

Philemon 1-7 “Faith and Love: The Foundation for Paul’s Appeal”
Deuteronomy 23:15, 24:6-18
Psalm 66

October 30, 2022

Introduction: Applying God’s Law When the Magistrate Doesn’t Care

In Paul’s letter to Philemon,
the apostle calls a master to free his slave.

Some have wondered why Paul did not appeal to OT law.

After all, Deuteronomy 23:15 says that “you shall not give up to his master
a slave who has escaped from his master to you.”

And yet Onesimus has escaped from Philemon and has sought refuge with Paul.

In our Politics and the Kingdom of God study,
we have had some opportunity to reflect on how the OT law applies today –
and now in the book of Philemon, we can see how Paul applies the law.

He doesn’t simply say, “Hey look, Moses says I shouldn’t return him!”

After all, the Mosaic law was given to *Israel* –
and under *Roman* law, Paul was obligated to send Onesimus back.

So what we see here is how Paul applies the *equity* of the Law – the *principle* –
to a Roman situation.

Paul submits to the governing authorities –
he sends the slave back to his master –
but along with the slave, he sends a letter that is designed to convince Philemon
to set Onesimus free.

If Paul had attacked the institution of slavery – insisting that slavery was morally wrong –
and threatening to excommunicate Philemon if he refused to emancipate all his slaves,
Paul would have turned the church into a revolutionary institution.

But while Paul thinks that freedom is better than slavery –
Paul does not think that the gospel should be subordinated to political ends.

There are lots of problems in every society.

As one commentator puts it,
“The tone of the apostle in his letter to Philemon is not virulent invective
against slaveholders with the demand for excommunication.
Nor is his tone a bill of infallibility for slavery
as an institution to be perpetually extended.” (James Dennison)

Rather, Paul wants us to see that our new identity in Christ
also brings a new community in Christ.

We are a family.
Our old ways of thinking about “family” will be challenged by this.

Sing Psalm 66
Read Philemon

This letter is a historian's nightmare!

One letter.

One letter that *assumes* so much background knowledge!

There is so much more to the story that we simply *do not know!*

Paul makes so many vague allusions to past events!

Philemon had heard the gospel from Paul –

possibly at Colossae – but we don't really know!

Now Paul is writing from a prison in Rome.

How did Onesimus wind up with Paul?

Some think that Onesimus had stolen something and fled from his master.

Others think that Onesimus had been sent to Paul on an errand –

but had overstayed his leave, and was now in trouble with Philemon.

Others think that Onesimus had done something to provoke his master,

and did not *run away* (after all, Paul does not speak of him as a runaway),

but that he *did* run to Paul to seek Paul's help in interceding with Philemon.

(As David Garland points out,

“A slave who had no intention of running away but absented himself

to ask a friend of his master to intervene was not regarded as a fugitive.”)

But however it happened,

Onesimus has also now come to faith in Christ through Paul's preaching.

And so Onesimus has carried this letter back to his master.

So, as one commentator puts it,

“We have two stories here—two narratives.

One story is about Philemon, his old nature, his useless slave.

The other story is about Onesimus, his new nature,

the fact that he is now a useful beloved brother.

The father of both is Paul—to the one, begotten in freedom;

to the other, begotten in bonds.

This narrative therefore focuses on relationships:

Paul and Philemon; Paul and Onesimus; Philemon and Onesimus.” (Dennison)

Paul desires more than just “emancipation.”

He wants *reconciliation*.

But he *knows* that this is going to be a tough sell.

In Roman culture, masters would regularly and frequently emancipate favored slaves.

(The freedmen would then owe a debt of gratitude to the master,
and thus would remain under the patronage of their former master).
But Onesimus is *not* a favored slave!
For whatever reason, he has incurred the wrath of Philemon –
and so Paul knows that it will take some work to persuade Philemon.

For this reason he crafts his letter very carefully to make his case.
Now, some have accused Paul of being manipulative –
of playing on Philemon’s emotions to get him to do what Paul wants.
But that approach fails to see that Paul is convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ
*demand*s this reconciliation.
The question, for Paul, is not what is the right thing to do.
The question is how to help Philemon see it.

Paul realizes that Philemon’s background and education will all work against him.
He needs to see that being *in Christ* challenges social and cultural ways of doing things.

But this radically Christ-centered approach is found even in the structure of the epistle.
“The salutation begins with Christ Jesus (v. 1) and ends with Jesus Christ (v. 3).
The thanksgiving and body of the letter begin and end with Lord (*Kyriou*),
while the sequence of Christological names
comes to a focus in the pregnant Pauline expression *en Christo* (v. 8).
That eschatological phrase "in Christ" will also reappear at the end of the letter (v20, 23).
Finally the conclusion (vv. 23-25) will close with the names of our Savior
in the very same Christological sequence as they occurred in the greeting (v1-3):
Christ-Jesus-Lord-Jesus-Christ.” (Dennison)

After all, Paul himself has a Lord and Master.
As Paul writes to the Colossians – in the letter that Onesimus carried –
“Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly,
knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.” (Col. 4:1)
We were all slaves to sin and death –
but we have been set free by the “eschatological invasion of history”
by the Son of God – our Lord Jesus Christ.
In Christ, the slave becomes a son – the debtor becomes an heir.

“And so this new age—this eschatological era—
this age of Christ and "in Christ"—
breaks in upon Philemon and Onesimus.
In Christ, they too are made members of the Lord of glory—
risen, ascended, seated in heavenly places in him.
They are members of the church above—heirs of light—
the sons and daughters of the great king of glory.
Slave, Onesimus, is "in Christ," raised up even now to the glory not yet fully revealed.
Master, Philemon, is "in Christ," lifted up to the heavenly arena
and seated with the slaves of King Jesus even now in glory.” (Dennison)

Paul does not attack slavery as a social and political evil.
(Indeed, in Colossians 3:22, he will command slaves to obey their earthly masters).
Rather, Paul provides a theological vision of the *church*
as a place where new relationships emerge,
in which slavery cannot endure.

1. Who Was Philemon? The Context of Colossians (v1-3)

¹ *Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,*

It is important for us to recognize that there are two authors of this letter.
Paul and Timothy.

We rightly see Paul as the leading author,
because the first-person singular throughout the epistle is plainly *Paul*.

But the fact that Timothy is listed as a co-author
cannot be ignored or dismissed.

At the end of the letter Paul will send greetings from five other “fellow workers,”
so Timothy’s role is more than just “sending greetings.”

Maybe Timothy wrote the first draft,
and then Paul edited it.

Usually Paul highlights his apostolic authority.

Almost all of the Pauline epistles begin,
“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus...”

Or “a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle...”

But not here.

Paul opens by saying “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus...”

Yes, the ESV says “a prisoner *for* Christ Jesus”
and that gets at something important here,
but the *form* is the same as when he says

“a servant of Christ Jesus” or “an apostle of Christ Jesus.”

Probably Paul is *not* saying that Christ has taken him captive
(although he does say that sort of thing elsewhere).

Rather, he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus

in the same way that he is an apostle of Christ Jesus.

He belongs entirely to Christ.

If the letter to Philemon was sent at the same time as the letter to the Colossians,
then there would have been at least three letters from Paul circulating –
(since Paul also makes reference to a letter that he wrote to the church of Laodicea).
And so Philemon would see that Paul usually emphasized his apostolic authority.

But here, Paul identifies himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Rather than emphasize his position *over* Philemon,

he takes the route of humility.
I am a prisoner.

By doing this, Paul is taking a stance *below* Philemon
in an attempt to persuade him to humble himself as well.

Yes, he *could* use apostolic authority to command him (verse 14),
but it is difficult to *compel* reconciliation.

If all Paul wanted was to get Philemon to emancipate Onesimus,
he could do it by command –

but Paul seeks *reconciliation* between those who had been alienated –
and that will take the path of humility.

Gregory the Great wisely comments that the pastor should be very careful not to use his authority
except in the case of those who are in rebellion.

I once was reminded of the wisdom of this counsel.

Someone came to me with a question of how to proceed in a delicate situation.

I answered honestly and clearly – from a stance of authority –
which was entirely the *wrong way to answer!*

This person was trying to figure out the right thing to do –
and so *did not* need someone asserting authority!

They needed me to reply with *humility*.

When you are in a position of authority
you need to be careful how you *use* that authority!

Yes, sometimes Paul is very bold and commands obedience –
but usually he only does that in dealing with stubborn disobedience.

When he is dealing with a dear friend and close colleague,
he thinks carefully about how to say it in a way that will allow his friend
to respond well.

Danny Olinger rightly suggests that Paul's use of "prisoner of Christ Jesus"
is a deliberate use of irony.

He is writing as an *unfree* man
he is writing to a free and wealthy man –
urging him to liberate another who is *unfree*.

It is as though Paul is saying,
"think about it, Philemon –
I am not free.

If you could free me, you would.
But I am unfree in the service of Christ.
Onesimus is unfree in the service of *you*."

May *we* take the same care in how we seek to encourage one another!

Notice also who the letter is written *to*:

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

Who is Philemon?

He is called “our beloved fellow worker” –
a term that Paul uses regularly to refer to those who labor in the gospel.
He is plainly the host of a church (“the church in your house”),
but the language of “beloved fellow worker” suggests that he is an elder,
and perhaps a pastor.

We see later in the epistle that Philemon was converted under Paul’s ministry.
(Verse 19, you owe me even your own life)

Paul frequently uses the term “beloved” to refer to fellow-believers.
Indeed, later in the epistle, he will say that Onesimus
is now a “beloved brother.”

Familial language runs throughout the letter.

Verse 1, Timothy our brother.

Verse 2, Apphia our sister.

Verse 3, God our Father.

Verse 7, my brother.

Verse 10, my child, Onesimus, whose father I became.

Verse 16, a beloved brother.

Verse 20, Yes, brother.

All of this is rooted in Paul’s doctrine of adoption –
that God has adopted us in Christ, so that we become fellow heirs with Jesus.
Jesus has established one new family –
and so we are called to live as that one new family.

So while the letter is, in one sense, to Philemon,
it is important to see what these other people are doing here:
Apphia is probably Philemon’s wife,
Some think that Archippus is Philemon’s son,
but others suggest that he is the pastor of the church,
because the letter is addressed to “the church in your house” (namely, Philemon’s house).

While the central matter of the letter is addressed in the singular to Philemon,
the framing material includes a lot of plurals:
The “you” in verse 3 is plural – as is the “your prayers” in verse 22,
and the “your spirit” in verse 25.

So Paul is writing this letter not merely as a personal letter to a friend,
but as a personal letter to a fellow-elder,

and one that is addressed to the church – to the fellowship that meets in his house –
so that there is some accountability involved.

As more evidence for this, there is a cryptic statement in Colossians 4:17,
“Say to Archippus, ‘See that you fulfill the ministry that you have received in the Lord’”
which may be an admonition from Paul
to encourage the *rest* of the churches in Colossae
to make sure that the situation with Philemon and Onesimus
is not ignored.

Col 4:15-16 makes it clear that there is a connection between the several churches in that region.
Colossae, Laodicea and the church in Nympha's house
appear to have been a sort of presbytery.
There appear to be several churches in Colossae
--in Col 1:2 Paul addresses "the saints and faithful brethren in Colossae"
--but here Philemon is addressed to Philemon, his wife,
Pastor Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon's house
--not to all the Colossian Christians,
but to the particular group of them that meets in this one location.

So think about the effect of this letter.

A large house could hold 60-80 people –
so if you are an elder of a 70 member congregation,
and a letter from the apostle Paul is read before the whole congregation
(which very likely includes *other* slaves as well!),
this will create major social pressure on Philemon!

That’s what Paul *wants* to do –
but he is also very sensitive to allowing Philemon to save face!
He does not want to shame Philemon.
He wants to honor Philemon – even as he asks him to do something very difficult.

But what he is asking comes under the banner of divine authority –
as Paul says in his greeting in verse 3:

³ *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is more than just a polite greeting.

A polite greeting in a Greek epistle would be *Chairein* (greetings).
A polite greeting in a Hebrew epistle would be *Shalom* (Peace).

But Paul says *charis* (not just “greetings” but *grace*)
and *eirene* (not just peace – generically,
but peace *from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*)

It’s the same basic greeting that Paul uses in all his epistles,

but it is not a throwaway line.
It is a uniquely Christian greeting that is loaded with meaning.

The blessings of the kingdom are grace and peace.

In the ancient world, a *good king* was one who used his wealth and power
for the good of his people.

We need to see that *grace* here, is not just the “grace of salvation,”
but the benevolence of God which bestows all that is his upon his people.

This is God’s good favor – his good-pleasure –
that God will bestow all good gifts upon those who fear him.

Likewise, Paul says that the other blessing of the kingdom is *peace*.

Throughout the scriptures, peace is more than just the absence of conflict.

Peace – Shalom – has to do with well-being,
with a bountiful and fruitful existence –
where all is *well* – where life is *good*.

And this grace and peace comes to us

“from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

After all, the Son of God became all that we are by nature,
so that we might become all that he is by grace.

He who was God

became a slave –

so that we who were slaves,
might be joined to the life of God.

As Danny Olinger puts it,

“The import of such a blessing is that as God is in himself, so are his people.

He lacks nothing, so they also lack nothing.

They are filled with the fullness of the goodness of God,
and being filled they are at peace.

The placing of the name of Christ upon New Testament believers
acts in a parallel fashion.

Believers in having Christ have every good thing.

They are at peace, living in absolute confidence that he has risen from the dead
and now presides in heaven...

Christ stands at the heart of this letter,

and in him, all who believe have been made free

being transformed from darkness to light

by his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ has set Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus free,

and now that freedom is to come to expression in their lives

as they relate to one another in a Christ-like fashion.”

2. Paul’s Thanksgiving: Setting Up the Appeal (v4-7)

a. Love and Faith (v4-5)

- i. Toward the Lord Jesus**
- ii. For All the Saints**

⁴ *I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints,*

In his thanksgiving,

Paul highlights Philemon's love and faith.

You can see the careful structure of this as Paul gives thanks

for Philemon's love and faith in verse 5,

and then prays for the continued fruit of "your faith" in verse 6,

and testifies to "your love" in verse 7.

And the place we need to start is by seeing that this is a love and a faith that is oriented *toward* the Lord Jesus and *for* all the saints.

Christ is the object and the goal of our love and our faith.

Notice that Paul does not make *emancipation* the object and goal of our love and our faith.

No social or political movement can ever rise to that place.

If we ever orient our love and our faith to a social or political goal,

then we will have exchanged our allegiance to King Jesus

for another allegiance!

Freeing the slaves was a good thing.

Obtaining justice for the unborn is a good thing.

Obtaining justice for those who have been oppressed is a good thing.

But *how we do it* matters.

Our faith, hope, and love, must *always* be oriented toward the Lord Jesus – and all the saints.

Paul could have taken a strong stand on the inherent injustice of slavery – and alienated Philemon, and the other slave-holders in Colossae.

But Paul is more interested in developing the sort of community in which slavery will have no chance of surviving!

Because Paul's goal is *not* to end slavery!

Paul's goal is to see the church in Colossae

become the sort of place where the kingdom of God is made evident!

where the family of Jesus lives like it!!

b. Faith and Love (v6-7)

- i. Produces Knowledge and Refreshment for the Saints**

- ii. Gives Joy and Comfort to Paul**

⁶ *and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every*

good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.^[a] ⁷ *For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.*

Because Paul is going to ask Philemon to do something that is radically counter-intuitive.
Roman masters were used to emancipating “good” slaves –
 slaves who would then become “freedmen” and “owe” their former masters.
Whatever the backstory with Onesimus may be,
 he was not one of the “good” slaves.
Paul’s appeal will not be on the basis of how *good* Onesimus has been.

Rather, it will be on the basis that Onesimus is a *brother* in Christ.

That’s why Paul words verse 6 the way he does.

“I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective
 for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us
 for the sake of Christ.”

When you hear the phrase “the sharing of your faith”
 you may be thinking about ‘witnessing’ –
 but the word here (*koinonia*) is much stronger.

I pray that the communion of your faith may become effective...

This is not just something you might say once in a while in the right setting.
The *koinonia* of your faith – the communion of your faith –
 is something that permeates *all* your relationships!

Here, Paul talks about sharing your faith as something that you should do
 with your fellow Christians!

Paul says the *koinonia* of your faith – this communion of your faith –
 this *sharing* of your faith –
 should become *effective* – should *produce* –
 the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

When faith is actively engaged in communion – in community –
 when faith is being lived out together as the people of God –
 the invariable result is that we come to *know* – we come to experience –
 every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ.

(And one of those things, Philemon, is that you will come to know *Onesimus*
 as a brother – and no longer as a slave...)

Paul is convinced that being in Christ changes everything.
 The truth of the gospel breaks down social barriers
 turning a slave into a brother.

And then Paul adds another line –

wanting to make clear that Philemon has *already* become this sort of man!

“For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother,
because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.”

You already have this sort of love, Philemon.

And I would say the same thing to *you*.

You already have this sort of love.

You already practice this sort of communion of faith.

But we need to consider what the implications of this faith and love may mean
as we continue to walk forward together in this city.

How can the faith and love that we have for the Lord Jesus and for all the saints
be made more evident –
so that the communion of our faith might become effective
for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us –
for the sake of Christ?!

How can we refresh and encourage our brothers and sisters –
and be refreshed by them?

(That’s not a rhetorical question!

I really want to know – how can *they* derive joy and comfort from our love?
And how can *we* derive joy and comfort from theirs?)