

The Books of Titus, Philemon, and Jude

Lesson 7: Paul's Appeal for Onesimus -- Philemon 1-11

It is the shortest of Paul's letters, just a single page, and it is also one of the most personal and tender things he ever wrote. There is no grand treatment of doctrine here, no sweeping argument about justification or the last days. Instead there is a story about three men caught in a painful, awkward, real-life situation, and a gospel that is quietly powerful enough to transform it. Paul is in prison. A runaway slave named Onesimus has somehow found him there, has heard the gospel, and has come to faith. Now Paul is sending him back to the very master he wronged, carrying this letter in his hand.

Philemon was a Christian, a man in whose home the church met, a man Paul calls "our beloved fellow worker" (v. 1). Onesimus had been his slave and had run away, perhaps after stealing from him. Under Roman law, Philemon held enormous power over Onesimus; runaways could be branded, imprisoned, even executed. Into that legal and emotional minefield Paul steps, not with a command, but with an appeal. He will ask Philemon to receive Onesimus back, and to receive him not merely as a returning slave but as something the law had no category for: a beloved brother.

Notice how Paul begins. Before he says a word about the difficult request, he pours out thanksgiving for Philemon. "I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints" (vv. 4-5). Paul is not flattering him. He is reminding Philemon, and us, of who he already is in Christ, a man known for love and faith. The appeal that follows will simply ask Philemon to let that love reach one more person, the one it would be hardest to love.

Then comes the gentle wordplay at the heart of the passage. The name Onesimus means "useful," and Paul says that this man, "formerly useless to you, but now indeed useful to you and to me" (v. 11), has been transformed. The gospel does that. It takes the useless and makes them useful, takes the estranged and makes them family, takes a runaway and a master and binds them together as brothers. As you read this letter, watch how the gospel works not by abolishing a hard situation overnight but by changing the hearts inside it, and ask where it might be asking you to see someone differently.

Group Discussion: Paul appeals to Philemon to receive back Onesimus, a runaway slave who has become a Christian, no longer merely as property but as a beloved brother (vv. 10-11, and the verses to come). The gospel does not announce a slave revolt; instead it transforms the relationship from the inside out. Why do you think God so often works to change hearts and relationships from within rather than only by changing external structures? What are the strengths and the costs of that approach?

Personal Reflection: Paul describes Onesimus as “formerly useless to you, but now indeed useful” (v. 11), a man the gospel had completely changed. Is there someone you have quietly written off as useless, hopeless, or beyond change, perhaps even yourself? How does the transformation of Onesimus challenge the way you see that person, and what would it look like to begin extending gospel hope toward them?

Read Philemon 1–11

Study Questions

1. 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)?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Galatians 3:26–28, all one in Christ, neither slave nor free; 2 Corinthians 5:16–17, no longer regarding anyone according to the flesh, for in Christ there is a new creation; 1 Corinthians 7:20–24, living faithfully in one's situation while valuing freedom; Colossians 4:7–9, Onesimus named as a faithful and beloved brother; Matthew 18:21–35, the forgiven who are called to forgive.