

Forgiveness: the Currency of the Church  
A Sermon on Philemon

by  
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## **I. PRAYER**

## **II. INTRODUCTION**

- Philemon was written during his imprisonment in Rome.
  - It was written at the same as the letter to the Colossians – they went to the same church at the same time.
  - That church met in the household of Philemon.
- Onesimus is a runaway slave
  - Slavery, in the Roman era at least, would be closer to our modern understanding of an employee and employer relationship than how we think of it when we hear that term.
  - While it's important to know that though slavery in a Roman context is much different than how we think of it, the punishment on a runaway slave was often still death.
  - It's very likely that in the context of this letter, Onesimus stole from Philemon when he departed for Rome, so after he's converted, and Paul hears of what has transpired, he sends Onesimus back.
    - He sends him back to make it right. He sends him back so that Philemon will welcome him in with open arms, as a brother in Christ, and they might have full fellowship in the faith.
    - And so even while the terms are not used once in this passage, you will see the themes of this letter stand upon forgiveness and reconciliation between brothers in Christ.

## **III. (vv. 1-3) GREETINGS FROM PAUL, A PRISONER OF THE LORD**

- Paul addresses himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

- Paul doesn't consider himself a prisoner of Rome – he is a prisoner of the Lord, Jesus Christ.
- Remember in the book of Acts, Paul specifically mentions he had received warning from the Holy Spirit.
- Secondly, we see that he introduces himself with Timothy.
  - This is the same Timothy we are familiar with in the New Testament.
  - Both Paul and Timothy are acquainted with Philemon, but in an intimate way.
- He then addresses Apphia, our sister, meaning she's also in Christ, and Archippus, our fellow soldier.
  - Some think that Apphia is Philemon's wife and that Archippus is his son,
  - This would make sense, given that it is a personal letter addressed directly to Philemon.
    - These are the only people within the church at Colossae mentioned explicitly by name in the letter.
    - While they are not stated to be his wife and son, it very well may be that they are.
- Additionally, Paul addresses the whole church in Philemon's household.
  - By him including that sentence, Philemon automatically knows that the contents of this letter are not simply for his eyes only.
- In verse 3, Paul then says, "Grace to you [plural], meaning the whole church, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
  - He is pronouncing a blessing upon the whole church – that grace and peace would proceed from both the Father and the Son.
  - As an aside, this is a great, simple verse to keep in the back of your mind when you're dealing with Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons.

#### **IV. (vv. 4-7) PAUL'S THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER**

- Philemon is man that is simply overflowing with love.
  - Paul personally thanks God always for Philemon.

- Paul gives thanks for Philemon specifically because he embodies a love for the Lord and His people because of that shared body of truth, called the faith, that was handed down from the apostles.
- And then we see what Paul prays for in verse 6
  - He prays that the fellowship of his faith become effective, or powerful, through the knowledge of every good thing which is in him, for Christ's sake.
    - Paul is praying for his love to become all the more powerful.
    - He is praying for this to happen in a specific way.
    - He is praying for this with a specific purpose.
- Verse 7 ties back to why Paul is giving thanks for Philemon
  - It was an interruption of his thanksgiving.
  - He mentions Philemon's love gave him much comfort and joy.
    - Why? Because the hearts of the saints were refreshed through Philemon.
      - That term heart here is not speaking toward the organ, but the seat of one's emotions.
    - This means they found relief and vitality through his service to them.
    - This is the type of man Paul is dealing with here and I want you to notice this as we move forward in the letter.

## V. (vv. 8-9) PAUL'S APPEAL FROM LOVE

- That "therefore" is a transition in the text.
  - This is when he starts to get to the point behind why he is writing.
  - Paul knew that he could have simply commanded Philemon. He had every right to do so – and he reminds Philemon of this.
    - But appeals to Philemon to do what is right on the basis of love.
    - That love is with reference to Christ
    - It is also with reference to the love that the apostle and Philemon share personally as a result of Christ.
  - And then he throws this in there: for I am such a person as Paul, the old man, now in chains for Christ.
    - Now just imagine the reaction Philemon had. He loves the apostle dearly.

- How do you turn down that appeal?

## **VI. (vv. 10-16) THE REASON FOR PAUL'S APPEAL**

- Verses 10 and 11 tell us plainly what his appeal is.
  - He's appealing on behalf of Onesimus, his child in the faith.
  - Why he calls him this is because Onesimus was led to faith as a result of him preaching the gospel to him, and so he views him as his son, just as he does young Timothy.
  - Then he says he was formerly useless to Philemon.
  - In effect, Paul is saying Onesimus is of infinitely greater value now as a child of God.
- Then in verse 12 he writes, "I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart."
  - He uses the same term here for heart.
  - Paul views himself as incomplete due to his absence.
    - Paul actually had a legitimate desire to keep Onesimus, not only because of his dear love for his spiritual child, but for the fact that he ministered to him whilst in chains.
    - Paul views this service as if Onesimus would be serving on behalf of Philemon.
- But notice, in verse 14 he tells Philemon he didn't want to force his hand.
  - He could have exerted his apostolic authority, but he doesn't.
  - He doesn't want this decision to be reached by exertion of power.
    - Instead, his appeal is founded entirely upon love.
    - Paul is appealing to him to reach the right conclusion to do what is fitting of Christians, knowing the genuine transformation that has happened in Onesimus.
- Then in verse 15-16, he speaks to divine providence.
  - Notice the passive verb in v. 15 – Paul does not speak to Onesimus fleeing from Philemon

- He instead indicates he was separated from him, and he was separated from him for a purpose: so that Philemon would have him back forever.
  - This is not referring to him gaining back his slave.
- He lost a slave and gained a brother. Verse 16.
  - And what’s more than this, he gained a *beloved* brother.
  - Onesimus has undergone a total transformation that no longer bears him as a slave in terms of his dignitary status.
- He’s beloved – especially by the apostle Paul, but then look at what he says here, “but how much more to you?”
  - He’s using an emphatic superlative.
  - He doubles down on the measure of love they now share as brothers and it is greater than the love the apostle has for Onesimus – and we’ve seen how much he already loves him.
- And then that little phrase at the end of v. 16, “both in the flesh and in the Lord”, is subordinate to the end of v. 15
  - Philemon has his human relationship back – yet in an immeasurably greater sense, because Onesimus is now in Christ.
  - Think of it in terms of two spheres of reality, the temporal and the eternal.

## **VII. (vv. 17-20) THE CONTENT OF PAUL’S APPEAL**

- This is where the specifics of his appeal start to flesh out.
  - He gives the first command in the passage – but notice it’s conditional.
    - *If* Philemon counts Paul as a partner he is to accept Onesimus as he would Paul.
  - And then he adds that if he has wronged him in any way or owes him anything, to charge that to Paul’s account.
    - And then he adds his signature – “I Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it.”
    - It’s a promissory note to Philemon, saying that whatever Onesimus owes him and in whatever way he wronged him, Paul will settle the debt.

- He's just played the part of Christ by substituting himself in Onesimus's place.
- Paul is asking that any retribution Philemon might have would be poured out upon himself instead.
- But then notice that little parenthesis here, the apostle delicately reminds Philemon that he is indebted to him.
  - Philemon is another of Paul's spiritual children; Paul led him to the faith, and so he says, you owe me.
  - What he's saying here is to just forgive the debt.
- Notice again in verse 20, Paul entreats him as his brother.
  - He asks Philemon to be profitable to him. How?
    - "Refresh my heart in Christ."
    - What this specifically looks like is forgiving Onesimus.

### **VIII. (vv. 21-25) PAUL'S CONFIDENCE AND FAREWELL**

- Paul isn't being facetious, he genuinely has confidence that Philemon will indeed refresh Paul's own heart.
  - He has every bit of confidence that Philemon will go above and beyond what he's asked him to do.
  - It was on this basis that he wrote the letter, especially in the fashion he did.
  - He appeals to him out of love, and in verse 21 we know why.
  - Philemon built a reputation – he had a verified track record of genuinely loving the Lord and His people.
- Now hears the final command of the apostle in v. 22, again, a conditional imperative.
  - With this final command, he gives yet another motivator to Philemon: If I'm released from prison, I'll be coming to inspect the fruit of your love toward Onesimus.
  - This letter is addressed not only to Philemon, but to the whole church. Everyone knows the situation.
  - An incredibly simple, yet practical principle from this is that Paul has given Philemon multiple things to motivate him toward doing what is proper.

- Ultimately, all of this is done under the auspices of pleasing Christ and bringing Him the due glory.
  - But that doesn't stop Paul from using everything at his disposal to gently push him in that direction.
- And then he closes the letter in v. 26. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.
  - Again, this is farewell is to the whole church – he's not speaking just to Philemon at this point.
  - It's a standard farewell in Paul's letters, but this the currency of the church: the grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ.

## **IX. CONCLUSION**

## **X. FINAL PRAYER**