

The Books of Titus, Philemon, and Jude, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 7: Paul's Appeal for Onesimus

Philemon 1-11

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally and pastorally at stake in this lesson is how the gospel addresses deep social wrong, in this case the painful reality of first-century slavery, and how it creates a new family that crosses every human division. The teacher should handle the historical setting of slavery with care, making clear that the New Testament does not endorse or bless slavery. Rather, the gospel plants principles that undermine it from within: it declares slave and master equal before God, makes them brothers in Christ, and so dissolves the very logic on which slavery rests. Paul's appeal that Onesimus be received as a beloved brother is quietly revolutionary.

The passage also models a gospel way of seeking change in others. Paul, who could have commanded, chooses instead to appeal in love (vv. 8-9). He grounds his appeal in Philemon's known faith and love, and he frames Onesimus's conversion in the language of new birth and family. The teacher should draw out both the relational wisdom of love over coercion and the doctrinal truth that conversion makes a person a new creation and a member of God's family, regardless of social status.

The formational aim is twofold. First, help students see every person, even the one they have written off, through the lens of gospel transformation, as Paul saw the runaway Onesimus. Second, help them adopt Paul's posture of loving appeal rather than coercion in their own difficult relationships. Send them home with a larger view of the family of God and a softer, more hopeful way of seeing and seeking the people around them.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul opens by identifying himself as "a prisoner for Christ Jesus" rather than as an apostle giving orders (v. 1). What does it reveal about Paul, and about the way the gospel works, that he chooses to appeal in love rather than command by authority (vv. 8-9)?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice immediately how Paul presents himself: not "Paul, an apostle," but "Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus." He sets aside the title that would carry the most weight and approaches Philemon as a fellow servant in chains for the gospel. This self-presentation shapes the entire letter; Paul will persuade, not command.

Help students see the wisdom and the gospel character of this choice. Paul says explicitly in verses 8 and 9 that though he is bold enough to command, he prefers to appeal for love's sake. He wants Philemon's goodness to be voluntary, springing from a transformed heart, not extracted by pressure. Coerced goodness is not the goodness the gospel produces.

Connect this to how God Himself works with us. God has the right to command, and He does give commands, yet He also woos, appeals, and invites, desiring willing love rather than mere compliance. Paul's method mirrors the gospel's own way of changing people from the inside.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Loving appeal over coercion as a gospel method of seeking change
- Voluntary goodness springing from a transformed heart
- Paul setting aside privilege to persuade as a fellow servant
- God's pattern of inviting willing love, not mere compliance

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul choose to appeal rather than command?
- What is the difference between coerced compliance and willing goodness?
- How does Paul's method reflect the way God works with us?

Question 2

Student Question:

Paul could have pulled rank but instead appeals "for love's sake" (v. 9). In your own relationships, when you want someone to change, do you tend to reach first for pressure and authority, or for patient, loving appeal? What might change if you followed Paul's example with one difficult person in your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes Paul's "for love's sake" (v. 9) into the student's own relationships. Most of us, when we want someone to change, reach instinctively for pressure, guilt, authority, or ultimatum. Paul models a better way, and the question invites honest reflection on our default approach.

Help students see why loving appeal is usually more powerful, even if slower. Pressure may produce outward compliance but often breeds resentment and rarely changes the heart. Patient, loving appeal respects the other person's freedom and gives the Spirit room to work. It is the harder, better path.

Move toward one relationship. Ask each student to identify one difficult person they have been trying to change by pressure, and to consider what loving appeal would look like there: a gentler

conversation, more patience, more prayer, an invitation rather than a demand. The goal is one concrete shift in approach.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Pressure versus loving appeal in seeking change
- The limits of coercion to change the heart
- Respecting others' freedom as the Spirit works
- Patience and prayer as instruments of real change

Discussion Prompts

- Do you reach first for pressure or for loving appeal? Why?
- Why does pressure often fail to change the heart?
- With which difficult person could you try Paul's approach?

Question 3

Student Question:

Paul thanks God for Philemon's "love" and "faith" toward the Lord Jesus and "all the saints" (vv. 4-5). How does Paul connect a person's faith in Christ with their love for fellow believers, and why does genuine faith always express itself in love for God's people?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Draw out the way Paul links faith and love in verses 4 and 5. He thanks God for Philemon's "love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints." The two are woven together: faith toward Christ overflows into love for Christ's people. Genuine faith is never merely vertical; it always works itself out horizontally in love.

Reinforce this from the wider New Testament. John writes bluntly that anyone who claims to love God while hating his brother is a liar (1 John 4:20). Faith that does not produce love for fellow believers is suspect. Philemon's reputation for love is, in effect, the evidence of his real faith.

Apply it to the appeal Paul is about to make. He is reminding Philemon of his track record of love precisely so that this love will reach one more person, the hardest one. Genuine faith should make Philemon willing to do the very thing his faith requires. Help students see that real faith is tested at exactly the points where love is most costly.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith in Christ overflowing into love for the saints (1 John 4:20-21)
- The horizontal expression of vertical faith
- Love for fellow believers as evidence of genuine faith

- Faith tested at the point of costly love

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul connect faith in Christ with love for His people?
- Why is love for fellow believers evidence of real faith?
- Where is your faith being tested at the point of costly love?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul says he is encouraged because through Philemon “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed” (v. 7). Who in your life refreshes your heart, and whose heart are you refreshing? What is one specific way you could be a source of refreshment to another believer this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question takes up the lovely image of verse 7: through Philemon, “the hearts of the saints have been refreshed.” Refreshment is a beautiful and specific ministry, the lifting of others’ spirits, the easing of their burdens, the renewal of their courage. Help students consider who plays that role in their own lives.

Encourage gratitude first. Naming those who refresh us, who encourage, who show up, who lighten the load, cultivates thankfulness and helps us recognize the value of this ministry. Such people are gifts, and they are often unsung.

Then turn it outward. Paul commends Philemon as a refresher of hearts; the question asks whether the student is one too. Refreshing others is within everyone’s reach: a word of encouragement, a practical kindness, presence in a hard time. Ask each student to name one specific person they could refresh this week and how.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The ministry of refreshing others’ hearts (Proverbs 11:25)
- Gratitude for those who encourage and lighten our burdens
- Encouragement as a ministry within everyone’s reach
- Becoming a giver, not only a receiver, of refreshment

Discussion Prompts

- Who refreshes your heart, and how?
- Whose heart are you refreshing right now?
- How could you refresh one believer specifically this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul prays that the sharing of Philemon's faith may become effective "for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ" (v. 6). What does this teach about the purpose of sharing our faith, and how does active gospel partnership deepen our own understanding of what we have in Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Unpack Paul's prayer in verse 6, which is dense but rich: that the "sharing" of Philemon's faith may become "effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ." The word translated sharing is *koinonia*, partnership or fellowship. Paul prays that Philemon's active partnership in the faith would deepen his grasp of all that believers have in Christ.

Draw out the principle: we come to know the riches of the gospel more fully as we actively share and live it, not merely as we study it in the abstract. Faith that is exercised in partnership and generosity grows in understanding. Doing the truth deepens our knowledge of the truth.

Apply it to the appeal. Paul is praying that as Philemon acts on his faith, including in the costly matter of Onesimus, he will come to understand even more deeply the grace he himself has received. Help students see that obedience and active faith are not just expressions of what we know; they are also how we come to know more.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Partnership (*koinonia*) in the faith as the context for deeper knowledge
- Knowing the gospel more fully by actively living and sharing it
- Obedience as a path to deeper understanding (John 7:17)
- Active faith deepening our grasp of grace

Discussion Prompts

- What does this verse teach about the purpose of sharing our faith?
- How does actively living the gospel deepen our understanding of it?
- Where might obedience teach you something study alone cannot?

Question 6**Student Question:**

Paul's whole appeal rests on the assumption that Philemon's faith should shape even his hardest decisions. Where is your faith being tested right now in a decision that involves forgiving, releasing, or restoring someone? How is Christ asking your faith to govern that choice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question presses the truth that genuine faith should govern our hardest decisions. The whole letter assumes Philemon's faith will shape what he does about Onesimus, the forgiving, releasing, and restoring of one who wronged him. Help students locate a parallel test in their own lives.

Invite honest identification. Most people are carrying some decision that involves forgiving a wrong, releasing a grudge, or restoring a broken relationship. These are exactly the places where faith is most severely tested, because they cost us something and require us to trust God with the outcome.

Point to Christ as both model and power. We forgive because we have been forgiven (Ephesians 4:32). The strength to release and restore comes from remembering how much we ourselves have received. Ask each student to name the specific decision where their faith is being tested and one step of faith-governed obedience they can take.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Faith that governs our hardest decisions, especially forgiveness
- Forgiving and restoring as tests of real faith (Ephesians 4:32)
- Trusting God with the outcome of costly obedience
- Christ's forgiveness as the model and power for ours

Discussion Prompts

- Where is your faith being tested in a hard decision right now?
- What makes forgiving and restoring such severe tests of faith?
- What step of faith-governed obedience could you take this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul calls Onesimus "my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment" (v. 10), describing his conversion in the language of new birth and family. What does this teach about how the gospel creates a whole new family that crosses every social line, and how it redefines who our true brothers and sisters are?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Focus on the family language of verse 10: Onesimus is "my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment." Paul describes conversion as a new birth that creates family bonds. The runaway slave is now Paul's spiritual son and, by extension, Philemon's brother. The gospel has created a relationship the social order had no category for.

Draw out the radical, leveling power of this. In Christ there is neither slave nor free (Galatians 3:28); all who are born again become children of God and members of one family. This new

family crosses every line that ordinarily divides people, status, ethnicity, history, and redefines who our true brothers and sisters are.

Apply it to the church today. The same gospel that made a slave and a master brothers still creates a family that transcends the divisions of our world. Help students see fellow believers, across every social and cultural line, as genuine family, and to let that reality reshape how they relate to those who are different from them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Conversion as new birth into the family of God
- In Christ, neither slave nor free; all one family (Galatians 3:26–28)
- The new family crossing every social and ethnic line
- The church as a family that transcends worldly divisions

Discussion Prompts

- How does the gospel create a family that crosses every social line?
- How does new birth redefine who our true brothers and sisters are?
- How should this reshape the way we relate to believers unlike us?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul, an old man in chains, still led a runaway slave to Christ (vv. 9–10). No circumstance was too limiting for him to be fruitful. What circumstance in your own life, a limitation, a hardship, a confinement of some kind, are you treating as a reason you cannot serve God right now? How might He use you exactly where you are?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question draws on the remarkable fact that Paul, “an old man and now a prisoner” (v. 9), still bore fruit by leading Onesimus to Christ in chains. No circumstance was too limiting for God to use him. Help students confront the limitation they treat as an excuse for fruitlessness.

Name the common excuses gently. We tell ourselves we will serve God when we are less busy, healthier, more settled, freer, in a different season. Paul, confined and aging, simply served where he was, with whom he was, and a soul was saved. God specializes in working through limited circumstances.

Move toward one concrete reframe. Ask each student to name the circumstance they have been treating as a reason they cannot serve, and to consider how God might use them precisely within it. Often the very limitation becomes the platform, as Paul’s imprisonment put him in the path of a runaway slave.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Fruitfulness within limiting circumstances (Philippians 1:12–14)
- Excuses that postpone service to a better season
- God working through, not around, our limitations
- Serving with whom and where we are right now

Discussion Prompts

- What limitation are you treating as a reason you cannot serve?
- How did God use Paul's confinement for fruit?
- How might God use you exactly where you are this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Onesimus was “formerly useless” but is “now indeed useful” because of his conversion (v. 11), and Paul is sending him back into a setting shaped by the painful reality of slavery. How does this letter show that the gospel does not endorse slavery but undermines it, transforming master and slave into brothers in Christ, and what does this teach about how the gospel addresses injustice?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal and pastoral block of the lesson, and it must be handled with care: how the gospel addresses the painful reality of slavery. State plainly at the outset that the New Testament does not endorse, bless, or institutionalize slavery. Scripture elsewhere lists slave traders among the lawless and ungodly (1 Timothy 1:10). The question is how the gospel works against such a deep-rooted social evil.

Show the gospel's strategy of transformation from within. Rather than calling for an immediate, violent overthrow of the Roman social order, which would have been crushed and would have obscured the gospel, the New Testament plants principles that dissolve slavery's foundations. It declares slave and master equally made in God's image, equally in need of grace, equally redeemed, and equally members of one family. Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus “no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother” (v. 16). Once a master must regard his slave as a beloved brother and equal before God, the entire logic of owning him collapses.

Help students appreciate both the wisdom and the cost of this approach. The strength of inside-out transformation is that it changes hearts, not just laws, and creates the very conviction that later abolished slavery where the gospel took root. The cost is that it can look slow, and to those suffering injustice, slowness is painful. The teacher should not pretend the question is simple. But the trajectory of the gospel is unmistakable: it treats every person as bearing God's image

and worthy of love, and that conviction, fully embraced, leaves no room for treating people as property.

Bring it to the present. The same gospel that undermined ancient slavery still confronts every system and attitude that treats people as less than image-bearers of God. Help students see that the dignity of every person, the equality of all in Christ, and the call to love even those society devalues are not modern add-ons to the faith but flow from its very heart. Keep the tone serious and hopeful, honoring both the gravity of the injustice and the transforming power of the gospel.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The New Testament does not endorse slavery; it condemns slave trading (1 Timothy 1:10)
- The gospel undermining slavery from within by making slave and master brothers (Philemon 16)
- The equal dignity of all people as image-bearers and the equality of all in Christ (Galatians 3:28)
- Transformation of hearts as the root of lasting social change, with its strengths and its costs
- The gospel's enduring confrontation with every system that treats people as less than image-bearers

Discussion Prompts

- How does this letter show the gospel undermining rather than endorsing slavery?
- What are the strengths and costs of changing hearts before changing structures?
- How does the gospel's view of human dignity still confront injustice today?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across these verses. Paul has shown you love that appeals rather than commands, faith that refreshes others, and a gospel that turns the useless into the useful and strangers into family. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this passage. What is the single truth from Philemon 1–11 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson into one personal takeaway. Encourage students to land on something specific, whether about how they seek change in others, how they see the family of God, or how they view a person they had written off.

Trace the movement of the passage. Paul appealed in love rather than commanding, gave thanks for a faith that refreshed others, and rejoiced over a runaway transformed into a useful

brother. Running through it all is a gospel powerful enough to change both the useless person and the hard relationship.

Close on hope. The transformation of Onesimus is a standing rebuke to every despairing verdict we pass on people, including ourselves. Ask each student to name the one truth they most need to carry into the week, and one person, perhaps themselves, they will begin to see through the lens of gospel hope.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Gospel hope for the person we had written off
- Loving appeal as the Christian way of seeking change
- The family of God crossing every human division
- Carrying one specific, applied truth into the week

Discussion Prompts

- What one truth from this passage do you most need this week?
- Whom do you need to start seeing through the lens of gospel hope?
- How is Christ forming you through this letter so far?