

## Philemon

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## Philemon

### “The Art of Restoration”

#### 1:1-10

- I. **Introduction**
- II. **Vs. 1-7 Refreshed by love**
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#### I. **Introduction**

This little letter is a marvelous example of Christian diplomacy, which someone once described as “*The art of getting someone to do something willingly that they wouldn’t normally do by force*”. It serves as a great blueprint in how to negotiate change in the most difficult thing in all of God’s creation to change, THE HUMAN HEART! The “*test tube*” of Paul’s transformational experiment is the most difficult of all human hearts to change, Christians and in the most difficult type of Christian to change, a pastor. This true life example of God’s ability to transform the most difficult persons heart ought to serve as an example to those whose condition is far less severe than a pastor’s heart, that “*Since God can effect change in the pastor, I know He can change my heart as well.*”

**Paul is upfront in what the remedy to effect change is and isn’t:**

1. Vs. 8 **It’s NOT by compulsion**: There is no heavy handedness or threat. Even more amazing to me is that based on Paul’s position he could have employed this tactic, and perhaps even got favorable results. The question that Paul doesn’t answer in verse 8 is, “*Why not use what would get the proper results?*” As you read the rest of this short letter the answer is quite obvious: “*The result wasn’t in getting the person to do the right, thing. No the result was getting them to do the right thing for the right reason!*” You can command, legislate, dictate and otherwise FORCE a person to do the right thing but it is temporary if it is not first accompanied by a change of HEART! And a change of heart cannot be commanded it must be WON!
2. Vs. 9 **It’s by love**: Only love and grace applied by the Spirit of God can cause a heart to do what it normally except in rare occasions has no interest in,

**considering others more highly than its self.** Paul spends no time at all on why “compulsion” doesn’t work and all of his time in this brief letter in why “love” is affective as he outlines two key parts to loves work on the heart:

- a. 1:11-16 **The value of others above self:** *The first tact of love is to convince the heart of the profitability and value of others (or other) above self.* Paul doesn’t deny that at one time Onesimus wasn’t valuable or profitable in fact he readily admits is, as such he is not a revisionist of history. There is a good deal of time spent on Onesimus’ failure but there is an equal amount of time spent on not only his change but the reason for that change, (Jesus) as well as case studies of examples and first hand testimony of that change.
- b. 1:17-22 **The debt paid on our behalf that cause us to be valuable:** The 2<sup>nd</sup> tact of love is to remind you of the fact that at one time you were equally unprofitable and unlovable. The work of Christ’s love is the reason we are now of equal value to those that we owed a debt to because of our failure towards them, we are no longer 2<sup>nd</sup> class citizens. Christ forgave our debt, others also forgave our debt and we demonstrate this as a fact in our own lives by also forgiving the debt others owe us by their wrong doing towards us.

To fully understand the process we need to understand **the primary characters in the case before us:**

**Philemon:** Paul describes him in verse as a beloved friend and fellow laborer, then in verse 2 tells us that a church met at his house. In verse 5 we are told that he was notorious for his love and faith which he exhibited towards Jesus and others a testimony which Paul readily admits had refreshed the saints, verse 7. In verse 17 Paul calls him a partner and in verse 19 there seems to be an indication that Paul was greatly involved in Philemon’s salvation and spiritual growth. Though I can’t say with 100% certainty I’m of the opinion that Philemon was serving in pastoral ministry in his home town of Colossae and again had a great deal of success in being obedient to his calling. Yet with that said Paul’s letter indicates a need to motivate by love and grace a change of heart towards someone they both knew, Onesimus.

**Onesimus:** Much of the 1<sup>st</sup> words on Onesimus from Paul is on his conversion, verse 10. In verse 16 we learn that he was a slave of Philemon’s and according to verse 11 an “unprofitable one at that.” Verse 18 seems to indicate that in some way he “wronged”

Philemon and perhaps stole from him as Paul mentions that “*if he owe anything*” Paul would repay. Lost in this story is three critical points that would more than complicate the situation:

- a. **The location of Paul when he received Onesimus who ran away from Philemon:** *The answer is Rome the capital of the Roman Empire, under house arrest.*
- b. **The penalty of runaway slaves from their masters:** *The answer is death!* Roman law permitted a master to execute a rebellious slave, but Philemon was a Christian. If he forgave Onesimus what would the other slaves think, if he punished him what would it say to those about his relationship with Christ and his witness?
- c. **The person who carried the letter back to Philemon, with Paul’s request:** *Based upon verse 12 my belief is Onesimus himself.* Thus Onesimus carried his fate by faith, in how the Lord would work in his masters Philemon’s heart by the words of the letter he now carried.

***Paul:*** We ought to be quite familiar with Paul by now but his influence upon both

Philemon and Onesimus underscores the remedy to changing a heart and as we shall soon discover it was a discovery that he had undergone more than once in his life. Paul truly exhibited the confidence he had in the Holy Spirit’s work in Philemon that he wrote of in verse 21 by sending this letter in the pocket of Philemon.

- Would Onesimus be obedient and go back to Philemon knowing that his master had the right to execute him for his rebellion?
- Would Philemon receive back his rebellious and disobedient slave on the testimony of his transformation?

That’s the letter in a nut shell!

## **II. Vs. 1-7 Refreshed by love**

Vs. 1-2 The letter was written during Paul’s first imprisonment in Rome described in Acts chapter 28:30-31 and is the only place in the New Testament where Philemon’s name is mentioned. When we compare Paul’s 13 other letters we discover a tone in this letter that doesn’t appear but four times. In 9 of those letters Paul calls himself an apostle in the introduction but here he refers to himself as their friend, as he writes this letter as a

friend. Also unusual is this letter is addressed to Philemon and his wife Apphia but it makes perfect sense as she would have been the supervisor of the household slaves. Some assume that Archippus was their son but there is no evidence of that and it is more than likely that Archippus was an elder who took the lace of Epaphras who had gone to Rome to help Paul.

Paul reminded them that he was a prisoner not of Rome (though he was under house arrest), but rather Paul said that his present condition was at the request of Jesus Christ. *What a difference in perspective when we see our self's not as victims of cruel circumstances, but rather House Guests of a Benevolent King! We all could use a seat looking out the window where Paul gained such a view on life!* Paul informed Philemon that Timothy whom he knew was present with him who Paul include the words jointly as “our brother” as well as “fellow worker”.

Vs. 4-7 Still part of the introduction of the letter the first part being the “greetings” the 2<sup>nd</sup> part being “thanks giving” Paul includes a section like this in all of his letters the only exception to this is Galatians. Four times in Paul’s letters he says he “*makes mention*” in his prayers for people which indicates that Paul didn’t always pray for long periods of time, sometimes he just offered up short little requests. The word for sharing in verse 6 is the word in the Greek koinonia which describes sharing of things in friendship with another.

Paul describes what he was thankful for with regards to Philemon; his love and faith that he had towards the Lord and demonstrated as such by the same being lavished upon the believers. His love was practical as it had according to verse 7 “refreshed the saints” with his words and works. Paul also said that he was consistently praying that

Philemon would be effective in his witness so that others would see the value of a relationship with Jesus. Part of that prayer of effectiveness centered on Philemon comprehending all the benefits he personally had in Christ. The better we know Jesus and personally experience his blessings, the more we will want to share those blessings with others.

### **III. Vs. 8-10 Transformed by love**

Vs. 8-10 At the time of this letter there were an estimated 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire the average sold for a day's wage while some educated and skilled commanded a 100 day wage price. A master could free his slave and in rare occasions a slave could buy their freedom if they could accumulate enough to purchase it. If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and give a description with the officials and they would be on a "wanted list". A runaway slave was not automatically returned to the owner and not every owner was cruel and mistreated their slaves as they were valuable and useful to the owner. When Onesimus became a runaway slave he apparently ran to Rome and met up with Paul, where he was led to the Lord. Though not impossible that he just happened to wonder to where Paul was under house arrest it is more than likely Onesimus' destination when he left. Had he known that his master had been led to the Lord by Paul whom he sought?

The very first word, "therefore" of Paul's intercession for Onesimus is based upon his assessment of Philemon's reputation of being a man of faith and love demonstrated by him being a blessing to others. Philemon now had the opportunity to "refresh two more hearts", his and Onesimus'. When Paul makes this appeal on behalf of **Onesimus**, he follows deep running traditions in Roman culture. There was an ancient Greek law,

inherited by the Romans, allowing any escaped slave sanctuary at an altar. The altar could be the hearth of a private family home; then the head of the family was obligated to give the slave protection while he tried to persuade him to return to his master. If the slave refused, the head of the family would put the slave up for auction and give the price for the slave to the former master. Perhaps Paul has that in mind when he says in verse 11 that “Onesimus” is now in Christ profitable as in the Greek that is the meaning of his name. It is equally interesting to note that Philemon is being asked to be affectionate in his heart towards Onesimus and Philemon’s name in the Greek means affectionate.