

*Paul’s letter to Philemon is a beautiful example of how Christian friendship works in a delicate, real-life situation by revealing the basis, reason, and nourishment that friends must share together through easy and hard times. By faith in Christ your truest friend, lay hold of the gospel and pursue true friendship.*

**Introduction** – “How’s your love-tank doing?” Relationships can be hard.

**Background** – The book of Philemon, a hidden jewel tucked away in the NT, is a short letter the apostle Paul wrote when he was about 60 years old. From his house arrest in Rome (cf. Acts 28), Paul sent this letter to his good friend Philemon who lived in the city of Colossae in the province of Asia. Colossae was not far from the church in Ephesus where Paul and Philemon had likely met and become friends. But now something had happened that tested their friendship and obedience to Christ.

## I. What We Are Together: The Basis for Friendship

### A. Level 1: common identity—see names (vv. 1-2, 10, 23-24; cf. books of Eph. & Col.)

The early church was a “small world” even as it was spread across the Roman Empire. Christians knew the names of church leaders in other cities and provinces because of the relative ease of travel, written correspondence, and tight networks of gospel laborers. If you compare people’s names in the books of Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon, you will see much commonality. Aristarchus, Epaphras, Tychicus, Onesimus. Some people were from the same place, others were on the same mission teams, and some found themselves visiting or living in the same place at the same time.

### B. Level 2: shared fellowship—see descriptions (vv. 1-2, 10, 12, 16, 20, 22-24)

In a “common grace” sense this level of friendship is attainable when any two people share more than common proximity and age. Shared values, shared family, and shared affiliations can form the basis for level 2 friendships. Often level 2 friends feel something like a “brotherhood”. But as we explore the dynamics of friendship revealed in this letter, I want you to see that, because of who Jesus Christ is and who he has made us to be, Christians have the very best resources to fulfill our calling to be friends. While ministering in Ephesus, Paul led Philemon to the Lord and they became good friends because they were now brothers in the Lord. Notice the ways he describes their mutual friends and fellow Christians. Timothy (“our brother”), Apphia (probably Mrs. Philemon: “our sister”), Archippus (either Philemon’s son or the pastor of the church: “our fellow soldier”), Onesimus (“my child,” “my very heart,” and “a beloved brother in the Lord”), and Philemon (“beloved fellow worker,” “brother”), Epaphras (“fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus”), and Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke (all “fellow workers”).

## II. What We Do Together: The Reason for Friendship

### A. Level 1: commitment to an external goal (vv. 1-3)

You can’t build a friendship on the mere desire to be friends. The nature of real friendship is that it has to be *about* something. Friendship needs a reason. [C.S. Lewis quote from *The Four Loves*] In these opening verses of the letter Paul clearly states he had friends who were all in a fellowship of friends for the same reason. That is what he means when he calls his friends “fellows”: fellow worker, fellow soldier, fellow prisoner. What happens when one of the friends gets tired of working toward the shared goal? It happened to Paul when his friend Demas quit working alongside him as a traveling missionary. Only by getting to a level 2 reason for friendship will the commitment to what the friendship is about have a chance to withstand all the temptations and trials that will eventually assail those friendships.

## **B. Level 2: faith in the transcendent truth/goodness/beauty of the work (vv. 10-17)**

1. When we take a closer look at the reason for level 2 friendship we are in the center of Paul's letter to Philemon. The reason Paul writes this personal letter to Philemon that is also an "open" letter to the whole church is to appeal to Philemon for his fugitive slave, Onesimus. After all that had transpired, the apostle became so attached to Onesimus his new son in the Lord that he called Onesimus "my very heart". Onesimus, whose name means "useful" and had been a "useless" slave, through the transforming power of Christ at work in him, is now showing himself to be quite useful to Paul as they served the Lord together.

2. Do you sense the messy dilemma in this triangle of friendship? There is only one way out of the dilemma that threatens this unusual Christian friendship. For friends laboring toward the goal of spreading the kingdom of God, the bond of Christian brotherhood forged between these gospel partners is the reason why they can joyfully and confidently choose the high and hard road. By acting on faith that Christ's gospel work would bear long-lasting fruit in their friendship, God did something unforeseen and extraordinary. History reveals that God blessed this one page of personal correspondence to powerfully subvert the evil institution of slavery in ancient and modern times. And it all started because three friends believed the truth/goodness/beauty of the gospel, and acted on it even when it was inconvenience, costly, and even risky!

## **III. What We Experience Together: The Nourishment for Friendship**

### **A. Level 1: mutual refreshment (vv. 4-7, 20-22)**

The great joy of all human friendships is the delightful give and take. No one would say people are friends if they don't actually enjoy the relationship. That much is obvious. Did you hear how Paul's appeal to Philemon for Onesimus is preceded by praise aimed at refreshing Philemon? Paul can speak so boldly and gushingly because he and Philemon love each other as only friends can. Praising his love for all the saints and his faith toward the Lord Jesus, Paul admits he prays for Philemon and derives much joy and comfort from the way his friend refreshes others in Christ. His prayers are not just praises, but also petitions that Philemon's ministry would be more and more effective, and that he would experience the fullest knowledge of every blessing believers have in Christ. There is another level of nourishment that supercharges the delight of friendship. Few attain to level 2 because it risks losing the mutuality of refreshment by totally giving oneself for the friend.

### **B. Level 2: sacrificial love (vv. 17-19)**

Sacrificial love is the ultimate nourishment for friendship. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the very best example of sacrificial love, and by far the richest resource available for friends to tap into for sustaining a friendship, especially when the friends are in danger of giving up on each other. Without the gospel there is no hope that Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus would have prevailed. Paul had experienced the love of Christ first, and in this delicate real-life situation he was compelled to imitate Christ by showing the love of Christ, offering to pay the whole debt Onesimus owed to his master. Sacrificial love is at the heart of the gospel message, that Christ paid the debt we owe and took the punishment we deserve, so that we would not have to incur the payment or suffer the punishment. If you lay hold of the gospel, trusting Christ to pay your sin debt and suffer your punishment, you'll gain friendship with God. And when you are in right relationship with God, having been eternally reconciled to him through the sacrificial love of Christ, you'll have the security of God's love to empower you to be a true friend to others. The gospel will become the basis, reason, and nourishment for your friendships when you know Jesus as your truest friend.

**Conclusion** – Imagine what God might be doing in and through you and your friends. Surely his hidden plans and purposes are wonderful! So dear brothers and sisters, live as you are called according to the gospel, because Christian, you are a friend.