

## Message #4

## Philemon 1:8-18

There was a Sunday School teacher who was teaching on the subject of the grace of God and she wanted to make sure that the class had got the point. So she concluded by asking a question, which was this: "Can anyone tell me what you must do before you can obtain forgiveness of sin?" There was dead silence for a moment and finally one of the small boys in the class raised his hand and said, "The first thing we must do to receive forgiveness of sin is sin." "We cannot receive forgiveness of sin until we have sinned." That young boy does make a point. The truth is we have all sinned and we all need forgiveness, and in order to get that we must face the sin.

This book of Philemon is intriguing in many ways. Philemon was a wealthy businessman who was from Colossae. He had come to faith under Paul's ministry when he was in Ephesus. At some point, his entire family came to faith in Christ—Apphia, his wife, and Archippus, his son. They became important people to the Colossian church and to the churches of Laodicea and Hierapolis.

Now Philemon had an employee or a slave whose name was Onesimus. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon and fled to Rome. While he was in Rome, he crossed paths with Paul, who shared with him the Gospel and Onesimus believed on the Lord and was saved. Eventually, this former Colossian robber will become an Ephesian pastor.

Now that Onesimus was a believer, he wanted to go back to Colossae and make things right with Philemon and his family and the whole church. Paul's letter to Philemon is designed to pave the way for that to happen. **According to Numbers 5:6-7, if someone was guilty of sin and confessed it, he needed to make restitution and even add 1/5<sup>th</sup> more than he took.** Onesimus had come clean of his sin and was under conviction that he needed to go back and make it right with Philemon.

It is intriguing to me that this book is, in many ways, a book that is designed to get Philemon to forgive Onesimus and yet not one time in the book is the word forgiveness even used. Paul wanted Philemon to forgive Onesimus and yet not one time does he actually say those words. It is assumed that if Philemon took Onesimus back, he would have to forgive him and that is what this letter is designed to do.

**PAUL INTERCEDES IN BEHALF OF ONESIMUS AND ASKS PHILEMON TO ACCEPT HIM BACK FULLY BECAUSE NOW HE IS A VERY USEFUL MAN OF GOD.**

God can change people and God does change people and when that happens, relationships change. The dynamics of relationships totally and completely change when one is right with God. There are moments of conviction that we face in which we need to go back and make things right.

Now we come to the heart of this epistle. Paul intercedes on behalf of Onesimus, with the goal of getting Philemon to take him back. This section is designed to provide a very logical appeal concerning Onesimus.

There are three main intercessory parts to this:

**INTERCESSORY PART #1** – Paul appeals to Philemon in behalf of Onesimus. **1:8-9**

There are two appeals that he makes:

**Appeal #1** - Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of who Paul is. **1:8-9**

Paul begins in **verse 8** by saying that he did have enough confidence in Christ to order Philemon to take back Onesimus. Paul was in Christ as a believer and he was an apostle of Jesus Christ. If anyone would have been in a position to give an order to Philemon about what he must do, it would have been Paul. He had the right and he had the authority.

But notice **verse 9**; because Paul did not demand Philemon do anything. Paul appealed to him as an aged prisoner of Jesus Christ on the basis of “the love” or “on account of the love.” The specific love he is referring to is the love that Philemon had for the Lord and for the people of God (**v. 5, 7**). Philemon had a reputation and Paul is appealing to him on the basis of his loving reputation. Paul bases his appeal on the matter of Christian love.

Now the word “aged” (πρεσβυτης) means Paul was older spiritually and physically. His age was about 60, which was old for that time. In fact, by virtue of all that Paul had suffered physically for the cause of Jesus Christ, his body was probably much older than 60.

Spiritually speaking, he had walked with God since he was in his 30’s, which made him much older than Philemon, who came to faith under Paul’s ministry in Ephesus. Paul had been a believer for 30 years.

So not only was Paul older in the faith and older physically, but he was also in prison for Jesus Christ. If anyone would have been in a position to give an order, it would have been Paul; but for love’s sake he did not do that to Philemon. **But rather than base his request on apostolic authority or ministry, he appeals to his age and his circumstance—he was old and in jail.**

He would present his case and let Philemon make up his own mind. I do not think it is right to try and manipulate anyone. Our job is to communicate truth and let God do with that truth what He will.

**Appeal #2** - Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of who Onesimus is. **1:10-11**

Now Paul takes the time to talk to Philemon about Onesimus and there are three truths that he brings out about Onesimus:

**(Truth #1)** - Onesimus was Paul's child whom he begot in prison. **1:10**

When Paul was in prison, somehow he crossed paths with Onesimus and presented the grace of God to him and he came to faith in Jesus Christ. We don't know how he came in contact with Onesimus. Obviously Onesimus was not a prisoner because Paul could send him back to Philemon and had he been in jail, he would not have had the authority to do that. The Apostle Paul does not use the term "born again" except for here. Onesimus had come to faith in Christ through the presentation of the Gospel while Paul was in jail. Now Paul could say that through his ministry many had come to faith in Jesus Christ and one of those men was Philemon. So Onesimus and Philemon have this in common—both came to faith in Christ through the ministry of Paul.

**(Truth #2)** - Onesimus was useless in past time. **1:11a**

In today's politically correct world, probably some would suggest you should never say that someone was useless. But you see, in God's world He is interested in truth. Onesimus was an unsaved thief who stole and ran away from his master. He was a criminal and he was useless. The word "useless" (αχρηστος) is one that means he was a useless good for nothing. Paul does not sugar coat this to make Onesimus look better than he is.

He does not tell Philemon he came from a dysfunctional family and he has emotional issues so we just need to coddle him. What he says is "he was useless."

There are people who fit this classification today. They are criminal types without Christ. They are not useful for anything.

**(Truth #3)** - Onesimus is useful in present time. **1:11b**

There is a real play on the Greek words here—at one point Onesimus was good for nothing, but now he is good for something. Onesimus had dramatically changed and now he was useful. He was valuable. He was a child of God; he was valuable to God, to Paul, and could be to Philemon.

Now this language is applicable to anyone prior to salvation and after salvation.

**INTERCESSORY PART #2** – Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. **1:12-14**

The fact that Onesimus was willing to go back to face Philemon speaks volumes for his transformed character. Onesimus wanted to make some sort of restitution for what he had done. He wanted to go back and face things. Previously, he had run away from Philemon and now he is willing to go back and face Philemon. By the way, Onesimus is not repentant because he got caught, because he did not get caught. He is repentant because he is right with God. God had done a work in his life. Sometimes someone will face something because they got caught doing something. That is completely different than not getting caught and facing something.

Now there are five facts brought out here:

**Fact #1** - Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon in person. **1:12a**

This is a key to the life and ministry of Onesimus. If one is going to be greatly used by God in the future, one must honestly face up to things and admit wrongs from the past. Onesimus needed to go to Philemon personally because he had wronged him. He needed to go back and face it. This is one reason why God will greatly use him in the future; he has integrity and honesty.

**Fact #2** - Paul sent Onesimus back out of his own heart. **1:12b**

Paul wanted Philemon to understand that this hurt the heart of Paul to do this. This was very emotional for Paul to have to say goodbye to Onesimus.

Paul was not having an easy time in life and this was a very special man that God had brought into his life and it was difficult for him to say goodbye to Onesimus.

**Fact #3** - Paul sent Onesimus back when he wanted to keep him. **1:13**

This was a major sacrifice for Paul to send him back because he had been such a help to Paul while in prison. Onesimus took it upon himself to serve Paul. He apparently became a real asset to Paul while he was in prison, trying to carry on the Gospel ministry. He had been a slave to Philemon and he apparently willingly made himself a slave to Paul.

Philemon could not be with Paul because he was in Colossae, but Onesimus could be with Paul and he could help him. It is clear that Paul had such a good relationship with Philemon that he knew if Philemon were in Rome, he would do everything he could to help Paul. Onesimus had done just that. He had ministered to Paul in the same way Philemon would have. So Paul wanted to keep him.

**Fact #4** - Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon to get his consent. **1:14**

According to Roman law, if a slave ran away from his master and someone else took the slave in, that person became accountable to the master to reimburse the master for every day you harbored the runaway slave.

Paul abides by the laws of society even though he would love to have Onesimus stay with him. He sent him back to Philemon because he was the one who had been wronged.

Notice carefully, Paul is not compelling Philemon to do anything, but he wants things done of his own "free will." The word "free will" (εκουσιος) means of Philemon's willing and voluntary choice (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 140).

Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him, but he knew he needed to go back and face Philemon.

**Fact #5** - Paul informs Philemon that this all may be for his good. **1:15-16**

There is no question that Paul believed in the providential sovereignty of God even in the matter of something that was sinful. Onesimus had stolen from Philemon, but God had saved him and now Paul believed that God may have been sovereignly working behind the scenes for the good of Philemon. Instead of having a relationship with a slave, God had used these events so now these two could be brothers.

Paul says this whole thing with Onesimus may turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Paul believed in the sovereignty of God even when Onesimus stole something and ran away. The plan of God could be so that Onesimus would end up back with Philemon forever not as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ who would be happy to serve him.

**INTERCESSORY PART #3** – Paul requests Philemon accept Onesimus. **1:17-18**

Now there are two requests that Paul makes to Philemon.

**Request #1** - Paul requests that Philemon accept Onesimus as he would him. **1:17**

Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would him. Paul does not want him accepted as a slave, but as a beloved brother. Philemon had great fellowship with Paul.

**Request #2** - Paul requests that Philemon charge the wrong to Paul's account. **1:18**

It was probably a huge sum of money that Onesimus had taken, because it enabled him to travel from Colossae all the way to Rome.

But when we are willing to pay someone else's debt and we are willing to forgive, we are never more like Jesus Christ.

Now think about this letter. How ridiculous would it have been for Onesimus to throw this letter away and to plead his own case? How wonderful it is to rely upon the work of another mediator to resolve the wrong we have done.

How ridiculous it would be for you to rely upon yourself and not rely upon the work of a mediator.

D. L. Moody said, "There are two ways of covering our sins: man's way and God's way. If you seek to hide them, they will have a resurrection sometime; but if you let the Lord cover them, neither the Devil nor man will ever be able to find them again."

God's way of salvation is via the God-man mediator—Jesus Christ. Do not rely upon yourself, rely upon Him and your sin account is settled.