

Study of Philemon

Wiersbe, W. W. (1992). [*Wiersbe's expository outlines on the New Testament*](#). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Introductory to Philemon

Introductory Notes to Philemon

I. The Man

Philemon was a Christian of Colosse (Phile. 2; see also Col. 4:9 and 16–17). It is possible that his son, Archippus, pastored the church at Laodicea (Col. 4:16–17); there was an assembly in Philemon's house too (v. 2). Philemon had been won to Christ through Paul's ministry (v. 19), possibly at Ephesus, since Paul had not visited Colosse personally.

II. The Letter

Onesimus was one of Philemon's slaves (v. 16) who had robbed his master and fled to Rome. By the providential leading of the Lord, this runaway slave met Paul, who led him to Christ. Legally, Philemon could have had his slave put to death for breaking the law, but Paul stepped in to intercede for the new Christian and to save his life. This brief letter speaks volumes to us, since it demonstrates in a vivid way the heart of the great apostle. His purposes for writing were: (1) to inform Philemon that his slave was not only safe but saved; (2) to ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus; (3) to request of Philemon that he prepare a room for Paul, who expected to be released shortly.

Of course, the main lesson of the letter is its picture of Christ as the Redeemer of lost sinners. Just as Paul was willing to pay the price to save disobedient Onesimus, so Christ paid the price on the cross for His wayward children. "Receive him as you would receive me," Paul wrote, reminding us that we are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6; 2 Cor. 5:21). The Christian will never enter heaven on his or her own merits. When the believer stands before the Father, Christ will have to say, "Receive him as Myself!" Thank God we have been covered by His righteousness!

III. Slavery

We need to remember that slavery was an accepted institution in the Roman Empire. Romans and Greeks brought multitudes of slaves (old and young) home from their wars, and the buying and selling of slaves was a daily part of life. Paul had a tender interest in slaves (1 Cor. 7:20–24; Col. 3:22–4:1; Eph. 6:5–9), encouraging them to be the best Christians possible and to win their freedom lawfully if they could. We do not

read that Paul specifically attacked the institution of slavery; the Gospel itself, preached and lived in the early church, ultimately destroyed this social problem. Paul's letter to Philemon is a classic example of how Christ changes a home and society by changing lives. It was not that Paul avoided the problem of slavery; rather, he realized the true solution would be found as men and women gave their hearts to Christ.

Philemon

I. Greeting

Paul's greeting in vv. 1–3 identifies him as a prisoner, a theme he repeats in vv. 7, 13, 22, and 23. Perhaps he wants to remind Philemon of the price he himself was paying, suggesting that anything Philemon might do for Onesimus would be insignificant in comparison. Of course, Paul was the prisoner of Christ, not of Rome, and he was not ashamed of his chains. Paul accomplished more from his Roman prison than we do as free citizens!

Apphia is called “beloved” or literally “the sister.” She was most certainly the wife of Philemon and the mother of Archippus (Col. 4:17). She would without doubt be concerned about Onesimus and would be playing an important role in the ministry of their “house” church.

II. Paul's Appreciation of Philemon (vv. 4–7)

A Spirit-led man will certainly be gracious and tactful, and Paul illustrates this attitude in his approach to the problem of the runaway slave. Instead of immediately pleading for the man's life, Paul first expressed sincere appreciation for his friend Philemon. This was not empty flattery; it was sincere Christian appreciation, “the love of God shed abroad” in Paul's heart.

Philemon sounds like the kind of man any of us would want to have as a friend. He was a man of love and faith (see Titus 3:15); after all, a love for the brethren is the best evidence of faith in Christ. Note in v. 5 the two-fold outreach of Philemon's life: upward to Christ and outward to others. See Gal. 5:6.

Philemon did not keep his faith to himself; he shared it (communicated) with others. Paul had been praying for Philemon, that his faith might “go to work” (be effectual) and be a blessing to others. Verse 7 indicates that Philemon was a “refreshing Christian” and the kind of man others appreciated. Philemon was about to face a serious test of his faith and love as he learned about the conversion of his slave, Onesimus.

III. Paul's Appeal for Onesimus (vv. 8–17)

Paul might have used his apostolic authority and commanded Philemon to forgive and receive Onesimus, but this would not have been right. For one thing, it would not help Philemon grow in grace or gain a real blessing from the experience. Law is a much

weaker motivation than love, and Paul wanted Philemon to broaden his spiritual understanding. This is why Paul uses the word “beseech” (v. 9).

Paul’s appeal is based on several factors. For one thing, he appeals to Philemon’s Christian love, a love which he had already praised (v. 5). Then Paul called the disobedient slave his own son in the faith, reminding Philemon that Onesimus was now a brother in Christ. The play on words in v. 11 is based on the meaning of the name “Onesimus,” which means “profitable.” In other words, Onesimus had already proved himself to be profitable to Paul’s Christian service in Rome. He was now the slave of Jesus Christ! Paul would have kept Onesimus as one of his own fellow laborers (v. 1), but he wanted to do nothing without his friend’s knowledge and consent.

The doctrine of the believer’s identification with Christ is beautifully portrayed here. “Receive him, that is, mine own heart” was Paul’s plea. Onesimus was so a part of Paul that it pained Paul even to send him back home! Verse 17 is what Jesus Christ says of every true believer, “Receive him as Myself!” We are “accepted in the Beloved” (Eph. 1:6). Onesimus was not returning home the same old person. He had a completely new standing before his master: he was now a brother beloved, identified with Paul, and therefore accepted. This is what the Bible means by justification: we are in Christ and therefore accepted before God.

IV. Paul’s Assurance of Payment (vv. 18–25)

But what about the Roman law? What about the money that Onesimus took? How could Philemon forgive if there was to be no restitution? This kind of forgiveness would only make him the accessory of a criminal. “I will repay!” promises the aged apostle. “Put that on my account.”

Again, this is a touching picture of Calvary. Christ found us as runaway slaves, law-breakers, rebels, but He forgave us and identified us with Himself. He went to the cross and paid the debt for us. This is the doctrine of imputation. “To impute” means “to put to one’s account.” Our sins were put to Christ’s account, and His righteousness was put to our account when we believed on Him. What marvelous grace! “Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity” (Ps. 32:2; Rom. 4:1–8). Our sins were put on His account, even though He committed no sin (2 Cor. 5:21). Our sins were laid on Christ, and His robe of righteousness was imputed to us.

The Christian needs to keep in mind the distinction between “accepted in Christ” and “acceptable to Christ.” The one who has trusted Christ for salvation is forever accepted in Christ and can never be rejected by the Father. Whenever believers sin, they are accepted, but their actions are not acceptable. It is necessary to confess that sin and receive Christ’s cleansing (1 John 1:9). Because we are accepted in Him, we have sonship; as we live lives acceptable to Him, we have fellowship.

Verse 19 illustrates the common form of an “IOU” back in Paul’s day. Paul was actually taking Onesimus’ debt upon himself.

Paul closed with personal greetings to Philemon and his household, reminding his friends of the many obligations they had to him. In fact, they owed their very salvation to Paul. The apostle was sure that Philemon would go “the extra mile” and do even more than he had requested. It is touching to read Paul’s request for their prayers and for a

place to stay when he was released from prison. How wonderful to have Christian friends who are concerned with the physical and spiritual needs of others.

This brief letter is priceless for what it reveals about the heart of Paul. It also illustrates what Christ has done for the believer. The two phrases that summarize the letter are: “receive him as myself” (v. 17) (our identification with Christ) and “put that on my account” (v. 19) (imputation—our sins laid on Christ).