

Charles Colcock Jones was a wealthy 19<sup>th</sup>-century landowner in the coastal region of Georgia near Savannah where he maintained three plantations by the efforts of over 100 enslaved humans. Charles Colcock Jones also was a Presbyterian minister of the gospel.

The people in Rev. Jones’ life were people of faith, people whose faith shaped their everyday lives. We know this because some 6,000 of his and his family’s letters were preserved by his oldest son, and two authors have won major prizes for their books using these letters to let us peer into the pre-Civil War South. Robert Manson Myer’s “The Children of Pride,” for example, won the 1973 National Book Award in History for what is called its “true history of the Civil War in Georgia.”



*Charles Colcock Jones, Sr.,  
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What “The Children of Pride” reveals is an era in the American South where some people lived very well by enslaving Africans to do all their work, which is to say, an era based on deeply flawed moral grounds. However, Charles Colcock Jones didn’t view his enslaved workforce that way, but rather as property, a view cemented in place by a self-serving interpretation of scripture as authorizing slavery and by long accommodation of Christians to the practice.

So, using our Anglican “three-legged stool” of scripture, tradition, and reason for informing Christ-like actions, Rev. Jones had tradition and (he thought) scripture on which to base his acquiescence to the major immorality of his age.

What set Rev. Jones apart in his time and place is that he reckoned—reasoned—that he and other plantation owners and ministers of the Gospel had an obligation to tell those they enslaved about Jesus. In fact, a [1972 article](#) about “The Children of Pride” credits Rev. Jones with what it calls a “major role in awakening the nation to the religious needs of black people” and says that, “at home, toward his own slaves, he practiced a benevolence that has to be described as both scrupulous and heartfelt.”

I’ve told you about the Rev. Charles Colcock Jones today because he once preached a sermon about today’s second lesson that the congregation at his church for enslaved people flatly rejected. According to Jones (as recorded in his diary and told in 2016 by Stephen Angell at the Earlham School of Religion in Indiana), Jones said, “When I insisted on fidelity and obedience as Christian virtues in servants and, upon the authority of Paul, condemned the practice of *running away*, one half of my audience deliberately rose up and walked off with themselves, and those who remained looked anything but

satisfied, either with the preacher or his doctrine. After dismissal, there was no small stir among them; some solemnly declared that there was no such Epistle in the Bible; others, that they did not care if they ever heard me preach again.”

Today’s Christians don’t think that the message in today’s lesson is about slavery. Instead, we insist that the message is that all people are equal, especially in God’s eyes and all equal in Christ Jesus.

Paul starts out this way by identifying himself in the opening of his letter as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus,” not,

- “A prisoner FOR Christ” or even
- “A prisoner BECAUSE of his belief in Christ,” but
- “Paul, a prisoner OF Christ,” as in, “Paul, enslaved of Christ Jesus.” In other words, “acting not on my own authority, but on the authority of our common owner and master, Christ Jesus.”

Paul then goes on to tell how brothers and sisters in Christ should treat each other:

- As equals, revealed by Paul telling Philemon he wanted to keep Onesimus “so that he might be of service to me **in your place.**”
- By calling Onesimus a “beloved brother” to them both.
- By claiming kinship, in and through Christ.

However, Onesimus clearly thought he had something he needed to “square” with Philemon, something we don’t know about. The Jo Belser interpretation of Philemon is this: It’s not good enough to be sorry for the things we have done that we regret or cause harm; to be truly free of the things from our past that trouble us, we have to take action to right out past wrongs, take responsibility for the consequences of our actions, and set things right, no matter the cost... as Onesimus did, with Paul’s help.

Onesimus, for example, apparently had run away from his so-called “owner.” It was not morally right for one person to own another, but the law back then made this injustice legal. Onesimus could have been punished severely for his actions, possibly even put to death. And yet, he set out to make things right.

Onesimus would have been worth about 500 denarii, almost two years’ salary for a freed worker. And we don’t know what, if anything, that Onesimus might have taken from Philemon to make his escape. Onesimus couldn’t possibly have paid the price for his own redemption. So, Paul himself offered

to make reparations for Onesimus, “if anything was owed.” Paul wanted Philemon to free Onesimus and send Onesimus back to him as a beloved son, offering Onesimus a home and a purpose in life.

Does this remind you of anyone else? Doesn’t Christ Jesus do these very things for us? Helps us face and repair our past so that we might have a future? Frees us from the weight of our wrongs? Makes reparations for us and pays the price of our redemption? Christ Jesus paid our debt, whatever we owed, for having run away from God. And best yet, Christ Jesus gives us a meaningful future, both here in this life and beyond.

We don’t know for sure whether Philemon did as Paul asked and freed Onesimus. I think so, though, precisely because the letter was preserved. Plus, there are hints that Onesimus later became a Bishop in the church, as all of Paul’s other assistants did. The same evidence suggests Philemon also became a bishop: love wins; freedom reigns!

Our lesson today offers these insights about forgiveness and reparation:

- When something in our past continues to trouble us, we need to examine what we did that feels unfinished and why it still troubles us.
- Then, we need to go back and put that thing right, whatever the potential cost, remembering that we never make this journey alone.
- Finally, when we are asked for pardon, the only basis is the one Paul claimed: LOVE. Not legality. Not economics. Not justice. Those things are for judges. As brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, our only recourse is love. Because love wins over all, in the end, and we are all equal before God.