



How Did the Apostle Paul Handle a Slave Owner?

Philemon verse 1: (NASB) *Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker*



Talking about slavery is a sensitive issue, and rightfully so. We live in an age where we recognize that ALL people have rights. We now live in a time where no group or working class should ever be separated from those rights. This was not always so. Many ancient societies survived on the backs of slaves, who were often comprised of conquered peoples or those who were generationally born into servitude. Christianity had its beginnings in the context of such societies. With such inequity, how could Christianity survive and even flourish? Could slaves AND their owners both thrive

under Christ? Fortunately, the Bible gives us a powerful view of how this actually worked in those days. Let's walk through the true story of two men on opposite ends of this spectrum and see how the Apostle Paul helped them both maintain their faithfulness to Christ and each other.

Since the book of Philemon is written by Paul while in prison with Timothy alongside him, it is thought to be written around AD 60. It is a personal letter about a personal matter. It is not written to a church.



This letter is unique in the New Testament. It is less than one page long, less than 500 words, does not have any reference to doctrine like the book of Romans, has no warnings like in the book of Galatians and has no fiery teachings. The Apostle Paul's typical fatherly authority is absent. This is one-on-one, brother to brother on a common level approach. The

book of Philemon is found right before the book of Hebrews.

Why is it included in the New Testament?

It lets us see Paul in a completely different light. This is not Paul the outgoing orator, the important apostle of God; this is a private, personal letter from a friend. This one letter, the shortest one Paul ever wrote, reveals a character that we do not see in any of his 13 letters. As we read this intimate letter, we will not only get to know the writer better, but we will develop a closer relationship with Paul.



Background, Philemon Historical Background - The Philemon Effect, TheBibleEffect.com

- *At the time when he's writing this letter, Paul was under house arrest in Rome for preaching the gospel. He was set to stand trial before Caesar Nero in Rome and was waiting there for two years before he got the chance before Nero. He intended to make the case before Caesar that both he and Christianity were not a threat to the peace of Rome. While awaiting his trial, he could have visitors and he continued to do his ministry spreading the faith and strengthening Christian communities by writing letters. Eventually a runaway slave named Onesimus showed up at his door.*



Onesimus is Philemon's slave who ran away to Rome. Somehow Paul's preaching must have made an impression on that slave's mind and he was attracted to the message. We are not told how Paul and the runaway slave met, but we know a strong bond formed between them. Imagine Paul's surprise when he found out the slave actually belonged to a friend and Christian brother of his, Philemon!

Would Paul play the part of the informer and report him to the authorities? The result could be death for Onesimus. But to say nothing of the matter, to keep quiet would be wrong. He did not want to lose Onesimus, but he had to somehow reveal that he did not belong there and should be returned to his master. Paul could not leave the house and explain this in person since he was under house arrest in Rome.

Instead, Paul used his writing abilities to prepare a letter. He would write to Philemon and have Onesimus personally deliver it.

Philemon was a friend and a brother in Christ. Paul did not want to offend him. Onesimus was turning his life around and had become a brother in Christ as well. But Paul could not commend a wrongdoer or excuse his offense. This would be a difficult letter to write.

Philemon 1-3: (NASB) *¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ²and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus - rather than a prisoner of the Romans. This shows us his focus and how he interpreted his personal experiences to glorify God through Christ.



What about the other people mentioned in this greeting? Who are Apphia and Archippus?

(Source: Barnes' Notes on the Old and New Testaments) Verse 2. And to our beloved Apphia. This was a female...and was probably the wife of Philemon...and Archippus our fellow-soldier... It has been supposed that he was a son of Philemon, and this would appear not to be improbable, as he was one of his family.

The Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon is a personal letter written specifically to him and his household.

We are given hints as to the importance of this household at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians:

Colossians 4:15-18: (NASB) *¹⁵Greet the brethren who are in Laodicea and also Nympha and the church that is in her house. ¹⁶When this letter is read among you have it also read in the church of the Laodiceans; and you, for your part read my letter that is coming from Laodicea. ¹⁷Say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it. ¹⁸I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. Remember my imprisonment. Grace be with you.*



Observations:

- Philemon's son Archippus is noted as having an important ministry which needed his focused attention.
- The letter to the Colossians was requested to be circulated to the Laodicean church. The Book of Laodicea is one of the missing books of the Bible where it is referenced but no one has found it yet. Unfortunately, we do not get to read the letter coming from Laodicea.
- Paul did not mention any fellow disciples lightly, showing the influence of Philemon and his family.



Every word Paul writes is meaningful and the people mentioned are important to him. Paul's greeting is "typical" Paul. He lets his reader know his personal circumstances, he recognizes those who reside with his reader and he is quick to express their equality with him in Christ. Philemon was his *fellow worker*, Archippus was his *fellow soldier* and the church group in that area was being served at Philemon's house. These personal greetings help us see the diplomacy of Paul's intentions. This would set Philemon's mind at ease with thoughts about family bonds and the one hope of Christ in the brotherhood.



The Apostle Paul always sought the common ground of Christ with the brotherhood, especially when he needed to confront serious challenges.

We are about to watch a master of Christlikeness and godly wisdom do some very difficult things!

**Paul is going to ask for radical action from Philemon.
How does he put this challenge in perspective?**

The letter to Philemon is extraordinary as a teaching tool for us. The Apostle Paul is going to ask Philemon to change a major part of his life for the sake of Christ. Needless to say, tact, reasoning and godliness all must be engaged for this change to have a prayer of happening.

Interestingly, Paul begins his plea with a prayerful approach. When Philemon read those first few verses, he must have rejoiced that his friend Paul was recalling the favor bestowed upon Philemon, what God had done for him.

Philemon 4-6: (NASB) *⁴I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;*

Paul describes a faithful and mature Christian. The fact he mentions love and faith *toward all the saints* confirms he is an example of a man of strong faith that has survived the test of time - Philemon would not have been able to



develop a reputation for showing such love in just a week or a month. He was obviously engaged in an observable way.

Paul highlights Philemon's character right before he writes this:

*⁶and I pray that the **fellowship <2842>** of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.*

When we think of "fellowship," we might think of getting together over a cup of coffee to talk about our favorite Scripture, something simple and casual. But the word for *fellowship* here is nothing like that - it is much deeper.

Fellowship: Strong's #2842 *koinonia*; partnership, participation, or (social) intercourse, or (pecuniary) benefaction

King James Version - (to) communicate (-ation), communion, (contri-) distribution, fellowship

The Apostle uses a powerful word to describe the **common participation** he had with Philemon. As an example of this connection, let's consider what happened as a result of Pentecost and Peter's discourse to the multitudes.


"koinonia" = FRIENDSHIP
SHARING
COMMUNION
PARTNERSHIP
PARTICIPATION



The following is the first use of this word in Scripture:

Acts 2:41-42: (NASB) *⁴¹So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. ⁴²They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to **fellowship <2842>**, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.*

Pentecost Acts 2:1-31



When the holy spirit (God's power and influence) first came upon the apostles and disciples of Jesus.

Koinonia did not start until Pentecost, when the holy spirit (God's power and influence) was activated. Jesus' followers are now together in a way that was not previously possible. Before his crucifixion, even Jesus and his apostles did not have this special kind of fellowship because they were not on the same spiritual level. The apostles were not begotten of the holy spirit like Jesus.

This was new, different and deeper. This is how Paul is describing the depth of his relationship with Philemon!

"koinonia" Another example of the power of *koinonia*:



1 Corinthians 10:16: (NASB) *Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a **sharing <2842>** in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a **sharing <2842>** in the body of Christ?*

The King James Version uses the word **communion <2842>**. There is a participation that could not have existed outside of the body of Christ.

This is the word Paul chose for Philemon. Rereading:

Philemon 6: (NASB) *and I pray that the **fellowship <2842>** of your faith may become effective through the **knowledge <1922>** of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.*

Knowledge: Strong's 1922, *epignōsis*; recognition, i.e. (by implication) full discernment, acknowledgement:—(ac-)knowledge(-ing, -ment)

The power of such knowledge:

1 Timothy 2:3-4: (NASB) ³*This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, ⁴who desires all men to be saved and to come to the **knowledge <1922>** of the truth.*



Paul recognizes that Philemon's head is in the right place regarding the truth. In other words, Philemon has full discernment of what the gospel is about. He is living the gospel message.

Philemon 7: (NASB) *For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.*



Paul recognizes that Philemon's heart is in the right place regarding the brotherhood. He sees Philemon's actions of love, compassion and wisdom.

If Philemon wasn't this kind of person, Paul could never have written this kind of letter. Philemon is a mature Christian, so Paul has to know this will have a massive effect on Philemon, knowing what the core of Philemon's life was about. Paul is not saying words just to say them; the holy spirit is guiding him.

Paul is sincerely reporting to Philemon that he is a strong disciple, worthy of being called Christian. When the Apostle Paul tells you that you are worthy of the title of "Christian," it is a big deal! So far, we are still only in the introduction of the letter.


Paul has carefully prepared Philemon for the main object of his letter. We are going to see how difficult Paul is going to make it for Philemon to turn down his request.

Because Paul sees Philemon in such a genuinely mature light, he will boldly go on to the matter at hand:

Philemon 8: (NASB) *Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to **order <2004>** you to do what is proper,*



Order: Strongs #2004, *epitasso*; to arrange upon, i.e. order
KJV - charge, command, enjoin

 This word is only used regarding those who wield great authority. This is the only time Paul uses this particular word.

Another example of the use of this word was Jesus' authority over the Sea of Galilee:

Luke 8:25: (KJV) *And he said unto them, Where is your faith? And they being afraid wondered, saying one to another, What manner of man is this! for he **commandeth <2004>** even the winds and water, and they obey him.*

This is the power of the authority the Apostle Paul could have wielded to force Philemon to take back Onesimus!



Paul knows what authority he has in Christ, and yet he does not use it:

Philemon 9: (NASB) *yet for love's sake I rather **appeal** <3870> to you - since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus.*

In other words, Paul is saying: "I could order this by my authority, but I am going to leave it to you. Let your Christian character and discipleship respond. Let your new creature drive your thinking and your actions. I am appealing to who you are, and that is where I'm leaving the decision. Let your spiritual conscience be your guide."

Appeal: Strong's #3870 *parakaleo*; to call near, invite, invoke (by imploration, exhortation or consolation)

KJV - beseech, call for, (be of good) comfort, desire, (give) exhort (-ation), entreat, pray

I am such a person as Paul, the aged - not as a feeble older man who is tired by this issue; he is Paul who has been able to grow up in Christ, learning to be wise and patient.

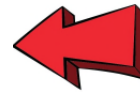
Yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you - we see an overriding maturity, kindness and wisdom. Paul demonstrates such tender loving care. We see his confidence in Philemon.

Paul advocates for Onesimus like Jesus does for us:

1John 2:1: (KJV) *My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an **advocate** <3875> with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous:*

Comforter: Strong's #3875 *parakletos* an intercessor, consoler
KJV - advocate, comforter

Appeal: Strong's #3870 *parakaleo*
Comforter: Strong's #3875 *parakletos*



Jesus' role for the believer is an advocate.

God ↔ **Advocate Christian**

An advocate is someone who sits with you on your side and pleads your case before a judge.

This is what Jesus' true followers have in him - he is our advocate with God. Here Paul is advocating for Onesimus in the same way; Philemon is in a place of judgment.

Paul is assuming an advocating role for the challenge Philemon is about to face. Paul is being Christlike and using high spiritual guidelines to make this letter work. It gives us the sacred sense of what happens when we are working within the issues confronting the lives of the brotherhood. The apostle teaches us that when dealing with personal issues they should be treated as sacred.



Paul is “living” Jesus for us so that we can see a practical example in an imperfect human being:

1 Corinthians 11:1: (KJV) *Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ.*



When facing the challenge of confronting one of the brotherhood to step up higher, let us model Jesus himself in our confidence in their spirituality as we advocate for their highest welfare.

The Apostle Paul is paving the road for us regarding how we are to deal with tough issues within the brotherhood.

**Paul has set a powerful and trusting context.
How will he now directly address the issue at hand?**

One of the most important lessons we can take from the letter to Philemon is to put **first things first**. Paul has been meticulous in sincerely stating his heart and truth connections with Philemon and will now carefully build on that foundation. We will see that the challenge is great, but God’s grace is greater. Paul helped Philemon understand how he saw him in order that Philemon could more easily accept what he needed to do.



The Romans, Greeks and Jews had many differences in law, manners and customs, but they all depended on a slave economy. What was Paul’s position towards slavery? He never preached against slavery, perhaps because if he did it would upset his whole proposition in life. He had a work to do and a limited time to do it. He would gain little if he started a campaign to free the slaves in

all of the Roman Empire. The Apostle Paul recognized and accepted the custom of slavery and worked within the existing system. He taught that if you are a slave, be the best slave ever. If you are a slave owner, be the best slave owner ever. Paul acted in a similar way to Jesus, who elevated women and gave them respect far beyond their status in society at the time. He did not break down the barriers, but worked honorably within custom and the law. He knew there would come a time when the barriers of gender and class would be broken and destroyed.

This was the way society worked at the time. There was no middle class or a working class who punched a time clock and got paid a specific wage. There were day laborers, but if you needed a consistent job, you were an indentured servant. If you were captured in war or born into slavery, you became a slave. The culture determined the severity of that servitude. The Roman culture had harsh and severe rules on servitude. The owner had the power of life and death over their slaves. The Jews had much different rules that were more humane.



The Romans treated slaves poorly, as if they were not human. Slaves were treated as property and could be used or abused at will without penalty of law.



The Greeks treated their slaves better than the Romans, but if a Greek slave was required to give evidence in a court of law as a witness, that slave could expect later to be tortured for giving that witness. However, the master could not put him to death without the court's consent. If a slave was in danger of having their virtue assaulted, they would take refuge in the temple and claim the right to be sold to a different master.



Under Jewish Law, no Jewish slave could be held involuntarily longer than six years. The Law contained provisions that would protect the slave. For example, when a young female slave reached age of marriage, she was allowed to go free if the master or son of the master did not marry her. For more about Jewish compassion required by the Law regarding slavery, see Episode 1142: Why Did God Allow Slavery in the Bible?

Let's take a look at the legal ramifications of this whole dilemma of being under Roman rule.



Roman law, Philemon Historical Background - The Philemon Effect, TheBibleEffect.com

- *The Roman laws for slavery saw slaves as the property of the master, and they came down very harshly on anything that could come across as a slavery rebellion. If a slave ran away the owner could have them tortured or even branded. And if the slave was a continuous problem the owner could have them crucified. If someone showed hospitality to a runaway slave they could be held liable for any financial loss caused while the slave was away.*

Paul has put himself in a position of difficulty because he is harboring Onesimus. Also, Paul is under house arrest himself! He is in a difficult predicament.

Paul begins to address the challenging issue with the best possible news.

He begins by focusing on Onesimus:

Philemon 10: (NASB) *I **appeal** <3870> to you for my child **Onesimus** <3682>, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,*

Onesimus: Strong's #3682 *Onesimos*, profitable, Onesimus, a Christian

Greek English Lexicon: Onesimus = "profitable or useful"

What better news could there be than Onesimus coming to Christ? He has come to Christ because of Paul's witness. Some might think it was in Onesimus' best interest to "come to Christ" because that was his ticket out of the trouble he brought on himself by running away. We need to remember it was the Apostle Paul vouching for him, a man who has served God his entire life, who is driven by God's spirit in every way. He says, *my child Onesimus*. He is telling Philemon that Onesimus is now part of the family.



We see Paul's fatherly approach to this young man who had done wrong. Paul has shown him what it was like to live under Christ's teaching and has taught him what was right in the eyes of the Lord.

Onesimus blended into Roman society almost like a free man now. Would Paul play the part of informer and report him to the authorities? Onesimus might be put to death. Should Paul say nothing about the matter? Keep quiet? Try to visualize yourself in this relationship with Onesimus who is developing a beautiful character and sincerely coming to Christ. What would you do? This is a hard decision - you do not want to lose him, but need to be honest and reveal somehow that he does not belong here and should be returned to his master. Of course, we know that Paul will send him back to Philemon, but before he gets to that point, look what he first puts into place. This teaches us how to be Christlike in our approach to our brethren.

Onesimus is family:

Philemon 11: (NASB) *who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.*

First, Paul announced that Onesimus is his child in Christ, and then he says that Onesimus was useless to Philemon. He ran away! But now he is useful to Paul and also to Philemon. He is useful and profitable. Paul is playing on the meaning of Onesimus. Onesimus is now living up to his name.



Onesimus in some ways resembles the newly-opened door to the Gentiles. The Gentiles came from a background that was completely God-less:

1 Peter 2:10: (NASB) *for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

Onesimus is now valuable, but he is still a runaway slave who most likely stole from Philemon in order to fund his flight to Rome.

Do you just forget all the wrongdoing?

Philemon 12-13: (NASB) *¹²I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;*

I have sent him back to you in person - Paul does exactly the right thing. He sends Onesimus back to Philemon to face the problem. Paul does not take him away from that consequence; he brings him to that consequence. Paul trusts that Onesimus will actually go back and not run away again. This shows us Onesimus had changed and was ready to face Philemon.

Sending my very heart - this is how attached Paul is to this new Christian!

I wish to keep him with me - Paul is here accentuating his attachment to, and the value of, Onesimus and crediting much of that value to Philemon.



PAUL REVEALS TWO SIGNIFICANT THINGS



- 1 He recognizes the propriety of sending Onesimus back to his rightful and legal owner by Roman law.
- 2 He freely acknowledges Onesimus' conversion as genuine.

On your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment - Paul might also be acknowledging that Philemon was a good Christian influence on Onesimus. Even though Onesimus made bad decisions, it is reasonable to assume Philemon was a good influence on him. Onesimus' ministering to Paul was as though Philemon was ministering to Paul during his confinement.

This describes Onesimus' turn-around:

1 Corinthians 6:10-11: (NASB) ¹⁰*nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God.* ¹¹*Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.*

Such was Onesimus, but now he has come to Christ and has a clean slate because Jesus died for his sins.

After focusing on Onesimus by talking about his value, Paul now focuses on Philemon. He clearly respects Philemon's position as the one who was wronged. This is obvious since he sent Onesimus back.

Paul's respect is confident in Philemon's spiritual maturity:

Philemon 14: (NASB) *but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.*

Paul leaves the door of Christian liberty wide open for Philemon. He is relying on Philemon's spiritual conscience to guide him into doing what is right for Onesimus and right for himself. He is relying on the holy spirit to provoke Philemon into doing the right thing in Christ.

This reminds us of the following, as Paul gives Philemon respect *in honor*:

Romans 12:9-10: (NASB) ⁹*Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil; cling to what is good.* ¹⁰*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to one another in honor;*

Paul lived his Scriptures. We see him *doing* what he wrote in his various letters. He exemplifies being *devoted* to the brethren *in brotherly love*; he *gives preference* to others, being *without hypocrisy*. All the things he said, he is putting into action. This is something we can strive to emulate in our own lives.

And remember, he is doing this while under house arrest and does not have the freedom to go where he wants. He extends himself to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus in a dramatic way. He is not complaining about his situation; he is encouraging and ministering.



He is almost more active in prison than he was out of prison! This is an example of an imperfect human being living a Christlike life, written in Scripture so that we can see how it is done.



“St. Paul in Prison,”
by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn, 1606-1669
MuseumStaatsgalerie, Stuttgart, Germany

Paul now looks to God’s providence in Philemon’s life as a way to understand the several unlikely events he has experienced:

Philemon 15-16: (NASB) ¹⁵*For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.*

Paul chose his words masterfully. Notice he says, *he was for this reason separated from you*. Other translations use *departed*. He tactfully does not say “he ran away” because that might have triggered resentment in the heart of Philemon. Instead, Paul explains that Onesimus *parted from you awhile that you might get him back forever*. What a graceful way of putting it, hinting that providentially God saw the outcome would be beneficial for everyone. Perhaps his conversion would never have happened had he not run away.

Onesimus was “parted” from Philemon, which was an inconvenience, and was wrong on Onesimus’ part. But because of this, Philemon will get him back as a brother, a family member, for all time! Paul here brings out the ideal of master and slave united in affection as brothers in Christ. Breaking down the distinction between master and slave in men’s hearts will eventually do more to abolish slavery than changing any laws could ever do. It changes the *perception* of the individual.

Slave and master were separated for a time to be joined as a disciple of Jesus for the coming ages of time. Light afflictions bring eternal blessings!

2 Corinthians 4:17: (NASB) *For our momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,*



Romans 12:11-13: (NASB) ¹¹*not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord;* ¹²*rejoicing in hope, persevering in tribulation, devoted to prayer,* ¹³*contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality.*



Bringing together those who are at odds begins with recognizing the facts of the matter and ends with appealing to the best of both parties.

The wisdom, strength and gentleness of Paul cannot be overstated. He is a minister of reconciliation!

**How does the Apostle Paul end his urgent plea to Philemon?
What lessons can we learn?**

Paul concludes his letter with his usual combination of strength and sensitivity. He finishes addressing every detail of what is important, but at the same time will leave the door wide open for future fellowship and co-laboring.

He will let everyone know how important they are to him because that is where the heart and mind of Paul lived. This short little letter shows us the core values that literally drove Paul every day. Whether he was in prison or not; whether dealing with a slave or a slave owner; whether a Gentile or a Jew - it did not matter. Paul was being himself, a dedicated disciple of Christ.

Philemon 17: (NASB) *If then you regard me a **partner <2844>**, accept him as you would me.*

Partner: Strongs #2844, koinōnos; a sharer, i.e, associate:
- companion, fellowship, partaker, partner



"koinonia" Partner here is the root word for partnership, *koinonia*, we mentioned previously. It is a deep connectedness, like a membership. Paul is asking Philemon to accept this runaway slave as though he, Paul, was standing there in Onesimus' shoes.

Paul extends his faith in Philemon to the point of equalizing Onesimus with himself in Christ.

This was the same example as Jesus:

Matthew 10:40: (NASB) *He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives Him who sent me.*

This is simple. We are reflections of Jesus Christ if we walk in his footsteps. Paul is a reflection and he now tells Philemon that Onesimus, also, needs to be looked at as a reflection of Christ Jesus. This is the depth of what happened here.

Now Paul deals with what could have been "the 800-pound gorilla" in the room. What of the legal issues Onesimus has opened up by his wrongdoing? In all of this, Paul has not suggested that Philemon just ignore the wrongdoing, or that it will go away if not addressed.



He steps in to take the responsibility of helping both Philemon and Onesimus:

Philemon 18-20: (NASB) ¹⁸But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). ²⁰Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

Why would Paul be willing to cover the cost of Onesimus' wrongs? First, he was legally liable according to Roman law. While it is important that he is willing to live up to Roman law, it is minimal compared to the grace that Paul himself was shown at his own conversion.

Paul's conversion is detailed in [Acts 9:3-7](#), [Acts 22:6-9](#) and [Acts 26:13-16](#). For more detail, see these episodes:



Jesus did not hold Saul of Tarsus responsible for his angry persecution of Christians which even resulted in some dying. Instead, he gave Saul/Paul grace and strength and the opportunity to be an apostle. Jesus did not hold Saul/Paul accountable for the stoning of Stephen, but he had to make up for it by doing Christ's work. As Jesus said when he appeared to Saul on the road to Damascus, Saul had wronged Jesus by persecuting Jesus' followers. Jesus called on him to do the right thing by caring for those same followers for the remainder of his life.



Paul's consequences were explained to Ananias, who questioned God's decision to send him to minister to this persecutor of Christians:

Acts 9:15-16: (ASV) ¹⁵But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel: ¹⁶for I will show him how many things he must suffer for my name's sake.

And Paul did suffer; he was stoned and left for dead, he was shipwrecked, he was whipped and sent to prison. There is a great record of standing up for Christ despite his background. Paul might even be seeing a little of himself in Onesimus. He knew what it was like to realize you had messed up so badly that there was little you could do to make amends. And yet, the solution was living for Christ.



What would Paul have actually owed? Maybe Onesimus stole something from Philemon to fund his flight, or perhaps there was the matter of the amount of work lost because Onesimus left the household - such as the cost of unplowed fields. This could have been a significant amount of money, and Paul said he would cover the amount. He never wrote things just to take up space; Paul meant everything he wrote.



Philemon 18-20: (NASB) ¹⁸*But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well.) ²⁰Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.*

Not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well -
 Philemon owes Paul for even bringing him into the fellowship of Christ!
 Now Paul, through God's grace, is doing the same for Onesimus.

Remember, Paul lives what he writes:

Ephesians 4:31-32: (NASB) ³¹*Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, along with all malice. ³²Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you.*

When we hear the sensitivity in Ephesians, and we consider the situation with Philemon and Onesimus, we can see the depth of what Paul was teaching. Paul's writings take on a whole new meaning when we see him in action, person-to-person, as a "real" individual dealing with a difficult problem of that day.

Philemon 21: (NASB) *Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.*

Paul has such confidence in Philemon here. Paul was persuaded of Philemon's godly response. Why? He knew him well as a brother and co-laborer in Christ! We cannot take that lightly. He knew him because of that partnership, that *koinonia* together under the robe of Christ's righteousness, working for the sake of the gospel.

Let's look at this lesson in a different way - through their names:

"Paul" = LITTLE Paul was once Saul of Tarsus, an influential "Pharisee of the Pharisees." He was converted to Christ and his name was changed to Paul, which in the original Latin means "little." So, we have the influencer - Paul - who was once *mighty* in his own eyes, now was made *little* in his own eyes so as to carry out the mighty plans of God through Christ.

"Onesimus" = USEFUL We have a man who, before his conversion, was *not* useful and did harm to his owner Philemon.

He runs away and finds Paul, *who is little in his own eyes*, and Paul teaches Onesimus about Jesus. Onesimus hears and accepts the call and now like Paul, becomes little in *his* own eyes. Now he truly is becoming *useful* as his name indicates because he is submissively living under the mighty hand of God.

"Philemon" = FRIENDLY The name is derived from *phileo* love, meaning a fondness and affection for others. Philemon is being called upon to see Onesimus not as his slave as he once saw him, but instead as a brother, to see him as the name Philemon dictates, with *phileo* love. Who is challenging Philemon to do this? The Apostle Paul, who is *little in his own eyes*.





Everyone is called upon to live up to their names. God's providence gives us so many levels of lessons!

Thus, we have all three men in our account having learned to be *little in their own eyes* and having learned to always put the will of God through Christ first. Each needed to put their human standing in society aside. Each needed to embrace the providence of God and to also embrace each other as "partners," *koinonia*, in the Christian faith.

How do we do this? We become *little in our own eyes*. The Apostle Paul learned how to teach others to be true converts.

We also need to rise above our personal circumstances and get a higher perspective. If we are professing to follow in Jesus' footsteps, and God is overruling for our highest spiritual welfare, everything we are and everything we do has to line up under the umbrella of being "in Christ." Paul told them they had to rise above their station, their status in life, and join this fellowship, *koinonia*, in Christ. It is amazing that such a short letter can have such transformative power for everyone involved.

Having appropriately disciplined a babe in Christ (Onesimus) and a mature man of Christ (Philemon), Paul now wraps up with hopefulness and faith:

Philemon 22-25: (NASB) ²²*At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.* ²³*Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,* ²⁴*as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.* ²⁵*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.*

Paul is confident Philemon will do as Paul has encouraged and adds that he is hoping to see him soon face-to-face.



The Bible never tells us what Philemon decided. Paul's appeal was written so tenderly and masterfully that it had to have an effect on Philemon. How would he ever face Paul again if he denied his request? Philemon really had no choice but to accept Onesimus. No doubt with the kind of character he had, he rejoiced in the fact that the Lord touched the heart of this slave and brought him into this wonderful family of God.

Nowhere in the entire New Testament is the heart of the Apostle Paul so well revealed as in this short, private letter written to his special friend, Philemon. It makes us wonder how many other letters Paul may have written, how many issues he may have dealt with that we just do not know about. This gives us just a glimpse of the power of the spirit working in him. We get to see the apostle in this unique way and how his relationship with others is profoundly genuine on all levels and in all cases.

Paul continued his faith in Onesimus. Colossians was also written from prison, probably a short time after the letter to Philemon:

Colossians 4:7-9: (NASB) ⁷*As to all my affairs, Tychicus, our beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow bondservant in the Lord, will bring you information.* ⁸*For I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about our circumstances and that he may encourage your hearts;* ⁹*and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here.*



Perhaps we can see a spiritual application which is a beautiful analogy of redemption. Onesimus might relate to mankind, God's creation and His property. Man's conduct brought displeasure to God, his Master, and man ran far away, no longer righteously serving God. In God's loving providence, man was led to his benefactor, Jesus. At the feet of Jesus, a coworker in God's plan, man as a repentant slave, pours out his soul and confesses his sin. Acting on the advice of Jesus, man returns to God and is received as a free man. All liabilities are put in the account of Jesus and are cancelled. This is redemption!



The Apostle Paul is such a fitting picture of Jesus; he shows us how to be Christlike with imperfect tools. Paul was imperfect like the rest of us. It is thrilling that this imperfect individual is able to show us this high, lofty standard.



Galatians 3:28 (NASB) *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

**Learning to live these words transforms our everyday life.
Just ask Philemon and Onesimus!**

This lesson has shown us how important it is to take ourselves out of the picture, become *little in our own eyes*, so that we can deal with the issues and challenges before us and our brotherhood. The Apostle shows us it can be done, even with the great disadvantage of being on house arrest. He took a runaway slave, converted him to Christ and then reunited him with his previous owner. They became a family in Christ. This is better than any fairy tale because when this story says, "They will live happily ever after," it means for eternity!

***So, how did the Apostle Paul handle a slave owner?
For Jonathan and Rick (and Julie) and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!***



Join us next week for our podcast on March 1, 2021
Ep. 1167: Can Good Things Ever Be Bad?

Bonus Material and Study Questions

There is no respect for others without humility in one's self. - Henri Frederic Amiel

Here is some background on defining the names Philemon and Paul:

Philemon: Strong's #5371 *Philemon*, a Christian, to be a friend to, fond of an individual or an object, i.e. have affection for (denoting personal attachment, as a matter of sentiment or feeling); specifically, to kiss (as a mark of tenderness)
KJV - kiss, love

Paul: Strong's #3972, *Paulos*; of Latin origin; the name of a Roman and of an apostle

Philemon 1-25: (NASB) ¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ²and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; ⁶and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. ⁷For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother. ⁸Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment, ¹¹who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me. ¹²I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. ¹⁵For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. ¹⁸But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well.) ²⁰Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say. ²²At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.



(Source: John Gill's Exposition of the Whole Bible) This epistle was written by the Apostle Paul, when a prisoner at Rome, as appears from its inscription and subscription; and seems to have been written at the same time, in the year 60, and sent by the same hand, as the epistle to the Colossians; seeing the same persons were with the apostle at the writing of both, and send their Christian salutations in the one, as in the other; compare Philemon 1:23,24 with Colossians 4:10,12,14 and Archippus, the minister in Colosse, is made mention of in both Philemon 1:2 and Colossians 4:17, and it is very probable that Philemon, to whom it was written, was a Colossian, since Onesimus, his servant, on whose account, and by whom it was sent, is said to be one of the Colossians, Colossians 4:9. Philemon is said to be one of the seventy disciples, and afterwards Bishop of Gaza; see Gill on "Luke 10:1." The occasion of the epistle was this; Philemon's servant, Onesimus, having either embezzled his master's goods, or robbed him, ran away from him, and fled to Rome, where the apostle was a prisoner in chains in his own hired house, under the custody of a soldier, and where he received all that came, and preached the Gospel to them, Acts 28:30 and among those that went to hear him, this fugitive servant was one, and was converted under his ministry; and who not only received the grace of God, but had such gifts bestowed on him as qualified him to be a preacher of the word. Now the design of this epistle is to reconcile Philemon to his servant, and to entreat him to receive him again, not only as a servant, but as a brother in Christ; and the most proper and prudent methods and arguments are used to engage him to it. The epistle, though it is a familiar one, and short, is very instructive; it shows great humility in the apostle, and that he did not think it below him to be concerned in doing such an office as to reconcile a master to his servant, and which is worthy of imitation; as also it teaches the right that masters have over their servants, which is not lost by their becoming Christians, and even ministers of the Gospel; and that recompense should be made unto them for injuries done by them: it likewise displays the riches of the grace of God, in the conversion of such a vile creature: and the wonderful providence of God in overruling that which was sinful in itself, running away from his master, to the greatest good, even the conversion of him; and is an instance of surprising grace: and from hence may be learned, that there is salvation in Christ for the chief of sinners; and that the conversion of them is not to be despaired of. The authority of this epistle was not questioned by the ancient writers, and stands always in their catalogues of the canon of the Scripture; and Marcion the heretic, who either rejected, or changed, or mutilated the rest of the epistles, could not lay his hands on this, because of the brevity of it, as Tertullian and Jerome observe.

On Colossians 4:9: With Onesimus, who had been Philemon's servant, ran away from him, and was met with and converted by the Apostle Paul, of whom he says many things in his epistle to his master. According to the Apostolic Constitutions, he was afterwards bishop of Beyrhoea; and some say he suffered martyrdom under Domitian; a servant of this name is mentioned by Suetonius, Ignatius speaks of one Onesimus as bishop of Ephesus, but not the same with this...a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you; either one of their ministers, as Epaphras was, Colossians 3:12 or one of their city, who was originally a native of that place; and which the apostle mentions, the more to recommend him; though this is the least part of his commendation; he calls him a "brother," being both a converted man, and in the ministry; and being faithful in his work to Christ, and greatly beloved, by the saints; and particularly highly in the esteem and affections of the apostle:



"koinonia" One more example of the use of *koinonia*:

Galatians 2:9: (NASB) *and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of **fellowship** <2842>, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.*

Study QUESTIONS

Ep. 1165: How Did the Apostle Paul Handle a Slave Owner?

<https://christianquestions.com/character/inspiration/1166-slave-owner/>

See:



1. What were the circumstances when Paul wrote his letter to Philemon? How did they influence the way the letter was addressed? (See Colossians 4:15-18, Philemon 1-3)
2. How did Paul begin his plea to Philemon? What made his choice of words so powerful? (See Acts 2:41-42, 1 Corinthians 10:16, Philemon 4-7, 1 Timothy 2:3-4)
3. What was Paul's approach when it was time to make his request? What can we learn from this approach? (See Luke 8:25, 1 Corinthians 11:1, Philemon 8-9, 1 John 2:1)
4. What were the differences in how the Romans, Greeks and Jews treated their slaves? Why was the situation more difficult because it was under Roman rule?
5. What did Paul say to appeal to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf? Why? (See Philemon 1:10-11, 1 Peter 2:10)
6. What did Paul reveal about his feelings towards Onesimus and his situation? (See Romans 12:9-10, 1 Corinthians 6:10-11, Philemon 12-14)
7. What did Paul say to change the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon? (See Romans 12:11-13, 2 Corinthians 4:17, Philemon 15-16)
8. How did Paul conclude his plea to Philemon? Why would he be willing to cover Onesimus' wrongs? (See Acts 9:15-16, Ephesians 4:31-32, Philemon 18-20)
9. Why was Paul confident that Philemon would do as he had encouraged? How did his relationship with Onesimus continue? (See Philemon 21-25, Colossians 4:7-9)
10. What can we learn about Paul's character in his letter to Philemon? How can we apply his example to our lives today?