

A Brief Introduction to Philemon

Keith Evan Schubert
Cornerstone Bible Baptist Church
Redlands, CA

Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archipus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Philemon 1-3 (RSV)

Philemon was a powerful man in Colosse. He owned slaves. He had a house that had guest quarters. It was large enough for the church to meet there. In all likelihood Apphia was Philemon's wife, and Archipus was Philemon's son and an elder in the local church (Colossians 4:17).

I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Philemon 4-7 (RSV)

Philemon is commended for: faith towards Jesus and love towards saints. This is a chiasm (x), thus the first description goes to the last group and the middle ideas are linked. Note that growth of knowledge is linked with sharing. One of the greatest growth opportunities to a Christian is to deal with unbelievers. We learn so much by explaining and answering questions. Of course we do not want to leap into a lion's pit, but in discipleship a more experienced christian is helping to handle these things. This is a key mark of discipleship, it is not just education, but certainly not less. It must include real life situations. Note also that it makes no sense to go into a real life situation until you have at least some knowledge. In this sense discipleship is a vocational education. As a final note on this section, look at the last sentence. Philemon refreshed the hearts of the saints he met, showing his love. Paul took joy and comfort in what Philemon was doing for others. Don't miss this, as this is the heart of a discipler. Disciplers do not take joy in recognition, gratitude, or praise. Disciplers take joy in the disciple being faithful to God and serving as he or she should. We will be looking at Christian discipleship in a couple weeks but I want you to think about the attitude and heart of a discipler, it is the attitude and heart of a mature Christian.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an ambassador and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment. (Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is

indeed useful to you and to me.) I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. 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; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own free will.

Philemon 8-14 (RSV)

Because Philemon has been such a solid believer Paul will not command him “to meet the minimum requirements”, rather Paul will allow Philemon to do that and more. Notice that forgiveness is not an option, it is the minimal response of a believer. It is likely that Onesimus not only ran away but stole things to pay for the escape. The bare minimum is to forgive him and receive him as a brother and love him as you would your dearest friend. Don’t think this is easy. Think of the one who hurt you the most, now think that that one shows up as a true brother in the Lord. The bare minimum is to do as Paul indicates. A second thing that comes out of this passage is how you are to think of those you disciple. They are like beloved children! This is the only attitude that is fitting. Disciples are children of our Lord, who have been entrusted to be cared for as Christ has cared for us. Treat them with no less love than you have been shown by Jesus. Note that Paul wants Philemon to be able to freely serve the Lord rather than by constraint, but Paul does clearly indicate what is to be done. Paul teaches and trains in one swift motion.

Perhaps this is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, 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. So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand, I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Philemon 15-21 (RSV)

This section deals with the attitude of the heart and mind. The concept of losing possessions to gain a brother should be a joy. Slavery is an abstract concept to us, let me make it more up close. Which is better, your car or a brother? How about your home or a brother? Can you think of any possession you would not give? How about your life? How would you feel if your child became a missionary in a dangerous place? We can not only hold nothing from Him, we must joy in giving all. Paul shows he is willing to put his money where his mouth is. Church history tells us Philemon did also. Will you?

At the same time, prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be granted to you. Ep’aphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristar’chus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon 22-25 (RSV)

Paul had never been to Colosse (where Philemon lived). Epaphras, a disciple of Paul, had founded the church. Philemon had probably been discipled by Paul during the second or third missionary journey. Paul was sending the book of Colossians with this epistle.