

# Paul's Prison Epistles

LESSON  
FOUR

PAUL AND PHILEMON



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# Paul's Prison Epistles

## Lesson Four

### Paul and Philemon

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## INTRODUCTION

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Most of us have experienced times when we feel that a friend owes us a favor. Maybe you've done something nice for a friend — given him a gift or helped him in a special way. And then the time comes when you need help, and so you approach your friend, asking him to repay the favor. At times like these, we often go to our friends 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 situation like this. He needed a favor from his friend Philemon. So, he wrote a letter to Philemon, reminding him of how much Paul had done for him, and asking for a favor in return.

This is the fourth lesson in our series *Paul's Prison Epistles*. We have entitled this lesson "Paul and Philemon" because we will be taking a close look at the letter Paul wrote to his friend Philemon, a member of the church in Colosse. We will see how Paul petitioned Philemon for a favor, asking Philemon 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 will survey 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 will focus on the modern application of this letter. Let's look first at the background to Paul's letter to Philemon.

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## BACKGROUND

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Paul's letter to Philemon differs from his other Prison epistles in at least two ways. For one thing, it is significantly shorter than the other letters he wrote during his imprisonment. In fact, it addresses only a single issue. And for another thing, it was written to an individual rather than to a church, meaning that it is deeply personal. And 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 will be to understand Paul's teaching in this letter and to apply it to our own lives today.

We'll explore the background to Paul's letter to Philemon in three ways: First, we'll identify the people involved in the 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

Many different individuals are named in Paul's letter to Philemon, but we will focus on those who were directly or indirectly involved in the favor Paul asked of Philemon.

First, we will introduce Philemon himself. Second, we will turn to Philemon's slave Onesimus. And finally, we will 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 to him, but Colossians 4:9 indicates that Philemon's slave Onesimus was a resident of Colosse. Listen to Paul's words there:

**[Tychicus] is coming with Onesimus, our faithful and dear brother, who is one of you (Colossians 4:9).**

Since Onesimus lived with his master Philemon at the time Colossians was written, Philemon must also have lived in Colosse.

Colosse 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 Colosse. 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 the men. Consider Paul's reminder to Philemon in Philemon 19:

**You owe me your very self (Philemon 19).**

In all likelihood, Paul meant that he had brought Philemon to faith, although it is 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, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers (Philemon 22).**

The Bible does not explain how Paul came to know Philemon. But as we have seen in earlier lessons, it does say that Paul traveled through Phrygia during his second and third missionary journeys. But as we have seen, Paul was not familiar with the churches in the Lycus Valley. 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.

## Onesimus

The second person we should introduce is Onesimus. According to Philemon 16, Onesimus was Philemon's slave, although it is unclear what kind of slave he was and in what specific capacity he served Philemon.

In the Roman Empire during the first century, slavery was extremely 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 that 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.

And although it was generally preferable to be free than enslaved, it is worth noting that more than a few poor individuals voluntarily sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain the security of daily food and shelter. And we know from historical records that in the early church, some Christians sold themselves into slavery in order to raise money for beneficences such as feeding the poor.

Generally speaking, the rights of masters over their slaves were not absolute. Roman law allowed slaves to earn money and own property, including other slaves, and even to 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.

Because Onesimus was Philemon's slave, he was a member of Philemon's household. But unlike his master, Onesimus was not a believer, at least not initially. But after Onesimus left Philemon's household to seek Paul's help, the apostle led him to faith in Christ and grew to love him greatly. Paul expressed his love for Onesimus in Philemon 10-16, writing:

**I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains... [He] is my very heart ... He is very dear to me (Philemon 10-16).**

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

In addition to these two main figures, Paul also mentioned a number of other Colossians in his letter to Philemon, including Apphia, Archippus and Epaphras. Each of these people also had a relationship with Philemon. Paul probably mentioned them with the expectation that they would serve as familiar witnesses and help him in his appeal to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

## 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 dear friend and fellow worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home (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 is 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 will recall from our prior lessons that he had been the one who established the church in Colosse and that the churches of the Lycus Valley had sent him to minister to Paul in prison. Because he was with Paul at the time, he could not serve as a local witness in Colosse. 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 and 24:

**Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. 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.

## PROBLEM

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 required Paul's intervention?

It's no secret that some workers are not good workers, that some servants are not good servants, and that some people refuse to accept their responsibilities and fulfill their obligations. And unfortunately, it appears that Onesimus was one of these people. And his failures, whether slothful, negligent or malicious, angered his master Philemon — so much so that Onesimus had greatly feared punishment from Philemon. And so, in order 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 a Greek word meaning "useful" or "profitable." But Paul said here that Onesimus had proven useless. By this wordplay Paul granted the point to Philemon that Onesimus truly had been a useless or unprofitable slave.

Worse than this, according to Philemon 18, Onesimus may actually have caused a significant loss for Philemon. Listen to Paul's words there:

**If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me (Philemon 18).**

Many interpreters understand this verse to imply that Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, which was a common crime among household 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 property.

In any case, Philemon had a right to be angry, and Onesimus probably had good reason to be afraid of Philemon. Under Roman law, masters had the right to punish slaves severely, even with heavy beatings. Onesimus was so worried about Philemon's wrath that he fled in fear.

Paul alluded to this circumstance in Philemon 15, where he wrote these words:

**Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good (Philemon 15).**

Apparently, Philemon himself had not intended for Onesimus to leave, and probably did not approve of his leaving. But Paul suggested that 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 A.D. 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 else for help and not trying to gain their freedom. So, if Onesimus fled in order to ask Paul to be his advocate and mediator with Philemon, he was not a fugitive.

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, including probably 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.

## **MEDIATION**

Now that we have identified the people and problem that Paul addressed in his letter to Philemon, we should turn to Paul's mediation between Philemon and Onesimus. As we consider Paul's mediation, we will look at two matters: 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 have said in prior lessons, it is most likely that he was imprisoned in Rome, although it is also possible that he was in Caesarea Maritima. But whether he was in Rome or Caesarea Maritima, he was quite a long way from Colosse 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. And he should have known full well that Paul resided there because the church at Colosse 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 and a servant of Christ Jesus, sends greetings. He is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured. I vouch for him that he is working hard for you and for those at Laodicea and Hierapolis (Colossians 4:12-13).**

Since Onesimus was from Colosse, and since his master Philemon was a prominent member of that church, Onesimus probably knew where Paul was. And with this knowledge, Onesimus chose that same city as his destination.

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 that Paul become his advocate, we are 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 was both an unbeliever and an unprofitable slave, and Philemon was a good, loving man. Philemon had a right to be angry and 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, it would have to be on the basis of mercy. And before he would ask for mercy for Onesimus, he would first have to be persuaded that Onesimus was genuinely repentant.

Paul's initial reluctance in this matter is admirable. After all, it would be foolish to pardon wrongdoers simply because they are afraid of being punished. Consider in this regard Paul's words in Romans 13:40 where he spoke of civil rulers in this manner:

**He is God's servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God's servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment 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 slaves. Godly authority figures carry out appropriate punishments 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 where another Roman slave appealed to his master's friend for help. A little before A.D. 111 the Roman senator Pliny the Younger wrote a letter to his friend Sabinianus on behalf of a freedman who worked for Sabinianus, and 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 is 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 is safe to conclude that Onesimus repented of all his sins that had so angered 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.

Once Onesimus had gained Paul's favor, it was appropriate that he return to Philemon. So, Onesimus left for Colosse bearing Paul's letter of advocacy. According to Paul's letter to Philemon, legally Onesimus 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 his return to Philemon.

The reason for this can be found in Philemon 12-16, where Paul wrote these words:

**I am sending him — who is my very heart — back to you. I would have liked to keep him with me ... But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous**

**and not forced... He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord (Philemon 12-16).**

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon because he wanted any gift from Philemon to be voluntary rather than compulsory, and because he wanted Philemon and Onesimus to be reconciled as brothers in Christ.

Presumably, their reconciliation would best be accomplished through a face-to-face meeting in which Onesimus repented and asked for Philemon's forgiveness, and in which 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.

## STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

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Now that we have surveyed the background to Paul's epistle to Philemon, we are ready to explore its structure and content, looking at the specific strategy and arguments Paul used to mediate between Onesimus and Philemon.

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

In short, in Philemon we see a humble man of God in action, taking responsibility, holding others accountable and expressing Christ's love. And so, as we survey the details of this letter, we will pay attention to Paul's Christian attitudes and actions, looking at the way he practiced the very ideals he communicated 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, and Paul's petition on behalf of Onesimus in verses 8-21, and finally concluding with final greetings in verses 22-25. Let's begin by looking at the salutation in verses 1-3.

## SALUTATION

The salutation, which appears in verses 1-3, 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

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. Paul spoke mainly of Philemon's love for the church, thanking the Lord for the ways Philemon had blessed his fellow believers in Colosse. Paul praised Philemon with these words in Philemon 5-7:

**I hear about ... your love for all the saints. ... Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints (Philemon 5-7).**

Paul did not say 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 done them some other benefit. Whatever it had been, Philemon had done it well and with a good heart. And since Onesimus had become part of the church, Paul expected Philemon to show him the same love.

Consider the situation between Philemon and Onesimus in light of Paul's teaching in Colossians 3:12-14 where Paul wrote these words:

**Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity (Colossians 3:12-14).**

Paul had called the Colossians, including Philemon, to remember that God loves and forgives all believers. And he had encouraged them to reflect the same love toward one another, patiently bearing with one another when wronged, and forgiving grievances rather than demanding recompense.

The application to Philemon and Onesimus is not hard to see. Onesimus had wronged Philemon — Paul affirmed that this was true. Yet, he 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 anger overrule his love when it came to Onesimus.

### **PETITION**

After the section on 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 will explore the petition in some depth, breaking it down into the following six elements:

- An explanation of Paul's role as advocate in verses 8-10
- An explanation of Onesimus' role as petitioner in verses 11-13
- An explanation of Philemon's role as master in verse 14
- An explanation of God's role as providential ruler of the universe in verses 15-16
- Paul's petition itself in verses 17-20
- And Paul's statement of confidence that the petition would be granted, in verse 21

Let's start by turning to Paul's explanation of his role as advocate.

### **Paul as Advocate**

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

**Although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul — an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus — I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains (Philemon 8-10).**

Because Paul was an apostle of Christ, he had the authority to order Philemon to do the right thing. But instead, he wrote to Philemon in ways that elicited Philemon's sympathy and concern.

In this passage Paul spoke as a weak, elderly man in need of help. And to those who are familiar with his strong writing style in other letters, this 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 soft-hearted Philemon? No. This was simply another side of the real Paul that we do not see often in his other letters.

Listen to the way Paul's critics in Corinth spoke of this other side of Paul in 2 Corinthians 10:10:

**His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing (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:

**Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who ... made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant ... he humbled himself and became obedient to 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, having a strong presence at some times, and being needy and mild at others.

Paul didn't need to trick or manipulate Philemon — 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 with genuine Christian love. So, he appealed to Philemon's heart, asking him to have compassion on an elderly man in prison and on the newly converted brother in Christ who ministered to him. And it was from this perspective that Paul introduced his advocacy for Onesimus.

After introducing himself as Onesimus' advocate, Paul spoke about Onesimus himself in verses 11-13. He also explained in more detail the relationship between Onesimus and Paul that led the apostle to bring Onesimus' petition before Philemon.

### **Onesimus as Petitioner**

In Philemon 11-13, Paul wrote these words:

**Formerly [Onesimus] was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me... I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel (Philemon 11-13).**

The Onesimus that Paul described here was a very different man from the one who had come to him asking for a mediator.

Onesimus had been a worthless slave. But he had been converted to Christ; he had repented of his sin, and mended his ways, showing his good faith by putting forth earnest effort to care for Paul in prison. And because Paul knew that Philemon was a loving Christian, he expected Philemon to rejoice at the news that Onesimus had come to Christ, and to 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, *chrēstos* (χρηστος) was remarkably similar to the word *christos* (χριστος), meaning "Christ." Paul's word for "useless" was *achrēstos* (ἀχρηστος), from the Greek prefix, a, meaning "not," and the root *chrēstos*, meaning "useful." Similarly, Paul's word for "useful" was *euchrēstos* (εὐχρηστος) from the prefix *eu*, meaning "well" or "good," and the root *chrēstos*, again meaning "useful." And the wordplay was this: Onesimus was *achrēstos* or "useless" when he was *achristos* or "without Christ." But he became *euchrēstos* or "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 was taking Philemon's place in service to Paul.

In the ancient world it was not unusual for a master to loan a slave to another person. This action was rightly considered a gift of sorts, as the master lost any work the slave might have done during the time of the loan, and the friend to whom the slave was loaned benefited. In this sense, through Onesimus, Philemon really was ministering to Paul. 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 carrying Paul's letter to Philemon, and probably traveling 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 Colosse to petition Philemon for mercy in the hopes of being reconciled to him, and perhaps even of being released. Onesimus was not a fugitive, and was returning to face his master's judgment.

## Philemon as Master

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 authority over Onesimus, and revealed his own motivation for making an appeal to Philemon instead of commanding him. Paul wrote these words in Philemon 14:

**I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced (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.



It may be that he wanted his friend 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.

Additionally, it appears that Paul wanted to show Philemon respect and to give his benevolence 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 in this way:

**Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Therefore, although ... I could ... order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love (Philemon 7-9).**

Essentially, Philemon's past love and faithfulness to the church encouraged Paul to think that Philemon would be loving and faithful to Onesimus as well.

In all likelihood, Paul chose this route for a variety of reasons, leaving Philemon in the traditional Roman role of a master who had to sit in judgment over his slave. He could decide harshly choosing to discipline Onesimus. Or he could judge mercifully, forgiving Onesimus for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of his friend the apostle Paul. The choice was truly his to make, although Paul made it abundantly clear which choice was the right one.

## God as Ruler

After laying out the various human parties in their relations to one another, Paul reminded Philemon of God's role as providential ruler in verses 15 and 16. In this section he 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:

**Perhaps the reason [Onesimus] was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord (Philemon 15-16).**

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

By speaking about God's providential control of the universe, Paul asked Philemon to step back from the conflict with Onesimus in order to see it from the perspective of God's plan. Yes, Philemon was angry, and he had a right to be. But the problems with Onesimus were insignificant compared to the blessings that God had bestowed through their strife.

Philemon was a good man. And once he realized that God had orchestrated the conflict with Onesimus in order to save a lost soul, his anger may well have turned to joy, just as Paul had hoped.

## Petition

After introducing all the characters involved in the mediation, Paul finally stated his petition in verses 17-20. Specifically, he asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus, and he 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:

**Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me (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. He did not argue that Onesimus deserved to be restored to Philemon. On the contrary, he implied that Onesimus deserved punishment. And he did not ask Philemon to show Christ-like mercy to Onesimus.

Figuratively speaking, Paul did not stand beside Onesimus as his defense attorney persuading Philemon to be merciful for Onesimus' sake. Instead, he stood in front of Onesimus as his father and protector, shielding him from Philemon, and providing reasons that Philemon should be merciful for Paul's sake.

Listen to the way Paul concluded his petition in Philemon 20:

**I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ (Philemon 20).**

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

And notice Paul's language here. First, Paul asked Philemon to "benefit" him, using the Greek verb "*oninēmi*" (ὀνίνημι) upon which Onesimus' name was built. Essentially, he asked Philemon to follow the example of his slave Onesimus in being useful to Paul. Second, Paul repeated his use of the word "refresh." In Philemon 7, Paul had commended Philemon for refreshing the saints. Here he encouraged Philemon to demonstrate integrity by refreshing the imprisoned apostle as well.

Scholars have raised many questions about the details of Paul's petition. Some believe that Paul was merely asking Philemon to treat Onesimus with mercy and kindness, and not to seek retribution or even restitution for the wrong Onesimus had committed. Others believe that Paul was asking Philemon for even more, perhaps for Onesimus' manumission, that is, his freedom.

This may be implied by Paul's words in Philemon 15-16, where Paul wrote in this way:

**You might have him back for good — no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother (Philemon 15-16).**

It is possible to read this verse as meaning that Paul wanted Philemon to free Onesimus so that Onesimus would no longer be a slave. This idea is strengthened when we notice that the Greek word "*aiōnion*" (αἰώνιον), here translated "for good," is rightly translated in several English translations as "forever" or "eternally." Even though Roman slavery was often perpetual, it was technically a temporary arrangement, so Paul could not rightly have assured Philemon that Onesimus would remain his profitable slave forever. But our relationships in Christ really will endure eternally. This makes it tempting to see an allusion in this verse to Philemon manumitting, or granting freedom to, Onesimus.

At the same time, it is important to recognize that Paul did not teach that Christian faith required all Christian masters to free their believing slaves. In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he did teach that freedom was preferable to slavery. But his instructions to households in which believing masters owned believing slaves did not include manumission. For example, he provided this teaching in 1 Timothy 6:2:

**[Slaves] who have believing masters are not to show less respect for them because they are brothers. Instead, they are to serve them even better, because those who benefit from their service are believers, and dear to them (1 Timothy 6:2).**

In light of the many ways slavery has been an institution of terrible abuse throughout history, it may seem odd to hear Paul speak in this way. After all, when most modern people think about slavery, our minds immediately recall the horrible atrocities committed in the African slave trade. We think of people who were enslaved by force, torn from their families, and subjected to some of the most inhumane treatment imaginable.

They were raped and beaten and 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 and devastatingly wrong. Neither Paul nor any other biblical author would have affirmed these practices. Instead, they would have condemned them in the harshest terms.

But in Paul's setting, slavery was different. It was usually a positive economic arrangement, especially when both master and slave were Christians. And the reality was that both master and slave 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 the church to tear down the social institutions. Instead, he taught them to handle slavery in a Christ-like fashion.

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 to treat him as an honored slave in his house, or if he was asking for Onesimus' legal freedom. Without knowing more details about Onesimus' skills and circumstances, it is hard for us to guess which outcome would have benefited him more. But in all cases, it is 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 mercy by the church.

## Confidence

Lastly, after presenting his 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 ask (Philemon 21).**

Paul had two strong reasons for believing that Philemon would grant his request. First, Philemon respected and loved Paul, and therefore would have been motivated to please him. And second, Philemon loved the church, which Onesimus had just joined.

Scripture does not record Philemon's response for us, nor does it tell us what happened to Onesimus. For many centuries it was believed that Philemon released him and that he eventually became bishop of Ephesus, dying as a martyr in Rome in A.D. 95. And there certainly was a bishop Onesimus who succeeded Timothy in the first century.

But in truth, Onesimus was a common name, so the slave may not have been the same man as the bishop. At the same time, a Christian trained by Paul easily could have risen to prominence, so we should not rule out the possibility.

In any event, Paul's confidence in Philemon should incline us to suspect that he did whatever was best for Onesimus. And according to some scholars, 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

Now that we have looked at Paul's petition to Philemon, we should turn to the last section of the letter, the Final Greetings to Philemon and his household, found 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 the earlier verses 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 served as a remote witness to the Philemon's resolution of the matter with Onesimus.

Now that we have looked at the background to Paul's epistle to Philemon, as well as at its structure and content, we are in a position to discuss the modern application of Paul's exemplary advocacy on behalf of Onesimus.

## MODERN APPLICATION

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One reason that Paul's epistle to Philemon is so important is that it shows us how Paul applied his own theology in his own life. As we look at his letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians, we find many general statements and hypothetical applications of his teachings. And these are extremely helpful to us. But in his letter to Philemon, we have moved beyond the general into the specific, beyond the hypothetical into the actual, beyond instruction to action. We see Paul as a Christian living consistently with his doctrine.

And so, as we look for modern applications of the book of Philemon, we will pay special attention to the ways Paul's mediation between Onesimus and Philemon corresponds to his teachings in other epistles, especially those to the Colossians and to the Ephesians.

As we consider the modern application of Paul's letter to Philemon, we will focus on three matters: first, the need for accountability among Christians; second, the value of compassion in our relationships in the church; 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 have mentioned, in his letter to Philemon Paul called on several individuals as witnesses to his advocacy for Onesimus, including Apphia, Archippus, Epaphras, and the local church at Colosse. Although Paul did not explicitly state his reason for doing this, the best explanation would seem to be 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 will look at several sections of verses from this passage, beginning with Ephesians 5:11-15, where Paul gave these instructions:

**Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. For it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient**

**do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible... Be very careful, then, how you live — not as unwise but as wise (Ephesians 5:11-15).**

Paul taught that Christians are to expose sins. His reasoning was that those who commit them would be ashamed to have their sins known. The wise thing to do, then, is to expose our lives to the light, that is, to the fellowship of the kingdom of light, so that we are prevented from sinning.

Now, Paul was not saying that Christians should police each other by making sure no one of us is ever alone or by spying on each other. Rather, he was pointing to the wisdom of accountability. When we live our lives in the open, when others know what we are doing, we are less likely to succumb to temptation. One reason for this is that we are ashamed to commit some sins when others know about them.

In the case of Onesimus and Philemon, if no one knew about Paul's letter, and if Paul himself did not plan to follow up with Philemon, then no one would have been able to hold Philemon accountable for doing the right thing. If he had treated Onesimus harshly, only Philemon himself would have known that this violated Paul's request.

But in making the matter public, Paul ensured that Philemon would endure the disapproval of his family and the Colossian church if he treated Onesimus harshly. The threat of this motivated him to do the right thing. The Lord himself commonly used the potential for shame to motivate his people to do the right thing in the Old Testament.

For example, in Habakkuk 2:16 the prophet proclaimed these words from God to Judah:

**You will be filled with shame instead of glory... The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory (Habakkuk 2:16).**

God threatened to shame the Judahites in order that they would turn from their sin. And in Ezekiel 7:18, the Lord tried to motivate Israel to obedience with the following threat of shame:

**They will put on sackcloth and be clothed with terror. Their faces will be covered with shame and their heads will be shaved (Ezekiel 7:18).**

In the same way, we have many secret sins in the modern church. Christians are willing to live with many of these sins, but would be ashamed if others knew about them. So, one way for the church to hold us accountable with regard to these sins is for believers to stay in close fellowship.

But shame is not the only form of prevention that Christian accountability offers. On the contrary, Paul's example in Philemon emphasizes that Christians should be accountable to one another largely through pleasant fellowship. Listen to Paul's words in Ephesians 5:19:

**Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs (Ephesians 5:19).**

Christians also keep one another from sinning by offering encouraging words to one another.

Finally, Paul indicated that we are to hold one another accountable through the mutual submission that all believers must render to one another. Listen to his words in Ephesians 5:21:

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

The church is to be a holy place, 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 that our church leaders and traditions train us to behave, and to the counsel of wise and godly believers.

In summary, through Paul's use of witnesses to Philemon's interactions with Onesimus, we learn that the church can prevent sin and encourage good works by showing disapproval for sin, by offering encouragement, and by submitting to the church's wise counsel.

Now that we have looked at the implications that Paul's letter to Philemon has for accountability in the church, we should turn to our 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 is 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. And he showed unparalleled wisdom and integrity and dignity.

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. It is the stories of him raising the dead, comforting the living, 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. In short, it is Christ's compassion that touches our hearts most deeply. And it is this compassion that Paul encouraged us to imitate through his praise, teaching, and example in his letter to Philemon.

We will consider two types of compassion in Paul's letter to Philemon beginning with kindness and charity, and then looking at acts of intercession. Let's begin by considering acts of kindness as examples of Christian compassion.

### Kindness

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

**Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints... I appeal to you on the basis of love... as Paul — an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus (Philemon 7-9).**

Paul was encouraged by the ways Philemon had refreshed the hearts of the saints, that is, the ways he had demonstrated kindness to other believers. And Paul wanted to receive similar charity on the basis that he was an old man and a prisoner, one deserving of pity and in need of aid. As he wrote in Colossians 3:11-12:

**Christ is all, and is in all. Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion [and] kindness (Colossians 3:11-12).**

Because other believers are united to Jesus, we must treat them as we would our Lord, and as our Lord has treated us, showing them abounding care, and helping 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 those in the church, and we must respond to their needs so far as we are able.

## **Intercession**

A second type of compassion Paul encouraged in his letter to Philemon was intercession in which one believer becomes an advocate for another. Intercession can take many forms. On one end of the spectrum, it can be as simple as an expression of opinion without personal risk that sways circumstances in favor of another. On the other end of the spectrum, it 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.

And in between these two extremes, many other types of intercession are possible. Listen to Paul's words to Philemon in on behalf of Onesimus in Philemon 17-19:

**Welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me... I will pay it back (Philemon 17-19).**

Through Paul's example, modern Christians are called to intercede for other believers in similar ways. Sometimes we are 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 live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God (Ephesians 5:1-2).**

Now that we have looked at some ways that Paul's teaching in Philemon applies to accountability in the church and to Christian compassion, we are ready to turn to our final topic: 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 are not simply talking about creating unity and love where none existed before. Rather, we are 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 in order to pursue something better, namely, mutual peace with one another, mutual love for one another, and mutual ministry 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 gospel.

Paul did insist 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 and to forgive one another, and to be restored to right relationships.

In the same way, in Paul's day, there were still tension, resentment and other conflicts between different races or ethnicities in the church, and Paul was not arguing that everyone who felt such strife was unsaved. Rather, he was saying that the basis for such problems had been erased by Christ, so that all racial and ethnic strife in the church was invalid and therefore sinful. For instance, in Ephesians 2:14-16 he wrote about the reconciliation of Jewish and Gentile believers with these words:

**[Christ] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility ... His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility (Ephesians 2:14-16).**

According to Paul's argument here, the reconciliation between Jewish and Gentile believers in Christ is an aspect of our union with Christ, and therefore it is an essential step in our reconciliation to God.

And the same is true in our day with regard to racial and ethnic strife, as well as with regard to every other difference between believers that becomes a source of problems. Because we are united to Christ, we are all forgiven and blessed. So, we have no basis for resenting or 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 and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you (Ephesians 4:32).**

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

**Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace (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. Reconciliation between believers should be a high priority in the modern church.

## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have looked closely at Paul's epistle to his Colossian friend Philemon. We have explored the background to this letter, and we have studied the letter's structure and content. And lastly, we have considered a number of modern applications derived from Paul's example in his 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 to other believers and confirms that he lived out the very doctrines he taught. Beyond this, it has much to teach us about the value we should place on each and every believer in the church, and on the ways that a proper consideration of their value ought to impact our lives, especially when it comes to maintaining right relationships.

As we live according to the principles that Paul modeled for us in his letter to Philemon, we will take great strides toward ministering to each other and toward building the church for the glory of Christ.