

MORE THAN A SLAVE

A Study of Philemon

Study #3

Formerly Useless, Now Useful

(Philemon 8-11)

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνήκον
9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ.
10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,
11 τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καὶ] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,

I. INTRODUCTION/REVIEW

- A. In our previous study, we saw Paul express his joy at the work that God was doing in Philemon's life.
- B. Paul also expressed his plea for Philemon, that Philemon's love for other believers would continue to spur him on to proper behavior toward, and dealing with, them; all of which applies subtle pressure on Philemon to cede to Paul's appeal coming in *verses 10* and following.
- C. Paul expressed his personal joy and comfort as he saw and heard how Philemon's love had "refreshed the hearts of the saints."
- D. And now, Paul turns his attention to the impetus of the writing, his real reason for putting pen to paper: he is about to make a very difficult request of Philemon regarding Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus.

II. TEXT: PHILEMON 8-11

- A. *verse 8* = Paul begins his appeal by reminding Philemon of his authority as an apostle. The effect is really quite brilliant. Essentially, Paul says, "Philemon, I could exercise my authority in dealing with you (*verse 8*) but I will deal with you from love instead (*verse 9*). If I can do that for you, you can follow my lead and do that for Onesimus."
 1. "**Therefore...**" = (Greek *dio*) This conjunction connects the phrase that follows with the one that precedes, in a cause/effect type of relationship. "I could order you to do what is right. But *because* of your well-known character, and how you routinely treat your brothers with love and compassion [*cause*], I will not order you—no, I will appeal to you instead [*effect*]."
 2. "...**though I have enough confidence in Christ...**" = Paul's call to apostleship came directly from Christ (*Galatians 1:1*), and he recognizes that his confidence as God's servant was purely a result of God's grace ("...**in Christ...**", cf. *2 Corinthians 3:4-6a*). Nevertheless, he does have apostolic authority (*2 Corinthians 13:10*; *1 Thessalonians 2:6-7, 4:2*).
 3. "...**to order you...**" = Paul makes it clear that he has the prerogative, as Christ's apostle, to command Philemon's obedience.
 4. "...**to do what is proper...**" = (Greek *aneko*) This Greek verb, "to be proper," is only used three times total in the New Testament (*Ephesians 5:4*; *Colossians 3:18*). Paul recognizes two very important realities in his appeal for Onesimus:
 - a. It may be difficult for Philemon to comply, seeing that the Roman law of the day gave slave owners total prerogative over the life and death of their slaves, just as Christ, our Master has over His slaves, namely, us (cf. *Romans 14:7-8*).
 - b. But dealing with one another in love as believers, however difficult, is not only an obligation...it is fitting and proper (cf. *1 Corinthians 6:1-8*). Just because you have a legal "right" does not require you to stand on it! And furthermore, there are instances in Christian life when walking in love *requires* and *dictates* a forfeiture of those rights. That is the nature of *agape* love (*John 15:12-23*; *1 Corinthians 13:4-7*), as demonstrated by Christ (*1 Peter 2:22, 24*).

- B. *verse 9* = A continuation of thought from *verse 8*.
1. “...**yet for love’s sake**...” = Paul’s love for Philemon (*verse 16*) leads him to deal gently rather than firmly with him. In the same way, our love for other believers ought to color our behavior toward them (*Ephesians 5:1-2; Colossians 3:12-14*).
 - a. As an apostle, Paul has the authority to command obedience (*1 Thessalonians 4:2, 11; 2 Thessalonians 3:4, 6, 12*).
 - b. But when possible, it is always better to appeal gently (*1 Timothy 5:1-2*).
 2. “...**I rather appeal to you**...” = Paul is inching his way toward the point he is trying to make. Here, for the first time, he finally clarifies that this correspondence with Philemon is to be an appeal, although he does not yet identify the exact nature of that appeal.
 - a. “...**rather**...” = Paul has other options, other means of achieving compliance, but he has chosen this route.
 - b. “...**appeal**...” = (Greek *parakaleo* = to call alongside) This is a marvelous Greek word, used many times in the New Testament, and translated by several English words in the NASB (see *Matthew 8:31, 18:29; Acts 24:4; 2 Corinthians 10:1; Ephesians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:11*). The best-known derivative is *parakletos* (“one called alongside”), used both of Jesus Christ (*1 John 2:1*), and of the Holy Spirit (*John 14:16, 26, 15:26, 16:7*). Paul is, in effect, calling Philemon alongside of himself. He has chosen to deal with Philemon in love rather than severity, and he is calling Philemon to come alongside and do the same.
 3. “...**since I am such a person as**...” = Here, to further apply gentle pressure, Paul reminds Philemon of just who is making this appeal. He will identify himself in three ways geared to foster sympathy in the hopes of encouraging obedience:
 4. “...**Paul**...” = A reminder of the bond between them. “It’s me, Paul, your friend!”
 5. “...**the aged**...” = Paul is an old man, and reminding Philemon of this softens the appeal somewhat, as well as adding more pressure to it. After all, we ought to have a certain reverence and deference for our elders (*Leviticus 19:32*).
 6. “...**and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus**...” = (see *verse 1* for the same Greek construction) Paul has gone through some horrific things because of his testimony for Christ (see *2 Corinthians 11:23-33*), and has earned due respect for it (cf. *Galatians 6:17*). Reminding Philemon of Paul’s hardship should encourage compliance.
- C. *verse 10* = At last! Paul finally begins to reveal his purpose by identifying the subject of the appeal, the one on whose behalf he is writing.
1. “...**I appeal to you**...” = (same Greek verb as *verse 9*) Here is the beginning of Paul’s request. He said in the previous verse that he would appeal rather than command, and here is the appeal coming to light—and it only took about half the letter to get here! You see that Paul is being very subtle.
 2. “...**for my child...whom I have begotten in my imprisonment**...” = Though the name *Onesimus* appears between these two phrases in the NASB, the Greek construction places these two phrases together, with the name at the end of the phrase instead.
 - a. “...**for my child**...” = (Greek *teknon*) Paul uses this description for Timothy several times (*1 Corinthians 4:17; Philippians 2:22; 1 Timothy 1:2, 18; 2 Timothy 1:2, 2:1*), and also for Titus (*Titus 1:4*). It denotes closeness, but also a clear and specific spiritual relationship: Paul had led these men to Christ (cf. *1 Corinthians 4:14-15*).
 - b. “...**begotten in my imprisonment**...” = The exact circumstances are not spelled out, but two things are clear: Paul met Onesimus while on house arrest in Rome, and Onesimus was saved by the gospel he heard there from Paul.
 3. “...**Onesimus**...” = His name means “useful” (compare with *verse 20*, “benefit” which has the same Greek root), and he was Philemon’s slave (*verse 16*) and lived in Colossae (*Colossians 4:7-9*). These are the only references to him found in the New Testament; consequently much of the rest of what we

- know of him (such as what happens when he returns to Philemon) comes from church history and tradition.
- D. *verse 11* = Paul describes a radical transformation in Onesimus's life.
1. "...**who formerly was useless to you...**" = Onesimus was Philemon's slave who, according to tradition and some hints from the text, had stolen from Philemon (see *verse 18*) and then run away, ending up in Rome almost 1,000 miles away. According to Paul, he had not been a good or beneficial slave, probably lazy and recalcitrant. Paul does not deny that restitution should be made; but he will shortly offer to make that restitution himself, knowing Onesimus would be unable to do so.
 2. "...**but now is useful...**" = A *complete* and *total* change in Onesimus's life! He has been transformed (cf. *2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:1-10*).
 3. "...**both to you and to me...**" = Paul elaborates in coming verses on this point. Onesimus is useful to Paul (*verse 13*) and also to Philemon (*verses 15-16*).

III. CONCLUSION

- A. Do you deal gently with other believers whenever possible, or do you tend to be more confrontational than is strictly necessary?
- B. Do you invest time forming deep and substantive relationships with other believers that can be a useful impetus in encouraging them toward good decisions and behavior (cf. *Hebrews 10:24-25*)?
- C. Are you busy, like Paul was, going about the business of making spiritual children in the Lord?
- D. Have you experienced the life-transforming, eternity-altering metamorphosis that comes from being made new in Christ?
- E. Do you recognize that your brothers and sisters in Christ have also experienced that metamorphosis, and that their past is no indicator whatsoever of their potential for meaningful service to God and others? It is one thing to let go of your own past, but can you let go of their pasts as well, and see them as new in Christ? Can you avoid bringing up their pasts, or flaunting their failures to them or to others?

IV. PRAYER