

# *The Christian Application Commentary*

## *Philemon*



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Last Update 10/28/18

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## Background

Philemon is a small and personal letter that found its way into the New Testament. For those of you unfamiliar with the book, it is a letter written to a man named Philemon by Paul. Paul wrote regarding a man named Onesimus, a slave of Philemon who had run away. It is important to remember that slavery in the time of Rome was not as we picture it from early American history. True there were captured enemies and others that were forcefully put into labor, but many of the slaves of time where those who were in debt and therefore were working off what they owed. It was not racially targeted or done for the supremacy of any one ethnicity, but instead to clear the debt they owed. In this time, slaves could purchase their own freedom from their masters and were even let go by some of their master. However, slavery in this form was still undesirable. God made all mankind in his image and they were not meant to be seen as mere tools. Masters were called to care for their slaves in the Old Testament and to set them free (Leviticus 25:39-46) at the year of Jubilee. The Bible has always taken the stance of treating humans with value. The Bible never endorses slavery, but only addresses it as a social fact, which at the time it was. When reading through the whole Bible the value put on all human life is seen everywhere.

## Philemon Chapter 1

**1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother: To Philemon our dear friend and coworker, 2 to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home. 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers, 5 because I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. 6 I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ. 7 For I have great joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.<sup>1</sup>**

Paul gives his standard greeting and includes Timothy who was likely with him when he wrote the letter. He indicates that he is currently a prisoner, so this letter was written from Rome during Paul's imprisonment. He addresses the letter mainly to Philemon, but also to 2 other believers and the church that meets in his house. This is a personal letter to Philemon, but Paul expected it to be read before the church. Finally, in verse 3 Paul wishes grace and peace on them from God. After the greeting, he starts by commanding Philemon for the love he holds for the saints and Jesus. This is something worth pointing out. Many times we try to correct things in the church, but in doing so forget to acknowledge the good they are doing. Remember, even if they are failing in one area it does not mean they are failing in all areas. A second thing to do is to pray for the person as well. Paul tells Philemon he is praying for his growth in Christ. Paul even lets him know that his example is an encouragement to him.

**8 For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, 9 I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love. I, Paul, as an elderly man and now**

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise stated all Bible passages are cited from the HCSB translation.

**also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus, 10 appeal to you for my son, Onesimus. I fathered him while I was in chains. 11 Once he was useless to you, but now he is useful both to you and to me.**

After commanding Philemon for his strengths Paul dives into the issue at hand, starting in verse 8. Because of the love Philemon has for the saints and for Jesus, Paul is appealing to that love on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. Paul indicates that he presented the gospel to Onesimus while a prisoner in Rome. In verse 11 he talks about how Onesimus was useless as a runaway slave, but now he would be useful to both of them as he is now a Christian brother. This is not a statement that unbelievers are not useful, just that a slave who would not work was not useful. How often people become useless to everyone, even themselves, when they run from God or even just from responsibility.

**12 I am sending him back to you as a part of myself. 13 I wanted to keep him with me, so that in my imprisonment for the gospel he might serve me in your place. 14 But I didn't want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be out of obligation, but of your own free will. 15 For perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, 16 no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—as a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but even more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.**

**17 So if you consider me a partner, accept him as you would me. 18 And if he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19 I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self. 20 Yes, brother, may I have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. 21 Since I am confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more**

**than I say. 22 But meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.**

Paul continues by indicating he will send Onesimus back to Philemon, because he does not want this good deed to be forced. He urges Philemon to accept his new brother in Christ, saying that his salvation may have been the reason they were separated for a while. Paul then appeals in verse 17 for Philemon to accept Onesimus as if he were Paul himself. More than that, Paul indicates that if anything is owed that he will pay it for Onesimus. He also reminds Philemon that their faith was thanks to his preaching and teaching, and that the knowledge of their faithfulness refreshes him. In all of this Paul shows confidence in Philemon and makes a point of spelling it out in verse 21. He is confident that Philemon will do the right thing. Beyond that Paul indicates that he is expecting to be freed soon and wants him to prepare a place for him.

**23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, and so do 24 Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my coworkers. 25 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.**

Paul then closes out the letter, giving greetings from several of the other co-workers with him. He wishes Philemon well and prays that God's grace will be on his spirit.

So, what do we learn from this letter? First off, we see the focus of treating all people, especially believers, well. Paul is concerned about Onesimus, but at the same time he shows the care and consideration for Philemon as well. Using grace and pointing out Philemon's strengths, Paul urges Philemon to continue in doing the right thing while informing him of what has taken place in Onesimus. Paul treated Philemon as a brother and did not try to brow beat him into the right thing. We need to do likewise as we deal with those in the wrong, or handling a delicate situation.

Second, we learn about rejoicing for all believers. By running away Onesimus had wronged Philemon. Still Paul urges him to forgive and forget and to rejoice over another brother in Christ. When people come to Christ we must not let prior events taint our joy for them. Always rejoice over the saved.

Lastly, we see Paul's generosity. Not only does he go through the effort of restoring this relationship, but he also offers to cover any expenses Onesimus incurred. We often struggle with money today, but remember Paul's generosity. Paul did not know Onesimus that well, but after seeing him come to Christ he spared no effort to help him. When we walk people to Christ we need to follow through by helping their needs as we can. Paul knew the importance of people and he handled problems well. We need to learn from his example and do likewise.

### **So What Do I Do With This Now?**

All the information is great, but what do I do with it now?

1 Remember that when you are confronting someone on a delicate issue to not view them as an opponent. Point out the areas that they are doing well in and encourage them to continue. Also pray for them before addressing the issue. This shows you care and brings God into focus as the reason for correction and not simply yourself.

2 When correcting a believer appeal to the love they hold for other believers and for God. Pastors and other leads can just demand they do as they ask, but this is not anywhere near as effective or helpful as appealing out of love. Forced change is no change at all.

3 God redeems those who seem useless, as all of us were viewed at some point, and gives them new purpose. Believers must be willing to give them the chance to serve and be used as God is calling them to, just as God and others gave us that chance.

4 Forgive others freely. Remember, although you may have a “justifiable issue” with someone, God has already forgiven you much more than that. We owe Him everything and He asks us to forgive others.

5 Take joy in those you have disciple, especially when they are seeking God.

You made it to the end! That was short! I hope you have learned a lot from this personal letter. Paul shows a much more compassionate side in this letter and sets forth many good examples for us to use. Remember, although it is short, it is no less important than any other part of the Bible. Please seek to apply it to your life today.