

Voices: Justice looks like Onesimus, the bishop of Ephesus

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EDITOR'S NOTE: "Justice looks like ..." is a special series in the Voices column. Readers will have the opportunity to consider justice from numerous viewpoints. The series is based on each writer's understanding of Scripture and relationship with Jesus Christ. Writers present their own views independent of any institution, unless otherwise noted in their bios.

You are encouraged to listen to each writer without prejudgment. Then, engage in conversation with others around you about what justice looks like to you.

[Click here](#) for more information about the series. [Click here](#) to read the full "Justice looks like..." series.

The church should be the first institution Christians should consider to examine what justice looks like.

Before advocating for it in the world, we should examine the quality of it in our own community and seek to understand what God's view of justice is.

In God's word, we will discover it; with one another, we should practice it; and before the world, we should advocate for it.

For me, the most helpful place to see this justice practiced is in the life of Onesimus, the bishop of Ephesus.

Onesimus' story

We first read of Onesimus in Paul's prison letters Philemon and Colossians. His story begins in the house of Philemon, a slaveholding house church leader and the recipient of the letter that bears his name.

Paul wrote to Philemon, appealing on behalf of Onesimus. His implicit request advocated for Onesimus' full release. His explicit request appealed for Onesimus' warm reception as a "beloved brother."

After all, it was Onesimus who would return to Colossae with letters from Paul to the church there. He would deliver the first letter to the church at Colossae, relaying to them—along with Tychicus—Paul's condition and well-being, and comforting the Colossians' hearts.

In Colossians 4:9, Paul calls Onesimus a "faithful and beloved brother," clearly indicating his new status as a minister and church leader. Imagine, therefore, how emotionally heavy it must have been for Onesimus to deliver this second letter to the man who could only see him as a slave—his property.

Paul's admonishment to Philemon is clear. He is "no longer a slave," he is your "brother beloved." Philemon, therefore, is instructed to receive Onesimus as if he were receiving Paul.

Onesimus is now "beloved," created in Christ for good works prepared for him before the foundation of the world. He is "beloved," born through the blood, claimed by grace, redeemed by mercy, lifted by love, captured by hope and astounded by glory.

He is "beloved," purchased by God, loved by Paul, and—with the transforming barrier-breaking power of the gospel—he will be received by Philemon as his brother, never again his slave.

Paul's ask

Although Paul never comes out and says, "Release Onesimus, and let him come back to Rome with me so he can preach the gospel full-time," it is clear this is what Paul is asking for.

After all, emancipation is the only realistic way Philemon ever could regard Onesimus as "no longer a slave." If he is "no longer a slave," it has to follow he is not obligated to remain with Philemon, because he cannot simultaneously be Philemon's brother *and* his slave.

In fact, the heavy ethical implications of the gospel leave absolutely no room for any Christian ever to lord over another, because the concept of supremacy is completely inconsistent with the grace of Christ's cross, which renders everyone equal.

The rest of the story

The lives of Onesimus and Philemon do not end with the biblical account. According to church tradition, Philemon went on to be the bishop of Colossae, Onesimus went on to be the bishop of Ephesus, and both men were martyred during the reign of Nero.

If this is true, then the slave owner and the slave would have abandoned their worldly titles and taken one another on as beloved brothers, serving together, leading together and ultimately dying together.

Sadly, modern scholarship doubts these events. In fact, a great deal of the commentary regarding Philemon is clouded by a fog of speculation, such as theories that Onesimus robbed Philemon and that Paul was writing to assure him Onesimus would be a good slave if allowed to return. For the most part, however, these speculations are mere eisegetical products of Western sensitivities.

The pain and loss Paul describes in verse 18 could be explained sufficiently by Onesimus' escape. More so, receiving Onesimus back as a "good slave" completely ignores Paul's crystal-clear language of "no longer a slave."

Concerning their doubt that Onesimus the slave became Onesimus the bishop, they cite the commonness of his name. However, there is only *one* Onesimus from Colossae—near Ephesus—who is listed among Paul's ministry converts and colleagues.

It makes sense he is the one who became bishop of Ephesus. The only reason such a claim is unacceptable to modern scholarship is because they suffer from eyes that refuse to see.

Seeing anew

It appears, therefore, that for the 21st century Western reader, the book of Philemon helps the church see why our vision of justice is so cloudy. We have a hermeneutic that simply refuses to see slaves and slaveholders giving up their worldly barriers for the sake of their fraternal bond in Christ.

We have been conditioned to think the gospel keeps slaves as slaves and teaches slave owners how to be benevolent masters. We have been taught to see that instead of seeing how the gospel breaks down every single barrier hindering us from being family in Jesus—living together, serving together, witnessing together, praying together, dying together, overcoming together and reigning with Christ in glory forever together. This, however, is what justice looks like.

From the balconies of the church triumphant, Philemon and Onesimus beseech us to let gospel love destroy every cultural, institutional and systemic barrier that keeps us from being family, so God's justice can be seen in the world when they look at the church.

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