

Off the Shelf

Sunday School Lesson

Philemon

Background

This letter from Paul was written around 60AD during Paul's first imprisonment in Rome. It is a brief and personal letter that contains an appeal for mercy and restoration. The name of the escaped slave, Onesimus, means profitable or useful. It is ironic that this slave failed to live up to his name, because he ran away. This letter illustrates the gospel in that Paul wants to reconcile Onesimus to Philemon, by paying for any wrongs or loss suffered by the failure of the slave to serve his master.

Introduction (1:1-3)

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

1. Paul begins his appeal in a humble way, rather than by claiming his authority as an apostle. *Why do you think he does this?*
2. Even though Paul was literally a prisoner in Rome, he considers himself even more so a prisoner of Jesus. *In what sense are born-again Christians, prisoners or slaves of Jesus?* (1 Cor 6:19-20)
3. This letter is addressed to Philemon and the Christians who met in his home. Rich and poor, male and female, slave and master—all were one in Christ and equal members of his family. Social distinctions would reappear when they left Philemon's home. *Have you experienced the wonder of Christian fellowship and the love of Christ that appears in intimate gatherings of his people?* If not, I recommend you find a small group of born-again believers.
4. The peace we have with God comes from the grace that we share through faith in Jesus Christ. Our unity and identity in Christ far exceeds any social, racial, ethnic or other distinctions that the world offers. (1 Jn 3:1-3)

Praise and Appeal (1:4-21)

I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints. I 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. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints. Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. I 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. But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no 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. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand. I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self. I do wish, brother, that I may have some benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask.

1. Paul praised Philemon as someone who was sharing the gospel and disciplining believers. He was generous and self-sacrificing. His life showed his love for Jesus and others. In these ways, he was being a faithful disciple and an example of becoming more like Jesus. *Do you know such people? How have they helped you to become more like Jesus?* (Prov 27:17; 1 Cor 15:33; 2 Tim 2:22-26)
2. Paul was sending Onesimus back to Philemon. This was needed because Onesimus had wronged Philemon and needed to repent. However, Paul urges Philemon to forgive him on the basis of love rather than the law. *How is this similar to the gospel? How is this like the prodigal son story?* (Lk 15:11-32)
3. Paul says that Onesimus became a believer and was of great encouragement and help to him, even though Philemon suffered the loss of his services. Here we see how God works good out of bad circumstances to his glory. God calls his saints from the darkness of their sinful mistakes, into his glorious new life in Jesus! (Acts 26:17-18; Eph 5:8-17; Col 1:13-14)
4. Paul asks for Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive himself. This would remind Philemon of the love, forgiveness and fellowship of believers found

in being disciples of Jesus. (Mt 10:40, 25:40) Jesus offers forgiveness to those willing to repent of their sins. Christians should be willing to repent and forgive each other. This is a sign of a healthy group of growing Christians. (Acts 2:37-47)

5. *How does confidence in Paul's faith in Philemon lead him to expect a loving and generous response from Philemon, beyond what he is asking? Have other Christians shown this type of love to you? Have you done this for other Christians?*

Conclusion (1: 22-25)

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

1. We don't know for sure if Paul ever returned to visit Philemon. We do know that Paul believed that their prayers would work towards this end. We pray with faith that God will answer our prayers. Prayers are not always answered the way we wish. Prayers are primarily a way to communicate with God and to seek his will for us and others. Prayers are not a wish list to gratify our desires. (Mt 6:9-13)
2. Paul includes others whom Philemon knows, as being well and with him. Such encouragement and assurance no doubt encouraged Philemon and others to continue to pray for them. Christians should share answers to prayers with other believers. This honors God and helps Christians to grow in faith through prayers. Too many times, we focus on what we think God needs to do, rather than on what he has done and is doing.
3. The power of God to save us and change us into the image of Jesus is called grace. Paul asks God to provide this spiritual energy, to enable Philemon to become more like Jesus and to act like Jesus. *Do you pray for grace for yourself and others? Have you experienced the transforming power of God's grace?*