

A Model for Christians Philemon

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

To Philemon our beloved fellow worker **2** and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

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 all the saints, **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. **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.

8 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, **9** yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— **10** I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. **11** (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) **12** I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. **13** I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, **14** but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. **15** For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, **16** no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. **18** If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. **19** I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. **20** Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

21 Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. **22** At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, **24** and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. ESV

“Philemon is about reconciliation and relationships between Christians. Onesimus {which means “useful”} was a slave of a believer named Philemon in Colossae. Apparently Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and fled. At some time while Paul was under arrest, Onesimus met him and became a Christian. Paul apparently wrote this letter at the same time as Colossians and gave it to Onesimus to carry back to Philemon {Cf. Col 4:9}. Paul appealed to Philemon to accept Onesimus back into his household, but as a brother in the Lord rather than a slave. In Paul’s estimation, Onesimus was far more “useful” {vs. 11} now that he was a Christian. Paul even promised to pay whatever debt Onesimus might owe Philemon.”

ESV: Introduction

Philemon

This brief letter is the only specimen preserved to us of St. Paul's *private correspondence*. It is, perhaps, surprising that no more of St. Paul's private letters have come down to historic times; for it hardly admits of doubt that he must have written very many. His vigor and activity of mind were so great, his affections were so warm and tender, and his acquaintances (not to say friends) throughout Asia Minor, Greece, and Syria were so numerous, that he could hardly fail to have correspondents in many lands; and we may be permitted to wonder that only a single letter should have remained out of so many.

Philemon (*i.e.* "a friend;" but the word occurs only as a proper name), to whom this Epistle was addressed, was a Greek Christian; who owed his conversion, it is inferred from Ver. 19, to St. Paul himself. He was probably a native of Colossae, in Phrygia, or at all events was settled there at the time when St. Paul wrote this letter to him.

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To paraphrase:

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.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN, "The Great Emancipator," wrote:

"This is a world of compensation, and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves, and, under a just God, cannot long retain it."

Paul's critics say he did not go far enough in his writings on the subject of slavery. Considering the culture in which he lived where slavery was "normal," he was almost revolutionary! He sent this slave back to his owner, and he came close to demanding the slave's release. The point is that we must act as individual believers on the basis of Christian principles, not so much on what is legal.

E.g., abortion is legal just as slavery was legal: both are wrong!

The letter to Philemon was written about 62 A.D., several years before the Timothy and Titus letters. This is Paul's only private letter, i.e. written to a single individual instead of to the church (although the church in their house is included).

Apphia is thought to be Philemon's wife and Archippus their son.

The decision called for is Philemon's to make, but he is being watched by his church family. Paul is confident that Philemon will make the right decision.

1. A LETTER from a PRISONER Philemon 1-3

¹ Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our
fellow soldier, and the church in your house:

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

Paul was inspired to write much of what the Bible teaches about the sovereignty of God and God's providence. So when Paul is in difficult circumstances he understands that what is happening is ultimately to the glory of God.

So to Paul, he is "a prisoner of Jesus Christ," not a prisoner of Nero.

Paul often includes Timothy in his addresses and here because Timothy is from this region he would have known Philemon.

Philemon is a "fellow worker" which usually means a minister of the Gospel in some capacity, whether a preacher, or deacon, or as a private Christian.

Apphia was probably the wife of Philemon and Archippus was their son.

The "church in your house" is either the church that met at his house or his family.

2. BROTHERS in the EXTENDED FAMILY

Philemon 4-7

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 all the saints,

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. 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.

It appears that Paul was in the habit of bringing churches and individuals before the Lord in his private devotions. Considering the extent of Paul's travels he must have spent considerable time in prayer.

Paul's compliments are not empty flattery that is intended to manipulate Philemon. This is simply an honest affirmation used to encourage Philemon.

Philemon had the reputation of being gracious and helpful "to all the saints."

The word "comfort" indicates that he provided a restful place for his fellow Christians to meet.

Philemon already had spiritual maturity and Paul is now giving him an opportunity to grow even more in the faith.

3. BROTHER-LOVE APPEALS to BROTHER-LOVE

Philemon 8-11

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)

Paul does not "pull rank" in that he does not exercise his authority as an apostle. He could have commanded Philemon to release Onesimus, but he wanted Philemon to agree to obey him.

Paul is asking Philemon to act out of love and not out of obedience to an apostle.

"Accordingly..." because of the kind of man you are, it is not necessary to command you to do the right thing, only to request it of you.

Here is a principle of leadership that we may use in many relationships:

Express the positive qualities (which must be true); make the request based on the belief that the person desires to do what is right.

Think of some relationships where you could use this principle of leadership.

When Philemon sees the name Onesimus he must have had a mix of emotions. Onesimus had run away and probably had stolen from Philemon. Remember that in Philemon's culture there was nothing wrong with owning slaves and that he, Philemon, was the injured party.

How Onesimus came to be with Paul is not told.
We just know that there are no "accidents" with God.

Paul makes a play on words out of the name of Onesimus. Onesimus means "useful or profitable," so what was unprofitable is now genuinely profitable.

4. ON BEING CHRISTIANS in a BAD SYSTEM Philemon 12-25

¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Onesimus had become so dear to Paul that he is called "my very heart."

What Paul is doing is risky because a slave was not a "person," but was rather a living piece of property much the same as an ox or horse. The owner legally could treat the slave in any way he chose; including killing him.

Onesimus is acting on faith as well as Paul. He was convinced that Christ was able to change Philemon's heart because his own heart had been changed.

Paul points out that:

- 1) The person who was once a slave is now a brother;
- 2) The "useless" slave is a valuable treasure;
- 3) The "property" is a man;
- 4) The powerless person is no longer subordinate, but under grace is equal.

Rather than directly confront the issue of slavery; Paul simply applies the love of Christ.

How else could the conflict between these two men separated by class as well as injury be resolved so that they are both satisfied?

Do you suppose that if a runaway slave and his master can be reconciled by the love of Christ that we could put aside our petty grievances against one another?

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