

I pray that your partnership in the faith might become effective by an understanding of all that is good among us in Christ. I have great joy and encouragement because of your love, since the hearts of God’s people are refreshed by your actions, my brother.

—Philemon 1:6–7, CEB

## LEARNING GOALS

1. To understand the cultural context for the book of Philemon.
2. To look at theories about the development of the situation addressed by Paul in Philemon, and Paul’s goal in writing to his friend on behalf of Onesimus.
3. To watch as Paul intervenes on behalf of one with lesser social standing, and understand the example it sets for believers.

## REFLECTION

The book of Philemon gives us a peek into a delicate first-century situation. Here we have a believer who is also a slave owner (Philemon), and the slave is not with his master, but with Paul. Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, and is appealing to Philemon’s better nature in receiving Onesimus without punishment. The letter is a “rhetorical gem” (Gorman, 459), and Paul deftly uses his words, as well as the cultural context, to encourage Philemon to respond with grace.

In understanding the context of the letter, it is helpful to look at the societal structure of the time, including the role of slaves. To our modern sensibilities, a believer who owns another human being is an oxymoron, but in first century Rome, with slaves making up 35–40% of the population, it is unlikely that people saw the contradiction.

Slaves were part of the economy, they were, “the electricity of the ancient world” (Thompson and Longnecker, 152). It would have been unthinkable to the first century mind to completely do away with slavery (Thompson and Longnecker, 152).

The letter is addressed to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, and to the church that meets in Philemon’s home. It will not be received and read in private; rather, it will be delivered, probably by Onesimus, and will be read in a group setting, likely to the entire house church. This will place some social pressure on Philemon to respond to Paul’s request in a manner reflective of the love of Christ, as the entire house church, having heard the letter, will be watching his actions.

Paul is setting up a request, that Philemon receive Onesimus not with harsh discipline, but with love, and even in these first verses he begins to let Philemon know what he hopes for. In verses 4–7, he underlines Philemon’s position as a respected and admired believer who has helped the cause of Christ by his love, faithfulness, and encouragement (Gorman, 456).

The letter is not specific about the circumstances surrounding Onesimus’s departure from Philemon’s household, nor exactly what Paul’s goal is in writing to Philemon. The two most credible theories about why Onesimus left are that Onesimus stole from Philemon and ran away to avoid punishment; stealing from a master could warrant severe punishment according to Roman law and custom (Gorman, 458). Another possibility, one more favored by today’s theologians, is that he had a falling out with Philemon, perhaps over a financial matter, and sought Paul’s help in mediating the conflict. In this scenario, Philemon actually might have sent Onesimus to Paul, having not engaged in punishment, but having found Onesimus to be useless (see verse 11) (Gorman, 462).

Paul’s overarching goal was certainly to return Onesimus to *usefulness*, instead of *uselessness*. The exact nature of that usefulness is what prompts speculation among scholars. Perhaps he wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus without punishment, to restore him to a positive standing in the household. It is also suggested that Paul was asking Philemon to free Onesimus completely. Thirdly, he might have hoped Onesimus

would be granted freedom so he could return to Paul and assist in his ministry (Gorman, 459).

The relationships between the three primary actors in this drama are critical to understanding what Paul is saying and what pressures are being brought to bear on Philemon to do the right thing. Paul and Philemon are co-workers, brothers in Christ. Each is in a position to help the other. Interestingly, though, Paul is not only Philemon's brother in Christ, but his spiritual father, since he was instrumental in Philemon's conversion. This places Philemon in Paul's debt, a fact of which Paul reminds him in verse 19 (Gorman, 460).

Paul is also a spiritual father to Onesimus, and Philemon and Onesimus share belief in Christ, both of which make Philemon and Onesimus brothers in Christ. Onesimus, once useless to Philemon, can now be useful, possibly as a stand-in for Philemon in helping Paul with his ministry (verse 13) (Gorman, 460).

Paul cares deeply for Onesimus, and even describes him as his "heart" (in some translations, his "bowels") (verse 12). So, within the course of this brief letter, Onesimus is described as Paul's brother, son, helper and "self" (Gorman, 460).

Philemon is a fascinating, if brief, look into how Paul carefully and skillfully manages a potential conflict between two believers who are related to each other in very complex ways. Paul intervenes on behalf of Onesimus, asking Philemon's help in making him useful again, this time possibly in new ways; he calls out Philemon's better nature, asking him to use the very qualities (love, faith, encouragement) for which he is admired, to bring peaceful and productive resolution to this delicate situation. In the next lesson we will explore Paul's method for helping resolve this situation, the outcome of this drama, and implications for us.

## LESSON PLAN

1. Engage
  - a. Briefly present the scenario Paul is dealing with in Philemon.

- b. Read the entire book, since it is so brief. Repeat verses 4–7, to focus the class on today’s lesson, verses 1–7.

## 2. Involve

- a. To the class: “Recall a time when you have had to mediate between two adults. What were the challenges of your role as mediator?”
- b. Cover the background information above, to outline the context of the mediation in Philemon, then discuss the following questions:
  - i. In the drama contained in Philemon, and keeping in mind the cultural context, what are the *risks* for Paul? Philemon? Onesimus?
  - ii. What *responsibilities* does Paul have as a Christ-follower? What are the *opportunities* within this situation? How do you see the cross embodied in Paul’s actions? (We will discuss this in greater depth next week.)

## 3. Challenge

- a. Although we will cover the body of the letter next week, discuss the following questions in regard to the information obtained thus far:
  - i. So far, what is the takeaway for the believer, in terms of stepping out on behalf of those who need our help? Why doesn’t Paul just step back and “let the chips fall where they may”?
  - ii. Think of groups that are marginalized in our society, as Onesimus certainly was in his. Who do people, indeed even Christians, push to the side in culture? Think of a time when you heard or saw a message that encouraged you to let those groups fight their own battles, or perhaps it blamed them for their plight, giving the impression that others have no responsibility to them. How does Paul’s willingness, indeed eagerness, to intervene on Onesimus’s behalf argue against that position? How does this challenge you in walking the Christian walk? How can you be an example of Christ’s love to those who are pushed aside?

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Thompson, James W. and Bruce W. Longenecker. *Philippians and Philemon*. Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016.