

Philemon – The Transformative Power of Fellowship

I. Introduction: Surprised to See Someone!

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our beloved fellow worker ² and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow
soldier, and the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, ⁶ and I pray that *the sharing (fellowship) of your faith may become effective* for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. ⁷ For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹ (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹ Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. ²² At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. – Philemon 1-25

Big Idea: The gospel of Jesus Christ transforms our relationships with each other, making possible and requiring reconciliation with other Christians.

“The letter to Philemon was the most brilliantly nuanced, compelling letters of reconciliation in ancient history. It is a model of grace and charm. As such, it can be a

great help to us all *if we care* to enhance our human relationships – especially those in the Body of Christ, where we have special stake in each other’s lives.”¹

“Nowhere is the social influence of the Gospel more strikingly exerted, nowhere does the nobility of the apostle’s character receive a more vivid illustration than in this pleading on behalf of a runaway slave.” – J.B. Lightfoot

“Tychicus will tell you all about my activities. He is a beloved brother and faithful minister and fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts, and with him, *Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you.* They will tell you everything that has taken place here.” – Colossians 4:7-9

A. The Relationship between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus

“...an ethical application of Paul’s understanding of the gospel as God’s gracious and loving act of reconciliation. One deserves to be loved simply because of one’s status as brother or sister in the faith. Onesimus’s ‘birth’ in Christ creates a new reality that overturns all existing realities.”²

II. What Can Philemon Teach Us?

“Even though sending Onesimus away would be like sending his very heart, Paul saw the reunion of Philemon and Onesimus as an opportunity for both men to provide the church—and the world—with a living parable of gospel reconciliation and partnership.”³

1. Paul and Philemon (the easier one)

A. Relationships Overflow with Thanksgiving and Encouragement

B. Relationships aren’t Determined by Convenience or Comfort, but the Cause of Christ

“So, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift at the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” – Matt. 5:23-24

C. Relational Persuasion Flows from Gospel Love, Not Coercion or Authority

D. Relationships Believe the Best about the Other

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*, pg. 380-81.

² Pieter G.R. de Villiers

³ Justin Taylor, *Gospel Coalition Blog*, November 9th, 2017

2. Philemon and Onesimus

A. Fellowship is “proven” in difficult situations.

B. Fellowship is undervalued.

“I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel,¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.” – Philemon 13-16

C. Fellowship means a willingness to absorb “costs.”

“If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self.” – Philemon 18-19

“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” – 2 Corinthians 5:21

D. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the power to transform the most difficult situations.

“Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do **Mark**, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.” – Philemon 23-24

“Relationships, even between Christians, are easily dominated by wrongs that have been done. People often treat one another and regard one another in the light of past hurts or injuries. Rejection, resentment, distrust or shame, embarrassment or insecurity can govern these relationships. What can happen if these difficult relationships are renewed by shared faith in Jesus Christ becoming the dominant factor? This is what Paul prayed would happen with Philemon and Onesimus.”⁴

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit. – Philemon 25

⁴ Ibid

