

Philemon

I. Setting

Philemon is the 16th book of the New Testament and 11th among the Epistles. The Epistles, or letters, are the primary doctrinal portions of the New Testament.

It is not that Gospels and Acts do not contain doctrine, but that the purpose of the Epistles is to explain to churches and individuals how to appropriate the teachings of Jesus.

Jesus' earthly life models ministry. In every area of ministry we must apply the example of Christ. He was filled with the Spirit, sought to honor God, put a high value on people and lowered Himself as the servant of all.

Once He ascended to heaven, He poured His Spirit out on believers and the New Testament church was formed. Acts focuses upon the birth, establishment and furtherance of the work of God in the world through the church.

The Epistles are written to the church further explaining doctrine.

A. Philemon is part of a section among the Epistles commonly known as "The Prison Epistle" and includes Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Philemon.

1. Paul, while incarcerated in Rome, wrote these letters. The details of his imprisonment are recorded in Acts 28. From bits and pieces, we can deduce from the prison Epistles, it seems clear that Paul:

- a. Was incarcerated in Rome
- b. Was in a prison house rather than a jail cell
- c. Was chained to a guard
- d. Was able to have visitors
- e. Was free to write and even reach out with very effective ministry during these difficult years

B. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters

1. Consisting of only one chapter and 25 verses, Philemon can easily be read through multiple times in one sitting.
 - a. Although small its message is quite large and necessary for every believer.

C. Philemon is somewhat unique in that it is a personal letter, regarding a personal matter. The letter is not addressed to the

church as a whole, but to Philemon and others in leadership, regarding the proper treatment of Onesimus, a runaway slave.

- D. While Paul is clearly not overstepping his apostolic authority, he does in fact exercise his right to speak Biblical truth into the life of Philemon.
 - 1. This is perhaps one of the missing elements of the modern church. Many believers, whenever confronted with something they do not like, simply move on to another church where their actions are not known or worse yet, condoned.
- E. Although a personal letter, Philemon has a universal message. After being received by the church in Colossae, copies were sent to the church at large and quotations from Philemon are found as early as the 2nd century.
- F. Helpful verse to unlock Philemon:
 - 1. **Colossians 1:8-9** “I am sending Tychicus to you for this very purpose, that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts, with Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you that he may know your circumstances and comfort your hearts.”
 - a. Onesimus was sent from Rome, to Colossae along with Tychicus.
 - i. They were carrying the letter to the Colossians as well as this letter to Philemon.
 - ii. This letter was a personal appeal from Paul to Philemon requesting he show lenience on Onesimus.
 - iii. Philemon was well within his rights to arrest Onesimus for his actions. Onesimus would have to trust in the providence of God.
 - 2. **Colossians 4:17** “And say to Archippus, ‘Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you may fulfill it’”
 - a. Archippus is one of 3 to whom Philemon is addressed.

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- b. Philemon 2 reveals that a church met in his home, making his ministry to lead a home church or home fellowship.
- G. The main characters include:
- a. Paul the Apostle and Timothy
 - b. Philemon – a wealthy man from Colossae who no doubt encountered Paul during his ministry years in Ephesus. Philemon heard the Gospel, became a believer, began growing in Christ, and was now a leader in a home church in Colossae.
 - a. Paul refers to him as “our beloved and fellow laborer”
 - b. And states that “you owe me your own life besides” apparently referring to how Philemon came to faith in Christ.
 - c. Apphia – a female leader in the house church. It has been suggested that she is the wife of Philemon, although that cannot be substantiated.
 - d. Archippus – a leader in the house church who is referred to as a soldier along with Paul. Church history suggests he was the son of Philemon again this cannot be substantiated.
 - e. Onesimus – a slave belonging to Philemon, who apparently stole from his owner and ran away to Rome. While in Rome, he came into contact with Paul, came to faith in Christ, and began to serve the Lord by ministering to Paul.
 - a. Vs. 16 – “No longer a slave...”
 - b. Vs. 18 – “If he owes you anything, put it on my account...”
 - c. Vs. 10 – “My son Onesimus, who I have begotten while in my chains”
 - d. Vs. 11 – “He is profitable to me”
 - e. Vs. 13 – “Whom I wished to keep with me that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains...”
 - f. Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke were those who supported Paul in the writing of the letter

- H. Philemon is a story that speaks of the need for forgiveness. The book is named after its recipient, Philemon, who was a wealthy leader in the church in Colossae. His slave, Onesimus, had run away to Rome. While on the run, he met Paul and became a believer. Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ and forgive him of the wrongs he has committed. The theme of the Book is forgiveness and the power of the gospel of Christ to transform lives and culture.

II. Situation

- A. Philemon was a wealthy Christian leader from Colossae who had come to Christ through Paul's ministry. It seems most likely that while Paul ministered in Ephesus, Philemon heard the Gospel and came to Christ.
1. Sometime later, Onesimus, a servant of Philemon, stole from his master and fled to Rome. There he encountered Paul and came to faith in Christ. After some time of growing in the Lord, and faithfully serving the apostle, he was sent back to Colossae with a letter to the church, and to face his master.
 - a. Paul sent Onesimus to Colossae with a personal letter to Philemon, urging him to forgive Onesimus' trespass since he was now a brother in the Lord.

III. Outline

- A. JS Baxter gives the following outline:

B.

1. Verses 1-3 Intro
2. Verses 4-7 Paul's praise of Philemon
3. Verses 8-16 Paul's plea to Philemon
4. Verses 17-22 Paul's pledge to Philemon
5. Verses 23-25 Farewell

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IV. Doctrines in Philemon

A. The Providence of God

The backstory of Philemon powerfully illustrates the providence of God. While we do not have the details recorded for us, we can surmise that while ministering in Ephesus, Paul came in contact with Philemon, who put his trust in Christ. It seems that he then brought the Gospel home with him to Colossae, and a church began in his home.

Sometime later, a slave named Onesimus stole money from his owner and fled to Rome. There, through the divine hand of God he somehow made contact with Paul, came to faith in Christ and began to minister along with Paul.

It is baffling to think that in a city of 1.5 million people that Onesimus would come into contact not only with a Christian, but with one who had led his owner to Christ.

B. The Impact of Kingdom of God on the Kingdom of Men

1. The Bible uses very interesting terms to describe the child of God

- a. **John 17:16** "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world.
- b. **Philippians 3:20** "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; . . ."
- c. **Hebrews 11:13-16** "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them."
- d. **1 Peter 2:11** "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the Soul, . . ."

2. It is clear that as a child of God our allegiance is to another kingdom.
3. The question remains; how does the Christian affect social change?
 - a. The New Testament is not about fixing the social conditions of the world, but about bringing people into relationship with Christ and transforming their lives so they live for the kingdom of heaven rather than the kingdom of men.
4. Clearly, however, it is the desire of God, that as believers, we impact the world around us.
 - a. We are to impact the whole world.
 - i. **Matthew 5:13** “You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men.”
 - b. And we are to impact the home.
 - i. **1 Corinthians 7:14** “For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy.”
5. It seems clear; the Biblical approach to social change is one which works from the inside out. Rather than simply condemning culture, the Bible calls believers to live above the culture. If a person experiences the love, mercy, and grace of God by receiving His salvation, God will reform his soul, changing the way he thinks and acts.
 - a. We see it with marriage in the letter to the Corinthians.
 - b. We see it with the treatment of women as equals in the letter to the Galatians and to Timothy.
 - c. We see it here in Philemon as he inadvertently deals with the subject of slavery.
6. Slavery
 - a. Slavery has been, and tragically, continues to be a plague on humanity.

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- b. There are many forms of slavery.
 - i. Within the Roman Empire an estimated 40% of the population was made up of slaves.
 - ii. Some were slaves because they were prisoners of war, others were abandoned children, and there were those who were sold into slavery to pay off debt.
- c. Slavery that takes the form of indentured servitude, where a person works to pay off a debt, is not condemned in Scripture.
- d. Slavery, where a person is taken against their will and forced to become the property of another is clearly condemned in Scripture.
 - i. **Exodus 21:16** “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”
 - ii. **1 Timothy 1:9-10** “. . .the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners... for kidnapers...”
- e. Regardless of how the world looked upon the slave, within the church they were equals.
 - i. **1 Corinthians 12:13** “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body-whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves of free- and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.”
 - ii. **Ephesians 6:8** “. . .knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free.”
 - iii. **Galatians 3:28** “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; or you are all one in Christ Jesus.”
- f. The book of Philemon puts a face on the problem of slavery in the first century. Philemon was called upon to treat Onesimus not as a runaway slave, but as a repentant brother.

- i. “Social evils are soonest changed by transformed lives”
JSB
- g. When Christian men apply Christian principles to their own life and circumstances, the world will radically be changed.

C. Doctrine of Forgiveness

We have 3 main players in our story: Philemon the victim, Onesimus the offender, and Paul, a seemingly unconnected third party.

Paul exhorts Philemon to forgive Onesimus; if necessary placing the debt he owed on Paul’s account. Paul goes on to remind him that he in fact was a debtor to Paul. This is a perfect example of the Biblical doctrine of forgiveness.

1. Jesus paid a debt he did not owe, to forgive a debt we could not pay.
2. The Bible teaches that since we have been forgiven we should seek to forgive.
 - a. **Colossians 3:12-13** “Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do.”
 - b. **Matthew 5:39** “But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek; turn the other to him also.”
 - c. **Matthew 6:14-15** “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”
3. Jesus taught that this forgiveness should be continual.
 - a. **Matthew 18:21-22** “Then Peter came to Him and said, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven.’”
4. Some suggest that forgiveness is only necessary when a person is truly repentant or sorry. The scenario might look like this; Joe hurt

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Bob's feelings, Bob is unwilling to forgive because Joe will not admit that he did anything wrong or that he is sorry, so Bob feels justified in refusing to forgive. To justify this **Luke 17:3-4** is quoted:

"If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and *if he repents*, forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, '*I repent*,' you shall forgive him."

The problem with this argument is that it ignores all the texts that tell us to forgive, even if the person is not sorry and shows no sign of repentance.

5. Forgiveness is a choice.

When wronged, we have the choice to follow the example of Jesus and the commands of Scripture and forgive, or to follow the example of the world and our own emotions and hold back forgiveness.

- a. Unforgiveness is the seed that brings forth the fruit of bitterness.
 - b. What about forgive and forget?
 - i. What we cannot forget is what we actually need to forgive.
 - ii. We are in fact to forgive in the way God forgives.
 - c. It is not that God forgets our sins as much as he chooses not to remember them any longer. Obviously God, who is omniscient, has not lost His memory of our transgressions. Rather, He refuses to call them to mind. He promises not to bring them up.
 - i. **Hebrews 10:17** - "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more"
 - ii. **Isaiah 43:25** - "I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins."
- ## 6. Philemon expresses, in a very practically way, how forgiveness works in the church.

- a. Philemon had every right in the Roman culture to punish Onesimus. This punishment could be in form of beatings, imprisonment or even death.
- b. But Philemon was part of another kingdom, and the principle that governs that kingdom is that we forgive those who have wronged us.

D. Doctrine of Persuasion

It is common in the church to have believers who are failing to do the right thing. This was the case with Philemon. As a Christian, he is required to forgive the trespass of his repentant brother, but the pressure from the culture he lived in would persuade him to require restitution for being wronged. Paul writes to persuade him to do the right thing.

1. To begin with, it is important to note that Paul does not use apostolic authority to require proper behavior from Philemon.
 - a. **Philemon 1:8-9** “Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you. . .”
 - b. **Philemon 1:14** “But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.”
2. In addition to this it is also worth noting, instead of calling himself an apostle, he refers to himself as a prisoner, a fellow laborer and a fellow soldier.
 - a. He is compelling to Philemon as a brother, not forcing his will upon him as an apostle.
3. Secondly, it is worth noting, while Paul does not use apostolic authority, he does seek to persuade Philemon to proper behavior using everything at his disposal. He reminds him of the debt he owes.
 - a. **Philemon 1:19** “... not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides”

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- i. Paul risked his life to bring the Gospel to Asia, and Philemon was a recipient of that occurrence.
- b. Paul speaks of five other men who were in agreement with Paul, all of whom are godly men, and all of whom are entreating Philemon to do the right thing.
 - i. **Philemon 1:1** “. . . Timothy our brother. . .”
 - ii. **Philemon 1:23** – “Epaphras, my fellow prisoner. . .”
 - iii. **Philemon 1:24** “. . . Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke my fellow laborers. . .”
- c. We might, at times, feel bowled over when a group of believers attempts a form of intervention in our lives. But keep in mind; this is a great act of love. They are, in fact, risking relationship for your best.
- d. If you are not allowing the people who have always spoken into your life, to continue to speak into your life, then something is radically wrong. If the people who have loved and supported you for years, are now held at arms distance, because you know they do not approve of the choices or perhaps relationship in which you are involved, that should tell you something.
- e. While Paul did not use his apostolic authority to bear in Philemon’s life, he did bring the ‘muscle’ of other believers to convince Philemon to do what was right.