

THE BROTHERHOOD OF BELIEVERS

Please do not read these comments until you have read the Scripture for this lesson. First let the Holy Spirit teach you directly from His Word.

Introduction

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon in Colosse during his two year imprisonment at Rome (Acts 28:30). During his imprisonment, he was a constant witness and soul winner for the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 28:31; Phil 1:12-18). One of those whom Paul led to Christ was Onesimus, a slave of Philemon. He ran away from him and sought hiding in Rome (Philemon 1:10). Paul entreated Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a Christian brother (Philemon 1:16). This letter is unique in that it is a letter written about personal matters, not church matters or general matters that pertain to all believers.

I. Introduction — 1:1-3

A. Writer — 1:1a

1:1a — The letter to Philemon was written by Paul who called himself a prisoner of Jesus Christ (1:1, 9). Paul mentioned his imprisonment five times in this letter (1:1, 9, 10, 13, 23) but he also recognized the providential hand of God in this because he was the prisoner of Jesus Christ (cf. Gen 50:20). This would certainly have an effect upon the thinking of Philemon in his experience with Onesimus.

B. Recipients — 1:1b-2

1:1b-2 — The main recipient is Philemon who was Onesimus' master. Philemon seems to be a convert of Paul, probably converted during Paul's ministry at Ephesus (1:19; Acts 19:1, 8-10). Philemon appears to be a Gentile leader in the church at Colosse and Apphia was most likely his wife. Archippus may well have been their son. There is a beautiful illustration of Galatians 3:28 in this letter: Paul was a Jew, Philemon a Gentile, Apphia a woman and Onesimus a slave; all were united in Jesus Christ.

Philemon was called a "fellow laborer" which speaks of achievement. Apphia was considered a sister which shows her promotion in the family of God. Pagan cultures often treated women as mere chattel property. Archippus was addressed as a "fellow soldier" which speaks of his endurance and strength. Philemon had opened his home to the local church (cf. Rom 16:5; Col 4:15). It was not until the 3rd century that separate church buildings began to appear.

C. Greeting — 1:3

1:3 — "Grace" - It is unmerited favor that God has heaped upon undeserving Christians. It is the normal greeting of Paul. Paul wanted this fullness of blessing for Philemon.

"Peace" — It has often been relegated to three distinct areas: peace with God (salvation), the peace of God (sanctification), and peace with others as a result of the first two (reconciliation).

II. Paul's Thanksgiving for Philemon — 1:4-7

A. The Recipient of Thanksgiving — 1:4a

1:4a — Paul's thanksgiving for Philemon was directed toward God, not toward Philemon. Man by nature would use flattery when he requested something from a person, but Paul looked beyond Philemon to God. He thanked God because it was God who made Philemon the good man that he was through salvation in Jesus Christ.

B. The Cause for Thanksgiving — 1:5, 7

1. Philemon's spiritual example — 1:5

1:5 — Paul thanked God for Philemon because he had heard of his spiritual growth. Philemon had faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. The idea is that of aspiration; Philemon was always seeking to let Christ have fuller possession of his life. This faith originates with salvation but continues to grow as a believer feeds on the Word of God by applying it to his or her life (Heb 5:11-14).

Philemon expressed his faith by his love unto the saints. Faith was the root of his character, love was the fruit. His love was not mere sentimentality but an outward expression of true concern for others.

Note also that his love was without partiality; it was toward all saints. He avoided cliques and tried to love all of the believers alike.

2. Philemon's spiritual effect — 1:7

1:7 — Paul was in bonds but he had great joy and comfort as a result of Philemon's love because it had refreshed the saints. Philemon's love was practical - it met the needs of his fellow saints. Notice how good deeds done in one place can bless a believer in another place.

C. The Manner of Thanksgiving — 1:4b, 6

1. Consistent prayer — 1:4b

1:4b — Paul was consistent in praying for Philemon. The phrase does not mean he was always in prayer for Philemon but whenever he thought of Philemon, he prayed for him with thanksgiving.

2. Concerned prayer — 1:6

1:6 — Paul prayed that Philemon's faith might be shared effectively as he fully grasped the many spiritual blessings he had as a Christian. He prayed that Philemon would exercise his faith toward the saints. A knowledge of Christian brotherhood would cause him to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ, not as a slave. Peter, likewise, stressed the importance of understanding spiritual blessings in order to have spiritual strength to do difficult tasks (2 Pet 1:4-10). Paul's example stresses two things for leaders to do: pray and teach.

It is also true that a believer that acknowledges every good thing that the Holy Spirit accomplishes in his life, i.e. the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22, 23), he will be a more effective witness and soul winner. When the Spirit is free to produce His fruit in a believer's life, He makes that believer a more fruitful witness when he shares his faith in Christ.

III. Paul's Appeal to Philemon — 1:8-20

A. The Manner of His Appeal — 1:8, 9

1. That which he rejected — 1:8

1:8 — Paul had the authority as an apostle to command ("enjoin") Philemon, but he had confidence that Philemon would obey him because of his maturity in Christ. This word for command stresses authority. It is used of Jesus when He commanded the wind and waves to be still (Lk 8:24). Nevertheless, Paul decided against the use of a command.

2. That which he realized — 1:9

1:9 — "Beseech" - Paul decided to entreat or appeal to Philemon to listen to his advice. The word "beseech" is similarly used in 1 Tim 5:1 and stresses an appeal based upon love, concern and respect. Paul appealed to Philemon as an "aged" man. He appealed to Philemon's maturity and wisdom. In addition, he appealed as a prisoner of Jesus Christ; it was for eternal values, not for Paul's personal advantage, that he made his request. This does not mean that a leader can never command (see 1 Cor 4:21; 5:4, 5), but rather it means that he must use wisdom in his leadership.

B. The Content of His Appeal — 1:10-20

1. The person — 1:10-12

1:10-12 — The person for whom Paul appealed was Onesimus whom he had led to the Lord. Paul dearly loved Onesimus because of what he was in Christ. Before salvation he was unprofitable to Philemon - perhaps he had stolen from him when he left his master (1:18). Now salvation had changed Onesimus into a valuable aid in Paul's ministry. It shows the power of conversion. There are no hopeless cases for the power of Christ's blood. The name Onesimus was common for slaves and meant "profitable" or "useful."

Paul did not deal with the issue of slavery in this letter. That was not his purpose. His purpose was to reconcile two brothers in Christ: one a master and the other a slave. Since Onesimus became a Christian, a great change occurred in his character: before he became a Christian he was a slave running from his Master's yoke; now he was a brother returning to his master's house to serve with a willing spirit.

2. The purpose — 1:13-20

a. Paul's desire — 1:13

1:13 — Paul's desire was to keep Onesimus because he was so useful to his ministry in Rome. Paul even considered the fact that Onesimus was now serving him in place of Philemon, who could not be in Rome. However, it was a violation of Roman law to keep a runaway slave. Paul said in reality, "Him I would detain but he is yours to retain" (cf 1:13-15).

b. Paul's deliberation — 1:14

1:14 — Even though Paul was torn between retaining Onesimus and returning him, he made the decision to return him because he knew that was his moral obligation. He did not want to use Onesimus without Philemon's approval. In addition, he wanted Philemon's approval to be given out of free Christian desire ("willingly"), not forced because of the circumstances.

c. Paul's deduction — 1:15, 16

1:15-16 — Paul indicated that perhaps Onesimus had fled so that God could providentially use this to bring about Onesimus' salvation. As a result Philemon only lost him temporarily, but now he would have Onesimus forever. Onesimus departed with evil motives but God meant it for good (cf. Gen 50:20). Now Philemon could accept him back as a person more than a slave; he could accept him as a Christian brother. This does not mean he was no longer a slave to Philemon but, rather, the relationship between the two transcended earthly relationships. True Christian relationships do not demean people for what they are socially, but commend them for how Christ can use them. So Philemon now had a brother for a slave.

d. Paul's decision — 1:17-20

1:17 — Paul then told Philemon that if he were truly his partner in the ministry, he would receive Onesimus as he would Paul. This meant that Onesimus would not receive the usual harsh treatment given to a returned slave.

1:18-19a — Paul recognized that Onesimus had wronged Philemon (either in robbing Philemon or in causing a loss of revenue due to his absence). Therefore, Paul asked Philemon to put that wrong on his own account. Onesimus' salvation did not release him from his moral obligations. This was no idle statement but something he fully intended to repay. This is a picture of our wrongs being placed on Jesus Christ. Onesimus was a slave and had no means whereby to repay his debt so Paul willingly offered to pay it for him. As lost sinners, we, too, were hopelessly unable to pay our debt of sin, but Jesus Christ intervened and paid our debt.

1:19b — Paul reminded Philemon, however, that he owed his own life to him. This seems to be a reference to Philemon's salvation through Paul's ministry. Philemon could never repay Paul for this nor was he expected to. Therefore, he should freely forgive and accept Onesimus.

1:20 — Philemon's cooperation in this matter would bring further joy to Paul.

IV. Paul's Expectation of Philemon — 1:21, 22**A. Concerning Onesimus — 1:21**

1:21 — Paul clearly anticipated and had confidence that Philemon would recognize his Christian duty and receive Onesimus back. Obedience to Christian duty is delightful when bathed in love and concern. Paul even anticipated that Philemon would do above His Christian duty.

B. Concerning Paul — 1:22

1:22 — Paul anticipated a visit to Philemon which indicates he expected to be released from prison in Rome. He asked Philemon to pray for his release. Paul believed in the power of prayer in spiritual warfare (Eph 6:18-20; cf. 6:10-17).

V. Benediction — 1:23-25

1:23-25 — Paul's letter concluded with greetings for fellow saints (regarding Demas, see 2 Tim 4:10-11).