

New Testament Studies

Philemon

(RVS Notes)

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Philemon—Redemptive Love

Introduction—In this short letter highlighting redemptive love, Paul writes to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon living in Colosse, wronged his master, robbed him, and escaped. He made his way to Rome to lose himself in the masses of that metropolis but instead encountered Paul and converted. He proved himself an eager and useful servant of the Lord Jesus. However, Paul and Onesimus both knew Onesimus had a responsibility to return to his master. Paul sent Onesimus back to Colosse with Tychicus, bearer of the letter to the Colossians (Col 4:9), and penned this poignant request to Philemon on Onesimus' behalf.

Philemon was probably won to the Lord Jesus during Paul's Ephesian ministry described in Acts 19. He was a person of means and hosted the church at Colosse in his home (2). He was a benevolent man (5-7) and his son Archippus may well have been the pastor of the church at Colosse (Col. 4:17; Phile. 2). Paul, under house arrest at Rome in the early 60s, writes this plea for Onesimus that initiates a transition from bondage to brotherhood brought about by Christian love and forgiveness.

Where is God's restorative grace badly needed in our families, our churches, our communities? How can God's people stand in the middle, holding out our arms to people on either side, bridging the gap and bringing together those divided by large or small matters, ready to be peacemakers and reconcilers in the name of the Lord Jesus?

Guiding Concepts:

Substitutionary atonement—The punishment for a runaway slave was grim indeed in ancient Rome and Paul pleads for mercy. If Onesimus has wronged Philemon in any way, Paul asks Philemon to put it against Paul's account. This is a wonderful picture of the Lord's substitutionary atonement on our accounts. Jesus' achievement in reconciling humanity with God is really put into effect when his people follow the same pattern. When the people of God allow the cross to shape their whole lives, the love of God is set free to change and heal in ways that we cannot at the moment even imagine.

Slavery—Philemon was a slave-owner, something we now regard as abhorrent. But in ancient society, slavery was something you could not imagine society existing without, like imagining modern society without electricity, or gasoline, or automobiles. It was an institution deeply embedded in Roman and in every ancient society. While this letter is not a direct attack on the institution of slavery, indeed such an attack does not appear in the New Testament, it does illustrate Christian principles that lead to slavery's renunciation.

Summary Outline: **Philemon—Plea for Onesimus**

Thanksgiving for and commendation of Philemon (1-7)

Plea for Onesimus (8-22)

Conclusion and benediction (23-25)

Philemon—Redemptive Love

Thanksgiving for and commendation of Philemon (1-7)—Paul praises Philemon and prays for spiritual maturity in his Christian brother. Indeed, his request for mercy to Onesimus and even emancipation (13, 16, 21) will require it given the customs of the age.

Well-to-do homeowners in which house churches met were normally honored patrons of the group. The letter addresses, Philemon, his wife, Apphia, and possibly his son and a local pastor. Wives of well-to-do men were often the actual household manager, including the activities of the slaves of the household.

Plea for Onesimus (8-22)—In pleading for forgiveness and restitution for Onesimus without significant punishment obvious to all, Paul was confronting social and economic assumptions head-on. Verses 13, 16, and 21, even hint at emancipation. This defied Roman legal tradition and expectation.

In 8-9 and 18-19, Paul uses the rhetorical technique of “not mentioning something” that he then mentions as supporting his request. In 8-9, Paul’s age and situation is in view; in 18-19, Philemon’s huge spiritual debt, his new life in Christ, is in view. The point of the appeal is how could one enslave again the son of one’s own spiritual patron. Paul seems to be hinting at Onesimus’ emancipation (13, 16, 21).

1:11-12—Here, Paul engages in a word play on Onesimus’ name. Onesimus meant “useful” or “profitable”, something he certainly had not been for Philemon. But the apostle goes beyond that. A tender father-son relationship had arisen between Paul and Onesimus. This was not the kind of treatment a runaway slave could expect from anyone.

1:15-16—Paul urges Philemon to take Onesimus back without punishment as better than a slave, but as a dear brother in Christ. The contrast is stark. A runaway slave, the most demeaning of all situations in the Empire at the time, is contrasted with an eternal relationship with the Lord of glory and a place in the community of faith. “[B]etter than a slave” (16) and “doing even more than I ask” (21) suggests emancipation.

1:17-20—What Paul does here reflects the infinitely greater intercession and redemptive act of Christ for us. Because of our sin, we are all indebted to God in a way that we cannot ourselves ever repay.

In some ways, this represents a lot of cheek in status-conscious Roman society. Paul is telling a social superior (Philemon is a prominent dude) who respects and indeed owes his spiritual renewal to Paul’s ministry, that they were equals and if you accept that Onesimus is my agent, you must accept him as you accept me, your equal. Paul’s second use of “not mentioning something” that he then mentions punches home the huge spiritual debt that Philemon owes.

1:22—Well-to-do patrons often offered hospitality. Indeed, providing lodging for a prominent guest was regarded an honor.

Conclusion and benediction (23-25)—These co-workers are also mentioned in the conclusion of the letter to the Colossians. This has occasioned much discussion concerning the authorship of Colossians and Philemon, both for and against coming from Paul’s hand.

Takeaway—Where is God’s restorative grace badly needed in our families, our churches, our communities? How can God’s people stand in the middle, holding out our arms to people on either side, bridging the gap and bringing together those divided by large or small matters, ready to be peacemakers and reconcilers in the name of the Lord Jesus?

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