

Philemon

Intro: Paul writes this letter for three express reasons:

- 1) To encourage Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in Christ. **(17)**
- 2) Hoping Philemon would willingly allow Onesimus to return and serve with him. **(13)**
- 3) To inform Philemon of Paul's intention to come and stay with him. **(22)**

Verses 1-3:

--**(1)** Paul is writing from prison in Rome and introduces himself as ***Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus***. This is the only time that Paul introduces himself as such, and he mentions his imprisonment six times in this short letter: **1, 9, 10, 13, 22, 23**.

--He is different from other inmates because they are in prison for reasons that have nothing to do with Jesus Christ. Paul *is* a prisoner of Christ Jesus. *How many of us could calmly sit and write that about ourselves if we were held back from how we desired to serve the Lord?*

--***and Timothy our brother***. . . places Timothy with Paul and in agreement with Paul's wishes as expressed in this letter.

--***To Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer***. . . Paul is writing to Philemon, who apparently lived at Colosse (**Col. 4:9**) and seems to be a part of the higher class as a slave owner and hosted the church in his home. Since Paul had never gone to Colosse, he likely met Philemon in Ephesus and there led him to the Lord **(19)**.

--Philemon apparently returned to Colosse and became part of a church plant, as a leader.

--**(2) to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier**. . . Most guess that Apphia and Archippus are Philemon's wife and son. ***The beloved*** could be translated *our sister*.

--As a ***fellow-soldier*** Archippus was fighting the good fight of faith alongside Paul. We know God had appointed him to some type of ministry Paul encouraged him to fulfill (**Col. 4:17**).

--***and to the church in your house***. . . This phrase is key to the letter. Most scholars rush to make this a private letter ignoring the clear indications it is more than that.

--Many able commentators say ***the church in your house*** refers to other saved family members. Such an inference is placing something into the text that is not there and ignoring the obvious.

--Every time ***the church in your house*** it is used in the Bible, it does not refer to direct family members but to the family of God as the Church (**Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15**).

--Paul would not have included Timothy at the start of the letter, the many others at the end of the letter, or plural pronouns in his greeting and farewell (**3+22+25**) if this was a strictly personal letter.

--1 & 2 Timothy are much more personal letters than this one—addressed specifically in greeting and farewell to Timothy and no other.

--The key to Philemon is realizing the fact Paul is addressing everyone aware of this very public situation. Philemon is a *public* letter with a *personal* appeal. The testimony of the response Paul anticipates **(21)** is the true power behind the epistle.

--Philemon would read this aloud and everyone who heard would watch him respond accordingly. Think of how the other Christian slaves present at that church gathering would be encouraged!

--(3) The **you** here is a plural pronoun and therefore includes all the church.

Verses 4-7:

--(4) ***I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers.*** . . Paul was thankful to the Lord for Philemon and the believers in his house. He constantly prayed for those displaying true Christian life and character.

--Wonderfully, his gratitude wasn't drained by a single prayer or expression. Paul was always encouraged by the life of God he saw in any believer.

--(5) ***hearing of your love and faith.*** . . Practically, the news he heard was most likely from Epaphras and Onesimus.

--Paul was thankful to God because only God could Author these evident virtues in their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit.

--***which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.*** . . genuine love and faith toward God will be expressed in genuine love and faith toward the people of God.

--(6-7) All the good things Jesus Christ was doing in Him, were spilling over to others, refreshing their lives. Love and faith look like different things in different lives: hospitality, mercy, help, giving, evangelism, prayer, ministry, etc.

Verses 8-11:

--(8) Here Paul gets to the meat of his letter. He is going to make a public appeal to Philemon. What is that appeal? **17: *If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me.***

--As an Apostle, Paul could have commanded Philemon to receive Onesimus on the level of the gospel and no longer as a runaway slave. But he doesn't. Instead. . .

--(9) ***yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*** . . Why would Paul use authority and command submission to the truth of the gospel when he didn't have to? As an old man (likely in his early 60's) in prison for the cause of Christ, he is asking Philemon to respond to the miraculous truth of new birth and new creation in Christ Jesus.

--(10) The true order of the verse is: *I appeal to you for my son, whom I have begotten in my bonds, Onesimus.*

--Wonderfully, Paul had numerous spiritual children: **(1 Cor. 4:14, 17; Gal. 4:19; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4).**

--You can imagine the scene as Philemon is reading this aloud before the church, Tychicus, and Onesimus.

--(11) *who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.* . . . There is a play on words here as the name Onesimus means *useful* or *profitable*.

--In Christ, Onesimus is no longer what he once was. His new identity is that of a son of God.

Verses 12-14:

--(12-13) Paul is sending Onesimus back, even though he clearly desired to have Onesimus with him as a helper in ministry. It wasn't easy for him to do so, in fact, he had also just done so with Epaphroditus (**Phil. 2:25-30**) to help that congregation as well.

--In this manner, we see the apostle's wonderful selflessness for the betterment of others.

Romans 15:1-3: *We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, leading to edification. For even Christ did not please Himself.*

--(14) ***But without your consent I wanted to do nothing.*** . . . Paul knows it would have been a breach of friendship and fellowship to have forced or presumed Philemon's agreement.

--***that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.*** The Apostle Paul is too wise to believe that social pressure or kind manipulation would work the spiritual graces he is looking for in Philemon. *Paul no doubt uses tact, but tact is different than winning a negotiation or trusting human powers of persuasion.*

--Paul is working to the right end with the right means. He knows a free godly response is what is best for Philemon, Onesimus, and all the church.

2 Corinthians 9:7: *So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*

Verses 15-16:

--Paul wants Philemon to see two things:

1) **(15)** God's hand was in these circumstances. Onesimus running away, ending up in Rome, finding Paul in prison, new birth, Epaphras being present, and Tychicus about to leave, etc.

--The hand of God is always behind a change in eternal destiny.

2) **(16)** Recognizing God's work means that Onesimus is ***more than a slave—a beloved brother!*** Legally was he still a slave? Maybe. Actually, was he still a slave? Not at all!

--Paul wanted Philemon to respond accordingly to Onesimus ***in the flesh and in the Lord.***

--What is happening here is a miracle. There were so many barriers being broken in Christ! A religious Pharisee was writing to his Gentile son in the faith, who was a free Roman citizen, about his runaway slave, who was also now his true son in the faith and Philemon's brother in the family of God.

--This was the central moment. The question was powerful but simple: *What would Christianity do?* The question was not *What does the law say? What was culturally acceptable or relevant?* Or even *What would Philemon do?* Only one thing mattered: *What would Christianity do?*

Verses 17-19:

--(17) This is the central request of the letter. This is what Christianity would do.

--Paul takes no place of authority over Philemon, but only asks Philemon to recognize his partnership in the Lord and treat Onesimus the same. He is placing them all on the same level at the foot of the cross.

--Here he was, a criminal prisoner of Rome that Philemon would gladly welcome into his house, asking the same for a runaway slave.

--(18-19) **But if he has wronged you. . . if** is really *since*. Onesimus had wronged Philemon. We don't know the extent, but something was there.

--Paul admits Onesimus has done Philemon wrong and promises to make fair restitution on behalf of Onesimus. Salvation doesn't absolve one from love's demand to do good where we have the power. *Think of Zacchaeus*

--How would Paul get the money to repay? It is possible Paul had some money through tentmaking or some type of inheritance (**Acts 24:26; 28:30**).

--I don't believe Paul is haggling here, I think he is joking because he knows he doesn't have to say what he is saying. To me, this shows comfortability more than conniving. I think the next three verses play that out.

Verses 20-22:

--(20) Thinking of Philemon's response was joyous and refreshing to Paul's heart. Why? Because only the Lord could do something like this in all three of them!

--(21) Paul confesses confidence that Philemon will do even more than he has asked. Paul has no doubts that Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus would bless him, bless the church as witnesses of the power of the gospel, and be a testimony of the grace of God in them all.

--(22) You don't invite yourself over the house of a person you think you have to manipulate into accepting something they really don't want to do. You invite yourself over a good friend's house, where you know you are welcome and where your blessing rests.

Matthew 10:11-13: Now whatever city or town you enter, inquire who in it is worthy, and stay there until you go out. And when you go into a household, greet it. If the household is worthy, let your peace come upon it. But if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you.

--We are not told in Scripture what happens to Onesimus in the end, but historically we do have Ignatius writing to a bishop of Ephesus named Onesimus!

Verses 23-25:

--Paul sends greetings from these other men. *Contrasts of Onesimus with Mark & Demas*

Ending Applications:

1) My relationship with Jesus Christ is proven by my relationship to others.

--What if Paul refused to share the gospel with Onesimus because he was a slave? What if Onesimus refused to return to Philemon with this letter? What if Philemon treated Onesimus harshly under the law? It would be Christ that was shamed!

1 John 4:20-21: *If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen? And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.*

--It is instructive to see how the apostle deals with the issue of slavery here in this letter. He doesn't address it directly at all. Instead, he insists upon two Christian men living out the real implications of the Gospel.

*Francis James Grimke was born to a slave mother and her owner in 1850. He served as a Confederate valet for two years to avoid being re-enslaved. After Emancipation he attended Princeton and in 1878 accepted the pastorate at an influential Presbyterian church in Washington DC. He remained there over 50 years, faithfully shepherding a mixed congregation with the Word of God.

--Here was his basic thought: *"Why should there be churches made up of white Christians and churches made up of colored Christians in the same community, where all speak the same language? Why should white Christians and colored Christians not feel perfectly at home with each other in the same religious gatherings, if they are all Christians, if they all believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, in doing by others as they would be done by, in loving each other as they love themselves, in their oneness in Christ Jesus, and if the same Holy Spirit dwells alike in all their hearts? With these great principles guiding, directing, and influencing them, that would be what you would naturally expect to find, just as in all churches you find all classes and conditions brought together—rich and poor, high and low, educated and uneducated. Any attempt to build the Christian church on any of these lines exclusively would be recognized at once as wrong, as contrary to the spirit of Jesus Christ."**

--Grimke knew it was only the truth of the Gospel that could change hearts and men.

--Christianity ends social evils by the transformation of souls. The answer is always the same. The only answer for all sinful ills is new creation—new birth—new life. Changed lives make for changed societies. *Good laws are fine, but they can be broken, changed, and don't give life. New birth is eternal and powerful.*

2) The gospel should be embodied in our changed lives.

--In this epistle, we see Paul put himself in the very place of Onesimus, as if he had wronged Philemon. He does this to secure the acceptance and future of a thieving runaway slave. He does so not as an authoritative apostle but with all love and humility and at his own personal loss of money or reputation.

--The life of Christ in them plays out with the character of Christ himself.

--We too were once slaves to sin, rebels and enemies of God, lost to our own ways. Totally unprofitable to God. And while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

--In Luther's preface to this epistle he writes: *"What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon. . . For we are all his Onesimi, if we believe."*