

Message #1

Various Texts

We are living in a time in which much of Christianity is promoting some very distorted views of love and forgiveness. Now we will acknowledge that true Biblical love and forgiveness is a very important part of church life and it is a Christian grace that should more and more exist in our church collectively and our lives individually. In fact, it was Paul who said that the greatest existing quality that we can manifest between “faith,” “hope” and “love” is love (I Cor. 13:13). So clearly love is to be an important part of our lives.

But just exactly what kind of love are we supposed to demonstrate toward one another? If someone is involved in sin and does not face it, are we supposed to just love them with open arms? Are we to demonstrate a kind of love that never says, “I was wrong” or “I am sorry”? Are we to demonstrate a love that never demands any restitution? Are we to demonstrate a love that never demands that someone face what they have done and admit what they have done?

If a person was unsaved and did something wrong and then got saved, should that person ever have to go back and apologize? If a family member wronged other members of a family and claimed to be a Christian, should the other family members just overlook the wrong and forget about it and say, “All is well?”

The book we are about to study will help us wrestle with this and figure some of this out. Frankly, we all desperately need the information and the instruction that comes from a little book in the Bible known as Philemon.

In the next weeks we would like to take a little journey through it.

Now we begin the letter by asking and answering some introductory questions:

QUESTION #1 – Why study the book of Philemon?

Let me give you four simple reasons:

Reason #1 - Because Philemon is one of only 66 **God- inspired** books in the Bible.

There is nothing that we will do this year or ever that will be more important than feeding on God’s Word. Feeding on God’s inspired Word transforms our minds, refreshes our souls and it builds our faith. The inspired Scriptures instruct us, convict us, reprove us and edify us. So carefully studying any book of the Bible is a valuable use of our time.

Philemon, like Jude, is a book that contains 25 verses but Philemon contains fewer words. In fact, **Philemon is the shortest of the Pauline letters with only 335 Greek words**. This fact is a tremendous proof of that this is a book in God’s inspired Word.

How does a personal letter containing just 335 Greek words, written on a piece of papyrus paper or vellum, end up being preserved and copied multiple times in several different manuscripts and end up in the Bible? There is only one answer; **Philemon is a book inspired by God.**

When we study manuscript evidence of books of the Bible, we discover that different manuscripts were copied by different people, at different times and in different places. Some copyists used all capital letters (uncial manuscripts) and some used all small case letters (miniscule manuscripts). Some were written on papyrus paper and some were written on vellum, dried animal skin. One of the most famous N.T. manuscripts is a manuscript known as the Aleph manuscript of the Codex Sinaiticus. The word “codex” means it was in book form and the place where it was discovered was at a monastery at Mt. Sinai.

It was a complete copy of the N.T. done in A.D. 340. It was written in all capital letters. There were 364 ½ pages that measured 13 ½ inches by 14 inches. Each page had four columns about 2 ½ inches wide. It had been copied on vellum, which in this case turned out to be antelope skin and **in it was the entire book of Philemon.**

The fact that Philemon is an inspired book is fully substantiated by the historical evidence.

- 1) Ignatius (A.D. 110) quoted from it as an inspired book, as did Cyril of Jerusalem (A.D. 315), Eusebius (A.D. 335), Jerome (A.D. 340) and Augustine (A.D. 400).
- 2) It was listed as an inspired book of God in all of the canon listings—Marcion (A.D. 140); Muratorian (A.D. 170); Apostolic (A.D. 300); Cheltenham (A.D. 360) and Athanasius (A.D. 367).
- 3) It was translated as an inspired book of God in the old Latin translation (A.D. 200) and the old Syriac translation (A.D. 400).
- 4) Plus all of the church council meetings identified it as an inspired book of God—Nicea (A.D. 325-340); Hippo (A.D. 393); Carthage (A.D. 397 & A.D. 419).

There have only been two times in history when Philemon has been challenged as belonging in the Bible. In the 4th century A.D., some said that the book did not contain the great doctrinal teachings of Paul and therefore should not be an inspired book. But Jerome and Chrysostom defended it. In fact, we will see that there are deep Pauline doctrines illustrated in this epistle. There is clearly a beautiful illustration of the Pauline doctrines of imputation and redemption. The idea that one should charge something to another’s account (**v. 18**) is clearly a doctrine of God that came through Paul and it is found in this book of Philemon.

In the late 19th century, some liberals attacked Philemon and many suspect their real motive was because Philemon gives strong support for Colossians and Colossians exalts Jesus Christ. Colossae was the home of Philemon and Onesimus was originally from Colossae (Col. 4:9). But as D. Edmund Hiebert said, “all attacks of the critics have utterly failed to dislodge the epistle” (*An Introduction to the New Testament The Pauline Epistles*, Vol. 2, p. 243).

No matter what the attack, Philemon stands as an inspired book of God.

Reason #2 - Because Christianity is lived out in a social context of personal relationships with real people who have real names and there are problems that do occur.

Church is a critical part of the Christian life and when you go to church you go to church with real people who have real names and real problems. We are expected to socially relate to each other. Personal relationships are formed and, at times, those relationships can become tense.

When you look at this little book of Philemon, one thing that certainly catches your eye is that **eleven people are mentioned in just 25 verses**. Five people are named at the beginning of the letter in the first two verses (**Paul, Timothy, Philemon, Apphia, Archippus**) and five people are named in the last few verses (**Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke**). In the middle of the book there is a central figure whose name is **Onesimus**.

What this tells us is that Biblical Christianity is a personal connection with people, lots of people. Relationships are formed and relationships are important and sometimes those relationships have problems. God wants His people living and loving in the proper Biblical way.

All kinds of people come to faith in Jesus Christ and into the church. Some have been heathens and some have been religious. There are people from all walks of life who get saved. There are business people like Philemon and there are slave labor people like Onesimus. God wants the church relating to each other in ways that honor Him and Philemon is a book that helps accomplish that.

Now what do you do if someone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ actually had done something wrong against you? Do you just automatically turn the other cheek and never say anything? Do you just pretend that nothing ever happened? Philemon is a critical book to relationships.

Reason #3 - Because Philemon is the most personal inspired letter in the entire Bible.

There is no doubt that Paul wrote lots of personal letters throughout his life. But only one of the personal letters ends up being in God's inspired Word and that letter is Philemon. D. Edmund Hiebert said Philemon is "the only one of its kind from the pen of Paul" (*An Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2, p. 248). William Graham Scroggie said, "It is the most perfect specimen in existence of private Christian correspondence; the communication of a perfect gentlemen" (*The Unfolding Drama of Redemption*, Act 2, p. 171).

However, just because it is a personal letter does not mean it was written just to one person. It is clear from verse 2 that this letter was written to the church. So the whole church needs the data from the book of Philemon.

One thing that is certainly touching about this book of Philemon is that this personal letter written by Paul was written to defend the character of a slave.

Onesimus had come to faith in Jesus Christ and was a changed man. Paul was the great Grace Age Apostle and yet he still took time for personal relationships with individuals. Paul was even interested in a slave who came to faith in Christ.

In fact, the whole key point of this little epistle is that **when a person comes to faith in Jesus Christ, all social relationships change because all are equal in Jesus Christ**. This point was monumental in the first century. If one were a slave in the Roman world, he did not have any rights. The master could do what he wanted to do with a slave and Rome supported this. So if a slave came to faith in Christ and were now elevated to the same status as everyone else in the church, this thought was revolutionary.

Reason #4 - Because Philemon demonstrates that God's grace is able to save, forgive and transform the worst kind of sinners.

Prior to coming to faith in Christ, Onesimus was a common thief. In fact, Paul said he was "useless" (v. 11). But God's grace saved him, forgave him and transformed his life. He went from being a slave to sin to being a saintly servant of God.

In fact, according to Eusebius, the church historian, and according to the writings of Ignatius, who was pastor of Paul's home church in Antioch of Syria, Onesimus ended up being the pastor of the church of Ephesus in the second century (*History of the Church*, p. 145; *The Apostolic Fathers*, p. 86). Every now and then we learn of some minister who became a thief; well, this story is about a thief who became a minister. Every now and then we hear about a minister who became immoral, but what about the immoral man who was saved and became a minister. That is Onesimus. We could title this—*The Colossian Robber who became the Ephesian Pastor*.

God reveals in His Word in many passages, both O.T. and N.T., that He is a forgiving God (Exodus 34:6-7). God's grace is able to save and use the worst kind of sinners. No matter what a person's background, when they trust Christ the slate is clean and all things become new. That is the grace of God. Name the sin and God's grace can totally forgive it. That is clearly what this book of Philemon teaches. But men that will be used greatly by God face up to things. They admit their sin, they admit their wrong and they turn from their sin and they serve God.

I love something Martin Luther said, "We are all God's Onesimi." We have all wronged our rightful master and salvation demands that we honestly face our sin.

QUESTION #2 – Who wrote Philemon?

There is no doubt that Philemon was written by the Apostle Paul. This is easily proved by the fact that Paul says he is the one writing it in **verse 1** and he uses the personal pronouns "I," "my" and "me" in reference to himself multiple times (1, 9, 10, 13).

There is also a fragment of an early Muratorian manuscript that says Paul wrote 13 epistles, which would mean Paul wrote Romans to Philemon, which number count is 13.

Eusebius says that Paul was the author of 14 inspired epistles, including Hebrews (*The History of the Church*, p. 108). To get to the number 14, Philemon must be one of those inspired books.

Richard Melick said there aren't many who have seriously questioned Pauline authorship and the fact that Paul wrote Philemon "has enjoyed almost a unanimous acceptance...without dispute" (*Philemon*, p. 336).

QUESTION #3 – Where was Paul when he wrote Philemon?

It is very clear from the book that Paul was prisoner in prison (**1, 9, 10, 13**). The fact that Paul was in prison is undeniable, but the problem is Paul was in prison so often that we need to zero in on which imprisonment he was in when he wrote Philemon. We get some help from **verse 9** because we learn that this imprisonment occurred when he was older.

If you track the life of the Apostle Paul, we may easily calculate that nearly 5 years of his Christian life was spent in prison. There was a two-year imprisonment in Caesarea (A.D. 57-59) (Acts 23:23/24:27). Then there was also another two-year imprisonment in Rome (A.D. 60-62) (Acts 28:30-31). Then there were other times he was locked up as well (i.e. Philippi (Acts 16)).

There is undoubtedly a close association between the book of Colossians and Onesimus (Col. 4:9). We may assume these letters were written around the same time. The prevailing testimony of Biblical scholars is that **Paul wrote Philemon during his two years of imprisonment in Rome**.

Think about this for a moment. Paul is the biggest name in the Gentile Age of Grace. He was a man who was often in trouble for preaching grace. He spent many years in prison and yet Philemon reveals that he still had a personal concern for a slave who was suffering.

QUESTION #4 – When was Philemon written?

Paul wrote Philemon while in prison in Rome around **A.D. 60-62**. This was in close proximity to the same time that he wrote three other prison letters—Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians. It was also an imprisonment of Paul in his twilight older years of earthly life.

QUESTION #5 – What is the occasion for the writing of the book of Philemon?

A man whose name was Onesimus had, at one time, worked for a man whose name was Philemon, who lived in Colossae. In fact, the language would imply that Onesimus was his slave (**v. 16**). Philemon was a Christian but Onesimus was not. Onesimus wronged Philemon and probably stole from him and absconded with the money and then left Colossae and fled to Rome (**v. 18**).

Now if you were a slave in the first century and you wronged your master or stole from him, the owner had a legal right to track you down and kill you.

There is a papyrus fragment from history (*Oxyrhynchus papyrus 1643*) that says a master had a right to imprison and brutally whip a runaway slave and could even have a slave crucified. Major rewards were actually offered for any bounty hunter who could track down and bring back a runaway slave (Ralph Martin, *Philemon*, p. 136). Onesimus knew this and so he fled to Rome. Rome would be a good hideout spot because it was a big city and criminals can get lost in a big city like Rome.

Now Roman law said that if you hid a runaway slave, you were liable for each day's work lost to the owner. Through some sovereign, unknown work of God, Onesimus came in contact with the Apostle Paul. We don't know how he came in contact with Paul, but he certainly did. Paul apparently shared the Gospel with him and he trusted Jesus Christ as Savior (v. 10). Onesimus became a new creation. He did an about-face. He started learning from Paul and he started serving Paul. In fact, he became so special to Paul that Paul said he was actually a key part of his heart (v. 12). Onesimus had dramatically changed but there was a loose end that needed to be resolved. There was the matter of Philemon who had been wronged. **Onesimus had truly repented, but he had not made any form of restitution.**

The Apostle Paul felt that in order to do what was right, Onesimus needed to go back and face Philemon. In fact, more than likely Onesimus himself sensed this was something he needed to do. If one is going to end up in ministry, one must honestly face things.

Tychicus was soon leaving Rome to carry the letter of the Colossians to them and Onesimus was to travel back with him (Col. 4:7-9). But before Onesimus went back, Paul felt it was important that he write a letter to Philemon in defense of Onesimus.

What Paul wants Philemon to do was unheard of in the Roman world. He not only wanted Philemon to take Onesimus back, but he wanted him to forgive him and to esteem him as an equal brother in Christ. It is interesting that Paul never demands this from Philemon. He presents his case and then leaves Philemon to make his own decision. He does not try to manipulate him or coerce him.

QUESTION #6 – What is the theme of Philemon?

This is a tough question to answer. There are many things we will learn from Philemon but certainly one of the main thoughts is this:

THE TRUE CONVERSION OF A SINNER CHANGES THE SINNER AND MAKES HIM EQUAL IN CHRIST WITH ALL OTHER BELIEVERS, AND ONE WHO HAS BEEN TRULY CONVERTED WILL BE WILLING TO TRY TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT WITH THOSE HE HAS WRONGED SO HE MAY HAVE FELLOWSHIP.

There is equality in Jesus Christ. As Robert Wall said, "Within the church, God is an equal opportunity God" (*Colossians & Philemon*, p. 189). Once one comes to faith in Jesus Christ, we are equal and we do have potential.

Whether slave or free, black or white, male or female, rich or poor, successful or not successful. We do have a spiritual equality and potentiality. However, for full fellowship and full potential to be reached, someone will need to admit wrong and seek to make it right.

We are living in a time when many hearts and consciences are hard. But there is something to be said for a tender Christian conscience that is so in tune with the Holy Spirit that it actually says, "I need to make this right." God greatly uses people who do this; God blesses people who do this.

May God use this book of Philemon to make us all sensitive to His will.