality profitable.