



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"A REVOLUTIONARY DEMAND"

Sunday Morning, May 6, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: Book of Philemon

Several years ago I read an amusing little story about a lighthouse keeper. At this particular outpost, in addition to the usual searchlight, they sent out an audible warning as well. Every ten minutes, day and night, a gun fired automatically. For twenty-five years the keeper lived under these circumstances. But late one night, at the appointed interval, the gun did not go off. The keeper jumped straight out of bed and cried: "What was that?"

In a backhanded way, this story points up one of the most powerful forces in human life - the fact of habit. We all develop certain patterns of activity and are accustomed to responding to situations in the same way. This is what the psychologists call "a conditioned reflex," and such is operative in every area of life. Physically, mentally, emotionally - we set up certain "tracks" and tend to move along them. Needless to say, these habits, once ingrained, are hard to change. When you become used to doing something in a special way, it is both difficult and unpleasant to alter the pattern.

But this morning, my sermon is about doing just that. I have entitled it "A Revolutionary Demand," for it requires that we reconsider some old habits and change some basic attitudes. Now this idea is certainly not original with me. I found it in a letter written nineteen hundred years ago. In what we know as the Epistle to Philemon, Saint Paul makes this same request, and as I ponder its content, it seems to speak to our own day. Here is one of the shortest, least known documents in the New Testament. Yet it is like "a night letter" written straight to the twentieth century. Let us examine these words of Paul more carefully.

Reading between the lines of these scant verses one detects a moving drama involving three persons. A slave by the name of Onesimus belongs to a certain Philemon, who is the leader of the church in Colossae. One day Onesimus steals some money from his owner and runs away to the anonymity of a big city. There, by coincidence - or was it providence - he crossed paths with an aged prisoner, Paul the apostle. And under Paul's mighty influence he was transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ. I could stop here and preach a whole sermon about these remarkable circumstances. Here was Paul, a prisoner, yet he never ceased to be spiritually creative. He did not need a pulpit or a church to be a witness. Even in chains he was able to bear fruit for the Kingdom. It is also amazing that Paul was aware of so lowly an individual. The great missionary had appeared before kings and rulers; he could hold his own with the finest minds of his day; he had all the load of an expanding missionary movement on his mind. Yet, in the midst of it all, he had time and insight to recognize the potential in this nonentity of a slave boy. Paul realized that "gold is gold wherever it is found," even in the gutter. He sensed a spark of significance in this unlikely personage, and his interest fanned that spark into a flame. The boy was literally converted, and his name gave Paul a good occasion to make a play on

words. The name Onesimus means "useful" or "profitable," so Paul writes later: "He formerly was useless, but now he is useful" (verse 11). Through Christ, Onesimus was now by nature what he used to be only by name. And what better description can you find for the effect of Christianity than just this? It takes waste products and makes them useful again. Clovis Chappel had a sermon on Onesimus that he entitled: "Making the No-Count Count." This is the purpose of Christianity, for did not Christ explain His coming as an attempt "to save that which is lost" (Matthew 18:11)? Therefore, behind this story is a remarkable apostle and a glowing reclamation.

But what was Paul to do with this promising young convert? He obviously wanted him to be one of his assistants in the ministry (verse 13), but there were great problems. Onesimus was still the property of Philemon, and a runaway thief, at that. Paul's sense of integrity would not permit him to let things go or even command Philemon to set this one free. The honorary way was exceedingly difficult, but this must be the approach. Onesimus must return to his master and thus learn that one cannot walk away from the consequences of his deeds. Christianity is never an escape from the past; it is rather the power to face that past and overcome it by reconciliation. He had sinned in two ways: by taking what he had no right to take and by doing what he had no right to do. Onesimus must learn Christian responsibility from this.

And there was something for Philemon to learn in the same experience. Paul seized this opportunity to help his brother grow in the implications of Christianity. So he tactfully and skillfully wrote a letter that was to accompany Onesimus, and in it was "the revolutionary demand." The whole problem centered in the attitude toward slaves. It is hard for us today to comprehend this, but this was the first century and slavery was as accepted an institution as mass production is today. Slaves were part of the whole economic system. They were regarded as property, not persons. They were living entities to be managed like any tool. This did not mean they were abused or degraded, necessarily. They were treated like a farmer would treat his work animals, and it never occurred to the owners of that day to think any differently. They were accustomed to responding to the matter in a certain way, and Paul could well imagine what Philemon would do to Onesimus. Without giving it a moment's reflection he might have the runaway killed as a warning to others, or at least brand an "F" onto his forehead so all would know he had been a fugitive. This is what he always did to a runaway, and Paul's problem was how to alter that pattern.

He begins the letter by praising Philemon's attitude toward other Christians. He had "refreshed the hearts" (verse 7) of many by his "love and faith...toward all the saints" (verse 5). In the same vein, Paul makes a subtle shift - he begins to talk about Onesimus. Everything he says is highly personal, as if he belonged in the former group. Paul speaks of him as "my child" (verse 10). He relates that through his ministry Onesimus was converted (verse 10), and gently reminds Philemon that this is exactly how he became a Christian (verse 19). Paul speaks of this one as part of his own heart (verse 12), and then comes to the crux of the matter: will you treat him, not as a slave, but as one of the saints? Will you extend the attitude you have toward other Christians to a group you had never so considered before? Will you alter your deep-seated ideas, and treat Onesimus like you would me, a beloved brother in Christ?

This was a revolutionary demand, make no mistake about it. It probably took Philemon's breath away at first, so sweeping were the implications. To regard slaves the same as saints; to treat as persons those who had always been things - this was an earth-shattering concept. And, yet, as he thought it through, Philemon realized it grew logically out of the essence of Christianity. What had Jesus taught? "For

God so loved the world" (John 3:16). This scope was the really distinctive note He sounded. Men had always known of love, but on a limited scale. They loved their families, their friends, their class, their race, their nation, but it ended there. It was always restricted to some "in-group." But here was undaunted inclusiveness. God is love - period. We are to love - period. There were no qualifying phrases or limiting clauses. This was the way Christ lived. He toppled many of the time-honored barriers by eating with sinners and loving His enemies and treating Jews and Gentiles alike. Much as Philemon may have wanted to, there was no escaping it: this was the heart of the religion of Jesus. As the seed grows, it is bound to split the rock. There is no avoiding the conclusion: "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond or free, male or female. We are all one in Him" (Galatians 3:28).

/ This is "the revolutionary demand" that was made of Philemon - to annex a new territory, to enlarge his scope, to extend the boundaries of his concern. He was to change his attitude toward a whole group of people. And this same demand is what is so pertinent to the needs of our own day. It is rather sad that almost twenty centuries have passed and this ideal has not been realized. We still divide up into little groups. We still limit our love to a few select individuals. We still respond impersonally to whole segments of society, be they race, class, or denomination. We still need to do what Paul asked of Philemon - to take our attitude toward the "in-group" and extend beyond where it has been our habit to go.

Now this is not, nor has it ever been, easy, but the need is absolutely urgent. It is not only the demand of the Gospel, it is the demand of the very nature of our times. I need not labor the point that from a practical standpoint our world has dramatically shrunk in the last fifty years. We used to be isolated provinces, protected by stretches of space and unaffected by the actions of each other. But all of that is a thing of the past. Today we are within forty-eight hours of any place on the globe. What happens here at one moment can be known everywhere in a matter of minutes. We are literally "one world" now, we are intertwined and interrelated as never before. And this outward shrinking calls for an inward expansion. Attitudes must be modified if men are going to live together in such proximity.

Something is happening every day in northern and eastern cities that illustrates our condition perfectly. People from the rural areas of the south are moving in droves to the urban areas. In some places they already constitute a sociological group. In Cincinnati they are referred to as "the WASP" - white, anglo-saxon, protestant. They are creating great problems in these areas for a very simple reason: they have grown up in wide, open spaces and are used to doing pretty much what they please. "Back down home" this sort of thing did not make much difference. But when they are jammed together in tenements, their actions take on significance for others. If they yell or sing at night or throw garbage out the window, it affects many others. The great difficulty is getting these folk to readjust to the demands of their new situation. And this is precisely the task that faces our world. We are in one big tenement house, and we have either got to learn to live together in love or we shall live together in hate. In the world of 1962, we simply cannot afford the old prejudices and hatreds and animosities. The demand to extend our love is not a pleasant option; it is the most urgent necessity of our century.

Therefore, in these revolutionary times, I ask you to consider this revolutionary demand of Paul. To those groups that you have always shut out, be it a race of people or management or labor or some social class or certain nationalities - whatever limitations it has been your custom to set up - I beg you to do for them what Philemon was asked to do for Onesimus. Regard them as made in God's image and part of the

family of man, and extend to them the love you have restricted to the few.

(This is the message of Philemon for today - the challenge of unlimited love. It involves many painful changes of habit, but is the mandate of our all-loving Lord. The church must take the lead in extending these boundaries, for we are "the body of Christ" on this earth.)

There is an old story about the campaigns of Alexander the Great. The Macedonian was known for his rigid discipline, and this was one of the great factors that accounts for his conquering the world. One night a soldier was found asleep on his guard duty. This constituted a most serious offense, and for judgment he was brought before the General himself. Alexander was seated on his massive horse when the man was brought to him. He heard the charge and then asked the soldier: "What is your name?" The man answered: "Alexander." The General's eyes narrowed and he shouted with frightening passion: "I asked you, man; what is your name?" The soldier faltered and repeated: "My name is Alexander." Then, with one swift movement, the General leaned over and knocked the man to the ground with one blow and said in a voice of cutting steel: "Listen, my man, either change your name or change what you are."

Listen! It is the voice of Christ saying to those who call themselves "Christians": "Either change your name, or change what you are!"

Revolutionary times! A revolutionary demand!

"Depart now in the fellowship of God the Father, and as you go, remember: in the goodness of God you were born into this world; by the grace of God you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour, and by the love of God, fully revealed in the face of Jesus, you are being redeemed. Amen."