

Lesson 1: Forgiveness and Freedom *Philemon*

Hook



Main Point: We advance the Gospel when we reflect Christlikeness in our relationships and perspective.

The United States Postal Service is always on the move. Below are a few statistics that provide a peek into an average day at the Postal Service:

- 121,452 address changes are processed
- 286,137 money orders are issued
- \$882,838 will be generated in online sales at usps.com
- 6.3 million people will visit usps.com
- 6,955 letter carriers will deliver mail entirely on foot
- 493,400,000 pieces of mail will be processed and delivered¹

Today we will have the privilege of reading a piece of mail that was sent from Paul to Philemon. In this letter is a charge for Philemon to allow the Gospel to transform his thinking of and relationship with a runaway bondservant, Onesimus.

¹ <https://facts.usps.com/one-day/>

Lesson 1: Forgiveness and Freedom *Philemon*

Book

Main Point: We advance the Gospel as the Church multiplies.

Text Summary: Paul writes a letter to his spiritual son, Philemon, asking him to welcome back his runaway slave, Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother. Paul had met Onesimus in Rome and had led him to the Lord there. Onesimus became a new man, with a new heart. Paul knew it would be a lot to ask, but he appeals to Philemon's great love for Jesus and for others to encourage him to receive Onesimus back as a brother and coworker for the advancement of the Gospel.

Philemon 1–3 [Read]

Why did Paul use the word “prisoner” in his self-description?

How would this prepare Philemon for what Paul would say about Onesimus?

What does Paul's greeting to Philemon tell us about Philemon?

Paul did use the greeting “grace and peace” often. But is there also a specific reason that Paul would use it as his greeting in this context?

Even though he is in prison while writing all of these letters, this is the only letter in which he uses the self-description “prisoner” in the introduction. In Philippians he uses “servant” and in Ephesians and Colossians, he uses “apostle.” He mentions that he is a prisoner in the body of Ephesians (Ephesians 3:1; 4:1) and in the closing of Colossians (Colossians 4:10), but this is the only letter, not just of the Prison Epistles, but of all of Paul's epistles, that he uses “prisoner” as his title in the introduction of the letter.

Paul is connecting himself to Onesimus here. Onesimus was a bondservant and would also be deserving of prison, or worse, under Roman law for escaping his master. Paul mentions that he is a prisoner again in verse 9, and that Epaphras, who founded their church, is also a prisoner in verse 23. Through this entire letter, Paul is imploring Philemon to have empathy on Onesimus, to treat him with mercy not just because Paul told him to, but “for love's sake” (v. 9). Identifying himself as a prisoner sets this tone from the very beginning.

Paul sent greetings not just to Philemon, but also to Apphia and Archippus and the church in his house (v. 2). This tells us, as we learned in the introduction, that Philemon was wealthy, was a leader in the church in Colossae, and an influential man in the church and the community. Some commentators have postulated that Apphia was his wife and Archippus was his son, but

there is really not enough evidence to know for sure. “Soldier” doesn’t refer to military, but to his being a fellow worker in advancing the Gospel.²

Patzia wrote that Paul’s greeting others and not just Philemon shows that this letter was actually public rather than private.³ But it could just be Paul’s saying to Philemon, “Say hi to those other guys for me, too.” Either way, the content of the letter is specifically geared toward Philemon and his particular situation with Onesimus. It’s not a general letter to the church at Colossae. But it was saved and made public later. If not before, at least when it was made part of the canon. So, even though it was a personal letter to Philemon, we can all learn something from it, just like every other word of Scripture (2 Timothy 3:16).

The New Testament Scriptures are not abstract philosophical musings. They are real-world applications of theological truth. They are both practical and personal. So, while it takes a bit of interpretative work to learn to apply them to our own contexts, they show us how our God is a relational, personal God who is intimately involved in every detail of His people’s lives.

Grace and peace (v. 3) were commonly paired together as blessings in the letters of Paul. This greeting combines the typical Greek greeting (*charis* – grace) and the common Jewish greeting (*shalom* – peace). Paul’s mission was to be God’s spokesman to the Gentiles. He was Jewish, and the Gospel was rooted in the Jewish faith, but he was typically writing to Greeks. In his writings and in Acts, he shows us how he was passionate about the truth that the body of Christ was both Jew and Gentile, together, equally (Galatians 3:28).

Paul was also emphasizing grace and peace with Philemon because of what he is about to ask him to do—forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother. In order to do that, Philemon will have to show the grace of God, as the father did with the Prodigal Son. But if he does, it will bring peace to their household and their church. Philemon’s forgiveness and love would be an incredible model for the church and the community of the amazing grace of God and the unity of the Holy Spirit.

How would forgiving Onesimus be an act of love, grace and peace?

What kind of message would it send to the church at Colossae?

What kind of message would it send to the secular community?

Colossians 4–7 [Read]

Why does Paul thank God for Philemon?

² Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon, Hermenia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1971), 186-7.

³ Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 106.

What does this tell us about Philemon?

What does Paul hope will be accomplished by the sharing of his faith?

It was typical for Paul to start a letter with a few sentences of thanksgiving for the person or church to which he was writing. In fact, the only church he did not do this for was the Galatian church, but that was a particularly grievous situation. Otherwise, Paul starts with the positives before rebuking or exhorting them to improve.

From this introduction, we learn that Philemon is a faithful leader of the church in Colossae. One of the churches meets in his home. He is wealthy enough to have a large enough home for church meetings and to own slaves. Paul specifically praises Philemon's strong faith and his love both for Jesus and for all the saints. Philemon is a man living the two greatest commandments—to love God and love others. In this opening, Paul is not only praising Philemon. He is also setting up the basis for the pleas he will later make to Philemon to show this same love to Onesimus:

In v. 5, Paul emphasizes Philemon's love for all the saints

In v. 9, he appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus back "for love's sake"

In v. 6, Paul affirms his fellowship with Philemon

In v. 17, Paul asks him to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself

In v. 7, Paul says that Philemon has refreshed the hearts of all people

In v. 20, Paul asks that Philemon refresh his heart in Christ by receiving Onesimus

Paul hopes that by appealing the great love Philemon has already shown to others, he will convince him to forgive Onesimus and to show grace and mercy to him "of his own accord" and not "by compulsion" (v. 14). Paul is reminding Philemon of his love for God and for others before he asks him to show that same love to Onesimus.

If Paul appeals to Philemon's love and faith, Philemon really has no reason not to forgive Onesimus. Because whatever Onesimus has done to him, it is nothing compared to the sins for which God has forgiven us. Perhaps Philemon has a right to be upset with Onesimus, he has been wronged. But if Philemon accepts God's forgiveness for himself, he has to forgive Onesimus.

If Philemon forgives Onesimus, they can give the church at Colossae and the secular community a picture of the forgiveness of God. It can be a beautiful example of the Gospel—that Jesus forgives sinners, rescues them from slavery, reconciles them to Himself, and brings them into His family.

Have you ever forgiven someone who wronged you terribly? Someone who truly didn't deserve your forgiveness?

How did you find the strength and love to do it?

How did it help advance the Gospel?

Philemon 8–14 [Read]

Why does Paul appeal to Philemon instead of command him?

Why was Onesimus useless before, and why is he useful now?

Why would Paul like to keep Onesimus with him? Why does he send him back anyway?

So now we get into the meat of Paul's request to Philemon. Paul opens this section by saying he could simply command Philemon to take Onesimus back and forgive him, but he doesn't want to do that. He wants to appeal to him to do it "for love's sake" (v. 9) and "of his own accord" (v. 14), not under compulsion, not out of obligation, but out of love. True love. Christ-like love. Love for your enemy, for someone who has wronged you (Matthew 5:38–48). Love that Onesimus doesn't deserve. Love that leads to reconciliation of a broken relationship (2 Corinthians 5:11–20). The way that God loves us. So Paul is not making a demand of Philemon, he is trying to persuade him.

Paul tells Philemon he would have been glad to keep Onesimus with him in Rome. He had become useful to him in his imprisonment. Paul and Onesimus have become so close that sending him back is like sending away part of his heart (v. 12). He could have kept him there to serve him on Philemon's behalf, but he knew the right thing to do was to send him back (v. 13) and he didn't want to do anything without Philemon's consent (v. 14). Paul is doing the right thing, even though he would rather do something else. So, he is hoping that Philemon will also do the right thing.

In this letter, Paul doesn't make demands, he persuades. He doesn't command Philemon; he makes an appeal to him. Patzia writes, "Paul approaches Philemon gradually, tactfully, and in deep humility."⁴ Paul wants Philemon's decision to take Onesimus back and treat him as a brother to be his own decision, not "under compulsion" (v. 14) but "for love's sake" (v. 9). He wishes to persuade, not pressure Philemon to do the right thing, what is "good" (v. 14), what is "required" (v. 8).

Paul's statements about Onesimus's being useless and then useful (v. 11) are a play on words of the name Onesimus, which means "useful." It was a common name for slaves in the ancient world because of its meaning.⁵ Though his name is "useful," he was useless to Philemon

⁴ Arthur G. Patzia, *Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 111.

⁵ Strong's 3682

because he ran away. But now, as a believer, he is useful to Philemon and to Paul. And he can be useful to the whole church at Colossae.

Philemon 15–16 [Read]

If Philemon does receive Onesimus back as a brother, what would this say to the church and the secular community about the love of God?

Paul offers that perhaps the reason God had all of this happen at all was so that Philemon could forgive Onesimus and bring him back to his household as a brother (v. 15–16). To show the world the radical forgiveness of God. That no matter what someone has done, no matter how they have betrayed us, we can forgive and love because Christ forgave and loved us. *While* we were His enemies (Romans 5:6–11). Jesus died for us. *While* we were sinners. *While* we were running away from Him, just as Onesimus ran away from Philemon. And His death and Resurrection reconciled us to God. So, Philemon has the opportunity to show this same kind of love and forgiveness to Onesimus that God showed to him.

Not just forgiving him, but treating him as a beloved brother (v. 16), would be even further witness to the world. Paul tells Philemon that Onesimus is more than a bondservant to him. He is Philemon's "beloved brother" (v. 16). In the kingdom of God, there is no slave and free. Social status no longer matters. We are all one in Christ Jesus. We are all brothers and sisters, all members of the family, all parts of the body of Christ.

Even though Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, following the rules of the human system of slavery, just as he told the churches in Colossae and Crete to do (Colossians 3:22; Titus 2:9), he acknowledges that Philemon and Onesimus really belong to the kingdom of God. Therefore, they are not slave and master, they are brothers. If Philemon brings Onesimus back into his household and treats him as a brother, it would be another beautiful picture of God's grace, of His Kingdom.

As modern readers, many of us are surprised Paul and the other church leaders don't ever try to abolish slavery in their culture. They don't sanction slavery as a God-ordained institution. They say there is no slavery in the kingdom of God—"*there is neither slave nor free ... for you are all one in Christ Jesus*" (Galatians 3:28). And yet, they seem to accept slavery as part of the socioeconomic fabric of the time.

In their writings, both Paul and Peter encouraged Christian slaves to serve their masters obediently, whether or not the master was a Christian (Ephesians 6:5–8; Colossians 3:22–25; 1 Timothy 6:1–2; 1 Peter 2:18–25). Paul commanded believers to remain in whatever condition they were in when they were called to follow Jesus. Regarding slavery, he said, if you have an opportunity to be free, take it, but don't worry if you have to stay a bondservant. You are still free in Christ, even if you are a slave (1 Corinthians 7:21–22). Just as God told the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon, their call wasn't to try to escape exile, but to learn to live faithfully *in* exile.

Paul doesn't appeal to a Christian political movement to topple the Roman slave laws and criminalize the enterprise. Instead, he tells them to *live differently* within the broken institution. As F.F. Bruce writes, "What Paul's letters do is to bring us into an atmosphere in which the institution of slavery could only wilt and die."⁶

Paul sent Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, but he also implored Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother. This is consistent with the Old Testament attitude toward slavery. "If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves" (Leviticus 25:39–43). They were to treat them as hired workers, not slaves, *and* release them in the year of Jubilee. Because all of Israel were family, they were to treat each other as brothers, no matter what their economic status. Because there is no slave or free in the kingdom of God. We are all brothers in Christ.

The New Testament writers are teaching Christians how to live as citizens of the kingdom in the reality of this world. So, if Onesimus and Philemon treat each other as brothers, if they live together in community and serve beside each other in the church, they will be a model for the rest of the world. Instead of overtly attacking the institution, the Gospel would change the world by changing the hearts of believers in the world. Starting with Philemon.

What was so life-changing about this was that Paul wasn't just asking Philemon to free Onesimus. He was asking him to make him part of his family. S.M. Baugh writes that the Greco-Roman world was very much family-oriented and for a slave to be set free and sent out of the household may have actually been a great disadvantage. "Without a family, he would have no immediate social, legal, or occupational connections."⁷ Paul told Philemon to set him free, *and* make him a part of his family. To treat him as a brother. Just like what God does when He rescues us from slavery and adopts us as sons (Galatians 4:7).

We live in a world with all kinds of broken institutions. We can work to make them better. We can vote; we can run for office; we can work in non-profits. All of that is good stuff. But it will not ultimately fix the world. Human systems are broken because they are being run by broken humans. Rewriting policy won't change human hearts. Only God can do that. If we really want to change the world around us, the best way to do that is to fix the brokenness in the people around us, by sharing the Gospel.

By Roman law in the first century, a runaway slave should be made an example of when returned to his master. But Paul was asking Philemon to make Onesimus an example in the

⁶ F.F. Bruce, *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Eerdmans, 1977), 407.

⁷ S.M. Baugh, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Vol 3* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 517.

complete opposite way. He was to use this situation to show the world what the kingdom of God was like. What forgiveness looked like. What love looked like. What grace looked like. He asked Philemon to do what was right before Jesus (v. 8) instead of what was right to the world.

Philemon 1:17–22 [Read]

How does Paul say Philemon should receive Onesimus?

What does Paul offer to do? Why?

Why is Paul confident that Philemon will obey?

Paul is appealing to Philemon on the basis of their own relationship. So far, Paul has called Philemon their “beloved worker” (v. 2); he has thanked God for him (v. 4); he has called him “my brother” (v. 7) and said he has derived much joy and comfort from his love (v. 7). Now he writes, “if you consider me your partner” (v. 17). Philemon and Paul were partners in the faith, coworkers for the same mission—the advancement of the Gospel. Paul even led Philemon to the Lord (v. 19). So when Paul told Philemon he would repay him for whatever Onesimus owed, he adds, even though you really owe me your own self (v. 19). He doesn’t say this to guilt Philemon or to shame him or to treat their relationship like a tit-for-tat kind of thing. It wasn’t that Philemon owed Paul and now it was time to pay up. Paul was using “owe” as a metaphor. Paul was giving his close relationship with Philemon, his spiritual fatherhood, as the reason why Philemon should listen to him. If he really trusted Paul and really saw him as an authority in his life, his spiritual father, his older brother in the church, he should trust him on this.

Paul offers to pay whatever Onesimus owes, like a kinsmen-redeemer would have in the Old Testament (Leviticus 25:25). But perhaps he imagines Philemon won’t actually make him do that, since he owes Paul so much more than just money. Paul is confident that Philemon will do what he asks (v. 21). He believes he will even do more than he asks (v. 21). Having appealed to Philemon from the heart, and having made solid theological arguments for why Philemon should show forgiveness, Paul is confident Philemon will see the wisdom and righteousness in forgiving Onesimus. If he does, this will be Paul’s “benefit” from Philemon (v. 20). He doesn’t ever need to repay him for leading him to Christ. Not that he could. But Philemon’s paying that forward by forgiving Onesimus will “refresh Paul’s heart in Christ” (v. 20).

Philemon 23–25 [Read]

These final verses are almost identical to the closing section of Colossians. The “your” is plural, either to Philemon and his household, Philemon and Onesimus, or even to the entire

congregation. Even if the letter was written to Philemon personally, Paul can send grace to everyone in his home and church.

What is the hardest thing you have ever had to forgive? Have you done it, or are you still holding on to that hurt and anger?

Is there someone in your life whom you need to forgive right now? Or whom you need to ask to forgive you?

Is there someone with whom you need to "be a Paul"? Someone you need to exhort to forgive someone else or to reconcile?

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Took

Main Point: We advance the Gospel as the church multiplies.

Today's lesson reveals to us a challenge: the Gospel calls us to forgive others and allow Jesus to transform our relationships. Is there a brother or sister in your life from whom you're withholding forgiveness? Write down that person's name and carry that name. Walk with this name prayerfully, allow the paper to remind you of the significance of the individual and his or her great worth to God. Ask that God soften your heart to reconciliation and a transformed relationship that reflects the Gospel.

Challenges

Forgive. If there is anyone in your life whom you either need to forgive or ask that person to forgive you, contact him or her now. Reach out in reconciliation. Ask to meet or write a letter—whatever is comfortable for you. This does *not* mean to put yourself back in an abusive relationship if that were the case. But even in an abusive relationship, it will help *you* if you can forgive, to let go of anger and hurt. You don't have to let that person back into your life, but pray about how you can forgive him or her while protecting yourself.

Be a brother/sister. Sometimes we forgot or don't even think about the fact that as believers, we are family. Think about people in your church family who may need someone to reach out to them in love. Someone who seems lonely or quiet. Someone who has been hurt. Someone who doesn't have a lot of other friends. A kid or teen who doesn't have strong parental influences. A widow or divorcée. A single mom or dad. Someone who may just need a friend.

Pray for unity. Even if there isn't anyone with whom you need to be reconciled, you can pray for unity of others in your church or family. Maybe there is a situation you know about and can pray specifically for or maybe you can just pray in general, that your church would be unified and that God reconcile anyone who is estranged. If it's something you know about, pray about whether you should "be a Paul" in that situation, and encourage the two people to reconcile.