

Paul's Letter To Philemon
Week One
Verses 1-25

Day One

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

vs. 1&2 – Paul was imprisoned when he wrote this letter. I am not sure exactly what the conditions were like, but he was not in anything like a modern jail. Perhaps he was under house arrest or maybe it was more of a prison cell as we would know one. In either case, Paul was putting his time to good use by writing since he could not be present. **Are you putting your time to good use, or are you waiting for your circumstances to change before you do what is in your heart?**

Paul was writing to a man named Philemon about a former slave that Philemon had owned. This slave escaped, became a believer and now Paul wanted to return the slave to Philemon. Along with Philemon, Paul addressed the letter to a woman named Apphia and to a “fellow soldier” named Archippus. Paul was still soldiering on Jesus, even though he was in prison for the cause of Christ. Paul had used the soldier analogy in one of his other letters:

Endure hardship with us like a good soldier of Christ Jesus (2 Timothy 2:3).

Are you a good soldier for the Lord?

Notice that there was a church meeting in Philemon's home, so perhaps Philemon was a pastor. He was someone with whom Paul had a close enough relationship that he could write about this matter to commend the former slave to his former master. Ministry is often all about relationships and not about buildings or projects.

v. 3 – Paul was writing about a difficult subject, but he wished them grace and peace. And it was not just a polite opening for his letter. It was his true desire that the Father and Son would bestow a blessing on the readers and their flock. **Do you have the same wish for those with whom you work and minister? Are you a source of grace and peace for them?**

Day Two

⁴I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. ⁶I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith, so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have

in Christ. ⁷Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints.

vs. 4&5 – Paul told Philemon that he prayed for him and that all his recollections of him were good ones. Paul prayed for Philemon because the latter was doing a good job in his pastoral ministry. **Do people pray for you based on your productivity or your need?** There is nothing wrong with having needs that require prayer, but that should not be the sum total of your existence or relationship with the Lord’s people. Some of your “need” should be help with the ministry and work that God has called you to perform.

Philemon had faith toward God and love for all the saints. That is quite a good report for a man to have and receive. In other words, Philemon had a good name. Proverbs tells us:

A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold (Proverbs 22:1).

What do you have to do to earn a good name? You must do good deeds and do them consistently over a long period of time. **Do you have a good name? Do you want one? Are you willing to pay the price to get one?**

v. 6 – **What was Paul praying in regards to Philemon’s life?** He was asking God that Philemon would be active in sharing his faith. Paul was passionate about his mission and the mission for him was building the Gentile churches. Paul cared for the people but he also cared for the work the Lord had assigned to him and that work would only be accomplished if people like Philemon shared their faith with others so the church would grow.

I took part in a staff in-service day of training on evangelism this past week and it was a good refresher on what I already knew: I must share my faith with those whom I come in contact. **Are you sharing your faith regularly?**

Paul pointed out that there is great personal benefit to sharing your faith with others. It will help you understand more fully all the good things you have in Christ. How is that so? Well, Jesus said that more will be given to whoever has and also to whoever is faithful in little, God will give more. This is true not just in natural things, but also spiritual. So if you give away what you have, God will give you more, even if what you are giving is your faith and knowledge of the Lord. So if you are not growing in the things of God, it may be because you are not giving away enough of what you have and know to others.

v. 7 – Philemon was a source of great encouragement to Paul because Philemon had done so much to bless the saints. **Can the same be said for you? Do you encourage others out of your love for God’s people? Is your ministry a source of joy and encouragement to your leaders? Are you looking for those whom you may refresh?**

Is your ministry outward focused enough to earn you a good name as an encourager of the saints?

Day Three

⁸Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my son Onesimus who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me.

vs. 8&9 – This verse introduces a most interesting concept. Paul indicated that he could order Philemon to do what Paul was suggesting. It was the right action where the former slave was concerned, and Paul was obviously within his appointed sphere to order Philemon to comply. Yet Paul did not want to order Philemon; he wanted him to comply because he was motivated by love to do the right thing. So Paul presented his case, but he stopped short of ordering Philemon to obey.

This is such an important principle for both leaders and followers. Leader should not be so quick to coerce, bully, order or direct followers to do the right things. Even if the leader has right on his or her side, the goal should be willing and not forced compliance, and that not to the leader but to the will of God. There is an old saying that goes something like this:

"A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still" – Sir Walter Raleigh.

Paul was older than when he first met Philemon and in prison for the gospel's sake, so all he could really do is write and appeal to his disciple to do the right thing for love's sake.

This principle is important for followers to understand because God is not simply after compliance, but after a changed heart. God can force you to do His will, for He has that kind of persuasive power. Yet He wants you to be conformed to the image of Christ and do things from the heart because the love of God is in you, motivating you toward good deeds and right actions.

If you are a leader, are you coercing people to do right things while ignoring their heart condition? If you are a follower, are you allowing yourself to be coerced, allowing others to make your decisions because your heart isn't right or because you are not seeking the Lord for yourself?

v. 10 – In this verse we see that the slave's name who had fled from Philemon was Onesimus. Paul identified him as a son, which probably means that Onesimus came to the Lord through Paul's ministry while he was in prison. Or perhaps Onesimus had served Paul so faithfully that they had a close relationship, like father and son in the Lord. In this short letter, Paul was making a statement about a runaway slave who had escaped from a Christian master and who had become a believer. The slave was returning to the scene of

his escape and Paul was addressing how this redeemed slave – not redeemed in human terms but by the blood of Christ – was to be received and treated. This is important because Paul has been criticized by modern commentators for not addressing the issue of slavery in his life and writing.

v. 11 – This slave was useless to Philemon, perhaps because he had been a poor worker or maybe because he had escaped. Yet Paul indicated that Onesimus had value at that point both to Philemon and Paul. Paul had a use for him in the ministry and that ministry obviously did not include Onesimus returning to his role as a slave, unless Philemon insisted on it. By law, Onesimus was still the property of Philemon, unless Philemon would set him free. This is an interesting scenario, don't you think?

Day Four

¹²I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced.

v. 12 – Paul was sending this escaped slave back to his former master! This former slave was near and dear to Paul's heart, but he was sending him back to the scene of his slavery and back to his former master. **Why was Paul doing this? Was it for reconciliation, so that Onesimus could make right his wrongs? Was it so he could resume his role as slave?** No, Paul had ministry plans for Onesimus back in his former home as a fellow minister.

Could Philemon receive this former slave as a brother and forgive past sins and release him from his former role? That is the question and Paul could have ordered Philemon to do the right thing. He did not want to do that, however.

v. 13 – Paul was in chains, probably under house arrest, and he wanted to keep Onesimus with him. He obviously had become very attached to this man who had been and could keep on being useful to Paul. The irony was not lost on anyone that Paul was in chains, a slave so to speak, and he was sending a freed slave back to his former master without chains. The one who should have been free was in chains and the one who technically belonged in chains was free. That is the nature of picking up your cross and following Him; you don't know what He has in store for you.

v. 14 – Paul wanted Philemon to do the right thing out of a free and spontaneous heart. So Paul was asking for Philemon's consent to send Onesimus back, not as an escaped slave but as a brother in the Lord. What a statement about slavery Paul made here! He did not condemn or approve it; he simply showed how being in Christ changed everything. Paul, Onesimus and Philemon could not look at life, roles, laws as they once had, but had to examine it all in light of the law of Christ, which is the law of love.

Philemon should no longer view things as a slave owner but as a brother and pastor. Philemon had to evaluate his actions based on the important truth that all things are new in Christ:

For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly, he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave (1 Corinthians 7:22).

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Day Five

¹⁵Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good— ¹⁶no 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. ¹⁷So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

vs. 15&16 – Notice Paul was not approaching the solution to this problem by asking Onesimus to return and be a slave. He was appealing to Philemon to receive back his former slave as a brother and fellow servant in the gospel work. This tells you that Paul was not committed to see slavery either as something noble or to be continued. Paul was stressing the fact that all things were now “new,” since everyone involved was a believer and was operating under God’s laws and rules, not under Roman laws.

Paul was not endorsing slavery, but knew he had little power to change that institution if he attacked it head on. What’s more, the new churches had their hands full simply establishing a foothold in the areas in which they were located. They did not need this battle at that point in time. Yet it is clear that Paul taught if a slave could obtain freedom, that was a very good thing.

Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so (1 Corinthians 7:21).

Paul gently but firmly presented his case to Philemon that he should receive Onesimus back with no repercussions. Philemon could insist on his rights to have his “property” restored, but then he would lose out on something better: to have his former slave come back as a brother and coworker in Christ.

Paul loved Onesimus, as he had already stated, but reminded Philemon that he loved him more, since they had a unique past history and relationship. Yet Paul continued to refrain from directing or ordering Philemon what to do, while working to educate him so he could make the correct decision in the Lord.

This points to the truth that leaders influence others, but don't dominate or coerce followers. This requires patience and good persuasive skills that don't cross over into manipulation or control. It also requires a firm knowledge of the correct action so that the full case may be presented and the listener persuaded of his or her own free will. Otherwise the leader has commanded external obedience while not addressing heart issues. **How willing are you to settle for influence if you are a leader? How willing are you to make your own decisions from the heart if you are a follower, and not just comply, acting like you are agreeable?**

v. 17 – Paul put Onesimus on the same level as both he and Philemon, and that level was a brother in the Lord. Paul urged Philemon to treat him as he would have treated Paul himself. **Do you show deference to some or do you treat everyone the same in the Lord?**

Day Six

¹⁸If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. ²⁰I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

v. 18 – Paul was willing to cover any loss or debt that Onesimus may have incurred toward Philemon. If it was only a matter of financial reparations, Paul did not want that to stand between the two men. Paul was removing any objection that Philemon could possibly have to this reunion. **I wonder if Paul and Philemon had previous discussions about this, and Philemon had expressed his reservations?** We will never know, but Paul was certainly thorough in the presentation of his case for Onesimus. I would have been glad to have a man like Paul on my side. He was a fearless man and champion of any cause that furthered the kingdom of God. **Can the same be said of you?**

v. 19 – It was common for men to have someone write their letters while the author dictated. Paul probably had someone writing but then took the parchment and wrote with his own hand to Philemon, adding to the personal touch and persuasion of his case. Paul was reiterating his promise to make restitution in his own handwriting, but he did not hesitate to add that Philemon owed Paul his very life, probably referring to his salvation through Paul's life and ministry. If Philemon could see Onesimus' debt in light of the debt that Philemon owed Paul, he could then make the right decision about Onesimus.

We must always remember that God has already extended any forgiveness toward us that He requires us to extend to another. What's more, our ongoing forgiveness is tied to our ability to forgive others:

Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors (Matthew 6:12).

In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. "This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart" (Matthew 18:34-35).

Is there anyone you need to forgive today? Forgiveness is never a matter of your feelings, but is a rational decision that you make in light of your own sinfulness.

vs. 20&21 – Paul wanted to receive some encouragement from Philemon's right decision, which he felt he was entitled to due to the nature of their relationship. Paul told Philemon to refresh his heart by receiving Onesimus. Leaders and followers are usually joined together at the heart, which adds to the power of what that relationship can produce – for good or bad. Paul was hoping that Philemon would make the correct decision in Christ and, if he did, that would be a source of strength for Paul.

It occurs to me that we don't know what Philemon decided to do. We only have Paul's written case for Philemon's suggested course of action. That is how it is with your life. We have the written will of God in His word addressed to you and your situation. That never changes, but your responses are yet to be recorded and are between you and the Lord – no one else.

Paul was confident that Philemon would make the correct decision and would even do more than Paul expected in this instance. That is how parenting and leadership function: they influence, persuade and encourage, trusting ultimately in the good will of the followers to obey, and even excel in obedience. This is not a passive role, however, for leaders can and should make the strongest case for the right actions of their followers while stopping short of manipulating or controlling their response.

Day Seven

²²And one thing more: Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you in answer to your prayers. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings. ²⁴And so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

v. 22 – Paul ordered Philemon to get a room ready for him for when he came. This was a subtle reminder that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter. Paul was suffering for the cause of Christ, and he was urging Philemon, who was free, to receive his former slave in that same freedom in Christ, while praying for Paul's release from prison. Preparing a room for Paul was also an act of faith and trust that the Lord would answer their prayers and release Paul from prison.

Paul made a brilliant and thorough case for Onesimus. He included rational and emotional appeals, and called to mind the ultimate reason for any decision, which was the will of God in that situation. Paul let Philemon know that he would have to face Paul when he returned, which Paul hoped would be added incentive for the right decision to be made.

vs. 23&24 – Paul always had a ministry team around him to assist in the work. There were times that Paul was alone, but most often he had help. We see the names of five men in this verse, plus Philemon and Onesimus, which made seven. Paul also mentioned two others in the opening verses, which makes a total of nine names mentioned in this short letter with whom Paul had a personal relationship. Ministry and the work of the Lord is almost always about those kinds of relationships, for the Lord’s work is always about touching lives and changing the communities around you.

On whose team are you a member? Who is a member of your ministry team? It isn’t just about what you believe and do, but with whom you believe and do it. Jesus had a team, Paul had a team, and it is safe to assume that you and I should have a team or at least be part of one as well.

v. 25 – Paul then closed with a quick prayer that the grace of God would be present in Philemon’s life. He would need this grace to make the right decision according to what Paul was asking him to do, and it was grace that had brought them all this far, so grace would ultimately have to finish the job. **Do you see your need for God’s grace? Do you see the need for grace in others? Can you make room for that grace to operate? Can you extend it toward others?**

Grace is unmerited favor from God and Philemon, Paul and Onesimus had already received it in abundance. Paul knew they would need more of it if they were to continue in relationship with God and one another.

Paul was willing to take on the tough issues of life and come up with solutions that were consistent with God’s will and Word. That is why he “took on” this issue of a runaway slave who had become a believer. **Are you willing to do the same in your own day and generation? Do you have the courage to stand up and heard on vital issues of social importance? Yet when you do, are you a rabblrouser only, or are you committed to do the right things, but to do them God’s way?** That is what Paul did in this letter and he left us a wonderful legacy. I hope you will follow in his footsteps. Amen.