

Philemon 8-18: *Paul's Appeal to Philemon*  
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We're studying a book of the Bible right now that is all about forgiveness. Interestingly, the word "forgiveness" is not found in this short letter, but forgiveness is the whole purpose of why it was written. We're looking at Paul's letter to Philemon, which he wrote as an appeal to Philemon to forgive his runaway slave, Onesimus. Onesimus had served in Philemon's household in Colossae, and then desiring his freedom, he stole from Philemon and ran away to the distant and very large city of Rome. It was there that he encountered the Apostle Paul. In God's providence, these two men met, and Onesimus was converted under Paul's ministry. Onesimus then became a valuable helper to Paul, as Paul mentions in this letter. But now Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. It's the right thing to do. There must be repentance and forgiveness and reconciliation in that important relationship. So here comes Onesimus, now a Christian, returning home to his Christian master, whom he has wronged deeply. Surely Onesimus came back to Colossae with fear and trepidation, not knowing how Philemon would react. His hope, though, was that the letter he had in hand would have a profound affect on his master.

Last week we looked at Paul's words in verses 4-7, where he commends Philemon for his love and faith, and prays that Philemon's faith will continue to flourish and grow. In that very edifying introduction to the letter, Paul is preparing Philemon for the difficult request he's going to make in the following verses. And that's what we're going to look at this morning.

I want start by observing several aspects of Paul's appeal in verses 8-18, and then I want to step back and look at this situation in the larger picture and look at it from the perspective of each of these men: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul. Let's start by looking at Paul's appeal here.

### **Paul's Appeal to Philemon**

1) He appeals to Philemon for love's sake.

Paul is very intentionally not giving a command. You see in verse 8, where he begins the body of his letter and gets to the real purpose of the letter, and he begins by saying, "Accordingly [therefore], though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet *for love's sake* I prefer to appeal to you . . ." The first word there, "accordingly" or "therefore," shows that Paul is building his appeal on what he has just said about Philemon in verses 4-7. There is an established relationship between Paul and Philemon. They know each other. Paul knows about Philemon's love and faith, and on the basis of that he makes his appeal. Because of what I know about you, Philemon, therefore I'm making this appeal. He does this in an interesting way. He states that he *could* do more than make a loving appeal. He *could* give a command. But instead he chooses to simply appeal for love's sake.

He wants Philemon to act graciously, not out of compulsion but from his own free will. This is what he says in verse 14. He doesn't give a command, because he doesn't want mere obedience to a command. He wants to see Philemon's love and faith become effective in forgiving Onesimus. That wouldn't happen if Paul ordered him to erase the

debt that Onesimus owed, or withhold punishment. Instead, Paul wanted Philemon's goodness to be of his own free will.

Something that is hard to determine in this letter is what exactly Paul wants Philemon to do. Is he simply hoping that Onesimus won't be punished for running away? Or is he being so bold as to ask that Onesimus will be sent back to Rome to continue serving Paul in prison? Is he asking that Onesimus might be set free from his slavery? That would be an extremely bold request in Paul's day, and I do think there's reason to believe that Paul was hoping for that.

He doesn't state it explicitly, though. He doesn't come out and command Philemon to do a specific thing. It is certainly clear that he wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back graciously. He wants Philemon to forgive Onesimus. But the specifics he leaves up to Philemon. Paul refrains from giving orders, but instead wants to see what Philemon's love and faith will prompt him to do. He appeals for love's sake.

2) He directs his appeal to Philemon's heart.

The appeal is not cold and calculated. It's filled with warmth and emotion, and Paul is not timid to use the example of his own life to spur on Philemon in his faith. Paul refers to himself as "an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus." He's pulling on Philemon's heartstrings here, evoking the deep love and respect Philemon has for Paul. At this point in reading the letter, Philemon hasn't even gotten to the actual appeal, but he has been encouraged by Paul's words in verses 4-7, and he's reminded of Paul's long ministry and his current imprisonment for the Gospel. His heart is brimming over with affection for this man who led him to the Lord and who is such an example of total devotion to Christ.

In verse 10 Paul finally states that his appeal is on behalf of Onesimus. He continues appealing to the heart, referring to Onesimus as his child. And then he says, I begot him spiritually. He became my son. I became his father in the faith. And this happened while I've been in prison. This news would be a shocking a delightful surprise for Philemon. Who would have thought that something like this could happen? But it has! Here is Onesimus, once a rebellious slave who stole and ran away, now a follower of Christ.

In verse 11 there's a play on words to communicate the dramatic change that has taken place. The name Onesimus, which was a common name for slaves, literally means useful. Contrary to his name, though, Onesimus had formerly been useless. Maybe he wasn't a very good worker, and then on top of that he stole from his master and ran away. He was useless, Paul says in verse 11 (*achreston*). But now he has become useful (*euchreston*). Now Onesimus is living up to his name, and not just in his physical work, but as a spiritual worker, too.

Paul speaks of Onesimus with such affection, in the hope of stirring up the same kind of affection in Philemon's heart. He continues in verse 12, "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart." This is a powerful way of communicating how precious Onesimus was to him. This appeal is all about the heart. Paul intentionally presents his request to Philemon in these heart-felt statements. He is not aiming just at a rational decision on Philemon's part. He wants to evoke deep love and compassion and forgiveness.

In verse 13 Paul shows that he is not just *saying* nice things about Onesimus. Onesimus had become so valuable and so dear to him, that Paul wishes he could keep

him there in Rome. Then he pulls on those heartstrings again, in the second half of verse 13: “in order that he might serve me *on your behalf* during my imprisonment for the gospel.” Philemon, don’t you want to help old Paul in prison, and here’s Onesimus, your slave, doing that very thing. He has been helping me. I want him here with me. That does seem to be a pretty clear hint that it would please Paul greatly if Philemon released his slave and sent him back to Rome. Paul, though, did not want to compel Philemon to follow any specific course of action. He didn’t explicitly tell him to do this or that. Instead, as he says in verse 14, “I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.”

Paul appeals for love’s sake. He directs his appeal to Philemon’s heart.

3) In verses 15-16 Paul also appeals on the basis of God’s sovereignty.

Notice the passive verb in verse 15: “For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while . . .” That’s a euphemistic way of referring to the fact that Onesimus ran away. But Paul wants Philemon to see this situation from a different perspective. Onesimus “was parted” from Philemon for a while, and that passive verb is what we call a divine passive. It’s a way of saying that God was ultimately the One who caused this to happen. It was part of God’s plan for Onesimus to steal from Philemon and run away to Rome.

Then look at the purpose: “*that* you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.” In God’s sovereignty, what has happened here is an incredibly good thing. Paul wants Philemon to see it from that perspective.

It reminds me of Genesis 50:20, where Joseph says to his brothers, “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.” In a similar way, Onesimus meant evil against his master. But in God’s good plan, this was for the purpose of bringing Onesimus to Rome to hear the Gospel from Paul and be changed forever. And now Onesimus comes back home, and the relationship between slave and master is going to be radically different, because now the two of them are brothers in Christ. That new relationship may lead Philemon to free his slave, as Paul seems to be suggesting. But even if that doesn’t happen, or doesn’t happen immediately, the relationship in the Lord will certainly overshadow their relationship as slave and master.

God has brought about something very good through some events that seemed very bad. And thus, Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of God’s sovereignty.

4) Paul appeals personally.

In verse 17 he says, “So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.” It’s not until here that Paul actually gets around to stating a clear request. He’s been leading up to it all along, and finally here he says it. He wants Philemon to receive Onesimus back as he would receive Paul. Paul presents this request very personally. He says, “if you consider me your partner (*koinonos*) . . .” They are partners in the faith. And Paul uses that partnership to plead his case. He’s saying, Philemon, we’re partners. We’re partners in the cause of Christ. And I’m excited about what God has done in the life of Onesimus. Please, receive him back kindly and graciously. In fact, receive him as you would receive me. Receive him as a partner, as a fellow-believer, as a beloved brother.

It's because of Paul's relationship with Philemon that he can state the request this way. There was a mutual respect and admiration between them, and so Paul can appeal to Philemon in this very personal way.

5) He appeals practically.

In verse 18 Paul recognizes that there may be some practical ramifications of what has happened, and he offers to make it right. He acknowledges that Onesimus has wronged Philemon and owes him. It was probably a sizeable debt that he owed. Philemon would have had to hire other workers or buy another slave to replace Onesimus. Then there was the merchandise that Onesimus had stolen in order to fund his trip to Rome. Philemon was apparently a man of some means, but this still would have affected his financial situation in a significant way.

So Paul addresses this practical matter. He doesn't want money to get in the way of forgiveness. Therefore he offers to pay the debt, himself.

This is Paul's appeal to Philemon, and we'll continue next week with the remaining verses. But we've seen this morning how Paul appeals for love's sake. He directs his appeal to Philemon's heart. He appeals on the basis of God's sovereignty. He appeals personally and practically.

Now, I want to step back and look at this situation from three different angles. I want to look at it from the perspective of the three different men who are involved: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul. As we look at each of these roles, we'll see that there's application for all of us, because throughout our lives we will find ourselves in these various roles. Let's consider them.

### **Philemon**

First, from the perspective of Philemon. Philemon is the man in this situation who needed to forgive. He had been wronged, and now he is confronted with this letter from his beloved brother and partner in the ministry, asking him to forgive. We can all identify with Philemon in this, because we live in a sinful world and people sin against us and against our loved ones. People don't act as they ought, and often times we will be the victim of another person's sin.

As Christians, we're called to forgive, which is never an easy thing to do. It was certainly not an easy thing for Philemon. There would have been cultural pressures to severely punish a slave who had run away. After all, what kind of message would it send to other slaves if Onesimus was not punished, let alone set free? And deeper than that, what about the hurt that Philemon still felt inside. A grave injustice had been done. Presumably, Philemon had been a kind and just master, and yet Onesimus stole from him and ran away. That may have badly damaged Philemon's reputation in the community. People may have suspected him of being cruel to this slave, prompting him to run away. There would have been all kinds of emotional scars and painful memories that rose to the surface at the sight of Onesimus. Philemon had to deal with all of these barriers to forgiveness.

He needed to look at the big picture of God's sovereignty and see that God ordained these events, as painful as they were. God allowed this to happen in order to bring about something miraculous: the salvation and return of Onesimus.

Philemon also needed to look at his need to forgive in light of his need to be forgiven. This is what puts forgiveness in the proper context. As Christians, we have been forgiven much, and therefore we must forgive much. To do otherwise is sheer

hypocrisy, like the unforgiving slave in Matthew 18 who was forgiven his debt of ten thousand talents but showed no mercy to his fellow slave who owed him a hundred denarii.

At various points in life we will find ourselves in the place of Philemon, needing to forgive. By God's grace we will extend that forgiveness, because we're aware that we are always in the place of Onesimus, the one who needs to be forgiven. Let's look at this story from his vantage point now.

### **Onesimus**

Onesimus had sinned. He had done wrong. He had then encountered the Gospel of Jesus Christ and was changed. And now he is returning to his master with a repentant heart and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation. I just mentioned some of the difficulties Philemon faced in granting forgiveness. Well, Onesimus was also in a precarious position seeking forgiveness. He had no idea what was in store for him. He didn't know if he would, in fact, be forgiven, or if he would be flogged or sold or executed. It's a risky thing to forgive. It's also a risky thing to ask for forgiveness. But it is the right thing to do. We need to ask one another for forgiveness when we sin, even if we're fearful of what the response might be.

Most importantly we need to seek God's forgiveness. There are many sins that we commit directly against other human beings, but every single sin, whether in word or deed or thought, is a direct offense against God. He is our Master. We are His slaves. And we have run from Him. We have stolen from Him. We have slandered His Name and dragged His reputation through the dirt. And here we stand, like Onesimus, in desperate need of His forgiveness. We deserve punishment. We deserve to be executed, and to suffer forever in hell because of our sin. But there is One who has made an appeal on our behalf.

### **Paul**

This leads us to the last perspective: that of Paul, who assumes the role of the peacemaker. He is the one who pleads the case of Onesimus. He appeals to Philemon, asking him to forgive. This is another role that we will need to take on in certain situations. There will be times when we need to speak the truth in love to a brother or sister in Christ and impress upon them the urgent need to forgive someone who has wronged them. If a fellow believer is harboring bitterness and refusing to forgive, that is something we need to confront. Paul gives us a good example to follow.

What is so beautiful to see here is that Paul's role, making an appeal to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, points to Jesus Christ's role in our salvation. For Jesus Christ makes an appeal to God the Father on behalf of sinners like us. This is the Gospel, friends. Like Onesimus, we stand in desperate need of forgiveness. There is enmity and hostility between us and God because of our sins. We need to be forgiven. We need Him to accept us, but we can't be accepted as we are. The Good News that is presented in the Bible is that God sent Jesus Christ to be the peacemaker. Jesus Christ pleads our case before the Father. For all who trust in Him, He says just what Paul said in verse 18: "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account." And that's just what the Father did. When Jesus died on the cross, every wrong we've done, every debt we owe, was charged to Christ's account. He suffered our punishment. He paid our debt. And as Paul says in verse 17, Jesus says to the Father, "receive him as you would

receive Me.” Our sins are credited to Christ on the cross, and His righteousness is credited to us, so that God receives us just as He would receive Christ.

As believers, let’s marvel at Christ’s peacemaking work on our behalf. And for unbelievers, you must know that you are in a very dangerous position. Apart from Christ, you are under God’s wrath. You must recognize that you need forgiveness, and you must humbly request that forgiveness, and you must see that Jesus Christ is your only hope.

In another letter that Paul wrote, he said this: “We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:20-21). This is such a beautiful articulation of the Gospel. It shows that our sin is charged to Christ’s account, so that we can then be accepted by God as righteous. Our debt is counted as Christ’s, and His righteousness is counted as ours.