

Philemon
Part Two
Philemon 1-25

1. A transformed slave.
2. A returning slave.
3. A slave becomes a brother.

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Philemon Part Two¹

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker— also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your partnership with us in the faith may be effective in deepening your understanding of every good thing we share for the sake of Christ. Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord's people.

Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— that 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 would not seem forced but would be voluntary. Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever— 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 fellow 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 Resources: "The Book of Philemon," *Ministry Pass*, <https://app.ministrypass.com/products/series-the-book-of-philemon-reconciliation-in-christ>

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1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon: A Bible Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition, Wesleyan Publishing House, Indianapolis, IN, 2004

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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. (Philemon 1-25, niv)

Years ago I was the pastor in a church in a small town where sooner or later everybody knew everybody. In our church, there were two families who were prominent leaders in the community – one family only attended our church occasionally, the other family attended faithfully, and that family were leaders in the church. I knew both families well. These two families had been friends for a very long time – doing things together often since the time their kids were little. But one day it came out that one of the members of the family who occasionally attended, had deeply wounded a member of the other family in a profound way – possibly even feloniously.

When I learned of this, I began walking with the father of the offended family for at least a couple of weeks, helping him sort through what their next steps might be. Remember, he was a leader in our church. At one point, as I was speaking to him, he told me that they would have to stop attending our church, unless I told the other family they were no longer permitted to worship at our church.

I tried to reason with him – I reminded him we had two services, so we could arrange for them to attend at different times. Besides, the offenders rarely attended anyway, and with everything going on, it was likely we wouldn't see them at all. I told him that I would be willing to meet with that family and work with them, even to the point of encouraging them to take responsibility and to make reparations. But most importantly, I told him that he needed to come to a place where he could forgive that offending family. It would be the way forward for his own family's healing. I also reminded him that we lived in a small town. When forgiveness on this magnitude is given to someone else, it would be significant. Forgiveness like this would rock the entire city – in a good way – it would be the kind of thing that could cause revival to break out.

He asked for a few days to pray about it. When he returned, he said, "I have to protect my family. Don't ever ask me again to forgive them. I can't and I won't." The leader and his family left our church, and the offending family never came back.

I was heartbroken. I hurt because they were hurting, and I couldn't help them. I hurt because I was losing a friend and the church a leader. I hurt because of the lost opportunity for healing and for the Gospel to be evident in our little community.

I don't judge that family – it's not my job to do that. I can't imagine the kind of pain they were feeling and how deeply they were betrayed and wounded by their good friends. They did what they felt they had to do. But it was tragic, I think, that the result of all that trauma was two broken families that quit speaking to each other, when it could have been different for them, for the church, and the community. But there was nothing I could do – I couldn't order them or force them to forgive.

From that experience, I can relate to how Paul felt when he wrote this letter to Philemon – hoping beyond hope that Philemon would do the right thing, knowing that if he did, it would be a transformational, revolutionary, counter-cultural demonstration of the Gospel.

Last week I gave you quite a bit of background into this power-packed little personal letter from Paul to Philemon. Today I want to conclude with a bit more context, along with some application for you and me. But let me just give a quick recap of the scenario in case you weren't with us.

Paul is imprisoned for sharing the Gospel, and is writing to his dear friend, Philemon. At some point earlier, Paul had led Philemon to faith in Christ, and together they started the church that met in Philemon's home. Paul is writing this letter with a specific request. There is a man named Onesimus who is a slave of Philemon, and somehow, he has crossed paths with Paul in prison. We don't know if Onesimus was a runaway slave or was sent by Philemon to assist Paul and then became derelict in that, but he was in deep trouble with his slave owner, Philemon. We don't know how Onesimus ended up crossing paths with Paul, but Paul was able to lead him to faith in Christ, and now he needed to go back to his slave master and make things right. Paul could have kept Onesimus with him to help him while in prison, but he knew the right thing to do was to first send him back to Philemon. But Paul makes a really big request: he's asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. This would have huge repercussions in the rest of Philemon's household and business because whatever he did for one slave would impact what he did with the rest of his slaves.

Before we go on, if you weren't with us last week, be sure to check it out, because we addressed a huge amount of background information, as well as the issue of slavery.

But today, the first thing I want us to see is...

1. A transformed slave.

Paul refers to Onesimus as "my son." That's because, like I said, Paul was able to lead Onesimus to faith in Christ, so in the family of God, he is as a son to Paul. Not just because Paul "birthed" him in faith, but because Paul loved him and felt the responsibility for his growth and wellbeing. As a good father, Paul wants Onesimus to take responsibility for his actions and make them right. Verses 17 and 18 seem to suggest that Onesimus was guilty of some kind of violation, whether he had stolen something from Philemon or had run away from him or both. But Onesimus was now God's son and Paul's child in the Gospel. Paul is staking his own reputation on Onesimus by sending him back.

Paul is also not so subtly using the human institution of slavery as an analogy for slavery to Christ. Earlier, Paul referred to himself as a prisoner of Christ, and now he's implying that a Christian is a slave to Christ.

What does this mean? This seems like a contradiction. After all, Jesus said:

“If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36)

Jesus talked a lot about giving us abundant life (John 10:10, 17:3), as do many other places in the New Testament – including by Paul himself. So what does it mean to be a slave or a prisoner of Christ?

We can get some insight from what Paul wrote in Romans 6:15-23. (Write that down so you can read it later.) Let me just read you an excerpt from verses 16-18; listen carefully:

“Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance. You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.” (Romans 6:16-18, niv)

Here's his point: a slave has no choice but to obey his or her master. That's the definition of a slave, and that is what we all were before we met Jesus: we were slaves to sin. We had no choice but to obey sin. But now we have given ourselves to Christ, and we willingly obey God – not because he forces us to, but because we choose to. We've been forgiven of our sin and cleansed of sin, and it is no longer our master. We have been given the Holy Spirit so that we have the power to resist sin and to obey God. So now, by choice, we are prisoners, or slaves, to Christ. I think you can understand the analogy, but you and I ought to be deeply convicted by that truth: if we are Christians, we belong to Christ. Paul said:

“Whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” (Romans 14:8)

As a Christian, I don't call the shots anymore – Jesus does. So Paul says in his letter to the church in Galatia:

“My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20, nlt)

That is the expectation of every Christian. Onesimus is a transformed slave. And so, as a result, Onesimus is also...

2. A returning slave.

Now, in verses 12-14, Paul explains why he's sending Onesimus back. Onesimus had to mend his broken past by owning up to and facing the things he'd done wrong to his master. When I was researching this, I like what one writer said: “Christianity is not out to help a man to escape his past and to run away from it; it is out to enable a

man to face his past and to rise above it...Christianity is never an escape; Christianity is always conquest.”²

Paul would have loved to have Onesimus stay and help him, but he knew there was a bigger thing at work than his own comfort and support; it was for Onesimus to face his past, and for Philemon to demonstrate the revolutionary idea of forgiveness and equality in the Kingdom of God. So Paul sent Onesimus back for both of those reasons.

Paul sees the opportunity for Philemon to demonstrate the difference that Jesus makes in a person’s life and in society. For Philemon to forgive Onesimus and receive him as an equal and no longer a slave was incredibly countercultural.

Paul is making his expectations of Philemon very clear, that the reason Philemon needs to do this is out of love – the love of God in his heart can only lead to one thing: forgiveness and equality.

Paul reminds Philemon that he *could* order him to do it – both as an Apostle, and as the one who led Philemon to the Lord. Honestly, Paul is saying, “I could order you to do the right thing, and I could guilt you into doing it. I *could* order you because I’m an Apostle, and I *could* guilt you into it because, after all, ‘You owe me your life, since I introduced you to Jesus in the first place.’ I *could* do those things... but I won’t. I *could* use guilt, but I won’t.” Paul is doing a bit of a flex here, saying, “Here’s the reasons I could order you, or coerce you, to do what I want you to do...but I’m not going to do that.” It’s kind of a classic Jewish Mother move. Did you hear about the Jewish guy that called his mother living in Florida? It had been almost a month since he last called her.

"Hi, Mom. How have you been?"

"Not so good. I've been feeling weak."

"Weak? Why are you feeling weak?"

"I haven't eaten for 28 days!"

"Twenty-eight days?! Why? What's wrong?"

"I didn't want my mouth to be full of food in case you should call."

When he turned thirty, his mother sent him two ties, so he worn one of them when he went to visit her. His mother said, “What? The other tie wasn’t good enough?”

So, yea, Paul admitted he could’ve done that, but in the end, he leaves the decision up to Philemon. He knows how much Philemon loves Jesus. Onesimus belonged to Philemon, but Philemon belonged to Jesus, and so now he needed to forgive Onesimus and receive him back as a brother. And that is the third point of this...

3. A slave becomes a brother.

² George E. Failing, “[The Epistle of Paul to Philemon](#),” in *Romans-Philemon*, vol. 5, The Wesleyan Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966), 670.

Because Onesimus has put faith and life in Christ, Philemon's slave is now his brother. This isn't a metaphor, and it isn't a request to treat him nicer now. It is a statement that Onesimus is a brother to Philemon in relationship, in spiritual standing, and in status. It is within Philemon's power to change his status from slave to sibling in Christ, and it is the only acceptable solution.

Last week I mentioned how, in our own nation's history, slave holders and white supremacists have heretically used this passage to justify slavery, and how on the other side, abolitionists and civil rights advocates have used it for their case against that. But there's a big problem with *how* the abolitionists used this passage to prove their point: they thought that Christians, who are morally superior, would "do the kind thing" and treat inferiors nicer. But they still believed that black people were inferior. In other words, they would sometimes use this passage as a magnanimous gesture to be kind to inferiors.

Let me give you an example that was in the news just this week. Once again, it comes from a Cold Play concert. Cold Play is a band that was big in the late 90's and early 2000s, and are still touring. You might remember they were in the news not too long ago, but we won't go into that.

This week, during a concert in London the lead singer, Chris Martin, brought a couple of fans on stage – two young ladies. He asked them where they were from, and they told him – they were from Israel. At that point, many in the crowd started to boo the two girls.

So Martin said, "I'm going to say this. I'm very grateful that you're here as humans. We are treating you as equal humans on Earth, regardless of where you come from." At surface level, that sounds nice enough, but something in you cringes, too, doesn't it? That's because, in an attempt to "be nice and treat people equally," he ended up treating them in a very condescending way. One writer said, "I cannot even begin to unpack how mortifying that moment must have been. Imagine being called up to be celebrated as fans of your favorite band, and it is turned into an opportunity to qualify your existence in front of an audience of tens of thousands."³ It's like he said to them, "We're going to treat you like one of us – you aren't humans, but we'll treat you like humans. Isn't that nice of us?" Do you hear the problem with that?

Now in Coldplay's defense, the band has been very supportive of Israel in the past, including making statements about the need to return the hostages. So maybe this was just a bad night. But it came across in a condescending way. By validating that they were "human," he ended up making it sound like they were less than human.

That is not at all what Paul is instructing here. Paul calls Onesimus (the slave) a "beloved brother" – the exact same term he used for Philemon at the beginning of the letter. Paul is not saying, "Treat Onesimus *like* he is one of us." He's saying, "In Christ we are the same. Period."

³ <https://www.stuff.co.nz/culture/360812550/chris-martin-accused-dehumanising-israeli-fans-latest-embarrassing-coldplay-concert-moment>

So let me say something here. The vision of West Valley Church is and always has been that we would be one church with two languages. God placed this church on this corner nearly 70 years ago, knowing the kind of community we'd be living in today – a community that is over 40% Hispanic or Latino. That's why we are working on all of our communications to be bilingual. That's why our worship slides and sermon slides are in both Spanish and English. That's why we currently have in-ear translation into Spanish, and that's why we are planning soon to have two worship services on Sunday mornings – one in Spanish, and one in English.

West Valley Church strives to understand and embrace the spirit of Philemon in this. We are a church of equals in Christ. We are beloved brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray we are nothing less than that to each other. Nothing less than this is acceptable in God's Kingdom and according to God's Word.

I suppose our leadership could force our church or guilt our church into being multicultural. But I appeal to you on the basis of love. It is as if God placed the letter to Philemon in the New Testament just for West Valley Church.

This is what Paul meant when he told Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a beloved brother and no longer a slave. Do you understand this?

So, what did Philemon end up doing? Did he end up doing the right thing? The Bible doesn't tell us. But let's fast forward about 40 years or so. A man named Ignatius was one of the early Church's great leaders and Christian martyrs. He was under arrest for being a Christian by the Roman government, being taken from Antioch to Rome to be executed. Along the way he wrote letters to the churches in Asia Minor. We still have those letters to this very day. During a stop in Smyrna, Ignatius wrote a letter to the church in Ephesus, and in the first chapter of that letter he wrote quite a bit about how wonderful their bishop was. Do you know what the name of the Bishop of the Church in Ephesus was? Onesimus. In fact, to make sure we knew it was the same guy, Ignatius made the same pun with his name that Paul did – he said he is Onesimus – which means useful – and that he is useful in name and in nature – and more so, he is useful in Christ.⁴ The same thing Paul said about Onesimus forty plus years earlier in the letter to Philemon – verse eleven.

The runaway slave became the great Bishop of Ephesus. This would probably not have happened if Philemon had *not* done the right thing.

One of the early church's great leaders was once a useless slave.

Who might be the next great leader of God's Kingdom because *you* do the right thing? Because West Valley Church does the right thing?

Prayer: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Benediction:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. (Philemon 25)

⁴ Barclay, 275