

# Philemon

Forgive Others and Seek Forgiveness							
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Rome to Colosse							
Fall AD 61							

**Key Word:** Forgiveness

**Key Verse:** "So if you consider me a partner, welcome him [Onesimus] as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me" (Philemon 17-18).

**Summary Statement:** The way a Christian slave owner should *forgive* and reinstate his runaway but repentant slave is how Christ forgives us.

**Application:** With whom do best relate to now?

1. **Philemon:** Whom do you need to *forgive* a wrong done to you?
2. **Onesimus:** Whose forgiveness do you need to *request*?
3. **Paul:** How can you *help* two others reconcile?
4. **The Church:** How can you *affirm* the reconciliation of others?

# Philemon

## Introduction

I. **Title:** The title (Πρὸς Φιλίμονα *To Philemon*) follows the standard practice of naming New Testament epistles after their recipients.

### II. Authorship

- A. External Evidence: All believed that Paul wrote Philemon until some 4th-century objections about its lack of doctrinal content. However, Jerome and Chrysostom vindicated the epistle, and Paul's authorship was universally held until the 19th-century radical critics.
- B. Internal Evidence: Paul refers to himself three times as the author (vv. 1, 9, 19). The letter also mentions Onesimus traveling with Tychicus to deliver the Colossian letter to the same city (Col 4:9), thus arguing for Paul's authorship of both letters.

### III. Circumstances

- A. Date: Paul wrote the letter in his first imprisonment in Rome (AD Feb. 60-March 62), evident in the parallels between this epistle and the one to the entire Colossian church (cf. v. 23 with Col 4:7-10). Hoehner's date for this epistle is the same as that for Colossians: fall AD 61.
- B. Origin/Recipients: Philemon (v. 1b), a wealthy Christian slave owner in Colosse, is the primary addressee, but the letter includes others in his church by using the plural "your" (vv. 2, 25).
- C. Occasion: During Paul's first imprisonment in Rome (AD Feb. 60-March 62), he led the fugitive slave of Philemon named Onesimus to Christ (v. 10b). The letter reveals that Onesimus had done some injustices to and stolen from Philemon (v. 18) before he ran away. Paul sent this letter to Philemon, whom Paul had also led to Christ (v. 19b), with Onesimus to Colosse to convince Philemon to forgive Onesimus as a brother (Col 4:9).

### IV. Characteristics

- A. This "New Testament email" is the shortest letter of Paul in the NT (only 25 verses).
- B. The letter to Philemon gives the clearest example of forgiveness in the New Testament. The Roman government gave absolute rights to slave owners and no rights to slaves, who were deemed their masters' property. "The slave was absolutely at his master's disposal; for the smallest offense, he might be scourged, mutilated, crucified, [or] thrown to the wild beasts" (J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 321). Onesimus' commitment to return to his former master risked his life to ask forgiveness, yet he still did it.
- C. This writing shows the nature of imputation perhaps better than any other. Paul requests that all the sins of Onesimus be placed not on Onesimus but on Paul (v. 18). In like manner, Christ took the sin of humanity on himself (Rom 5:12-21).
- D. In this correspondence, Paul provides many reasons forgiveness is essential:
1. Forgiveness solidifies friendships (vv. 8-11, 17, 20).
  2. Restored relationships make people more helpful to us (v. 11).
  3. Forgiveness involves one's heart (v. 12).
  4. The sacrifice that forgiveness requires is painful but good for us (vv. 13, 18-19a).
  5. Forgiveness shows humility since it must be voluntary, not forced (vv. 14, 21).
  6. Forgiveness reminds one that God controls painful events (vv. 15, 16).
  7. Forgiving others reminds us of God forgiving us (v. 19b).

- E. The letter finishes without the end of the story ever completed. The question looms, “Did Philemon forgive Onesimus?” Three factors support that he did:
1. Philemon preserved this epistle and allowed the churches to circulate and copy it so that later it was included within the canon. If he had *not* forgiven Onesimus, it is unlikely he would have allowed this lack of forgiveness to be publicized!
  2. Paul expressed great confidence that Philemon would do more than forgive Onesimus (v. 21). Perhaps this means that the apostle did not doubt that Philemon would grant Onesimus his freedom so that he would no longer be a slave.
  3. Ignatius wrote a letter to the nearby church in Ephesus about AD 115 and addressed it to “Bishop Onesimus”! Are the former slave and the Ephesian bishop the same man? This occurred approximately 55-57 years later when Onesimus was in his 70s.

## Argument

Paul's short letter to Philemon shows the importance of forgiving offenders and being forgiven (making right the offenses one causes) as necessary decisions for walking with God. This views the letter from the perspective of both Onesimus and Philemon. Paul greets Philemon (vv. 1-3) and praises him (vv. 4-7) as an introduction to his main request, the pardon of Onesimus (vv. 8-21), followed by closing personal remarks (vv. 22-25). The letter served not only as an individual correspondence to Philemon since it addresses others in the church (v. 2) and uses the plural “you” in verse 25.

## Synthesis

### Forgive others and seek forgiveness

<b>1-3</b>	<b>Greeting</b>
<b>4-7</b>	<b>Prayer/commendation</b>
<b>8-21</b>	<b>Appeal for Onesimus</b>
8-11	General appeal
8-9	Paul's credentials
10-11	Onesimus' new status
12-16	Reasons for return
12-13	Proper
14	Philemon's authority
15-16	Sovereignty
17-21	Specific appeal
17	Forgiveness
18-19a	Imputation
19b	Debt to Paul
20	Complete acceptance
21	Grant freedom
<b>22-25</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>
22	Preparations
23-24	Greetings from co-workers
25	Blessing

## Outline

### **Summary Statement for the Book**

**The way a Christian slave owner should *forgive* and reinstate his runaway but repentant slave is how Christ forgives us.**

- I. Paul greets Philemon, his wife, his son, and his church with wishes for God's grace and peace to prepare his appeal for Onesimus (1-3).**
  - A. Paul introduces himself in humble and friendly terms to stir Philemon's sympathy and conscience and adds Timothy's name to strengthen his appeal (1a-b).
    1. Paul humbly and warmly (no apostolic appeal) greets Philemon to touch his conscience from one bondsman for another (1a).
    2. Paul adds Timothy to give weight to his appeal by affirming that Timothy agreed with Paul about the letter (1b).
  - B. Philemon and others receive the letter to show Philemon the widespread influence of his private decision about Onesimus (1c-2).
    1. Philemon, a wealthy Christian slave owner, is the primary recipient of the letter (1c).
    2. Apphia, Archippus, and the house church also receive the letter as an additional incentive for Philemon to accept Onesimus (2).
      - a) Apphia, placed between two men instead of after, is probably Philemon's wife and would influence his decision about Onesimus (2a).
      - b) Archippus is probably Philemon's son and pastor of the church, so he would need to know about Philemon's response to Onesimus (2b).
      - c) The church in Philemon's home being addressed shows the public effects of his decision about Onesimus (2c).
  - C. Paul wishes his readers God's unmerited favor and peace to remind Philemon that grace and peace for Onesimus come from God (3).
- II. Paul prays for and commends Philemon's love and faith to encourage these qualities toward his runaway but repentant slave Onesimus (4-7).**
  - A. The nature of Paul's thanksgiving is continual, Godward, and personal to let Philemon know he esteems him highly (4).
  - B. Paul thanks God for Philemon's faith in Christ, shown by loving believers to imply that Onesimus is among them (5).
  - C. Paul prays for Philemon's faith to be active in his relationships so this same faith might be shown toward Onesimus (6).
  - D. Paul thanks God for Philemon's love shown in good deeds that refreshed believers (7).
- III. The way Philemon should forgive and reinstate Onesimus is how Christ forgives us (8-21).**
  - A. Paul makes a general appeal for mercy on Onesimus to prepare Philemon to grant his specific request later (8-11).
    1. Paul appeals based on his credentials as Philemon's old friend suffering for Christ to arouse Philemon's sympathy (8-9).
      - a) Paul appeals not from his apostolic authority but from brotherly love so that Philemon's decision would be voluntary (8-9a).

- b) Paul appeals as a man having grown old through a strenuous life to add weight to his plea (9b).
  - c) Paul appeals as a prisoner for Christ's sake to arouse Philemon's sympathies and make him favorable to grant Paul's request (9c).
2. Paul appeals to Onesimus' new position and usefulness as a believer so Philemon would treat him like other Christians (10-11).
    - a) Paul appeals to Philemon based on Onesimus' new position in Christ so that he will act properly in the family of God (10).
    - b) Paul appeals based on Onesimus's new usefulness to Philemon and Paul as a believer so that he will see his true value (11).
- B. Paul gives many reasons for sending Onesimus back to Philemon to show his real motives and convince Philemon to forgive him (12-16).
1. His desire for a continuing relationship with Onesimus could not overrule doing what was right (12-13).
  2. He recognizes Philemon's authority over Onesimus as his slave so Philemon can decide if Onesimus could stay with him (14).
  3. Perhaps God was working for the greater good by Philemon and Onesimus becoming brothers in Christ (15-16).
- C. The way Philemon should forgive and free Onesimus is how Christ forgives us (17-21).
1. Philemon should accept Onesimus back as a brother to show Onesimus' equal standing with him in Christ (17).
  2. Paul offers to pay Onesimus' debts to Philemon like Jesus forgave him unconditionally (18-19a).
  3. Philemon owes his salvation to Paul so he should forgive Onesimus rather than require paying of his debts for stealing (19b).
  4. Philemon accepting Onesimus would encourage Paul (20).
  5. Paul expresses confidence that Philemon will both forgive and free Onesimus (21).
- IV. Paul closes his letter to reinforce the public nature of Philemon's decision and to remind of God's power for fulfilling his appeal (22-25).**
- A. The church should prepare for Paul's soon visit in answer to their prayers and quickly respond to Paul's plea for Onesimus (22).
  - B. Five voluntary fellow prisoners with Paul also greet Philemon to reinforce the public nature of his decision about Onesimus (23-24).
    1. Epaphras, who started the Colossian church (Col 1:7) and voluntarily shared Paul's confinement, greets Philemon (23).
    2. Four other fellow workers with Paul also greet Philemon to emphasize the public influence that Philemon's decision will carry (24).
  - C. Paul blesses the Colossian church with Christ's grace to underscore the Source of power to fulfill his appeal in the letter (25).



## Bible Study

# Dear Onesimus, I'll Write the Letter— but You Deliver It

by Gary Stanley

The letter to Philemon is all that remains of Paul's efforts to help one of his converts get his life straightened out. Onesimus was a slave<sup>1</sup> who ran away from Philemon,<sup>2</sup> his master, and made his way to Rome. He became a Christian after meeting Paul.<sup>3</sup> On the eve of Paul's trial before Caesar, and with the press of the churches on him,<sup>4</sup> Paul still found time to compose a brief note on behalf of a slave. That Paul should write such a note isn't the least bit odd. But that a note written to an obscure individual who lived in a town Paul never visited<sup>5</sup> should find a place among the rest of the New Testament — that's another matter.

Perhaps the theme of Paul's note is the reason for its popularity; it touches a universal need — forgiveness. In the 25 verses of Philemon, Paul relates six basic elements of forgiveness<sup>6</sup> to Onesimus, Philemon and himself. But how the note to Philemon was written in the first place . . . well, the following scraps of correspondence (real or otherwise) may unlock some doors.

Dear Onesimus,

A pastor friend of mine named Epaphras arrived yesterday from Colossae. As I was telling Epaphras about you and how useful<sup>8</sup> you have been to me since our first meeting, he expressed surprise. It seems that Philemon, a believer from Colossae, once had a slave by the same name.<sup>9</sup> Onesimus is a common enough name (especially among slaves), but from what Epaphras tells me, you two could be twins! Small world, isn't it, Onesimus?

Your brother,

*Paul*

Dear Paul,

It was just a matter of time before I was found out. Well, I'm kinda relieved. Epaphras has been to my master's house lots — that's where their church meets.<sup>10</sup> I wasn't bothered at all by my actions until I met you and then

God, personal-like.

But now I'm sorry I ran away<sup>11</sup> (not to mention the stealing).<sup>12</sup> I've tried to forget it all and work on doing better now. It hasn't helped much. I thought Christians were supposed to feel forgiven.

Your servant,

*Onesimus*

Dear Onesimus,

Up until now I've not been as concerned with your past as I was with your future. But it now looks as though your future is dependent on how you respond to your past. What do you think you should do?

A fellow bond slave of God,

*Paul*

## Dear Onesimus, I'll Write the Letter—but You Deliver It (2 of 2)

Dear Paul,  
 You think I should go back, don't you? Paul,  
 there are more than 60 million slaves around  
 today, and they all know one thing — the life  
 of any slave ain't worth nothin' if he  
 crosses his master, and gets caught.<sup>13</sup>  
 If I go back, I'll be beaten,  
 branded and maybe even  
 killed! You were born a  
 citizen,<sup>14</sup> so how could you  
 possibly understand?  
 I want forgiveness,  
 but I ain't sure  
 I want it more  
 than life.  
 Your brother,  
*Onesimus*

Can't we just write him a letter explaining everything? If  
 I go back, I figure I may get only one shot at this if things  
 don't go the way they're suppose to.

Sincerely,  
*Onesimus*

Dear Onesimus,  
 You're right, a letter is a good idea. I'll gladly write him  
 a note explaining the situation and interceding on your  
 behalf. But forgiveness simply won't work in the abstract.  
 Its sweet savor is found only when it's done face to face.<sup>20</sup>  
 I know.<sup>21</sup> I want you to stay, but you need to go back. I'll  
 write the letter—but you deliver it.<sup>22</sup>

Love,  
*Paul*

Onesimus did deliver Paul's note, and Philemon did forgive  
 him. Tradition<sup>23</sup> holds that Philemon sent Onesimus back to  
 Rome to serve Paul. More than 50 years later, a man named  
 Onesimus was the bishop of the church at Ephesus, probably  
 the first place an effort was made to collect the books of our  
 New Testament. If Bishop Onesimus was the former slave,  
 how appropriate that he would want a little note on a grand  
 theme to be included.

Many sides of forgiveness are found in Paul's note to  
 Philemon (see footnote 6). Can you find the six steps Paul took  
 in the case of Onesimus? What are the parallels between  
 Paul's handling of this specific case with Christ's efforts on  
 your behalf?

The footnotes are given to whet your appetite for further  
 study and application (they're also the justification for my  
 speculation).

Dear Onesimus,  
 You've greatly underesti-  
 mated your master, Philemon.  
 You saw him only through the  
 eyes of a slave; he has a Master, too. If the  
 gospel can cause a runaway slave to return  
 to his master, don't you think the same gospel can  
 cause the master to forgive the slave?<sup>15</sup> Your service to me  
 is commendable,<sup>16</sup> and I believe your faith to be sincere,  
 but it won't bring about the forgiveness you're looking  
 for.<sup>17</sup>

*Paul*

P.S. You're also wrong about my not knowing the taste of  
 slavery. I've willingly been a slave a lot longer than you've  
 been alive.<sup>18</sup>

Dear Paul,  
 You sure are right. I need to ask Philemon to forgive  
 me. But it's such a long way back, and you said yourself  
 you wanted me to stay 'cause I was a big help to you.<sup>19</sup>

1. Philemon 16; 2. Philemon 15; 3. Philemon 10; 4. Paul's letters to the churches  
 of Ephesus, Philippi and Colossae were all written from prison about the same  
 time that Philemon was written (A.D. 62). The loving concern and instruction  
 he wished to impart personally had to be put in letters instead; 5. Colossians  
 1:4,8; 6. Merrill C. Tenney's *Survey of the New Testament*, p. 317, lists all six  
 elements of forgiveness: the offense, compassion, intercession, substitution,  
 restoration to favor, and elevation to a new relationship; 7. Epaphras was likely  
 the pastor in Colossae (Colossians 4:12,13), and he went to Rome to help Paul  
 during his time of need (Philemon 23). Epaphras also prompted Paul to write to  
 the church of Colossae concerning the heresies there (Colossians 1:7,8); 8. Paul  
 is making a pun on Onesimus' name, which means useful (Philemon 11);  
 9. Philemon 10,11; 10. Philemon 2; 11. Philemon 15; 12. Philemon 18; 13. See  
 William Barclay's *Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon*, pp. 310ff; 14. Acts  
 22:27,28; 15. Philemon 8,9,21; 16. Philemon 11; 17. Matthew 5:23,24;  
 18. Romans 6:17, 18; 19. Philemon 13; 20. Philemon 14; 21. Acts 9:1ff is the  
 story of Paul's forgiveness found on the road to Damascus; 22. Philemon 12;  
 Colossians 4:7-9; 23. The church father Ignatius wrote a letter to the church in  
 Ephesus around A.D. 115 making mention of their bishop, Onesimus.

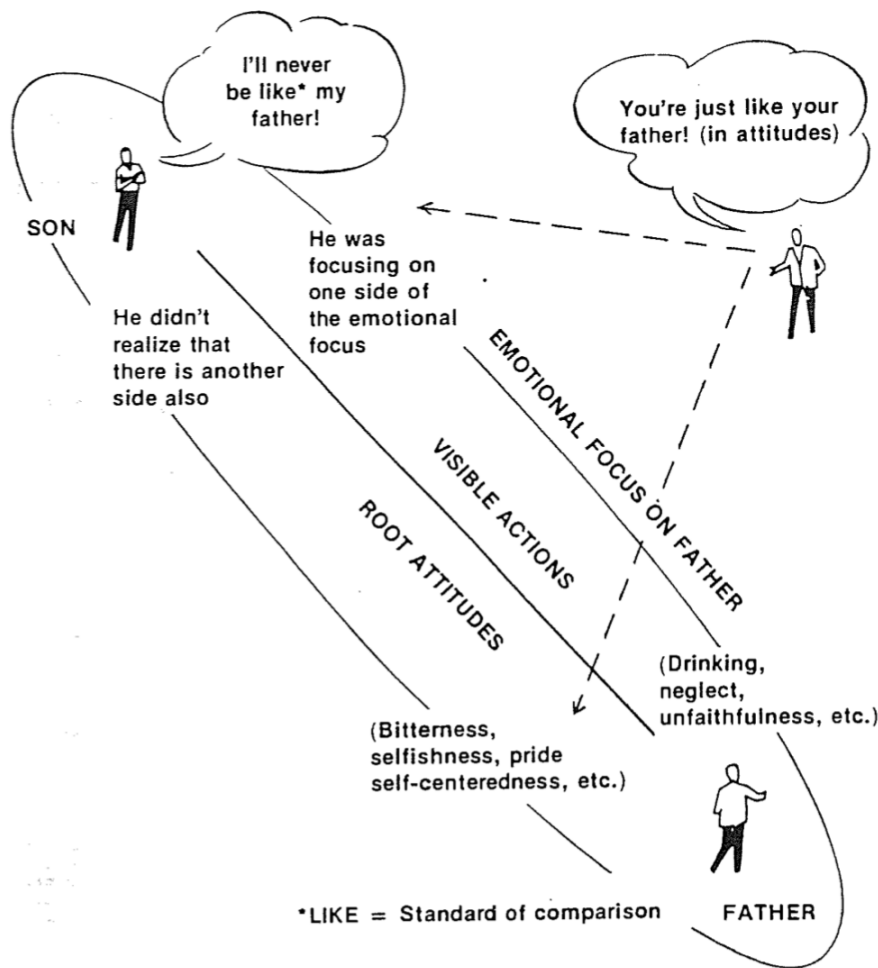
Gary Stanley, a graduate of Baylor University and South-  
 western Baptist Theological Seminary, is on the faculty of the  
 International School of Theology.

# HOW WE BECOME LIKE THOSE WE RESENT

• A bitter young father recalled his unhappy childhood days and renewed his vow, "I'll never be like my dad!"

His dad drank, was unfaithful to his wife, and had grossly neglected his son.

Now the son was married and had his own family. He never drank, he was very faithful to his wife, and he spent long hours with his family. Yet, those who were closest to him said, "You're just like your father!" Why was this true?



• When that son stated, "I'll never be like my father!" he established a standard of comparison with his father.

The "emotional focus" on the visible actions of his dad made it impossible for him to stop thinking about his father. These thoughts became the dominating concerns on his mind.

The more he thought about the actions of his dad, the deeper his bitterness became.

This bitterness was easily detected by all those who were close to him. Also evident were pride, selfishness, stubbornness and a host of other destructive root attitudes.

These were the same attitudes which the father had. Those who were closest to both of them were thus able to say to the son, "You're just like your father."

Source: Bill Gothard, Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts Basic Seminar Textbook, 1979, 1981 revised 1986 (July)





# ***BASIC STEPS TO GAIN A FORGIVING SPIRIT***

• It is one thing to agree to forgive someone after he offends you. It is quite a different thing to have a spirit of forgiveness toward every offender whom God allows to come into your life. In order to gain this, we must understand the following factors.

## **1. REALIZE THAT GOD IS WORKING THROUGH THE ACTIONS OF YOUR OFFENDER**

As long as we think that the one who hurts us is acting independently, we can hardly help growing bitter. But as soon as we realize that God "raised him up" for a specific purpose in our lives, we will be able to gain a forgiving spirit. He may think evil against us, but God means it for good. (Genesis 50:20) "Surely the wrath of man shall praise Thee; the remainder of wrath shalt Thou restrain." (Psalm 76:10)

## **2. THANK GOD FOR THE BENEFIT HE PLANS THROUGH EACH OFFENSE**

God's command to give thanks in all things is especially essential at this point. (I Thessalonians 5:18) We don't have to be thankful in order to thank God. Thanking God is an act of the will. Being thankful is an act of the emotions.

When our lives are dedicated to God, He puts a protective wall around us so that nothing can touch us except that which God permits. He permits it for a purpose, and this purpose is for our ultimate joy and reward. It is for this reason we can thank God for each offense.

## **3. DISCERN WHAT CHARACTER QUALITIES GOD WANTS TO DEVELOP IN ME THROUGH THE OFFENSE**

When we wrongly react to an offender, we are revealing various lacks of character which need to be developed such as, love, meekness, patience, faith, gentleness, self-control, etc. Even if we respond correctly to an offender, other qualities will have to be strengthened such as joy, peace, godliness, etc.

## **4. EXPECT TO SUFFER FOR DOING RIGHT AS A NORMAL PART OF CHRISTIAN LIVING**

Many of us have the mistaken idea that if we are Christians we won't have to suffer, yet the Scripture clearly states, "For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on Him, but also to suffer for His sake." (Philippians 1:29) "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." (II Timothy 3:12) "If we suffer we shall also reign with Him." (II Timothy 2:12)

— Bill Gothard, 18YC



## How Do I Ask for Forgiveness?

1. Never say, "I'm sorry (full stop)."  
Say, "Will you forgive me for \_\_\_\_\_ (specifically identify your offense)?"  
*Philemon 10, 18*
2. Request forgiveness in person—not by phone or letter or fax or email or text or through mediators. . .  
*Onesimus traveled 1400 kilometers to speak to Philemon in person*
3. Show humility without concern for saving face.  
*Philemon 1, 8-9, 14 (cf. Gal. 6:1b, 3-4)*
4. Remember that your response is not a private issue, but public, involving many people.  
*Philemon 1-2, 25 (plural)*
5. Make the request for forgiveness as public as the offense.
  - a. Public sins require public apology (1 Tim. 5:20)
  - b. Private sins require private apology (Matt. 18:15)

## Restoring Relationships

### General Principle: Romans 12:18

#### When Offender: GO!

Matthew 5:23-24  
James 5:16

#### When Offended: GO!

Matthew 18:15  
Galatians 6:1

## The Value of the Philemon Postcard

Jon Courson's *Application Commentary: New Testament* (© 2003), pp. 1429-1433 (1 of 4)

### Paul the Peacemaker

Whether it was in a crowded Roman marketplace, or through an armed Roman guard, we can't be sure. But this much we do know: The "aged apostle" and the runaway slave met, resulting in the letter before us. Why was this personal postcard of Paul's included in the canon of Scripture? I suggest the following possible reasons ...

### Biographical Value

For a man to go to bat for a slave was unheard of in Paul's day. Greek historian, Pliny, recounts an incident concerning a slave who accidentally tipped a dish he was carrying, causing a bit of food to spill on his master's table. His punishment? He was immediately thrown into the courtyard pond stocked with bloodsucking lampreys and was devoured. According to Pliny, this was not unusual treatment because slaves were thought of as less than human. Yet here is Paul saying, "I care deeply about Onesimus."

Most people think of Paul as harsh and austere. His letter written on behalf of a runaway slave clearly says otherwise.

In the little book before us, we also see in Paul a man who not only had a compassionate heart, but one who didn't pull rank. To Philemon he says, "I'm going to talk to you as a brother. I'm praying for you. I have confidence in you. I'm going to give a suggestion to you that you would be wise to consider, but I'm not going to force this upon you."

His letter to Philemon allows us to see in Paul a heart, an attitude, a tactfulness, a grace that helps round out our understanding of our wonderful brother, Paul.

### Ethical Value

Onesimus is saved. He's born again. But what does Paul do? He tells him he must go back and pay his debt. Why is this important? Because many people say, "There's no need for restitution, no need for meeting my obligation because I wasn't a Christian when I ran up my credit cards to forty thousand dollars." Or, "I signed that contract before I was born again; therefore, it doesn't matter now" This little book is important because it says a new life does not release one from old debts. Yes, we have a new life in Christ, and He looks at us as being without spot or wrinkle positionally, but we have an obligation to the people around us practically to pay old debts and make things right.

Mom and Dad, please teach your kids that once confession is made, there is immediate and total forgiveness from God, but they still have an obligation to make things right in man's sight. The world looks at Christians, wanting to find a reason not to believe.

## The Value of the Philemon Postcard

Jon Courson's Application Commentary: New Testament (© 2003), pp. 1429-1433 (2 of 4)

Let's not give them one. Onesimus shows us that we have an ethical obligation to pay debts—be they financial, relational, or societal.

### Theological Value

Under the inspiration of the Spirit, Paul told Philemon that perhaps it was part of God's plan for Onesimus to rip him off and run away in order that Onesimus would come to a saving knowledge of Jesus. But notice Paul says, "Perhaps."

Growing up, I would hear testimonies of guys who came to the Lord after years of doing drugs or being involved in gangs. And I erroneously concluded that the only way to be really used by God was to first go through perversity. God may perhaps work that way, but it's not the only way. I am so thankful I was raised in a Christian home. Oh, it might not make for a very exciting testimony, but it shows that God is not limited to any single methodology.

### Political Value

Paul doesn't use this situation to kick off an antislavery campaign. He doesn't say, "We'll start the Onesimus Coalition. Get our newsletter, and for only thirty-five dollars a month, you, too, can lead a movement to abolish slavery." No, Paul masterfully and insightfully says, "Philemon, I trust God's work in your life, and I know you'll do even more than I'm suggesting to you," the implication being that Philemon would set Onesimus free of his own accord.

Paul was not trying to legislate morality, but rather he was trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit to transform a man's heart internally. The problem with the Christian political movement is that so often it tries to clean the fish before it catches it; it attempts to change people before saving them.

Paul makes a suggestion here, saying, "Do more than what I say." Centuries go by. The gospel does its work through Wilberforce in England, through Lincoln in America. Hearts are changed. People come to understand that the institution of holding another man down is not right, and the work Paul begins is finally complete. Cultures and communities only truly change when people are born again, when they're changed from within.

### Doctrinal Value

As important as the biographical, ethical, theological, and political implications of Paul's Epistle to Philemon are, I believe the doctrinal value inherent in this seemingly insignificant little postcard is the reason we hold in our hands Paul's letter as part of the canon of Scripture. Herein we see the glorious "Doctrine of Imputation," as Paul says to Philemon, "If Onesimus wronged you, if he owes you anything, charge it to my account."

*Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin. Romans 4:8*

## The Value of the Philemon Postcard

Jon Courson's Application Commentary: New Testament (© 2003), pp. 1429-1433 (3 of 4)

To whose account is our sin imputed, or charged?  
To the account of the One who was pinned to a Cross in our place.

*Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ... Romans 5:1*

The incredible fact of justification means God not only forgives our sin but also chooses to forget we're sinners.

*For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God... Romans 3:23—25*

Imputation is based upon justification, which can only come about through propitiation. Propitiation means that the righteous wrath God should hurl on me, the righteous anger He should feel toward you, was absorbed by His Son.

*I remember reading the story of a man who, on his way to the kitchen late at night, noticed the top of the terrarium in which he kept his eight-foot boa constrictor was ajar. As he glanced around the room for the snake, he was suddenly gripped by a horrifying thought. He ran to the nursery, where he found the snake in his son's empty crib. Racing to his garage, he grabbed an ax and began chopping the snake, hoping to pull his baby to safety. But it was too late. No one arrested this dad for killing the boa constrictor. No one called the animal rights people. No, everyone identified with the righteous anger in his heart concerning the fate of his son.*

So, too, it is a loving Father who feels a holy indignation, a righteous anger when He sees every one of His children being eaten up by the snake of sin. He is right in taking up the ax and saying, "I can't stand what sin has done. It's swallowed up, ripped off, and ruined people's lives."

Yet as willing participants, we become not only the victims of sin, but propagators of it. So to destroy sin, God would have to destroy mankind. Instead, He comes up with an unbelievable third alternative. He took the ax of His indignation and didn't thrust it in the snake, but buried it in Himself. He who knew no sin became sin (2 Corinthians 5:21). God's understandable, justifiable, righteous anger was released, His justice meted out when He slaughtered Himself to become the propitiation for my sin.

What does this mean? It means that reconciliation is based upon imputation by means of justification through the work of propitiation. Simply said, reconciliation between God and us meant Jesus had to die. Reconciliation always means someone has to die.

Husband, if you're distanced from your wife; Wife, if you're estranged from your husband; Kids, if you feel as though there's a problem between you and your parents, the only way there will be reconciliation is if someone dies. Will you choose to die, Husband? Will you choose to end the war between you and your wife by laying down your point of view, your way of thinking, your anger, bitterness, or hostility? Will you choose to die, Wife, by laying down your hurts and your fears, your

## The Value of the Philemon Postcard

Jon Courson's Application Commentary: New Testament (© 2003), pp. 1429-1433 (4 of 4)

cares and concerns in order to make peace with your husband?

Will you choose to die, Kids, to your own demands and needs and, instead, honor your parents?

At work, on the ball field, in the classroom, at home, the only way there can be reconciliation is if someone dies. The question is, will it be you?

"But he has to pay for what he said about me," or "She has to pay for what she did to me," or "They have to pay for how they hurt me."

"It's already been paid," Jesus says. "As I bled on the Cross of Calvary, I absorbed that sin specifically."

Therefore, all that remains is for us to say, "Thank You, Lord. I'm free."

As I consider this, I wonder who you are.

Some are Onesimus. If you're Onesimus, open your heart anew to the Lord, and do what's right. If you're not paying child support, pay it. If you're cheating your workplace, make restitution. I admire Onesimus because instead of refusing to go back, he returned and made things right. If you're Onesimus tonight, I have good news for you: God can do something wonderful with your life if you'll choose to do what's right.

Some are Philemon. If you're Philemon, you need to say, "I have no right to hold this debt, this unforgiveness, this bitterness toward that person. And even though I might not agree with him or have been hurt badly by her, I am going to see Christ dying for that sin and embrace that person once again."

Others are like Paul, looking for ways to make peace. If you're making peace between people at war with one another, good for you! In humility, you are not pulling rank, not preaching, but simply willing to not only point out the problem but also ready to get your own hands dirty to help pay the price.

Who am I?

I suppose I'm all three. Sometimes, though not often enough, I'm Paul. Other times, needing to make things right, I'm Onesimus. Often, I'm Philemon, needing to forgive. Yet this powerful postcard of Paul ministers to me on all three levels. And I pray it will do the same for you.

May you, like Onesimus, celebrate the freedom of your salvation. May you, like Philemon, embrace others, knowing their sin has been imputed to our Lord's account. And may you, like Paul, be a peacemaker.

In Jesus' Name.

## Philemon and the Domestic Maid

"Postcard to Philemon," NT Survey Class Presentation, SBC, 2005 (1 of 2)

### The PLIGHT

Singapore has always been regarded as Antioch of South East Asia. Recent survey shows that Christians hold the majority of the top and middle management positions in the government and corporate business. In view of this, Christians employ a majority of the domestic maids. The survey also shows that most maids come from Indonesia and the Philippines, with a minority from Thailand, Sri Lanka and Myanmar.

They come here because:

- Singapore is a safe and secure place to work. A good balance of government employment policies protecting both the interests of the employers and the foreign workers.
- Poverty and high unemployment rate in their country.
- The remuneration here is better than they can get back home.

How do they come?

- Many of them pay huge sums of money to an employment agent to find a job here. They often end up selling personal items or borrowing (from legal as well as illegal agents) to meet this fee. At the end, there are no guarantees that the agent will be able to secure a job for them. Often times, many have nothing to return to.

What are the problems they will encounter working in Singapore?

- Difficulties adjusting to city living, differences in cultures and languages. Inability to communicate creates much frustration for the employer and employee.
- The emotional aspects, the domestic maids have to battle being away from family and friends. Homesickness and loneliness can be a major problem. Their social need not met.
- Inability to meet the demands of the job, since many of the domestic maids are not trained housekeepers, are not familiar with modern electrical conveniences or just cannot fulfill their responsibilities to the expectations of their Singaporean employers.
- In their country of origin, some of this domestic maid were professionals; teacher in high school, nurse, accountant and etc. Coming to Singapore to work as a maid does affect their morale and self-image.
- Oppression and exploitation are also other problems the domestic maids may face. Unreasonable and demanding employers who force their maid to work long hours without sufficient rest or subject them to physical and verbal abuse. They are not properly nourished.

## Philemon and the Domestic Maid

"Postcard to Philemon," NT Survey Class Presentation, SBC, 2005 (2 of 2)

### Our PART

The church's primary concern is each person's salvation. The existence of the church is to preach the Gospel, teach moral truths, practice communal life, which is shaped by love, baptized those who believed and teach the congregation everything Jesus had commanded so that believers can strive toward sanctification in Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit.

The challenge:

As a body of believers, do we exemplify Christ's love?

Is there a place in this body for maids?

Is it a master-and-slave situation?

Do we care about the salvation of the maids?

If they do receive Christ, is there a place for them in Church as a sister?

As Christians, Paul's reminds us not to conform to the standards of the world and the prophet Micah urges us to do justice and love kindness. Even if this practice is a norm it does not give us permission to follow the norm and ignore what the Bible commanded us to do.

As Christian employers we should be mindful of the following:

- Let's be realistic with our expectation of them. Let not forget that our children are watching how we conduct ourselves as a Christian employer and how we treat others should reflect Christ to our children.
- Let's practice what Leviticus 19:33-34 said "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God". Let us follow the example of the employer reported in the Sunday newspaper how this employer had showed love and care to his Indonesian maid that has a rare heart disease.
- Let's not be "kiasu" or "kiasi" and gave them a break. In Exodus 20: 10 and 23:12: "Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest and the maidservant and the slave born in your household, and the alien as well, may be refreshed". This "Sabbath" obedience communicates the need for proper proportion between work and rest and also promotes social justice and compassion.
- Thank God for the privilege to be able to employ a domestic maid. Take this employment as an opportunity given by God to share with them the Gospel. In Luke 12:48: "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" and also in 1 John 4:20: "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen". Let us profess our faith and be a living testimony for our Lord Jesus Christ.