

Paul's Prison Epistles

Lesson 4

Paul and Philemon

Manuscript



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INTRODUCTION

Most of us have experienced times when we feel that a friend owes us a favor. Maybe we've done something nice — given a gift or helped in a special way — and then the time comes when *we* need help. So, we approach our friend, and say, “I know you may not want to do this, but I could really use your help. And you do owe me a favor.” In many ways, the apostle Paul faced a similar situation. He had done a lot for his friend, Philemon, and he needed a favor from him. So, Paul wrote to Philemon, reminding him of how much Paul had done for him, and he asked Philemon to show kindness to someone else as a favor to him.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*, and we've entitled it “Paul and Philemon.” We'll be taking a close look at the letter Paul wrote from prison to his friend Philemon, a member of the church in Colossae. In this letter, Paul petitioned Philemon for a favor, asking him to reconcile himself to Onesimus, Philemon's slave who had recently come to faith in Christ.

Our study of Paul and Philemon will divide into three main parts: First, we'll look into the background of Paul's letter to Philemon. Second, we'll examine the structure and content of Paul's letter to Philemon. And third, we'll focus on the modern application of this letter. Let's look first at the background of Paul's letter to Philemon.

BACKGROUND

Paul's letter to Philemon differs from his other prison epistles in at least two ways. On the one hand, it's significantly shorter than the other letters he wrote during his imprisonment. This is largely because the letter directly addresses only a single issue. And on the other hand, it was written primarily to an individual person, Philemon, rather than to a church or group of churches. For this reason, it is deeply personal. This means that the more we know about Philemon and the other people involved, and the more we know about the circumstances Paul addressed, the better prepared we'll be to understand Paul's rather specific teachings in this letter. And the better prepared we'll be to apply these personal matters to our own lives today.

We'll explore the background of Paul's letter to Philemon in three ways. First, we'll identify the people involved in the personal matter Paul addressed in his letter to Philemon. Second, we'll look at the problem that gave rise to Paul's letter. And third, we'll explore Paul's involvement and mediation of the problem. Let's first turn our attention to the people involved in this matter.

PEOPLE

Paul's letter to Philemon mentions a number of people, but we'll focus on those who were directly or indirectly involved in the favor Paul asked of Philemon. First, we'll introduce Philemon himself. Second, we'll turn to Philemon's slave Onesimus. And third, we'll mention a number of people who served as witnesses to Paul's involvement in the matter between Philemon and Onesimus. Let's begin with Philemon, the man to whom Paul wrote this epistle.

Philemon

Philemon's hometown is not mentioned in Paul's letter. But in chapter 4 verse 9 of Paul's letter to the Colossians, Paul indicated that Philemon's slave Onesimus was a resident of Colossae. There Paul wrote:

Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother ... is one of you (Colossians 4:9).

Since Onesimus lived with his master Philemon at the time that Paul wrote Colossians, Philemon must also have lived in Colossae. Colossae was a fairly small city situated in the Lycus Valley near the towns of Laodicea and Hierapolis. The Lycus Valley lay in the region of Phrygia, within the Roman province of Asia, known in modern times as Asia Minor.

Philemon himself appears to have been actively involved in ministering to other believers in Colossae. For instance, in Philemon 7, Paul spoke of the way Philemon had lovingly refreshed the hearts of other believers. Paul thought so highly of Philemon that, in verse 17, he spoke of Philemon as his partner in gospel ministry. And it may even be that, in verse 2, Paul identified Philemon as the host of the local church. But beyond this, Philemon seems to have had a significant history with Paul that formed a strong bond between them. Consider Paul's reminder to Philemon in Philemon 19:

You owe me your very self (Philemon 19, NIV).

In all likelihood, Paul meant that he had brought Philemon to faith in Christ. Although, it's also possible that he had literally saved Philemon's life in some other way. But whatever the case, Philemon owed Paul a great debt.

We can also see the strength of their relationship in Philemon's prayers for Paul's release from prison and in Paul's plan to lodge with Philemon after being released from prison. We read Paul's words to this effect in Philemon 22:

Prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you (Philemon 22).

The Bible doesn't explain how Paul came to know Philemon. But as we've seen in earlier lessons, the book of Acts indicates that Paul traveled through Phrygia during his second and third missionary journeys. Of course, as we've also seen, Paul was not familiar with the churches in the Lycus Valley. So, the truth is, we don't know how Paul and Philemon became friends. But we can say with confidence that they knew each other very well.

Having introduced Philemon, the second person we should consider is Onesimus, Philemon's bondservant — *doulos* (δοῦλος) in Greek — which can also be translated “servant” or “slave.”

Onesimus

When we read of slavery or servitude in the New Testament, we often make the mistake of thinking of chattel slavery. This was a form of slavery that existed in recent centuries in Europe and in North and South America. Sadly, chattel slavery continues in some parts of the world even today. In chattel slavery, slaves are bought and sold, along with their current and future children, as mere property with little to no legal protections. But to have a better understanding of the book of Philemon, we have to keep in view the nature of slavery, at least in theory, within the Roman Empire during the first century.

In the Roman Empire during the first century, slavery or servitude was very common. As much as one third of the Empire's population consisted of various sorts of slaves. Slaves were typically owned by wealthier individuals, and their status depended largely on the social status of their owners. Some Roman slaves were uneducated and performed menial tasks, but others were educated, some highly so, and served in ways commensurate to their education. They could be household managers, accountants, tutors, or almost anything else that was needed.

Although it was generally preferable to be free than to be enslaved, it's worth noting that the destitute in the Roman Empire often voluntarily sold themselves into slavery or servitude to obtain the security of daily food and shelter. And we even know from historical records outside of the Bible that in the early church, some Christians sold themselves into slavery as a way to raise money for the sake of the sick and the poor.

Also, it's important to know that, generally speaking, the rights of masters over their slaves were not absolute. Roman law allowed slaves to earn their own money and own their own property. They could even have their own slaves, and purchase their own freedom from their masters. And beyond these rights, many slaves were manumitted, that is, given their freedom, when they turned thirty years old, even though this practice was not mandated by law.

In order to really understand Paul's letter to Philemon, we have to have a good understanding of what slavery was like in the Roman world. Because I think the modern picture we have of slavery is very different from what it was actually in Rome. I think our picture is very much influenced by what we think of as slavery in the American

South prior to the American Civil War where people had been ripped from their homes in another country, dragged away from families, sold into just a horrendous, brutal life... But in the Roman culture, slavery was much different in that slaves were often the educated people in the household. They had authority and responsibility in the household. They had a life that was very much different from what we would think of as slavery. And oftentimes people would voluntarily put themselves into a position of slavery in order to have a home and a life and to survive. In addition, it was much easier for people in the Roman Empire to get freedom from their slavery — that could certainly be done.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

Because Onesimus was Philemon's slave, or bondservant, he was a member of Philemon's household. But, unlike his master, Onesimus was not a believer, at least not early on. For some reason, Onesimus left Philemon's household and sought Paul's help. And the apostle led him to faith in Christ and grew to love him deeply. Paul expressed his love for Onesimus in Philemon 10-12:

I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment... he is ... my very heart (Philemon 10-12).

Paul referred to Onesimus as his "child" because he had brought him to faith in Christ and because he had developed a fatherly love for him.

In addition to Philemon and Onesimus, Paul also mentioned a number of familiar witnesses that he probably thought might help him in his appeal to Philemon. These Colossian believers included Apphia, Archippus and Epaphras, each of whom had a relationship with Philemon.

Witnesses

Paul mentioned Apphia and Archippus in the letter's address, found in Philemon 1-2. Listen to what Paul wrote there:

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house (Philemon 1-2).

The mention of Apphia as Paul's "sister" might simply indicate that she was a believer. But since she is distinguished from the rest of the church, it is more likely that she was a member of Philemon's household — probably his wife. Archippus, in turn, may have been the host of the local church, although it is also possible to read this verse as saying that the church met in Philemon's house. Whatever the case, given the nature of

the letter, it's likely that he was mentioned as a person of some influence over Philemon, whether as a local pastor or as part of Philemon's household.

With regard to Epaphras, you'll recall from our prior lessons in this series that he had been the one who established the church in Colossae. He was also the one sent by the churches of the Lycus Valley to minister to Paul in prison. Because he was with Paul at the time, he could not serve as a local witness in Colossae. But his status in the church made his opinion particularly respected. So, Paul included a special greeting from Epaphras. Listen to these words, found in Philemon 23-24:

Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers (Philemon 23-24).

Notice that the greeting from Epaphras is listed first, and that it is both longer than and distinct from the others. This emphasis on Epaphras let Philemon know that Epaphras was doing more than sending a greeting; he also had a keen interest in making sure that Philemon would respond properly to Paul's letter.

Having introduced the people most closely related to the subject of Paul's letter, we are in a position to address the problem itself. What exactly went wrong that led to Paul's intervention?

PROBLEM

It's no secret that some workers and servants work harder than others, and some perform their duties more faithfully than others. For a variety of reasons, there are other servants and workers who don't work as hard. They refuse to accept their responsibilities and fail to fulfill their obligations. Unfortunately, it appears that Onesimus was one of these people. We don't know much about what Onesimus did, but his failures, whether slothful, negligent, or malicious, angered his master Philemon so much that Onesimus feared some kind of punishment. And to avoid this punishment, Onesimus left Philemon's household.

Consider Paul's words to Philemon about Onesimus in Philemon 11:

Formerly he was useless to you (Philemon 11).

There is a play on words here. The name "Onesimus" is actually derived from the Greek word *oninēmi* (ὀνίνημι), meaning "helpful" or "profitable." But Paul said here that Onesimus had proven "useless" — neither helpful nor profitable. By this wordplay, Paul granted to Philemon that Onesimus had not lived up to who he was supposed to be within Philemon's household. Worse than this, according to Philemon 18, Onesimus may actually have caused a significant financial loss for Philemon. Listen to Paul's words there:

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account (Philemon 18).

Many interpreters understand this verse to imply that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, which was a common crime among household servants and slaves. But Onesimus might also have incurred a loss for Philemon in other ways, such as through poor management of household resources, or destruction or loss of Philemon's property. In any case, Paul admitted that Philemon had a right to be upset, and Onesimus probably had good reason to be afraid of Philemon. Under Roman law, masters had the right to punish slaves severely. Onesimus was so worried about Philemon's wrath that he fled in fear. Paul alluded to this circumstance in Philemon 15, where he wrote:

For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever (Philemon 15).

Apparently, Philemon himself had not intended for Onesimus to leave, and probably did not approve of his leaving. But Paul suggested that, in his providence, God had a positive reason for allowing the situation. Through this time of separation, God changed Onesimus, so that he became a great benefit to Philemon.

Now, in the Roman Empire, slaves who left their masters' households in this manner were not necessarily fugitives. If they fled with no intention of returning, they were fugitives. But the law also permitted slaves to leave their masters temporarily to find an advocate or mediator who might reconcile them to their masters. Several Roman jurists recorded this fact. For instance, Vivianus, who wrote between AD 98 and 117, argued this way:

If a slave leave his master and come back to his mother, the question whether he be a fugitive is one for consideration; if he so fled to conceal himself and not to return to his master, he is a fugitive; but he is no fugitive if he seeks that some wrongdoing of his may be better extenuated by his mother's entreaties.

Similarly, Proculus, writing in the early first century, had this to say:

[A slave] is not a fugitive ... who, having in mind that his master wished physically to chastise him, betook himself to a friend whom he induced to plead on his behalf.

And Paulus, in the late second century, provided this commentary:

A slave who takes himself off to a friend of his master to seek his intercession is not a fugitive.

These legal comments demonstrate that Roman law permitted slaves to run from their masters, so long as they were running to someone to intercede on their behalf. So, if Onesimus fled to ask Paul to be his advocate and mediator with Philemon, he was not legally a fugitive.

The thing that we need to understand, one, about Philemon is that it was used as the foundation for the fugitive slave laws in America. So when Onesimus ran away — and again, did he steal something, why did he run away? — And then again, in God's sovereignty, he connected him with Paul. Paul considered him as, he calls him, a child. Paul considered himself as the father of Onesimus. He led Onesimus to Christ. So he didn't necessarily harbor him, because if he was harboring him, he would not have sent him back to Philemon with the intent of Philemon being a Christian and that he would set him free. So he did not harbor him. If he was harboring him, then he would have hid him and taken him off somewhere else.

— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

In summary, then, the initial problem in Philemon's household was that Onesimus had caused some loss to Philemon, whether intentionally or unintentionally, through negligence, sloth, or malice. And this problem was compounded by the resulting tension between Onesimus and Philemon. This tension more than likely included Philemon's anger and intent to discipline Onesimus, and Onesimus' fear. And finally, it culminated in Onesimus' flight from Philemon. Philemon may have assumed that Onesimus was a fugitive. But Onesimus' true motives remained to be seen.

Now that we've identified the people and the problem that Paul addressed in his letter to Philemon, we should turn to Paul's mediation between Philemon and Onesimus.

MEDIATION

We'll look at two facets of Paul's mediation: first, Onesimus' petition that Paul become his advocate; and second, Paul's agreement to advocate for Onesimus. Let's turn first to Onesimus' petition to Paul.

Onesimus' Petition

During this time, Paul was in prison. As we've said in prior lessons, it's most likely that he was imprisoned in Rome, although it's also possible that he was in Caesarea Maritima. But whether he was in Rome or Caesarea Maritima, he was quite a long way from Colossae where Philemon lived. According to some scholars, this distance was too great for Onesimus to have sought out Paul as an advocate or mediator. As a result, they conclude that Onesimus was seeking to start a new life far from Philemon, and encountered Paul only accidentally.

Now, we should admit that Scripture does not tell us what Onesimus was thinking when he fled from Philemon. Nor does it tell us how he came to meet Paul in prison.

Nevertheless, it does provide some details suggesting that Onesimus sought out Paul as his advocate. For one thing, Onesimus went to the city where Paul was imprisoned. He should have known full well that Paul resided there because the church at Colossae had sponsored Epaphras' mission to care for Paul in prison. We read about this in Colossians 4:12-13, where Paul wrote these words:

Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has worked hard for you and for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).

Since Onesimus was from Colossae, and since his master Philemon was a prominent member of that church, Onesimus probably knew where Paul was, and intended to seek him out. Besides this, once in the city, Onesimus pursued a meeting with Paul. Paul was imprisoned under house arrest, so that he could not move about freely. It's hard to imagine, then, that Onesimus could have run into him accidentally. It's most likely that Onesimus went to Paul on purpose.

Finally, Paul wrote to Philemon only after Onesimus had endeared himself to Paul. In Paul's letter to Philemon, he indicated that he had converted Onesimus to Christianity, and that Onesimus had ministered to Paul in prison. In other words, Paul defended Onesimus only after Onesimus had proven himself to Paul. Since Onesimus stayed with Paul long enough to secure his advocacy, it suggests he had fully intended to seek Paul's help in his situation.

Having considered Onesimus' petition for Paul to become his advocate, we're now ready to look at Paul's agreement to defend Onesimus before his master Philemon.

Paul's Agreement

Paul did not immediately agree to mediate between Onesimus and Philemon. After all, Onesimus had been an unprofitable slave, and Philemon was a good, loving man. Philemon had a right to discipline Onesimus, and there was no indication that he planned to do this unfairly or unjustly. Philemon would have been within his rights to punish Onesimus. So, if Paul were to defend Onesimus, he would have to appeal for mercy. And before he could ask for mercy for Onesimus, he would first have to be persuaded that Onesimus was genuinely repentant.

Paul's initial reluctance to advocate for Onesimus is admirable. After all, it would be foolish to pardon wrongdoers simply because they are afraid of being punished. Consider Paul's words in Romans 13:4, where he spoke of civil rulers in this manner:

[The governing authority] is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer (Romans 13:4).

This same principle applies in many relationships that include authority structures, such as between parents and children and, in the social structure of the first-century Roman Empire, masters and their servants. Godly authority figures carry out appropriate discipline because it is the right thing to do. And so, it was appropriate, and probably typical, that when a slave or servant appealed to his master's friend for help, that friend did not impose upon the master without being sufficiently persuaded that it was the right thing to do.

For the sake of comparison, let's consider a historical example outside of Scripture when a Roman slave appealed to his master's friend for help. A little before AD 111, the Roman senator Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to his friend Sabinianus on behalf of a freedman who worked for Sabinianus. This letter has been preserved for us through history. Listen to this excerpt from Pliny's letter:

The freedman of yours with whom you said you were angry has been to me, flung himself at my feet, and clung to me as if I were you. He begged my help with many tears ... he convinced me of his genuine penitence. I believe he has reformed, because he realizes he did wrong... Make some concession to his youth, his tears, and your own kind heart, and do not torment him or yourself any longer.

Just like Onesimus, this freedman of Sabinianus turned to his master's friend for help. And just like Paul, Pliny did not agree to mediate until the freedman had proven his repentance and good intent. So, it's safe to assume that Onesimus initially stayed with Paul to convince the apostle of his good intent. And during this time, Paul preached the gospel to Onesimus, and the Holy Spirit brought him to faith in Christ. And since genuine conversion is always accompanied by repentance of sins, it's safe to conclude that Onesimus repented of how he had offended Philemon. And with his newfound life in Christ, Onesimus became a new man, and dedicated himself to ministering to the apostle in prison. And Paul, in turn, cared deeply for this new child of God, and grew to love him as a son.

Paul's claim that Onesimus was "his heart." We need to go back to understand Paul's Jewish background. To the Jew, the heart was the very seat of your emotions, the seat of your passions, the seat of who you are, your intellect. Everything about you was engaged in the heart... So, when Paul is saying that Onesimus is my heart, how dear is Onesimus to him? How important is Onesimus to him? And again he's telling that to Philemon to make sure that Philemon understands there is a strong bond and a connection that has been developed... It's really a heart-to-heart connection that they developed. So when he says that, it's like the love of a father for a son. That's the deepness of the relationship that had been developed between Onesimus and Paul.

— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

Once Onesimus had gained Paul's favor, it was appropriate that he return to Philemon. So, Onesimus left for Colossae bearing Paul's letter of advocacy. According to Paul's letter to Philemon, Onesimus legally might have remained with Paul without becoming a fugitive. But morally, this would not have been the best solution. Rather, the Christian values of charity and reconciliation demanded Onesimus to return to Philemon. Consider Paul's reasoning in Philemon 12-16, where he wrote these words:

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me ... but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord... [He is] a beloved brother — especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (Philemon 12-16).

Although Paul would have liked for Onesimus to stay with him, Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. He wanted any consideration from Philemon to be voluntary rather than compulsory. And he wanted Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled as brothers in Christ. Presumably, Paul believed that their reconciliation would best be accomplished through a face-to-face meeting in which Onesimus repented and asked for Philemon's forgiveness, and Philemon graciously forgave and accepted Onesimus. And given Paul's high praise of Philemon as a deeply loving Christian, as well as Paul's strong advocacy for Onesimus, it appears that Paul expected this to be the outcome.

Now that we've surveyed the background of Paul's epistle to Philemon, we're ready to explore its structure and content. Let's look at the specific strategy Paul employed to mediate between Onesimus and Philemon.

STRUCTURE & CONTENT

Paul's letter to Philemon is unique in many ways. For one thing, it's Paul's only canonical letter that does not focus on teaching. In Philemon, Paul wrote more as an advocate and friend than as a teacher. For another thing, in nearly every other letter, Paul directly appealed to his apostolic authority and commanded that things be done as he ordered. But in the letter to Philemon, Paul explicitly chose not to command Philemon. Instead, he appealed to him as a co-worker for the gospel and asked him for a favor. Besides this, the epistle to Philemon is Paul's most personal letter. Paul expressed his deep concern for both Onesimus and Philemon, and made his requests based on their friendship.

In short, in the letter to Philemon, we see a humble man of God in action, taking responsibility, holding others accountable, and expressing Christ's love. And so, as we look into the details of this letter, we'll pay special attention to Paul's Christian attitudes and actions. We'll highlight how he put into practice many of the ideals he taught in his other prison epistles.

Our discussion of the structure and content of Paul's epistle to Philemon will follow the outline of the letter itself:

- beginning with the salutation in verses 1-3,
- then continuing with Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon in verses 4-7,
- moving to Paul's petition on behalf of Onesimus in verses 8-21,
- and finally, concluding with Paul's final greetings in verses 22-25.

Let's begin by looking at the salutation in verses 1-3.

SALUTATION (PHILEMON 1-3)

The salutation identifies Paul as the primary author of the letter, and states that the letter also came from Timothy. It includes an address that names Philemon as the letter's primary recipient, and mentions several others who were to bear witness to the letter: Apphia, Archippus, and the local church congregation of which Philemon was a member.

Paul knew that he was making a big request of Philemon and that it might have been difficult for Philemon to do him this favor. So, rather than allowing the matter between Philemon and Onesimus to remain private, Paul invited Philemon's household and church to witness his advocacy for Onesimus. No doubt he hoped that the watchful eyes of so many fellow believers would encourage Philemon all the more to be gracious to Onesimus. The salutation ends with a standard greeting in the form of a brief blessing.

THANKSGIVING (PHILEMON 4-7)

Following the salutation, we find Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon in verses 4-7. Paul commonly included a section on thanksgiving at this point in his letters. In this thanksgiving, Paul spoke mainly of Philemon's love for the church, and he thanked Philemon for blessing his fellow believers in Colossae. In Philemon 5-7, Paul praised Philemon with these words:

I hear of your love ... for all the saints ... I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you (Philemon 5-7).

As we see here, Paul didn't say precisely what Philemon had done, but he did mention that it had been refreshing for the saints. Perhaps Philemon had come to their financial relief, or had performed works of service for them, or had benefitted them in some other way. Whatever it had been, Philemon had done it well and with a heart full of love. And because Onesimus had become part of the church, Paul hoped that Philemon would show him the same love. Consider Paul's teaching in Colossians 3:12-14 in light of the situation between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul wrote:

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one

another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Colossians 3:12-14).

In his letter to the church at Colossae, Paul had called the entire church, including Philemon, to remember that God loves and forgives all believers. And he had encouraged them to reflect God's love in service to each other by patiently bearing with one another when wronged, and by forgiving grievances rather than demanding recompense.

Forgiveness is the hardest thing God asks of human beings, especially of believers. The application of God's love is a fundamental overflow which moves you to forgive those who have offended you, because you love as he has loved you, and you forgive as he has forgiven you. You are sent as he has sent you. These are all common biblical themes. So, what the Lord Jesus has done in forgiving you is what you extend in grace and mercy to others.

— Dr. Ramesh Richard

The application of this general teaching to Philemon and Onesimus is not hard to see. Onesimus had wronged Philemon and, as we'll see, Paul affirmed that this was true. Yet, Paul asked Philemon to love consistently, to show Onesimus the same love that he showed to other believers. He asked Philemon to bear up patiently under the wrong he had suffered, and to forgive Onesimus rather than punish him. By affirming Philemon's love, Paul encouraged him to be consistent in his character, and not to let his justifiable anger overrule his love for Onesimus.

PETITION (PHILEMON 8-21)

After his salutation and thanksgiving, Paul presented his petition to Philemon in verses 8-21. The petition represents the main purpose of the letter, namely advocating on behalf of Onesimus before Philemon. We'll explore the petition in some depth, breaking it down into six elements: first, an explanation of Paul's role as advocate in verses 8-10; second, an explanation of Onesimus' role as petitioner in verses 11-13; third, an explanation of Philemon's role as master in verse 14; fourth, an explanation of God's role as providential ruler of the universe in verses 15 and 16; fifth, Paul's twofold petition itself in verses 17-20; and sixth, Paul's statement of confidence that Philemon would fulfill his petition in verse 21. Let's start with Paul's explanation of his role as advocate.

Paul as Advocate (Philemon 8-10)

Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 8-10:

Though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you — I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus — I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment (Philemon 8-10).

Because Paul was an apostle of Christ, he had the authority to order Philemon to do the right thing. But knowing the complexities of the situation, Paul wrote to Philemon in ways that elicited Philemon's sympathy and concern. Here, Paul spoke of himself as a weak, elderly man in need of help.

To those who are familiar with Paul's strong writing style in other letters, references to his weakness may seem more than a little unusual. After all, Paul commonly demanded that people respect his authority and submit to his teaching. Was he merely trying to manipulate Philemon? No. This was simply another side of Paul that we do not see often in his other letters. Listen to how Paul's critics in Corinth spoke of this other side of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:10:

His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account (2 Corinthians 10:10).

Paul's critics attacked him for presenting himself as forceful in his letters, but humble and unassuming in person. In person, Paul could be quite meek. And this should not surprise us. After all, Paul constantly strove to be like Christ, who also knew when to be forceful and when to be humble. Consider Paul's teaching in Philippians 2:5-8:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who ... emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant ... [H]e humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:5-8).

Jesus Christ, God incarnate, was a strong teacher. But he also humbled himself so far as to let mere creatures subject him to an ignoble criminal's execution. It was only fitting, then, that his apostle should emulate him in similar ways by having a strong presence at some times, and by being humble and mild at other times.

There is no reason to think that Paul tried to trick or manipulate Philemon with feigned humility. He was an apostle. If he had wanted to, he could have demanded Philemon's obedience. And had he done so, Philemon probably would have complied. But Paul wanted Philemon to respond to this situation not out of compulsion, but out of genuine Christian kindness and love. So, he appealed to Philemon's heart. Paul asked him to have compassion on him as an elderly man in prison, and on Onesimus as a newly-converted brother in Christ who had ministered to Paul in prison. It was from this perspective that Paul introduced his advocacy for Onesimus.

Onesimus as Petitioner (Philemon 11-13)

After introducing himself as Onesimus' advocate, Paul spoke about Onesimus, the petitioner, in verses 11-13. Paul explained in more detail his relationship with Onesimus and how that relationship led him to bring Onesimus' petition before Philemon. In Philemon 11-13, Paul wrote these words:

Formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me... I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel (Philemon 11-13).

The Onesimus that Paul described was a very different man from the one who had first come to him asking for a mediator. Onesimus had proven himself worthless in Philemon's house, but he had been converted to Christ. He had repented of his sins and mended his ways. He had demonstrated his good faith by earnestly caring for Paul in prison. And because Paul knew that Philemon was a loving Christian, he trusted that Philemon would rejoice at the news that Onesimus had come to Christ. And he hoped that Philemon would forgive his transgressions as he would any other Christian who sinned against him.

Paul included a wordplay in Philemon 11-13 that emphasized this change in Onesimus. Specifically, he drew upon the Greek term *chrēstos* (χρηστός), meaning "useful," that was remarkably similar to the word *Christos* (Χριστός), meaning "Christ." Paul first admitted that Onesimus had been "useless," or *achrēstos* (ἄχρηστος), from the Greek prefix "a," meaning "not, and *chrēstos*," again meaning "useful." By contrast, Paul described Onesimus as having become "useful" using the term *euchrēstos* (εὐχρηστός). Here he added the Greek prefix *eu*, meaning "well" or "good" to *chrēstos* for emphasis. And the wordplay was this: Onesimus was *achrēstos* or "useless" when he was *achristos*, or "without Christ." But he became *euchrēstos*, "very useful," when he received *Christos* as his Lord.

Paul also pointed to ways in which Onesimus had already begun to make reparations for his transgressions. As Paul wrote, Onesimus had been taking Philemon's place in service to Paul in prison. In the ancient world, it was not unusual for a master to loan a slave or servant to another person. This action was rightly considered a gift of sorts, as the master lost any work the servant might have done during the time of the loan, and the friend to whom the servant was loaned benefited. In effect, Philemon had been ministering to Paul through Onesimus. This is why Paul said that Onesimus had become useful, not only to him, but also to Philemon. So, Philemon had yet more reasons to be merciful to Onesimus.

Finally in this section, Paul also mentioned that he had sent Onesimus back to Philemon, presumably by carrying Paul's letter to Philemon as he probably traveled in the company of Tychicus. Paul mentioned this in Philemon 12, writing:

I am sending him back to you (Philemon 12).

Onesimus was returning to Colossae to petition Philemon for mercy in the hopes of being reconciled to him, and perhaps even of being released. Onesimus was not a fugitive. He had found an advocate in Paul, and he was returning to face his master, Philemon.

Philemon as Master (Philemon 14)

After describing his own role as advocate, and Onesimus' role as petitioner, Paul went on to speak of Philemon's role as master in verse 14. Here, Paul acknowledged Philemon's legal authority over Onesimus. He also revealed his own motivation for making an appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him. Paul wrote these words in Philemon 14:

I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord (Philemon 14).

Paul wanted Philemon himself to choose to do the right thing. And so, he made it clear that his petition came as a request rather than as an apostolic command. We cannot be sure of every facet of Paul's motivations for writing to Philemon in this way. It may be that he wanted Philemon to gain heavenly rewards by doing the right thing for the right reason. And perhaps he also thought that a voluntary reconciliation between the two men would make their brotherly relationship in Christ all the stronger. It is clear, however, that Paul wanted to show Philemon respect and to give him the benefit of the doubt. Then, if Philemon treated Onesimus well, it would provide greater encouragement both to Paul and to the church. This was Paul's reasoning in Philemon 7-9, where he wrote this:

I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you. Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you (Philemon 7-9).

Essentially, Philemon's love and faithfulness to the church in the past led Paul to believe that Philemon would be loving and faithful to Onesimus in the current circumstances.

When he writes to Philemon, Paul is endeavoring to persuade Philemon to think about Onesimus in a different way. He doesn't simply command Philemon to release Onesimus, even though Paul assumes that he would have that kind of spiritual authority, but instead ... he's endeavoring to encourage Philemon to see Onesimus, not in terms of that class of people that he would fall into, but he is calling upon Philemon to look at Onesimus as his brother in Jesus Christ, his true spiritual equal in Jesus Christ, because that's the way

Paul can see this new creation that God had established, this manifestation of God's new reign through his Messiah and Savior in the world. And so, he is endeavoring to help Philemon mentally or spiritually walk into a brand new reality and begin to relate to Onesimus and others in a way that reflects the reality that God has established for our lives when we are in Jesus Christ.

— Dr. Steve Blakemore

In all likelihood, Paul approached Philemon in this way for a variety of reasons. To be sure, he affirmed Philemon's legal rights in Roman society, but he also affirmed the Christian ethic of love and mercy. Philemon could have chosen to discipline Onesimus harshly, or he could show forgiveness for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of his friend, the apostle Paul. The choice was his to make. Of course, Paul made it abundantly clear which choice was the right one.

God as Ruler (Philemon 15, 16)

After laying out the various human parties and their relations to one another, Paul called for Philemon to consider God's role as providential ruler in these circumstances in verses 15 and 16. In this section, Paul pondered the greater good that God might bring out of Onesimus' sin, if Philemon would only grant his request. Paul referred to God's providential hand in Philemon 15-16, writing these encouraging words to Philemon:

For this perhaps is why [Onesimus] was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother — especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord (Philemon 15-16).

As Paul taught in other epistles, the Lord controls everything in the universe. And he often permits bad things to happen so that his good purposes might be accomplished. Paul suggested that God had orchestrated events to bring Onesimus and Philemon into conflict so that Onesimus would be forced to seek Paul's advocacy. And the Lord allowed this so that, through Paul's ministry, Onesimus would be brought to faith in Christ and be reconciled to Philemon as an equal in the Lord.

Paul asked Philemon to do something that all followers of Christ should do. He encouraged him to step back and see his conflict with Onesimus from the perspective of God's plan. Yes, Philemon was angry, and he had a right to be. But his problems with Onesimus were not outside of God's control. And as Paul's well-known words in Romans 8:28 remind us, God works all things for good for those who love him. The negatives of Philemon's situation could not be compared to the blessings that God would bring to both Philemon and Onesimus. Philemon was a faithful Christian. And Paul

believed that once Philemon realized how God had orchestrated his conflict with Onesimus to save a lost soul, his anger would turn to joy.

Twofold Petition (Philemon 17-20)

After introducing all the characters involved in the mediation, Paul finally stated his twofold petition to Philemon in verses 17-20. Specifically, he asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus. He also offered himself as Onesimus' substitute in the event that Philemon chose to exact payment or recompense from his slave. Paul's twofold petition is summarized in Philemon 17-18:

Receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account (Philemon 17-18).

Notice what Paul did here: He appealed to Philemon for a personal favor, as if Paul himself were the one who needed Philemon's grace. Paul didn't argue that Onesimus deserved to be restored to Philemon. On the contrary, he implied that Onesimus deserved to be disciplined. But Paul didn't simply ask Philemon to show unconditional mercy to Onesimus either. Figuratively speaking, Paul didn't stand *beside* Onesimus as his defense attorney, persuading Philemon to be merciful for *Onesimus'* sake. Instead, he stood *in front of* Onesimus as his spiritual father and protector, shielding him from Philemon by providing reasons why Philemon should be merciful for *Paul's* sake. Listen to the way Paul concluded his twofold petition in Philemon 20:

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ (Philemon 20).

Paul hoped that Philemon would so respect him that he would extend mercy to Paul's spiritual son, whom he loved with all his heart. And so, in his petition, Paul asked Philemon, his brother in Christ, to minister to him by showing kindness to Onesimus.

Notice Paul's language here. First, when Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him, he used the Greek verb "*oninēmi*" (ὀνίνημι). You'll recall that this term was also the basis of Onesimus' name. As before, this is a play on words. Essentially, Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him by being kind to Onesimus, just as Onesimus himself had benefited Paul. Second, Paul repeated his use of the word "refresh." In Philemon 7, Paul had commended Philemon because "the hearts of the saints had been refreshed" through him. Here, Paul appealed to Philemon's character as a servant of Christ who considered the needs of others. And he encouraged him to refresh Paul during his imprisonment, just as he had refreshed those in Colossae.

Paul says, "Refresh my heart," which is a fascinating concept as he looks to Philemon who is a spiritual leader and who has refreshed many hearts. And this is the third time in the book of Philemon that

the word “heart” is being used. And so now Paul commands him to refresh his heart... So it refers back to this idea in Psalm 23 of “The Lord is my shepherd ... he restores my soul.” This, in a powerful way, shows the ministry of a strong spiritual leader that Philemon was as a pastor, where part of our job is teaching, but part of it is restoring, refreshing, encouraging the saints in Christ as we teach them. And so, this command on Paul's part to Philemon also refers to his need as an apostle to be refreshed himself.

— Dr. Pete Alwinson

Scholars have raised many questions about the details of Paul's petition to Philemon. Some believe that Paul was merely asking Philemon to treat Onesimus with mercy and kindness, and not to seek retribution or restitution for the wrong Onesimus had committed. Others believe that Paul was asking Philemon for more, perhaps even for Onesimus' manumission, that is, his freedom. This appeal for freedom may be implied by Paul's words in Philemon 15-16, where Paul wrote this:

You might have him back forever, no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother (Philemon 15-16).

It's possible to read this verse as meaning that Paul wanted Philemon to free Onesimus, so that Onesimus would no longer be a bondservant or slave. This idea is strengthened when we notice that Paul used the Greek word “*aiōnion*” (αἰώνιον), rightly translated here as “forever.” Even though Roman slavery was often perpetual, from a Christian point of view, it was a temporary arrangement. So, Paul may very well have been encouraging Philemon to take an eternal perspective on his relationship with Onesimus. This makes it quite possible that Paul actually called on Philemon to set Onesimus free.

At the same time, it's important to recognize that Paul did not teach that Christian faith required all Christian masters to free their slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7:21, he taught that freedom was preferable to slavery, but he never insisted on manumission. He only exhorted Christian masters to be sure to treat Christian servants and slaves as their brothers and sisters in Christ. Along these lines, listen to Paul's instructions in 1 Timothy 6:2:

Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved (1 Timothy 6:2).

To be sure, slavery has been an institution of terrible abuse throughout history. So, it may seem odd to us that Paul wrote these instructions. When most modern people think about slavery, our minds immediately recall the horrible atrocities associated with more recent forms of chattel slavery. We think of people who were enslaved by force,

torn from their families, and subjected to some of the most inhumane treatment imaginable. These slaves were often raped, beaten mercilessly, branded and murdered. And to our shame, many Christians defended this brutality by appealing to the way the Bible approached ancient slavery. But they were tragically wrong. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author would have affirmed these practices. Instead, they would have condemned them in the harshest terms.

You can't find any verse in the entire Bible that has God applauding that slavery exists. That's important. But God is revealing himself from within human culture, and slavery, unfortunately, has been part of human culture from the beginning and to this day, and in fact, there's more slaves on earth today than ever in the history, just by pure numbers, maybe not by percentage. Slavery was a big topic in the New Testament when one out of every three persons in the Roman Empire was a slave... This was a way to deal with debt in a culture that didn't have any kind of governmental safety nets for people who came into severe money problems, so a lot of people would become slaves because they owed money. Other persons became slaves because they were on the losing side of a war. So, those were kind of the two main reasons that people fell into slavery. The more modern slave phenomenon that we've seen in, say, the eighteenth, nineteenth century with slaves coming out of Africa, that was a kind of a unique piece. That would actually be almost be kidnapping, which by the way the New Testament completely condemns.

— Dr. Brian D. Russell

But in Paul's setting, slavery or servitude was very different, at least legally. It was often a mutually beneficial economic arrangement, especially when both master and bondservant were Christians. And the reality was that both masters and those who served them lived in the same household and were required by God to minister to one another and to love one another. They were, for all intents and purposes, an extended family. And because these relationships could be conducted in ways that were both godly and beneficial to all parties, Paul did not instruct Christians to tear down these social institutions. Instead, he taught them to treat each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, much more like we conceive of Christian employers and employees in our modern world.

Paul's teaching about slaves and masters might at first glance seem to be something that just isn't relevant to us today because we want to eliminate slavery and masters. But I think there is a great parallel, especially as we understand what some of slavery was like in the Greco-Roman world, that the kinds of behaviors and attitudes that Paul was calling for slaves and masters to have are attitudes that are intended to remove any stumbling block for the gospel... So, if we

carry that over to dealing with employers and employees today, the same things hold true. Employers should treat their employees with dignity, with respect as people made in the image of God, and should make sure that they're not doing anything that would cause those employees to ignore or to, in some way, argue against the gospel simply because that employer is treating them badly. You just don't want to have that as a stumbling block. And likewise, employees. You know, if you're a follower of Christ, and you're working for somebody, you should work hard and diligently and respect those who have this position of authority over you. Because if you're lazy, if you're disrespectful, if you are not doing your job to the best of your ability, all of that reflects on your witness as a follower of Christ.

— Dr. Dan Lacich

We can be certain that Paul wanted the best for Onesimus, and that Philemon knew how to meet the apostle's expectations. But Paul's vague language makes it impossible for us to know whether he was simply asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus and treat him as an honored servant in his house, or if he was asking for Onesimus' legal freedom. And, given the tenuous economic conditions of that day, it's hard for us to guess which outcome would have benefited Onesimus more. But whatever the case, it's clear that Paul's petition was designed to secure a good life for Onesimus, one in which he was treated with Christian honor and respect, and shown love and kindness.

Confidence (Philemon 21)

Lastly, after explaining the roles of those involved in the mediation, and presenting his twofold petition to Philemon, Paul ended with a statement of confidence in verse 21. Here, Paul expressed his belief that Philemon would do as the apostle asked. We read these closing words to Paul's petition in Philemon 21:

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say (Philemon 21).

Paul had two strong reasons for believing that Philemon would comply with his request. First, Philemon respected and loved Paul, and so, would have been motivated to please him. And second, Philemon loved the church, which Onesimus had just joined as a new believer.

Scripture doesn't record Philemon's response for us, nor does it tell us what happened to Onesimus. For many centuries it has been widely held that Philemon released him, and that he eventually became Bishop of Ephesus, dying as a martyr in Rome in AD 95. And there certainly was a Bishop Onesimus who succeeded Timothy in the first century. And it would not be surprising to find that a Christian trained by Paul

could have risen to such prominence. So, we should not rule out the possibility. But in truth, Onesimus was a common name. So, Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus may not have been the same man as the Onesimus of the letter to Philemon. In any event, Paul's confidence in Philemon should incline us to suspect that Philemon did whatever was best for Onesimus. The fact that we even possess Paul's letter to Philemon implies that Philemon did the right thing, since he probably would have destroyed the evidence of Paul's request if he had not granted it.

Final Greetings (Philemon 22-25)

Now that we've looked at Paul's salutation, thanksgiving, and petition, we should turn to the last section of the letter: Paul's final greetings to Philemon and his household in Philemon 22-25. This section contains rather standard greetings in verse 24, and a fairly standard blessing in verse 25. But two details in verses 22 and 23 are worthy of special attention. First, in verse 22, Paul expressed his expectation that he would be released from prison rather quickly, and he asked Philemon to prepare a room for him. No doubt this would have encouraged Philemon to grant Paul's request, as he would have to face the apostle himself in the near future. Second, as we mentioned earlier in this lesson, Paul sent a special greeting from Epaphras in verse 23, indicating that Epaphras would serve as a witness to Philemon's resolution of the matter with Onesimus.

We've considered the background of Paul's epistle to Philemon, as well as its structure and content. Now, we're in a position to explore the modern application of Paul's exemplary advocacy on behalf of Onesimus. How should we apply the teachings of this letter to our lives today?

MODERN APPLICATION

As we've seen, Paul's epistle to Philemon displays how Paul applied his theology to his own personal life, as well as to the lives of Philemon and Onesimus. By contrast, his letters to the Colossians and Ephesians contain many general doctrinal teachings and general applications of his teachings. These letters are extremely helpful to us in many ways. But Paul's letter to Philemon moves us beyond the general into the specific, beyond the hypothetical to the actual, beyond instruction to attitudes and actions. For this reason, we'll pay special attention to the ways Paul's mediation between Onesimus and Philemon reflects the more general teachings in his other epistles, especially in his epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians.

As we consider the modern application of Paul's letter to Philemon, we'll focus on three matters: first, the need for accountability among Christians; second, the value of compassion in our relationships; and finally, the importance of reconciliation within the family of God. Let's turn first to the need for accountability among Christians.

ACCOUNTABILITY

As we mentioned earlier, in his letter to Philemon, Paul called on several individuals as witnesses to his advocacy for Onesimus. These included Apphia, Archippus, Epaphras, and those in the local church at Colossae. Although Paul didn't explicitly state his reason for doing this, the best explanation is that he hoped their watchful eyes would encourage Philemon to do the right thing. This strategy was in keeping with his teaching in Ephesians 5:11-21. We'll look at several sections from this passage beginning with verses 11-15, where Paul gave these instructions:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible ... Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise (Ephesians 5:11-15).

Paul taught that Christians are to expose sins — “the unfruitful works of darkness” — by bringing them into the light. His reasoning was that when our sins remain hidden by darkness, we can continue to cling to them. But when they are exposed, we see them for what they are, and we are ashamed. Knowing that others will rightly disapprove of what we do is a powerful motivator against sin. So, we are wise to walk in the light, that is, to remain in close, open fellowship with other believers who will lovingly expose our sin and keep us from shame.

Now, we should add that Paul was not saying that Christians should police each other or spy on each other. Rather, he was pointing to the wisdom of accountability. Although some cultures today have dismissed shame and disapproval as motivators toward righteous behavior, the truth is that when others know what we are doing, we are less likely to succumb to temptation. So, we can avoid many sins by living transparently in fellowship with other believers.

In the case of Onesimus and Philemon, if no one else knew about Paul's letter, and if Paul himself did not plan to follow up, there would have been no accountability. It would have been easy for Philemon to treat Onesimus harshly. But in making the matter somewhat public, Paul ensured that Philemon's family and church would consider any bad behavior toward Onesimus shameful and would hold Philemon accountable. This accountability to others would motivate him to do the right thing.

We see a similar approach throughout Scripture. Time and again, God sought to turn people from sin by warning that their sins would be exposed, and they would suffer shame and disgrace. For example, listen to Habakkuk 2:16, where God proclaimed these words through the prophet:

You will have your fill of shame instead of glory... The cup in the Lord's right hand will come around to you, and utter shame will come upon your glory! (Habakkuk 2:16).

Here, God threatened curses if the people did not turn from their sins, and those curses included “utter shame.” And in Ezekiel 7:18, the Lord motivated Israel to obedience with the following threat of disgrace:

They will put on sackcloth and be clothed with terror. Every face will be covered with shame, and every head will be shaved (Ezekiel 7:18, NIV).

Without accountability, it's easy for Christians in every age to hold fast to secret sins. So, one way to keep from sinning is for fellow believers to hold each other accountable by staying in open, loving fellowship. Of course, the potential for disapproval and disgrace is not the only form of Christian accountability that keeps us from sinning. On the contrary, Paul's example in his letter to Philemon emphasizes that Christians can also hold one another accountable by offering encouraging words. The joy of Christian fellowship helps us avoid sin. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:19:

[Address] one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).

When we are tempted to do the wrong thing, encouraging words from other believers can keep us from sinning.

As believers, we are to share; we are to confess to one another. We should be able to trust each other and to depend on each other. Accountability is a crucial component... How do I act when I'm somewhere by myself that no one knows me? Because God knows what I'm doing. But if I have a close friend that I can open up and I can reveal my heart and get that counsel, get that comfort, get that compassion, but also the encouragement, and telling me, “No, don't do that,” or “Let me walk you through that.” How many times in the New Testament do we see “one another”? And that “one another,” again, is tied in with the relationships that we are to have — one another. And that accountability is going to help us to grow stronger, to grow more in our relationship and our walk. That's part of the sanctification process, is that love that we can share one to another.

— Dr. Thaddeus J. James, Jr.

Finally, in Ephesians 5:21, Paul indicated that we are to hold one another accountable through our mutual submission. Paul wrote:

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ (Ephesians 5:21, NIV).

The church is to be holy, a fellowship of God's obedient people. And this means that the church's counsel should be godly and righteous. So, as we live in fellowship with

one another, encouraging each other to good deeds, we need to pay special attention to the ways our church leaders train us to live for Christ. And we need to listen to the counsel of other wise and godly believers. By submitting to one another in these ways, we can avoid many of the pitfalls of sin.

As we've just seen, Paul applied the principles of accountability found in his other letters to Philemon's interactions with Onesimus. And from his appeal to Philemon, we learn how the body of Christ can prevent us from falling into sin and lead us to good works. By exposing sin, offering encouragement, and submitting ourselves to each other, we help each other live "not as unwise but as wise."

Now that we've considered how Paul's letter to Philemon applies the principle of accountability in the church, we should turn to a second point of application: the importance of compassion in our relationships with other Christians.

COMPASSION

Of all the characteristics that Christ demonstrated during his earthly ministry, it's perhaps his compassion that was the most striking. Yes, he had a zeal for holiness and reverence, and his emphasis on righteousness and morality is undeniable. He also showed unparalleled commitment to obeying God. But even more memorable are his kindness, his pity, his concern, his love for others, his eagerness to forgive, his willingness to suffer so that others would not have to. The Gospels are filled with stories of Jesus raising the dead, comforting the brokenhearted, curing the sick, restoring the lame, feeding the hungry, shepherding the lost and the hurt and the frightened — and dying on the cross for the sake of those who hated him. Christ's compassion touches our hearts most deeply. And in much the same way, Paul exemplified compassion in his letter to Philemon.

We'll look at two types of compassion in Paul's letter to Philemon, beginning with kindness and charity, and then acts of intercession. Let's begin with kindness as an expression of Christian compassion.

Kindness

Paul taught all believers to show kindness and charity. We see this when he praised Philemon for his ministry to the church, and when he appealed to these qualities as the basis for his petition to Philemon. Listen to Paul's words in Philemon 7-9:

For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you... for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you — I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus (Philemon 7-9).

Paul was encouraged by the ways "the hearts of the saints had been refreshed" through Philemon, that is, the ways he had demonstrated kindness to other believers. And

Paul requested similar kindness on the basis that he was an old man and a prisoner, deserving of pity and aid. As he wrote in Colossians 3:11-12:

Christ is all, and in all. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts [and] kindness (Colossians 3:11-12).

Because other believers are united to Jesus, we must treat them as we would treat our Lord, and as our Lord has treated us. We must show an abundance of care as we seek to meet their needs. In these and many other ways, Paul showed that kindness and charity are important aspects of Christian living. And so, just like Paul and Philemon, modern Christians must be moved by pity and love for their fellow believers. We must respond to the needs of others so far as we are able.

The letter of Paul to Philemon is a great example of how we are to deal kindly and compassionately with others. And the reason for it is, as God's people, we are to reflect God's love and also be instruments of God's love. And that means dealing with other people the way God has dealt with us. And so, when Paul appeals to Philemon to deal with the runaway slave Onesimus in the same way that Paul has dealt with Philemon, you see he's appealing to that pattern. That pattern by which God dealt with Paul was the pattern by which Paul dealt with Philemon, and now Paul calls Philemon to deal with Onesimus in the same way... And so the pattern for God's dealing with us is the basic pattern for dealing with each other.

— Rev. Michael J. Glodo

In addition to showing kindness, a second type of compassion that Paul encouraged in his letter to Philemon was intercession. We are to become advocates for one another.

Intercession

Intercession can take many forms. At times, it can be as simple as expressing an opinion — without much personal risk — that sways circumstances in favor of another. But at other times, interceding for others can be as intense as giving up one's life to protect another who is guilty. The most obvious example of this type of intercession is the sacrifice that Christ offered in order to obtain salvation for sinners. In between these two extremes, many other types of intercession are possible. Listen to Paul's words to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus in Philemon 17-19:

Receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account... I will repay it (Philemon 17-19).

Paul's example calls for all of us to intercede for other believers in similar ways. Sometimes we're called to intercede in simple ways. At other times, our compassion for others may call us to greater levels of intercession. And in some cases, compassion may even compel us to intercede by laying down our lives for the benefit or protection of others. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:1-2:

Be imitators of God ... And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).

Now that we've seen how Paul's teaching in Philemon applies to accountability in the church and to Christian compassion, we should also mention how Paul was deeply committed to the reconciliation of believers to one another through our Lord Jesus Christ.

RECONCILIATION

When we speak of reconciliation, we need to make it clear that we aren't simply talking about creating unity and love where none existed before. Rather, we're talking about creating unity and love where hostility existed before. Reconciliation is rooted in forgiveness and mercy, and it is maintained through patience and longsuffering. It assumes that there is a source of conflict between us, but that we have put aside the conflict to pursue something better — namely, to pursue mutual peace with one another, mutual love for one another, and mutual service to one another.

In his epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, Paul spoke frequently of reconciliation between believers, both on an individual level and on a corporate, ethnic level. And he described this reconciliation as an essential element of the Christian faith. The entire letter to Philemon was based on the reality that both Onesimus and Philemon had an obligation to restore their relationship, and to embrace one another as brothers in Christ without holding grudges.

Onesimus, for his part, had to repent of his sin, which he had done upon converting to Christianity under Paul's ministry. And, as Philemon's slave, he also had to submit himself to Philemon's judgment. Philemon, in turn, was obligated to love Onesimus, to treat him with kindness, to forgive his sin, and to embrace him as a brother in Christ. In the same way, modern believers must be eager to repent, to forgive one another, and to be restored to right relationships.

You have Philemon and Onesimus who are estranged from one another, and what Paul is doing, at considerable risk and sacrifice to himself, is that he is trying to reconcile these two who are estranged. And what Paul does is, he is exemplifying — and you see this even in some of the terms that he uses in the Greek — he is exemplifying the reconciliation of sinners to God in Jesus Christ, and he's saying that the church is to be a place where we who have been reconciled to God

in Christ ought to be a reconciling body, that if there are divisions or differences, we ought, even at cost and sacrifice to ourselves, to work towards reconciliation in the body of Christ. We're not saving ourselves, we're not contributing to our salvation, but we are expressing on a human level what God has first done for us.

— Dr. Guy Waters

In Paul's day, there were deep-seated tensions, resentments and conflicts between different ethnicities in the church, especially between Jews and Gentiles. Yet, Paul insisted that the basis for such problems had been erased by Christ. In Christ, all racial and ethnic strife in the church was invalid and therefore sinful. Listen to Ephesians 2:14-16, where Paul wrote these words:

[Christ] is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility ... that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).

As we see here, the reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ is a vital facet of our union with Christ. Therefore, it is an essential dimension of our reconciliation to God. And the same is true in our day with regard to racial and ethnic resentments and strife, as well as every other conflict among believers. Because we are united to Christ, we are all forgiven and blessed. So, we have no basis for refusing to be reconciled to any believer. Our Lord has removed any basis for conflict between us, so that we must recognize our strife as sin, and strive for unity, love and harmony in the body of Christ. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 4:32:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).

And consider his teaching in Colossians 3:13-15:

[Bear] with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, [forgive] each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body (Colossians 3:13-15).

We have been called to abandon our prejudices and resentments, and to love one another, to see each Christian through the eyes of Christ, and to enjoy peace together. Just as Paul encouraged Philemon and Onesimus, reconciliation between believers should be a high priority in the modern church.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson, we've looked at Paul's epistle to his Colossian friend Philemon. We've explored the background of this letter. We've studied the letter's structure and content. And we've seen a number of crucial modern applications we should make to our lives today from Paul's letter to Philemon.

The epistle to Philemon is a small but wonderful part of the New Testament. It offers us a unique insight into how the apostle Paul related on a highly personal level to other believers. And it shows how he applied his teachings to his own life and to the lives of others. As such, this epistle has much to teach us about the value of each and every believer in the church, and how their value ought to impact our lives. In his letter to Philemon, Paul modeled the principles he taught. And as we take these principles to heart, we'll see practical ways we can apply Christian teachings as we serve each other and build up the church for the glory of Christ.

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GLOSSARY

achrēstos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "useless," "unprofitable"

achristos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "without Christ"

aiōnion – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "forever," "eternal," "without beginning or end"

Apphia – Woman from Colossae that Paul affectionately called "our sister"; most likely a member of Philemon's household, probably his wife

Archippus – "Fellow soldier" of Paul in the ministry; possibly the host of the church in Colossae and/or a member of Philemon's household

Asia Minor – A geographical area that is now part of western Turkey where Paul did the majority of his missionary work

chrēstos – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "useful" or "good" (referring to character)

christos – Greek word (transliteration) for Christ; used in the Septuagint to translate "*mashiach*" or "messiah," meaning "anointed one"

Colossae – Relatively small city in the ancient Roman province of Asia Minor in a region called Phrygia in the Lycus Valley; home of Philemon and Onesimus

doulos – Greek term (transliteration) for "bondservant," "slave," or "servant"; a person who is wholly in service to another; often used by the apostle Paul to describe his relationship to Christ

Epaphras - Fellow laborer with the apostle Paul and founder of the church in Colossae who was sent by the churches of the Lycus Valley to minister to Paul in prison

euchrēstos – Greek term (transliteration) for "very useful"

intercession - Mediation or petition through prayer on behalf of another

Lycus Valley – An area defined by the Lycus River in the ancient Roman province of Asia Minor where Colossae, Hierapolis and Laodicea were located

manumit – To free from slavery; emancipate

Onesimus – Philemon's run-away slave from Colossae who appealed to the apostle Paul while Paul was in prison and who became very dear to Paul

oninēmi – Greek term (transliteration) meaning "helpful" or "profitable"; basis for the name "Onesimus"

Paulus – Famous Roman jurist in the late 2nd century/early 3rd century who wrote extensively on Roman law and was named by the Law of Citations (AD 426) as one of five Roman jurists whose work was considered authoritative

Philemon – One of Paul's close friends from Colossae who labored alongside Paul in gospel ministry; master of the run-away slave Onesimus

Phrygia – Name of an ancient region in the central part of Asia Minor where Paul established and later visited several churches during his missionary journeys

Pliny the Younger – (ca. A.D. 61–ca. 113) Roman Governor of Pontus and Bithynia from around A.D. 111-113; nephew of Pliny the Elder; known for his letters to friends and associates

Proculus – Prominent Roman jurist in the first century who gave his name to the Proculian school, a sect of legal thought that contrasted with the Sabinian school; often cited by later jurists

Tychicus – One of Paul's close friends from Asia Minor who accompanied Paul during part of his missionary journeys and who brought messages to and from Paul during Paul's imprisonment

Vivianus – Second-century Roman jurist who wrote legal opinions regarding slaves and slavery