

Subject: *Lessons from a Christian Postcard*

Scripture: *Philemon 1:1-25*

This is one of Paul's letters or epistles, but it is more like a postcard or a brief note. It is one of the shortest books in the Bible (only 25 verses), and it is also one of the most personal. This little postcard reminds us how God blesses and uses the written word (handwritten letters, notes, and cards).

Jesus is in the demolition business and He is also in the construction business. He wants to tear down walls between people and build bridges of love and forgiveness. Jesus is the great Bridge-Builder. The ancient world had plenty of barriers and man-made walls (male and female, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, masters and slaves). This short letter was written by Paul to his brother in Christ and friend, Philemon, about a runaway slave named Onesimus.

1. THE PRAISE (vs. 1-7)

Paul begins by introducing himself and greeting the readers. This is one of Paul's four personal letters along with 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus. It was a letter sent to Philemon, but it was also intended to be read to the church meeting in Philemon's house (vs. 2). This would hold Philemon accountable to do what Paul is asking him, and at the same time, it would teach the church a valuable lesson in forgiveness and brotherly love. Apphia was probably Philemon's wife and Archippus was probably his son.

We know that Paul was a prisoner when he wrote this letter (vs. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23) and it is classified as one of his prison epistles along with Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians. He was not just a prisoner of Rome, but a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Everything in life has a purpose when you're a believer. "For to me to live is Christ..."

Paul has nothing but praise for Philemon. He mentions three specific things:

A. Philemon's love and faith toward all saints (vs. 5)

Love is mentioned six times in this short letter. Does Christian love really work? Does it work in the worst of circumstances? Does it work between a prominent slave owner and a runaway slave? Paul believes that Christian love can work and will work.

B. Philemon's love and faith toward the Lord Jesus (vs. 5)

Philemon demonstrated real faith by the way he lived. His faith was communicated (made known) effectively by recognizing every good thing that Christ had put in him. The church was meeting in his home. Churches did not have church buildings until the third century. Until then, they met in small groups inside homes.

C. Philemon's ministry of refreshing the saints (vs. 7)

Paul speaks of "the bowels" which literally means "the inner parts." We would say "the hearts" of the saints. Philemon was a person who refreshed others. We should be a blessing, and not a burden to others. Some people you have known, instead of being the wind beneath your wings, they are the anchor on your boat. Instead of building you up, they bring you down. Are you refreshing to be around?

2. THE PLEA (vs. 8-17)

Paul had authority as an apostle, but he doesn't use it. He is not overbearing, but tactful and courteous. A true test of character is how a person treats people who are "under" them. Paul makes an appeal for Onesimus, who has been saved while in Rome (vs. 10). Apparently Onesimus ran away and thought he could hide in the big city of Rome, but God found him. He set up a divine appointment with the apostle Paul. In verse 11, Paul says that Onesimus ("useful") is now truly useful because he is now saved. Every believer ought to be useful. In his plea to Philemon on behalf of this runaway slave, Paul was willing to do three things: he was willing to identify with Onesimus (vs. 12); he was willing to intercede for Onesimus (vs. 12, 17); and he was willing to invest in Onesimus (vs. 18).

Paul based his request for Philemon to receive Onesimus, his runaway slave, on three things:

- A. Paul based his plea upon Philemon's love and goodness
- B. Paul based his plea upon Philemon's new relationship to Onesimus
- C. Paul based his plea upon Onesimus' changed character

3. THE PROMISE (vs. 18-19)

Paul promised to pay Philemon whatever Onesimus owes. He says, "You have my word on it." Paul then gently reminds Philemon that he owes a debt to him (vs. 19).

4. THE PEACE (vs. 20-22)

Paul is confident that Philemon will grant his request and do even more than he asks. He is also confident that he will be released and will see Philemon again face to face.

5. THE PICTURE

This whole story is a picture of Christian forgiveness. It portrays forgiveness without ever using the word. Harold Willmington called this book, "The ABCs of Christian Forgiveness." The Book of Philemon illustrates many truths about salvation and the Christian life:

- A. Onesimus is a picture of all sinners – guilty and out of fellowship with our owner
- B. Paul is a picture of Jesus – a mediator who intercedes for us and pays the debt we owe
- C. This letter pictures regeneration (vs. 10) – "begotten"
- D. This letter pictures repentance (vs. 11) – Onesimus was a changed man. He who was not useful has now become useful.
- E. This letter pictures reconciliation (vs. 12, 17) – "receive him"
- F. This letter pictures providence (vs. 15) – God turns negative things into positive things and temporary circumstances into eternal blessings.

- G. This letter pictures imputation (vs. 18-19) – Imputation is the principle by which we are justified. Christ’s goodness is put to our account and our sin is put to his account. J. Vernon McGee said: “We have the standing of Christ before God or we have none at all.”
- H. This letter pictures Christian forgiveness and acceptance – God shows us how to forgive others who have done us wrong and how to receive new believers in the church regardless of their background. ***Romans 15:7*** *Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*

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1. _____ (vs. 1-7)

A. Philemon's love and faith _____ (vs. 5)

B. Philemon's love and faith _____ (vs. 5)

C. Philemon's ministry of _____ (vs. 7)

2. _____ (vs. 8-17)

A. Paul based his plea upon Philemon's _____

B. Paul based his plea upon Philemon's _____ to Onesimus

C. Paul based his plea upon Onesimus' _____

3. _____ (vs. 18-19)

4. _____ (vs. 20-22)

5. _____

A. Onesimus is a picture of _____

B. Paul is a picture of _____

C. This letter pictures _____ (vs. 10)

D. This letter pictures _____ (vs. 11)

E. This letter pictures _____ (vs. 12, 17)

F. This letter pictures _____ (vs. 15)

G. This letter pictures _____ (vs. 18-19)

H. This letter pictures _____

Romans 15:7 *Wherefore receive ye one another, as Christ also received us to the glory of God.*