

# Lessons from the Book of Philemon

Rick Railston

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Paul's letter to Philemon is not often quoted and frankly, it's not often studied. And, if most of us are honest, it's not often thought of. You just don't think of it because it's only twenty-five verses long and yet it covers one of the most delicate situations that have ever been recorded in the Bible.

Now, in the Book of Philemon, there are three main characters. There is Paul, who wrote it; Philemon, to whom it is addressed and Philemon lived in Colossae; and then there is Onesimus, who was a former slave of Philemon who actually delivered the letter to Philemon. And we'll get into the details of that as we go through.

But there is so much more to this than meets the eye. The Book of Philemon is unique in a couple of important ways. As we go through this, if you have a marker, you might want to put it in Philemon, but also put it in Colossians 4 because, as we are going to see, these two books are very, very closely related.

Now, by way of introduction, Paul normally dictated all of his epistles. And we're getting into the point of one of the reasons why Philemon is unique. Paul normally dictated his epistles and then hand wrote a salutation and then signed it. Let's go to Colossians 4. You want to leave a marker here and look at verse 18. Notice what Paul says:

**Colossians 4:18.** *The salutation by the hand of me Paul. Remember my bonds. ... (KJV)*

The New Kings James and the NLT say "Remember my chains." And you can almost imagine as Paul was writing this, you can hear the chains clinking on his arm. He says:

**Colossians 4:18b.** *... Remember my bonds. Grace be with you. Amen. (KJV)*

Now, let's go over to 2 Thessalonians 3 and verse 17 and see where he did it again. 2 Thessalonians 3:17, I'll read this out of the NLT. Notice what he says:

**2 Thessalonians 3:17.** *Here is my greeting, which I write [with] my own [hand]—Paul. I do this in all my letters to prove [that] they [really] are from me. (NLT)*

So, again, he wrote a salutation and he signed it, after dictating the bulk of the letter to his scribe, whoever was helping him at the time.

The Expositor's Bible Commentary says this:

Paul was dictating to his secretary up to chapter 3 verse 17. At this point, he took the pen into his own hand to add a closing greeting. Apparently Paul followed this practice consistently expecting churches where he had served to recall his distinctive handwriting. It was particularly needed in this epistle as a deterrent against any future attempt to forge a letter in his name. The practice of forging letters was customary in ancient times.

So, he wanted to make sure; at the end of the letter, he added a salutation in his own handwriting and then signed his name. Now, as I said, Paul would dictate his letters to a scribe. Remember, Paul at this time was in failing health. He was a prisoner. He was literally from time to time in chains. Therefore, it only makes sense it was easier for him to dictate a letter to a scribe and have his scribe fully complete the letter except for the salutation and his writing the signature. It could well be that he had a distinctive signature. Mr. Armstrong had one. And that way the people would know this was literally from Paul and not a forgery.

Now, Philemon is unique for two reasons.

**Number one is the entire letter to Philemon was written by hand by Paul. It was not dictated.**

Look at Philemon verse 19. Notice what Paul says.

***Philemon 19.*** *I Paul have written it with [my] own hand, ... (KJV)*

Since it was Paul's practice to dictate his letters and then sign them with a salutation, why would he personally write this one? You could say, "It's short." Well, yeah. But he could just as easily have dictated it and then sign the last sentence, but he chose not to do that. Why is this letter so special in that regard?

The letter to Philemon was most likely written and delivered at the same time as the letters to Ephesians and especially the letter to Colossians. Since that was the case, Paul already had a scribe on the scene. He was in Rome. He had a scribe on the scene. Why not just dictate them all? Why not do that? And the implication in the letter to Philemon is that, when he wrote it, he had literal chains on his arms. So, it would have been far easier to dictate the letter if he was in prison or in house arrest, as we'll see with chains on his arms, but he chose not to do that. So that leads to the second reason. The first is that he wrote the entire letter by hand.

**The second reason is because it is a very, very personal letter to Philemon.**

It was not required to be read in the churches as the letter to the Colossian Church was. And, yet, for some reason, God chose to preserve this very personal letter to an individual from Paul; God chose to have it preserved for us. And then you have to ask why. Why would God do that? Why would He choose a twenty-five verse letter to be preserved in His Word? And the answer has to be that there is something in that letter

that we need to learn. All of the Christians down through the millennia need to learn that lesson.

So, the title of the sermon is:

### Lessons from the Book or the Letter to Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon.

What we want to do first is we want to establish some background for this epistle. Now, Paul was a prisoner in Rome. He arrived in the late winter of 61 A.D. and was there through the early spring of 63 A.D. And he was under, for most of the time, under house arrest. It had been about thirty years since he was struck down on the road to Damascus. He had been an apostle for thirty years, doing God's work for thirty years.

Now, there were five other brethren there with Paul in Rome: Luke, Mark, a man named Aristarchus, Demas, and Epaphras. We're going to see that there are connections between the Book of Philemon and Book of Colossians. Epaphras is one of those connections. He was a prisoner with Paul in Rome. He was also an elder from Colossae as we're going to see. And, obviously, Epaphras was well-known to the church in Colossae because he was an elder. And he was especially well-known to Philemon since the Colossian Church met in Philemon's house. Let's go to Colossians 4 and verse 12. We'll see this. Notice what Paul says to the church at Colossae. He says:

***Colossians 4:12.*** *Epaphras, who is one of you, a [bond] servant of Christ [meaning he was an elder], [greet]s you, always [laboring] fervently for you in prayers, that [you] may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. (KJV)*

So, Epaphras is a connection between Paul in Rome and the church in Colossae.

Now, all five of these companions that we just mentioned of Paul are mentioned both in the Book of Colossians and the Letter to Philemon: Luke, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Epaphras. Therefore, it lends credence to the fact that Colossians and the Letter to Philemon were written at the same time since all five were not there with Paul during his entire incarceration. So, the fact that all five were mentioned in both books indicates that both letters were written about the same time. We'll see the importance of that in just a minute.

So, what we've seen so far is that Paul dictates a letter to the entire church in Colossae. Now Colossae is a sister-city of Laodicea. They're only about six miles apart. No where is Colossae as wealthy or as prominent as Laodicea. Laodicea is on the rise; Colossae is in descent as a city of power and importance. But Colossae had one thing that Laodicea did not have. Colossae had ice cold springs; ice cold spring water was available to the residents of Colossae. So, guess what the Laodiceans did? They piped the water the six miles from Colossae to Laodicea. And when it arrived, guess

what? It wasn't cold anymore. It was lukewarm. And that we can relate to Revelation 3 and the "lukewarmness" of Christ's letter to Laodicea.

So, as we're going to see, Philemon was likely an elder and his son was an elder, and possibly his son was the pastor to the church at Colossae.

Now, the backdrop of these two books has an 800 pound gorilla in the room and that 800 pound gorilla is slavery. We know the Roman Empire was a kingdom that promoted slavery. And I gave a sermon on slavery at the time of Christ and at the time of the apostles on February 4, 2012. So, if you want background on that, you can go to the website and listen to that.

Now, the Roman Empire had a population at that time of approximately 54 million people and depending on where you were, where you lived in the empire, a third to a half of all the people around you were slaves. In Rome, it was actually more than half. Slaves were a piece of property and they could be treated by the owner in any way he wanted. Some owners treated slaves worse than they treated their enemies. It was just a fact of life. It was something everybody had to live with.

Slavery was the topic of the New Testament church. Remember 1 Corinthians 11? Paul is condemning the Corinthian Church about how they kept the Passover. And he said; basically what he was saying was, "You wealthy slave owners, you get drunk and you're stuffing yourselves on the Passover, totally missing the meaning of it, while the slaves come in and they're hungry. They have nothing to eat." He was condemning them for that. In Ephesians, Paul gives instructions to both Christian masters and Christian slaves on how they should treat one another. So, slavery is a key, another key to understanding both the Letter to Philemon and the Book of Colossians.

Now, let's look at the background of the three people involved.

First, Paul. He had been an apostle, as I said earlier, for roughly thirty years. We're going to get into his background in just a minute because it directly pertains to how he approaches his letter to Philemon.

Now, Philemon was a fellow elder to Paul. Look at Philemon at the very first verse. Let's notice what Paul says

***Philemon 1.*** *Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ [for Jesus Christ], (KJV)*

He's in Rome.

***Philemon 1b.*** *... and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, (KJV)*

This clearly indicates that Philemon was an elder.

He was also a very wealthy man. He was married and the church met at his house. Look at verse 2.

**Philemon 2.** *And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, (KJV)*

Meaning he was an elder too.

**Philemon 2b.** *... and to the church in [your] house:*

The church met in Philemon's house.

Now Clarke's Commentary (and most all the other commentaries agree), Clarke says:

It is very probable that Apphia was the wife of Philemon, and Archippus, their son, the pastor of the church at Philemon's house.

So, it would only be natural that they would be included in the introduction if they were part of his family. Notice Colossians 4:17.

**Colossians 4:17.** *And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which [you have] received in the Lord, that [you fulfill] it. (KJV)*

So, Apphia was logically his wife; Archippus was his son who was an elder. It was a personal letter. And so it just seems natural and logical that they would be included in the greeting.

He was also wealthy enough to have room to house Paul on Paul's visit. Notice the beginning of verse 22 of Philemon. Paul was thinking he would be able to come for a visit and he said:

**Philemon 22.** *But withal prepare me also a lodging: ... (KJV)*

And Paul, undoubtedly, had stayed previously at Philemon's home.

Now, Philemon owned at least one slave, Onesimus who ran away, but he might have had others. We just don't know. In any regard, Philemon and his family were probably the leading family of the church in Colossae.

Now, the third character is Onesimus. Onesimus was a slave and he was formerly from Colossae. Let's go back to Colossians 4. We'll begin in verse 7 and read through verse 9. Now notice what it says. Paul is saying in this letter which we're going to find that it's read to the entire church:

**Colossians 4:7.** *All my state shall Tychicus declare unto you, who is a beloved brother, and a faithful minister and [a] fellowservant in the Lord: (KJV)*

Tychicus was going to Colossae to help deliver this letter and he said, "He's going to explain what's going on." Verse 8:

**Colossians 4:8.** *Whom [Tychicus] I have sent unto you for the same purpose, that he might know your estate, and comfort your hearts; (KJV)*

Notice this one, verse 9. Tychicus is coming:

**Colossians 4:9.** *With Onesimus, ... (KJV)*

Paul is sending him back. We see that in verse 12 of Philemon.

**Colossians 4:9.** *With Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They shall make known unto you all things which are done here. (KJV)*

Referring to Rome.

So, Tychicus and Onesimus are going to Colossae to deliver the letter to the Colossian Church and to deliver the personal letter to Philemon. Onesimus is with Paul in Rome but he is a Colossian or from Colossae. The thing is, now Onesimus is a converted member of the church.

Remember in verse 9? We just read in Colossians 4 "Onesimus, a faithful and beloved brother." That means he is now converted.

Look at verse 10 of Philemon. Look at what he says in this personal letter.

**Philemon 10.** *I beseech [you] for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: (KJV)*

So, it's clear that Paul at some time while he was in prison baptized Onesimus. And then he used Onesimus to help him. He helped deliver the letter to Colossians and delivered the letter to Philemon. Most all translations and commentaries agree on that. Look at verse 13 of Philemon. It's talking about Onesimus.

**Philemon 13.** *whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. (NKJV)*

So Onesimus, at some point, was baptized by Paul and was used by Paul as a helper.

Now, to the problem, here's the big, big problem. Onesimus was a slave to Philemon.

The word "Onesimus" in the Greek means *profitable*. And that name was probably given to Onesimus when he was purchased by Philemon. And Philemon made the payment and said, "Here's my slave." And he said, "He's going to be profitable to me. So, I'm going to call you "Profitable." I'm going to call you Onesimus."

But the problem arose when Onesimus ran away. And that was something that you just didn't do in Rome. That was punishable by torture and death. Look at the beginning of verse 11 of Philemon.

**Philemon 11.** *Which in time past [referring to Onesimus] was to [you] unprofitable, (KJV)*

His name was "Profitable, but he said, "Unto you in times past, he was unprofitable," obviously referring to the time when he ran away.

Now look at the beginning of verse 15. I'll read it out of the NLT. He says:

**Philemon 15.** *Perhaps you could think of it this way, Onesimus ran away for a little while. (NLT)*

He left Colossae, left Philemon's home, and ran away. We don't know why. There is no record of why. But he wound up in Rome. Now, the lowest caste or class of an individual in the Roman Empire was a slave who ran away. They were the lowest of the low. They were subject to torture, subject to death.

But now (Onesimus ran away. We don't know why.), he wound up in Rome and was converted and baptized by Paul. This is the problem because you have an elder in Colossae who lost his slave. The slave ran away. Now the slave is helping Paul and he's baptized and you have a source of trouble and problems.

Now what happens is that Paul asks for a tremendous act of mercy and forgiveness by a fellow elder (Philemon), a leader and a member of the Colossian Church. Paul sends this letter to ask for mercy. Let's go now to Philemon verse 10. I'll read it out of the New King James. This is a personal letter to Philemon. He says:

**Philemon 10.** *I appeal for my son Onesimus, ... (NKJV)*

That is a change of the way you look at things. Onesimus was Philemon's property.

**Philemon 10b.** *... whom I have begotten while in my chains, 11) who once was unprofitable to you, but now [at this time] is profitable [both] to you and to me. (NKJV)*

Now verse 12 drops a bomb shell. He says:

**Philemon 12.** *I am sending him back. ... (NKJV)*

Oops. What's going to happen when he comes back? That's the whole subject.

**Philemon 12b.** *... You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, (NKJV)*

“You receive him. I’m asking you to receive him as you would receive my own heart,” because in the Roman Empire if he got caught and came back, typically, as I said, they would be tortured or killed. Verse 13, he says, “Onesimus.” We just quoted this.

**Philemon 13.** *whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.*

14) *But...* (NKJV)

Notice verse 14

**Philemon 14.** *But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, ...* (NKJV)

Now contrast that with maybe some things in our past where evangelists and where apostles became dictators. Paul could have just said, “I, Apostle Paul, order you to do this,” but he didn’t. He said, “Without your consent, I don’t want to do anything. I don’t want to offend. I don’t want to cause problems. I don’t want to do anything.”

So, going on in verse 14:

**14b)** *...But without your consent I wanted to do nothing ...* (NKJV)

Paul was not a dictator.

**14 continued)** *... that your good deed might not be by compulsion ...* (NKJV)

Meaning: “Because I put a gun to your head or I order you to do something.”

**14 continued)** *... as it were, but voluntary [because you want to].* (NKJV)

Verse 15:

**Philemon 15.** *For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever,* (NKJV)

Now what is he getting to here—forever? Verse 16 tells us.

**Philemon 16.** *No longer as a slave, but more than a slave—[as] a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.* (NKJV)

So what’s happening here is Onesimus ran away from Philemon his master and now Paul is sending him back as a spiritual brother. Now think about that! How is Philemon going to react to this? How is the local church going to react to this? What’s going to happen? How are the local slaves in the Colossian Church going to react to this? How are their masters in the Colossian Church going to react to this?



Going on in verse 17, he says:

**Philemon 17.** *If then you count me as a partner [meaning a fellow elder], receive him as you would me.  
18) But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account. (NKJV)*

Now, the term “put that on my account” is a Greek accounting term. We say it today. “Put it on my bill. Put it on my account. Put it on my tab.” Paul is saying that he is willing to personally pay for any damages Onesimus caused Philemon when he left. Now, could it be that maybe Onesimus stole something? We don’t know. It’s not recorded, but Paul is saying “Whatever it costs you, I’ll pay for it.”

Verse 19:

**Philemon 19.** *I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay—not to mention... (NKJV)*

And now Paul is putting a little subtle pressure on Philemon.

**Philemon 19b.** *... not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides. (NKJV)*

Now, probably what happened is that Philemon was converted in the presence of Paul. God called Philemon; Paul counseled him; Paul baptized him; and Paul could well have ordained him as an elder. That’s why he says, “You owe me even your own self besides.”

Verse 20:

**Philemon 20.** *Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. (NKJV)*

Notice what Paul says in verse 21.

**Philemon 21.** *Having confidence in [your] obedience [to God’s Law] I wrote unto [you], knowing that [you will] also do more than I say. (KJV)*

Now what more could Philemon do other than welcome him back? Think about that. What he could do and what Paul is subtly asking for is to give Onesimus his freedom. He is a Christian brother and now Paul is saying, “What more you can do... I know you’re going to do more than what I ask of just receiving him back.”

Now remember the culture of slavery. Philemon owned Onesimus. He paid money for Onesimus. And Paul is saying, “I want you to welcome him back with open arms and I

want you to do even more than that,” implying giving him his freedom. What Paul is asking Philemon to do is behave in a very, very converted manner.

Now, let’s look; let’s think about; let’s stop here now. This letter, these two letters, one going to the Colossian Church to be read in church and then the personal letter to Philemon are on their way and they arrive. Now look at the potential for division within the church and tension within the church there at Colossae.

Now, we have to look at the Letter to Philemon and the Book of Colossians together. They are tied together. You can’t understand one without understanding the other. Both of Paul’s epistles were delivered by Onesimus. Most commentaries, translations agree to that. Paul’s epistle to the Colossians was to be read to the entire church in church. Look at Colossians 4, the beginning of verse 16. Paul says:

***Colossians 4:16.*** *And when this epistle is read among you, ... (KJV)*

It had to be read to the entire church. Now, obviously, before the epistle arrived, everybody in the church knew of the situation. They knew Onesimus had fled. And, knowing the grapevine in the church, even though they didn’t have computers and e-mail as we do today, undoubtedly word came back to Colossae that this slave Onesimus was now with Paul. So, the church knew; had to know what was going on.

Now, imagine Philemon and Onesimus in church together as the Letter to Colossians was read. Now, think about that. And, in fact, Philemon might have read it or his son Archippus might have read it, but they are there in the same room in Philemon’s house when the Letter to Colossians was read.

There was great potential for division and for hurt feelings and trouble, especially between masters and slaves within the congregation because the masters would obviously gravitate toward taking Philemon’s viewpoint of the matter. He’s a slave owner that’s been wronged and robbed. And the slaves in the congregation would naturally take Onesimus’ point of “Hey, here’s a converted brother now coming back.” And if it wasn’t handled properly, it could blow the whole church apart. That’s why Paul wrote this very personal letter. Now, there is no record of what happened after that. We have no record of what happened, but there are some hints that we’ll see in just a minute.

Now, what we want to do is to take the three people involved and look at their background and how they approached this time when Philemon received the letter and the letter to the church at Colossae was read in church.

Let’s talk about Paul for a minute. Let’s briefly review what Paul’s experiences are up to the point where he wrote these two epistles. Let’s go to Acts 7. We’ll begin in verse 58. We’ll stay in Acts here for this segment on Paul. Acts 7:58, we’re breaking into the account of the stoning of Stephen. Acts 7:58 and it says:

**Acts 7:58.** *dragged him [referring to Stephen] out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their coats at the feet of a young man named Saul.*

59) *While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit."*

60) *Then he fell on his knees and cried out, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." When he had said this, ... (NIV 2011)*

The NIV says:

**Acts 7:60b.** *... he fell asleep. (NIV 2011)*

We know he died. I'm reading out of the NIV. Chapter 8 verse 1:

**Acts 8:1.** *And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. ... (NIV 2008)*

Now the Greek word for "approval" means *to be gratified with, to be pleased with or to have pleasure at.*

So, this man Paul is having pleasure at seeing Stephen stoned. Think about that.

**Acts 8:1b.** *... On that day a great persecution broke out against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.*

2) *Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him.*

3) *But Saul began to destroy the church. ... (NIV 2011)*

Now the Greek word for "destroy" is the word *havoc*, which comes directly to English. And the meaning of the Greek word "havoc" means *pigs uprooting a garden.*

Now think of this. You plant a nice garden. You have all the rows in line. You have the tomatoes over here and the onions over here and watermelon over here and cantaloupes over there, all growing in nice rows. And then you loose a couple of pigs into the garden. What do they do? They bury their snouts in the garden and just tear it up; eat up everything and it just tears the whole garden up.

That is the picture of what Paul was doing to the church. He was wreaking havoc on the church. Notice the last part of chapter 8 verse 3.

**Acts 8:3b.** *... Going from house to house, he dragged off both men and women and put them in prison. (NIV 2011)*

Now look at chapter 9 verse 1. I'll read this out of the New King James.

**Acts 9:1.** *Then Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest,*

*2) and asked letters from him to the synagogues of Damascus, so that if he found any who were of [that] Way, ... (NKJV)*

Meaning: Christianity is a way of life.

**2b)** *... [they] were of [that] Way, whether men or women, ... (NKJV)*

It didn't make any difference to Paul. Men or women, he would throw them both in jail.

**2 continued.)** *[that] he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. (NKJV)*

Verse 13. Now with this, we're breaking into the point where Christ has just spoken to Ananias in a vision and Ananias is responding. He says:

**Acts 9:13b.** *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard many reports about this man [referring to Paul] and all the harm he has done to your [saints] in Jerusalem. 14) And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name." (NIV 2011)*

Paul was on a mission.

Now look at chapter 22. Acts 22, we'll begin in verse 4. I'll read this out of the NIV, Acts 22:4. Paul is talking here. He's confessing in a way. He says:

**Acts 22:4.** *I persecuted the followers of this Way to their death, arresting both men and women and throwing them into prison, 5) as also the high priest and all the Council can testify. I even obtained letters from them to their brothers in Damascus, and went there to bring these people as prisoners to Jerusalem to be punished. (NIV 2008)*

The Greek word for "punished" means *to avenge or to inflict a penalty.*

Look at verse 19.

**Acts 22:19.** *"Lord," I replied, "these men know that I went from one synagogue to another to imprison and beat those who believe in you. (NIV 2008)*

Now think about that—tortured God's people.

Look at chapter 26, Acts 26. I'll read it out of the NIV. We'll begin and read verses 9 through 11. Acts 26:9, he says:

**Acts 26:9.** *"I too was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth.*

*10) And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests, I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. (NIV 2008)*

Murdering Christians.

Verse 11:

**Acts 26:11.** *Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished [he said], and I tried to force them to blaspheme. ... (NIV 2008)*

Now how would you force a human being to blaspheme? Torture. If you bring enough pain on somebody, all human beings have a breaking point and they will say anything to stop the pain. Paul not only killed Christians but tortured them attempting to blaspheme the name of Christ.

**Acts 26:11b.** *... In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them. (NIV 2008)*

Now, can you imagine how Paul later felt when he in his ministerial travels came to an area and was preaching Christ to the relatives of somebody he had murdered or tortured? Or what if somebody was out in the audience that was disfigured because Paul had ordered them to be tortured? Can you imagine that? When we go to outlying churches, when you go to Toledo or Worden or Green Bay or Wausau, you feel welcome. The people want you to come. How would you like to walk in and there were relatives of somebody you had killed?

All of that was on Paul's head. All of that was what Paul had to carry around. Notice his guilt and regret. Let's go to 1 Corinthians 15 and read verse 9. We'll read it out of the New King James, 1 Corinthians 15:9. Notice how he looks at himself because of his past. 1 Corinthians 15:9.

**1 Corinthians 15:9.** *For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (NKJV)*

He carried this around, this guilt and this regret, for the rest of his life. He ran into people that were relatives of those he had murdered. He ran into people he might have tortured. Now that continues on in 1 Timothy 1:16. I'll read it out of the NIV. Paul did not deny it. He admitted it. This is one of the keys to repentance: You have to admit you have a problem. And Paul openly admitted it for all to know. 1 Timothy 1:16.

**1 Timothy 1:16.** *But for that very reason, I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his [immense] patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life. (NIV 2011)*

And you see, one of the reasons Paul was called was to show all of us today God's mercy and God's forgiveness and God's grace, because none of us—as bad as our sins are—none of us have murdered Christians; none of us have tortured Christians. And, yet, this man did and Christ struck him down on the road to Damascus; he became converted and Christ forgave all of that. The Father forgave all of that. And that should be encouragement to us that no matter what we have done, if we repent, God will forgive. That's why Paul was called, one of the reasons—to show us that.

So, this is how Paul comes to the Letter of Philemon. This is his background.

Now let's look at the background of... or let's look at this incident, rather, from the experience and perspective of Onesimus. Now, Onesimus, the runaway slave, is now coming back to Colossae. Now, I'm sure he came back with great uneasiness and great regret because he ran away. And maybe he took something with him. Maybe he stole some food or some clothes on his way out of town. We don't know. But I'm sure he had regret and guilt similar to what we just read about Paul.

Now, imagine Onesimus coming back with these two letters, arriving in Colossae. He's hand delivering them and he knows one of them is going to be read aloud in church and he's going to be there. And part of what Colossians covers is it teaches how slaves ought to react and how they ought to treat their masters. And he's going to hear this when he, in fact, just recently ran away.

Look at Colossians 3 and verse 22 out of the New King James. This was read aloud in church. Onesimus delivered it to the church. Colossians 3:22.

**Colossians 3:22.** *[Slaves], obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but in singleness of heart, fearing God.*  
(KJV)

Now, Onesimus is out in the audience and he hears this being read and he ran away. Now, I'm sure when this sentence was read all of the heads in the Colossian Church turned and looked at Onesimus. Can you imagine? He knew this was coming. So, he's sitting there and he knew he was guilty. So, that's where Onesimus comes from.

Now, let's look at this incident from Philemon's perspective, this wealthy minister, leading family in the church, and whose son is an elder and possibly the pastor of the church. He is the owner of Onesimus, the runaway slave. And Philemon is personally asked in a private letter by Paul not only to pardon this runaway slave and to receive him back, but most likely to grant him his freedom.

And Philemon, obviously, read the scriptures and he understood that if we want mercy, if we want Christ's blood to cover our sins, then we're going to have to show mercy and would Philemon do that similar thing? Would he show mercy to the slave that is coming back?

Let's turn to Colossians chapter 3 and see what Philemon heard when Paul's letter was read in his own house in the local church. Colossians 3 beginning in verse 11, notice what Paul says.

**Colossians 3:11.** *Where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond [or] free [master or slave]: ... (KJV)*

There is neither master nor slave.

**Colossians 3:11.** *... but Christ is all, and in all [he says]. (KJV)*

This is being read in church. Philemon is hearing it.

**Colossians 13:12.** *Put on therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, ... (KJV)*

The King James says, "bowels of mercies." It means *tender mercies*. He says, "Put on tender mercies:"

**Colossians 13:12b.** *... kindness, humbleness of mind, meekness, [and] longsuffering; (KJV)*

Now everybody in the room knew this was directed to Philemon, and also for Onesimus' sake. Verse 13:

**Colossians 13:13.** *Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do [you]. (KJV)*

This is read aloud with these, Onesimus and Philemon, right there. Verse 14:

**Colossians 3:14.** *And above all these things put on [love], which is the bond of perfectness.*

*15) And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also [you] are called in one body; and be [you] thankful. (KJV)*

What Paul is saying here in verse 15 is, "Don't let this incident cause division in the church. Don't allow that to happen. Satan is going to work on you to cause factions and trouble. Don't let that happen."

Look at chapter 4 and verse 1.

**Colossians 4:1.** *Masters, give unto your [slaves] that which is just and [fair]; knowing that [you] also have a Master in heaven. (KJV)*

And I'm sure all the eyes went to Philemon at the reading of that. What he's saying is "Give your converted slave his freedom."

Now, Philemon also had to remember 1 Corinthians 6 and verse 20. Let's go there. Understand this slave/master relationship in the New Testament. Notice what we're told in 1 Corinthians 6:20. Paul is reminding us all. He says:

**1 Corinthians 6:20.** *For [you were] bought with a price: ... (KJV)*

And every slave and every slave owner knew exactly what he was referring to.

**1 Corinthians 6:20.** *For [you were] bought [at] a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's. (KJV)*

Now what is being said here is Onesimus must forgive Philemon for any wrong that might have happened. We don't know what it might be. Philemon must forgive Onesimus for running away and maybe some other things that we don't know.

Let's turn now to Matthew 18. And while you're turning there, think about this. Matthew 18... The Book of Matthew, rather, had likely been in circulation by this time for seven or eight years. And by the time Paul's letter to Philemon was written, probably Philemon had read it [Gospel of Matthew] many, many times because it was circulating through the churches. It had already been written. And in Matthew 18, there is a parable by Christ and Christ is addressing the exact problem of what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Let's go to verse 23, Matthew 18:23.

**Matthew 18:23.** *Therefore is the kingdom of heaven like a certain king, who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. (NKJV)*

Now, we know Christ is that king. Verse 24:

**Matthew 18:24.** *And when he had begun to settle accounts, one was brought to him, [who] owed him ten thousand talents. (NKJV)*

Now if that was silver, a thousand talents of silver, today it would be worth roughly \$10 to \$15 million—not a small amount of money. So, this servant owed the king, Christ, that amount of money. Verse 25:

**Matthew 18:25.** *But as he was not able to pay, his master commanded that he be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and that payment [was to] be made.*

*26) The servant therefore fell down before him, saying, 'Master, have patience with me, and I will pay you all.'*

*27) Then the master of that servant was moved with compassion, released him, and forgave him the debt. (NKJV)*



This man is Philemon, because we all owe Christ everything. We owe Christ our lives. He died for us. Verse 28:

**Matthew 18:28.** *“But that servant went out and found one of his fellow servants, who owed him an hundred denarii ... (NKJV)*

A tiny amount relative to what he had owed. This is Onesimus, who clearly wronged Philemon, ran away, maybe stole something, but doesn't owe near what all of us owe Jesus Christ for His sacrifice—nothing compared to what Philemon owed Christ. Verse 28, the latter part:

**Matthew 18:28b.** *... and he laid hands on him and took him by the throat, saying, ‘Pay me what you owe!’*

29) *So [this] fellow servant fell down at his feet and begged him, saying, ‘Have patience with me, and I will pay you all.’*

30) *[But] he [wouldn't do that]: [he] went and threw him into prison till he should pay the debt. (NKJV)*

He did not forgive. Verse 31:

**Matthew 18:31.** *So when his fellow servants saw what had been done, they were very grieved, and came and told their master all that had been done.*

32) *Then his master, after that he had called him, said unto him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt, because you begged me:*

33) *Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, just as I had pity on you?*

34) *And his master was angry, and delivered him to the torturers until he [could] pay all that was due to him.*

35) *“So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” (NKJV)*

Now undoubtedly, Philemon was aware of this parable. Undoubtedly, he remembered it in this situation and this incident. And, as I said, there is no record of what happened. We don't know what happened, but the apostle Paul was certain at the end of his letter... Remember? We read it. He was certain that not only would Philemon forgive Onesimus, but that he would also grant him his freedom. He [Paul] says, “I know you will do more than what I ask.”

Okay. Now, we don't know the end of that story. One of these days, we'll find out, but why did God allow this twenty-five verse letter to be put forever in His Word? He has a reason for that. And what we're going to do now is look at the lessons for us today, because even though there are only twenty-five verses in this epistle, there are several lessons for us because, as I said in the beginning, Paul is dealing with one of the most delicate situations ever recorded in the Bible. We have a potential blow-up. We have a potential problem between a master and a slave and a church. “And I'm [Paul] involved

because the slave is with me now. And I baptized him,” and the list goes on. The whole church could just explode.

**First lesson: We must take responsibility for and repent of the sins that we commit.**

We have to acknowledge them; we have to take responsibility for them and we have to repent of them.

Now this is a lesson Paul had already learned. Remember? We read in 1 Timothy 1:16 where he said, “I am the worst of sinners.” And we read all those accounts in Acts where Paul ‘fessed up and said, “This is what I’ve done.” He said, “I am the worst of sinners. I’m not even... I’m the least of the apostles.” And he readily admits all the murder and the mayhem and the torture that he had done. He’s not hiding a thing.

Now this is a lesson Paul had learned, but Philemon and Onesimus would learn. They had yet to learn that. That what? We are all sinners. All of us are sinners. We all have done things we are embarrassed about. All of us, like Paul, have guilt. We have regret. We just hate ourselves for what we’ve done. If you’re like me, you have flashbacks sometimes of something you said or something you did and you just cringe. And we all have to deeply repent.

So the first lesson is we have to take responsibility for and acknowledge and repent of our sins. We’ve done that. We wouldn’t be here if we hadn’t done that.

**But the second big lesson is something, I think, all of us wrestle with. I certainly do. We must look forward and not backward.**

Now, this is a lesson that Paul had already learned. This is a lesson that Philemon and Onesimus would learn. We’re talking about when we allow guilt to inhibit our spiritual growth. When we get fixated on the past and we just stay there, we can’t grow beyond that.

Now, did Paul let his sins hold him back? These horrible sins? Did he let them hold him back? Think about it. Put yourself in Paul’s place. If we had murdered Christians, if we had tortured Christians, if we had thrown women in jail, if we had caused children to be without mothers and fathers and then we were converted, how would we handle that? What would that do to us? Well, Paul has an answer for that in Philippians chapter 3. Let’s go to Philippians 3; we’ll read verses 13 and 14 out of the New [International]. Notice Paul has repented of his sins and he is looking forward and not backward. Philippians 3:13.

***Philippians 3:13.*** *Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do [Paul says]: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead.*

*14) I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Jesus Christ. (NIV 2008)*

Now, if anybody wanted to forget the past, it would be Paul. And what he's saying by extension is, "Look, folks, all of you need to do the same thing. God has forgiven you. God has wiped it as far away as from the east is from the west. Now look forward and don't look back." But yet, I think all of us fall into the trap of beating ourselves up over and over and over again. I do the same thing. I repent of sins and, then, a month or two later I think of the same thing and I'm repenting all over again. And then I re-repent and then re-re-repent and it goes on and on and on. And I'm sure God gets tired of it after a while, but sometimes it's just hard to let go because we hate ourselves so much.

Now, let's ask the question. Did Onesimus allow what he did to hold him back? We don't know for sure, but historians reveal that a man named Onesimus was a leading minister in Ephesus. Ignatius writes this about 100 A.D. And he writes that this man Onesimus was an elder and a leading minister in Ephesus and he was later martyred. Now, was this the Onesimus that we've been talking about? Onesimus was a common name back then. So, we don't know. Someday we'll find out, but wouldn't it be something if this slave who was baptized and who came back with this letter and then was reconciled to Philemon and was given his freedom and then later ordained as an elder and then was martyred on behalf of Jesus Christ? Wouldn't that be something?

A lesson of the Book of Philemon from both Paul's perspective and Onesimus' perspective is, again, we're all sinners. We all have things we regret and that we're embarrassed about. We all feel guilty, but we cannot let our past keep us from spiritually moving forward and spiritually growing. We can't do that.

And, yet, many times in the church, people live in the past. They can't let go of the blow-up of the church back in the mid-nineties. They can't let go of some minister abusing them. Or they can't let go of what somebody did to them. Or they can't let go of their own failings and faults. And they just are fixated on it and they live in the past.

But notice what Paul says. Even with the guilt and the regret that he had, notice what he says in 2 Timothy 4. Let's go there, 2 Timothy 4:8. I'll read this out of the New King James. After all the sins that he had committed—the murder and the mayhem and the torture and the splitting up of families and throwing men and women into prison—2 Timothy 4:8. "Finally," he says.

***2 Timothy 4:8.*** ... *there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, ... (NKJV)*

He knew that!

***2 Timothy 4:8b.*** ... *which the Lord, the righteous Judge will give me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing. (NKJV)*

What a powerful lesson! If Paul brought into the church when he was converted all of that baggage (And it was a big one!) and, yet, he was able to acknowledge, repent, Christ forgave and then look what he did. Look how he moved forward. That is a powerful lesson for us today that we cannot allow our past and our past guilt and our past regret to keep us from growing spiritually. That is the second big lesson.

**The third lesson from the Epistle to Philemon is no matter how great we individually have been wronged, it will never be greater than the wrong we have committed against God and Christ.**

No matter how much somebody hurts us; no matter what happens to us... And we've been wronged. We've been on the receiving end of abuse or gossip or lies or slander or whatever. No matter what we've received, it will never be greater than the wrong we individually have done to God and to Jesus Christ.

That was a lesson Philemon had to learn. And that was the lesson in the parable that we read in Matthew. God has forgiven us of the sins we have repented of. He has shown us mercy despite all the wrong that we have done to Him. Therefore, if God has forgiven us of the wrong we've done to Him, shouldn't we forgive others the wrong that they have done to us because whatever somebody has done to us, it will never be greater than the wrong we've done to God and Jesus Christ?

If we want mercy, we must show mercy. Let's go to Matthew 6, the Sermon on the Mount. Christ got this principle across right in the very first sermon that we have recorded. Matthew 6, we'll read verses 14 and 15. It couldn't be any more plain.

***Matthew 6:14.*** For if [you] forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: ... (KJV)

Philemon knew these words.

***Matthew 6:14.*** But if [you] forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses. (KJV)

Now, go back to Matthew 5 and look at verse 7.

***Matthew 5:7.*** Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. (KJV)

So, no matter how we've been wronged or how intensely we've been hurt by other people, it is nothing compared to the wrong that we have done to our heavenly Father and to Jesus Christ. Therefore, we should give forth the same mercy that we have received from them. That's the third big lesson.

**The fourth: We have to admit, we have to be willing to admit that people can change and people can grow.**

That's why we were called; it's to change and grow. Remember? We won't turn there, but 2 Peter 3:18: "Grow in grace and knowledge." We're required to grow. We're required to change.

We're required to change from the old person to the new person. Let's go to Colossians 3. Remember this was read aloud in the church. Philemon was there. Onesimus was there. Apphia was there. Archippus was there. Colossians 3:9. Paul is saying:

**Colossians 3:9.** *Lie not one to another, seeing that [you] have put off the old man with his deeds; (KJV)*

Look at verse 10.

**Colossians 3:10.** *And have put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him [Christ] that created him [the new man]: (KJV)*

Look how much Paul changed from the murderer of Christians to the one who preached the gospel more powerfully than any of the apostles. And, yet, he felt he was the least of the apostles. More of his words have been recorded in the New Testament than any other writer. And, yet, this man was a murderer of Christians. Look how much he changed over a thirty-year period of time.

Onesimus must have changed greatly while he was with Paul. He was baptized. He was converted. He saw the example of Paul. Mark and Luke were there. He saw their examples. So, the Onesimus that was coming back to Colossae was a different man than the one who ran away—totally different man.

The lesson for us is: People can change. We have to do likewise. Maybe some brethren or ministers have hurt us in the past (five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five years ago). We have to allow for the fact that now (five, ten, fifteen, twenty, years later) maybe they have repented. Maybe they have seen themselves. Maybe they are not the same person that they used to be. Maybe they have changed to the point they would never do that again. We have to allow for that.

None of us wants to be held into account. I certainly don't want to be held into account for words I said and deeds I did twenty years ago. And we should not hold others into that same account. We have to realize that people change.

**Now, the lesson for us also is: We have to change too.**

If Paul changed from murderer to the foremost preacher of the gospel—if he changed that much—that puts the onus on us that we must change also. Onesimus obviously changed. We must change also. So, we have to admit that people can change and can grow. And we have to realize that it's our responsibility to do that very thing.

So now concluding, maybe we can now see why Paul's Letter to Colossians ties in with the Letter to Philemon. And we can see why the Letter to Philemon is so unique and why God had it preserved for us today and how the two tie together and how there are so many things to learn. We've just touched the tip of the iceberg. There are so many things to learn from this incident. But this epistle reveals to us lessons that are essential for the greater church today, the greater Church of God. They are essential for us as individuals. They are essential for us to change, to be in the image of our Savior Jesus Christ so we can be His bride. So, let's learn the lessons from Philemon.