

Philemon
A Little Letter with a Contemporary Message

*My interest in presenting the implications of this little letter is rooted in the increased fracturing, not so much in the American culture, but the reaction of many in our churches. An exceedingly divisive presidential-election season, the tragedy of citizenry violence in our capitol, the degeneration of our primarily two-party system to blistering confrontation without civility or fairness to the opponent, and the horrible Covid crisis that has now generated into a “Mask Controversy” has created a world that is foreign to me. Sadly, I recognize that Jesus instructed us about life, greed, and belligerence in a world without Christ. Where has presentations gone on issues that are conducted in openness and fairness of reporting, airing both sides of the issue (its benefits and negatives relative to options in a civil manner seeking the good of the whole)? Our nation was built on the assumption of the arts of corporate decision-making and choices benefiting the majority, more than the strongest, most powerful voice). That said, should not the church be the pattern for a society that has lost its way? This little letter, perhaps, can be a help to us! Please, hear me, I am **NOT** saying we should not have differences, sincere convictions, or abdicate to blind acceptance that all moral choices are private mandating tolerance. In the manner of holding our convictions are we conducting ourselves like the world or the Christ?*

Introduction:

1. What can we say about this letter generally?
 - a. It is only one of two of the briefest letters in the New Testament canon (the other written to Gaius by John [III John] and the longer of the two). This letter was written to Philemon and what we know of him personally is that he was closely aligned with Paul in Christian ministry.
 - 1) Philemon is described as a dear, mature Christian man.

“... our beloved *brother* and fellow worker” (vv. 1)., see also vv. 4-7)
 - 2) He appears to have both a wife (Apphia) and a son (Archippus, who is also engaged in the work. It seems that Archippus was a leader in the church in Colossae (Col. 4:17).
 - 3) A house church gathered in their home (v. 2).
 - 4) Because of the reference to Epaphras, a believer from Colossae, who established a believing community there (Col 1:7) and the reference to Onesimus (“our faithful and beloved brother” [Col. 4:9] in association with the church, the assumption is that the letter was destined for a resident in Colossae.
 - 5) It is also clear that Philemon was a man of considerable wealth. The church gathered in his home (v. 2); he was known for his generosity (v. 7 “the saints have been refreshed through you”); and he was the owner of a least one slave who he would have consider of inferior social status (v. 16 “more than a slave”).
 - b. This very personal letter was written by the Apostle Paul, though he only designated himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (vv. 1, 10). *Why such will be explained in the*

- commentary to follow.* The immediate situation was that Paul was limited by house-arrest in Rome (He was accused of crimes against the empire, but his accusers have two years to instigate the charges in Rome so Paul was simply being held until the trial could eventuate. Jewish leadership used the time hopefully to reduce his effectiveness as they had done in the incarceration in Caesarea). Though the missionary team was operating, Paul was confined, Epaphras was restricted also (v. 23), but Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke seem not to have been (v. 24). The dates assigned to Paul's first imprisonment are 60-62 AD (Acts 28: 30-31).
- c. The immediate cause of the letter is rooted in Paul's labor in Rome where a runaway slave from the house of Philemon is brought to Christ.
 - d. It is likely that letter to the Colossians and the private letter to Philemon were brought from Rome by Tychius and Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9).
2. What is the specific issue that called for the letter?
- a. Onesimus, fleeing from his owner, escaped to Rome, a huge city. Not only did he seek freedom from his physical servitude, but he also stole from Philemon to finance the flight and his new freedom (v. 18, "... if he owes you anything charge that to my account"). Both actions were worthy of severe punishment, even death.
 - b. To illustrate the severity of slave treatment, Tacitus, the Roman historian, relates the instances of a slave owned by a master of 399 others murdered his owner, Lucius Pedanius Secundus, a senator in 61 AD. The Roman senate ordered not only the death of the slave, but all 400 of Secundus' slaves.
 - c. Through some circumstances unrelated, Onesimus came to hear the gospel and embraced Christ through Paul ("... for my child who I have begotten in my imprisonment," v. 10).
 - d. The letter, written by Paul's "own hand" (v. 19), is an appeal to Philemon to receive his slave back without recrimination and as his equal in Christ, though there is no evidence that Paul asks for his freedom from slavery though it might be inferred .
 "... no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother,
 but much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (v. 16).
3. What is enduring point of the letter?
- a. Here we have illustration of the workings of God on the human heart. The letter speaks to the wonder of divine providence and redemptive grace. An insignificant, rebellious slave fled his master, but in flight found his true master! Salvation may not alter our human status, but, in subduing our hearts and altering our nature, it radically changes our values and goals in life.

Parenthesis: Slavery in Roman Culture

- 1) *Slaves were the working class (agriculture, mining, construction, governmental offices, the education of children, domestic services, etc).*
- 2) *Slavery was unrelated to race (most were conquered people, but it could have resulted from criminal activity or excessive debt, many were simply unwanted children). Some volunteered for the benefits of bondage over freedom and*

insecurity. The enslaved were not taxed and had right to common-law marriages and social organizations (Christian churches, for example).

3) *Their lot was determined by their owners, some kind and some vicious! Some were purchased for pleasure! Romans often had three types of women: one through marriage to produce heirs, some for pleasure, and some to do the work!*

- b. The point of Paul's plea was that slavery did support social stratification in society, but it certainly did not in the family of God. In one sphere unequal status persisted, in the other it ended. By ending inequality in the Christian movement, it would indirectly bring its end in the empire by setting a virtuous example. The church of the first century had both slaves and non-slaves, the poor and the well-to-do, that became equals before God in Christ. The sense of unity that stretched without the blinding impact of culture is impressive.
- c. Though a slave might experience divine redemption, it did not bring with it the dissolution of social distinctives. Onesimus remained a slave while becoming a "brother"!
- d. Further, the redemption experience for a slave bringing equal status before the Lord for all did not absolve any criminal activities of the part of the slave. The cost of human injustice was not to be eliminated by the reckonings of grace!
- e. We must not miss the approach that Paul employed in addressing a volatile circumstance with a dear friend. With the status of an apostle, he could have simply exercised his authority and ordered Philemon to receive his runaway back without repercussions. Instead, his tact is to speak from the perspective a dear friend and co-laborer. The proverb says it this way, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger (15:1).

"Though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you" (vv. 9-10).

"If then you regard me as a partner, accept him as you would me" (v. 17).

4. What is the structure of the letter?

The Greeting of Philemon, vv. 1-3

The Thanksgiving for Philemon, vv. 4-7

The Plea to Philemon, vv. 8-22

The Remembrance of Philemon by others, vv. 23-24

The Benediction, v. 25

Comments:

I. The Greeting of Philemon, vv. 1-3

A. The writer, v. 1a

As stated above, Paul does not begin with a statement of his authority (apostleship), but with a description of his situation. He is a "prisoner" of Jesus in the accompaniment of Timothy.

B. The recipients, vv. 1b-2

Philemon: a Christian man

Apphia: likely his wife

Archippus: most likely a son, "a fellow soldier"

The church: the saints in Colossae that gathered in Philemon's house

C. The blessing, v. 3

First-century personal letters often had a wish or blessing (grace and peace). Philemon might have needed grace for the topic at hand as well as peace in it. "Father" does not suggest physical generation, but intimacy of relationship.

II. The Thanksgiving for Philemon, vv. 4-7

Consistent with letters of the time, the greeting is followed with personal recognition of the recipient linking the writer and the reader. In a way, it is a bridge creating a statement of trust and affiliation leading to the body of the letter. Legitimate praise for a person is a wonderful way to make a request. What Paul will ask of Philemon is not incongruous with his character and, thus, Paul is asking for consistency as a new opportunity has arisen.

A. Thankfulness to God stated, v. 4

Paul immediately wants Philemon to be aware of his care, affection, and appreciation for him.

B. Thankfulness reasoned, v. 5

It is most likely the Epaphras, who have established Christian testimony in the Lycus Valley (Colossae), brought news ("I hear") concerning Philemon's service in the gospel to Paul. Love and faith combined in the man as expressed toward God and fellow believers ("all the saints" [the word appears in the plural in the NT, the exception being Phil. 4:13 when it refers to the believers as a collective]. We are a family, not mere individuals; we act collectively as one).

C. For thankfulness to be increased, v. 6

Paul's prayer is that the spiritual reputation of Philemon would increase in the sharing of good things with others. It seems that what Paul is doing in this section is preparing Philemon to respond positively to his subsequent request.

D. Thankfulness personally expressed, v. 7

The word, love, appears three times in this letter. Paul rejoices in having heard of Philemon's compassion care for the saints (v. 5), here he expresses personal spiritual strengthening in his demeanor, and later (v. 9), he will appeal for an extension of that love to Onesimus. "Through the knowledge of every good thing" anticipates the shocking acknowledgment and plea to follow, a criminal has become a brother in Christ!

(Paul request of Philemon will be based on his spiritual character that will be affirmed in vv. 4-7. He is asking for consistency of behavior extending beyond social convention, an appeal to a higher morality than mere cultural standards, not only for forgiveness but acceptance.)

III. The Plea to Philemon, vv. 8-22

A. The basis, vv. 8-9

"Therefore" indicates the tact of Paul; his appeal will not be based on his apostolic authority, but love, love for God and for his children. It seems that Paul appeals to his

sensitivities further by mentioning his own circumstances (his age implying maturity and wisdom and his status, a prisoner of the Lord [religious, not merely political]).

- B. The issue, v. 10,
The topic is a runaway slave, Onesimus, who had come to Christ through the ministry of Paul and has now joined his spiritual children (“my child”).
- C. The change, v. 11
Onesimus means “profitable or useful,” but he had proven far less than that. However, through his conversion he who was unprofitable has come to be as the meaning of his name both to Paul and Philemon.
- D. The mandated consequence, v. 12
“I have sent” implies a legal action on Paul’s part. The point is that, though now a believer (forgiven by God and righteous through divine imputation), Onesimus is liable for his behavior prior to coming to Christ. Here Paul affirms the legal rights of slave owners both to possess slaves and to exact just judgment for disobedience.

Paul adds an affectional twist. He is not only sending back what is Philemon’s legal possession, but also his “very heart.”

- E. The contrary desire, v. 13
The apostle desired that Onesimus continue his laboring in the gospel even considering that Onesimus’ help was a gift from Philemon. In a sense Paul was saying that Onesimus’ continued service would be a gift from Philemon but he had no authority to retain him.
- F. The determining motivation, v. 14
In a subtle manner Paul is pleading for Onesimus’ service, but he would not do so without Philemon’s consent, a willingness born out of Philemon’s heart, not the apostle’s need. See the same sentiment in v. 13.
- G. The providential possibility, vv. 15-16
 - 1. Stated, v. 15a
Paul presents a hypothesis (“perhaps”) that Onesimus’ flight to Rome, encounter with the apostle, and redemption was in the predetermined plan of God (“he was ... separated” is in the passive voice, that the action was caused by other than Onesimus). *The NASB references Gen. 45: 5, 8; Joseph’s declaration to his brothers that they meant his slavery for evil, but God sent him there to persevere his people..*
 - 2. Reasoned, vv. 15b-16
“That” indicates, in Paul’s judgment the reason for Onesimus’ flight to Rome. Though apart from him for a while, it was that he might gain him back forever, not merely as his subject but “a brother.” The implication is that God sent Onesimus to Rome so that Philemon would have “a brother.”
- H. The plea for acceptance, v. 17
This is the clearest statement of Paul’s intent in the letter. The plea is predicated on the “if” clause. It is a first-class condition meaning that they are sharers in a common cause.
- I. The issue of remuneration, vv. 18-19
 - 1. The fact of thievery, v. 18a
Again, the “if” is a first -class condition; it is a fact. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, likely to finance his escape.

2. The generosity of Paul, vv. 18b-19a
The command (present, active) to Philemon is that he be credited as responsible for the loss. "I will repay it." Paul accentuates the promise in his own handwriting; it is a legal testimony of intent.
3. A parenthetical comment, v. 19b
Here is evidence that Philemon is indebted to Paul in the fact of his conversion, perhaps during Paul's two-year labor in nearby Ephesus (Acts 19: 10, 20; Epaphras also founded churches in Colossae, Hierapolis, and Laodicea)
- J. The favor requested, v. 20
Paul's is asking for a temporal favor ("refresh me") considering his eternal service to Philemon through the grace of God.
- K. The apostle's confidence, v. 21
This is the third time in the letter that Paul claims that Philemon will do what is proper without the need to pressure him with a command, apostolic authority (vv. 8-9, 14).
- L. The desire for a visit, v. 22
We know that Paul expected to be released from his initial imprisonment in Rome as he was only retained under house arrest with considerable freedom (see Acts 28:30-31 and Phil. 1:26 ["... my coming to you again"]). This comment may be a reminder to Philemon that he would likely face the apostle personally soon, and he asks for preparation to do so!
- IV. The Greeting to Philemon by others, vv. 23-24
Four fellow missionaries send greetings to Philemon, perhaps Timothy was unknown to him personally to the recipient.
Epaphras: founded the assembly that met in Philemon's home (as well as in Hierapolis and Laodicea).
Mark: This is John Mark: the writer of the gospel, closely associated with Peter early, cousin of Barnabas, defector on the first missionary journey, later restored to Paul (I Tim. 4:11).
Aristarchus: a co-laborer in Colossae with the four (Col. 4:10-12)
Demas: A faithful man with a disappointing end
Luke: the beloved physician, missionary
- V. The Benediction, v. 25

Parenthesis: What was the outcome of Paul's plea to Philemon?

Perhaps the clearest answer is found in the book of Colossians, written during Paul second and final imprisonment in Rome.

"... Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number" (4:19).

According to Ignatius of Antioch, writing to the church at Ephesus at the end of the century, Onesimus emerged as a leader, the bishop of Ephesus, in the late first century and was martyred in Rome under Emperor Domitian.

"... Onesimus, whose love surpasses words, in the flesh as your bishop. I pray that you may love him with a love according to Jesus Christ, and that you may all be like him. For blessed is He Who granted unto you,

worthy as you are, to possess such a bishop" (Letter to the Ephesians, 1).

Applications:

1. I must confession that my primary motivation for turning to this little letter is our contemporary cultural context, most specifically the social, cultural, and political divide that not only has brought chaos, disintegration, and factionalism to our nation, but has, in many cases been carried into our churches (party affiliation, Covid-19, masks). While the community of believers that should be a paradigm of proper social relationships and conduct, the evidence but bitter infighting, demeaning comments, and separations that should be expected in the world but exists among us. While we have every right and duty to have discussion and disagreements on issues, hostility and character defilement should not be. What we have found in this little letter is a powerful message of forgiveness, even when our rights and possessions have been violated when true repentance has taken place. We have been forgiven, just as Philemon, so we should be willing to forgive and live as brothers and sisters in the community of Christ with harmony and self-respect, not acrimony. When the forgiveness brought to us so unmeritedly and certainly undeservingly through the forgiveness of God, should we ever harbor animosity and a degrading spirit toward those we have conflict of opinion? I am not talking about differences of opinion, even those of deep conviction, but how we allow ourselves to manifest them as Christ-like family members.
2. Our passage today speaks loudly concerning the wonder of redemption. Onesimus, betrayed the meaning of his name ("profitable"), stole from his authority, and fled. However, this man could not flee from the grace of God, even to Rome. In a distant place, not the home of a Christian man and family, the unprofitable became profitable. There is hope for all and everyone, though they may not know it. "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform" are the words of an old hymn. Redemption changed a slave into a son! What a marvelous picture of you and me; a slave to broken dreams and unfulfilled passions, became a member of the family of God. Onesimus is a picture of all of us; we ran away from the gospel only to have been found by it!
3. A sobering lesson in this episode is that the kind of deliverance Onesimus received, did not suggest a lack of needed, and required, accountability for the wrongs of his conduct. He broke the law of God by taking on the personal responsibility to end his enslavement forcefully and took what was not his own to finance it. Redemption, divine forgiveness, was the unimaginable solution to his desire, but it did not make previous wrongs inviolate. He sought forgiveness of the one he wronged. Divine forgiveness wipes the slate of sin before God away forever, but it does not obliterate the need to recognize our relational negligence and seek forgiveness and adjudication.
4. Slavery was greatly curbed in the ancient world by the example set forth by the Christian community. The model of the church in treating people with dignity and equality in the community of God was a powerful impetus, not only for the embrace of the faith, but cultural change. Is this not a lesson for our churches today? While I do not oppose Christian social activism, it is most effective when it is practiced and exemplified in the church for all to see. Emptiness and wrong solutions are most effectively envisioned when beautiful and helpful solutions are offered as an alternative

5. Reflective of our cultural and societal mores, the church has often been seen as embracing, condoning, perpetuating them. Our materialistic culture prizes competition at the expense of the rights of others. Worth, importance, success resides in wealth accumulation (our possessions), athleticism, academic and professional status, and physical appearance. Do we not carry the same value and prejudices into our believing communities? Do we not show social prioritization at times by valuing accomplishment over character? Do we not see that godly character is not wealth dependent, achieved through education alone, the color of our skin, or the size of our clothing? While there are legitimate differences (we do not share equally in all things) those differences should bring us together because we can all help each other in our individual weaknesses through what others possess and we do not. This we call a family! This is a true community! We are one in Christ, equal with differences that make us unique. "They will know we are Christians by our love!"
6. Often people that we conceive furthest from any gospel interest are simply lumps of blighted clay that God is shaping into trophies of His grace. This is clearly exemplified in Onesimus. We should not despair for a wayward son or daughter; God may be providentially taking them through a wilderness of experiences to make them into insight, caring servants someday.
7. This little letter illustrates the gospel in two marvelous ways, using words for social issues that are also used of the meaning of our salvation. In v. 13, Paul speaks of Onesimus as taking Philemon's place in his service to Paul. The apostle uses the words, "in the place of," as well as other writers, to describe what Jesus did for us. He "took our place;" He acted on our behalf; He paid the debt of our derelictions. In v. 18, Paul indicates that anything Onesimus had defrauded Philemon of should be "reckoned to his account." He says that he is willing to accept the debt of another by placing it in his own accounts-payable ledger. The words used here are the words used in a theological context for imputation. Our debts have been placed on the account book of Christ; Christ was willing to accept our debt and pay it for us. This is called grace. This is what Christ did for you. This is what Christ promises to do for every indebted person who accepts His provision for all our past, present, and tomorrows, as well as for eternity.