

# At Home In The Community

Printed Text · Philemon 1:8-18

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: EXPLAIN why Paul pleaded for Onesimus; EXPLORE our feelings about standing up for someone needing advocacy; and IDENTIFY ways we can stand up for someone being bullied or discriminated against.

## In Focus

Pastor Freeman has a great burden ministering to the teens in the inner-city community where his church is located. He spends a lot of time steering them away from certain elements in the neighborhood.

The house across the street from the church is abandoned and is being used as a crack house where cocaine dealers and addicts live and buy drugs. Pastor Freeman strives to keep the teens away from this influence. Still, they live in the same neighborhood as the crack house. Often seeking ways to avoid dangerous forms of outreach, community members sought the encouragement and advice of Pastor Freeman. The pastor let the community members meet at the church and plan ways to make their neighborhoods safe, develop the community, and advocate on behalf of themselves and their young people.

One day, some of the community activists discovered a politically connected family owned the crack house. Known for giving large donations to local organizations, this family would undoubtedly not like being known as slumlords of a crack house.

The community decided to take a stand. Pastor Freeman and most of the pastors in the community decided to join with the activists by protesting in front of the home of the prominent family. When the youth and others in the neighborhood saw Pastor Freeman, the pastors, and the activists advocating for them, they knew that they were not alone and God's people cared for them too.

*In Philemon, Paul advocates for Onesimus. Share a time when God called you to advocate for someone else.*

## Keep In Mind

"Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say" (Philemon 1:21, KJV).

## Words You Should Know

- A. **Beseech** (KJV), Ask (NLT), (Philemon 9) parakaleo (Gk.) – To implore, to call for, to exhort.
- B. **Onesimus** (v. 10, KJV; vv. 10, 11, 15, NLT) onesimos (Gk.) – Profitable, useful.
- C. **Partner** (v. 17) koinonos (Gk.) – A sharer, associate, companion.

## Say It Correctly

**Beseech.** bi-SEECH

**Onesimus.** oh-NEE-si-muhs

## KJV

**Philemon 1:8** Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,  
9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.

10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:

11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:

12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:

13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:

14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.

15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;

16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?

17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.

18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;

## NLT

**Philemon 1:8** That is why I am boldly asking a favor of you. I could demand it in the name of Christ because it is the right thing for you to do.

9 But because of our love, I prefer simply to ask you. Consider this as a request from me—Paul, an old man and now also a prisoner for the sake of Christ Jesus.

10 I appeal to you to show kindness to my child, Onesimus. I became his father in the faith while here in prison.

11 Onesimus hasn't been of much use to you in the past, but now he is very useful to both of us.

12 I am sending him back to you, and with him comes my own heart.

13 I wanted to keep him here with me while I am in these chains for preaching the Good News, and he would have helped me on your behalf.

14 But I didn't want to do anything without your consent. I wanted you to help because you were willing, not because you were forced.

15 It seems you lost Onesimus for a little while so that you could have him back forever.

16 He is no longer like a slave to you. He is more than a slave, for he is a beloved brother, especially to me. Now he will mean much more to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord.

17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18 If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge it to me.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Slavery in the Roman Empire.** Roman law recognized that slaves were human beings, but there was ambiguity, because slaves were also considered to be property. A slave owner could legally kill one of his slaves, but if the owner was murdered, all the slaves in the household would be killed. And so slaves could be treated brutally and the slave masters were not held accountable.

Conditions varied for slaves according to the type of work they did and where they were. A large number of slaves did agricultural work, especially in Italy. But slaves were found in many different professions and some could have even higher living standards than peasants who were unable to advance beyond that type of work. Slaves could put aside some money and eventually purchase their freedom. And some freed Roman slaves became independently wealthy. Nearly everyone in the Roman Empire took slavery for granted.

Those who worked in a household, such as Onesimus did, had the most hope of buying their freedom, because they were often sent away to do errands and while they were away, they had the opportunity to do a little business of their own. But slaves sent on errands also had a greater opportunity to escape. If they escaped, they usually would run far away for safety's sake and they might take some of the master's money with them for traveling expenses. Even if Onesimus did not take any of his master's money, the time he was away would have necessitated Philemon purchasing another slave to do his work—thus causing extra expense—and slaves were not cheap (Keener, 642–643).

When a slave was recaptured, he or she was punished severely. Old Testament Law required the Jews to give slaves a safe hiding place (Deuteronomy 23:15–16) and not oppress them, but Roman law punished those who harbored runaway slaves. (When the slave was returned, he was usually branded with a burning iron with the letter F on his forehead. F stood for fugitive, meaning “fugitive from the law or runaway.” So by the law of the Roman Empire where he was himself under arrest at the time, Paul was required to return Onesimus to Philemon.

## Background

Although there are other names mentioned, Philemon is actually a personal letter from Paul to Philemon, appealing on behalf of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Philemon lived either near or in the city of Colossae, which was located in what is now Turkey. Philemon was a wealthy landowner who had partnered with Paul in the ministry. Although we do not know much about this partnership, we do know that Philemon opened his spacious home in Colossae for a new church to meet. Paul wrote and sent a letter to these Colossian Christians at the same time that he wrote the personal letter to Philemon.

When Paul wrote this correspondence, he was in prison, either in Ephesus or Rome. He included Timothy in the greeting, but we can tell that this was a personal letter from Paul because he wrote in the first person, “I.” He mentioned that the letter was to Philemon and Sister Apphia, probably Philemon's wife, and Archippus, who was either Philemon's son or an elder in the church (v. 1). By including these others in the address, Paul added strength to his appeal to Philemon. This is just one of the many devices used by Paul to ensure that Philemon would follow his advice.

The substance of Paul's letter to Philemon was an appeal on behalf of Onesimus, a slave who had run away from Philemon. Paul greeted Philemon as a beloved co-worker. Although Philemon's socio-economic status was above that of Paul's, Paul could have exerted his apostolic authority over Philemon, but he chose not to. Instead, he appealed to Philemon as a brother, one whom he prays for and always thanks God for (v. 4). He commended Philemon for loving all people and for his generosity and kindness toward God's people. As he praised Philemon for these virtues, Paul hoped that he would show these same characteristics toward Onesimus, who has now become a believer also.

## At-A-Glance

1. An Appeal Based on Christian Authority (Philemon 1:8–9)
2. An Appeal Based on Christian Compassion (vv. 10–12)
  3. An Appeal Based on Christian Service (vv. 13–14)
4. An Appeal Based on Christian Brotherhood (vv. 15–18)

# In Depth

## 1. An Appeal Based on Christian Authority (Philemon 1:8–9)

Paul asks Philemon for a favor, rather than giving him a command, concerning Onesimus. He reminds Philemon that he has the authority to command him, but instead he appeals to Philemon's integrity to do the right thing. Paul also appeals on the basis of their shared love for each other. Then he reminds Philemon that he, Paul, is older than he is and he is now a prisoner for the Gospel. How could Philemon say no?

## 2. An Appeal Based on Christian Compassion (vv. 10–12)

Paul calls Onesimus his child because he is his spiritual father; Paul is the one who has led him to Jesus Christ as Savior. Here Paul makes a little pun of Onesimus's name which means "useful" or "profitable" (v. 11). This was a common name given to slaves; however, during the time of Onesimus' escape, he had been useless to his master. Now, since he has been converted, Onesimus has been a wonderful help to his spiritual father. Paul is sure that since Onesimus has been saved, he would serve Philemon well, but Paul tells Philemon that in sending Onesimus back to him, it is like sending his "own heart" (v. 12).

## 3. An Appeal Based on Christian Service (vv. 13–14)

Timothy was Paul's partner in ministry, but this meant that he was often gone for long periods of time to take care of evangelistic and pastoral concerns. But Onesimus was there ministering to Paul's personal needs on a daily basis. All of us owe our spiritual fathers/mothers for their leading us to Christ. Philemon owed Paul and Onesimus owed Paul. Just as we should pay special honor to our earthly mothers and fathers, we should honor those who have led us to Christ. Especially as our fathers and mothers get older, we have a special responsibility to help them. But Philemon was busy in Christian service in Colossae so he couldn't help Paul, his spiritual father. So Paul suggests that Onesimus is serving him in Philemon's place. Paul could just have written and told Philemon that he was keeping Onesimus with him to help him in his place, and that he was sure Philemon would have wanted that to happen. However there is a danger in doing things this way. We risk making others resentful, and since Paul could not just pick up a phone and talk this over with Philemon; he sent Onesimus all the way back to Colossae.

## 4. An Appeal Based on Christian Brotherhood (vv. 15–18)

Philemon probably thought it was a bad piece of luck when Onesimus ran away, but Paul wants to help him see that this happened so that God could work it for good. Now Onesimus comes back in an eternal relationship; he has become Philemon's brother in Christ. In the church, the slave master has no higher rank than the slave, because they are brothers and sisters. The NIV translates verses 15 through 16: "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother." So once Onesimus received Christ, his relationship with Philemon and every other believer was changed forever

In the final appeal, Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus just as he would welcome Paul himself. And Paul volunteers to pay anything that Onesimus owes him.

So how did Philemon respond? Did he brutally punish Onesimus for running away? Did he keep him as a more valuable slave now that he was a Christian? Or did he set him free to return to

ministering unto Paul? Bible scholars point out that if Philemon had not gone along with Paul's advice, Philemon probably would not have allowed the letter to be preserved.

Some have even speculated that Onesimus, the bishop of Ephesus in A.D. 110, was the same Onesimus as in the letter to Philemon. Further, they think he might have been a force for the inclusion of this letter in our Bible, in order to show God's grace in taking a runaway slave and making him the bishop of that great city of Ephesus.

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. On what basis did Paul appeal to Philemon (Philemon 9)?
2. On whose behalf was Paul appealing to Philemon (v. 10)?
3. When did Onesimus become Paul's spiritual son (v. 10)?
4. What did Paul want to do with Onesimus (v. 13)?
5. How had Onesimus's relationship to Philemon changed (v. 16)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

The abolition of slavery was not directly advocated in the New Testament, but in many ways Christianity had a part in the breakdown of the Roman Empire, because in the church every believer had become equal (Galatians 3:28–29). If a pastor was a slave and his master was a member of his congregation, in spiritual matters the slave had authority over the master. There was a multitude of slaves in the Roman Empire and when many people turned to Christ, this turned society upside down. Why do you think that a Christian-based nation like the United States of America had slavery? How was slavery in the Roman Empire different from the type practiced in the United States? What part did Christians play in the eventual abolition of slavery? Paul did not command Philemon concerning Onesimus, and yet he was quite strong in his appeal. Describe how Paul appealed to Philemon. Which of his appeals do you think was most effective? Explain.

### **Liberating Lesson**

1. Various types of protest were used during the Civil Rights era. Do you think we need new methods of appeal today? What biblical strategies are most effective for today's problems, especially in the area of racial discrimination?
2. Do you think that our experiences as an oppressed people can help us help others? What other groups do you see discriminated against? How are their experiences different from ours? How are they the same? Brainstorm some possible methods that we can use to stand up for others.

### **Application For Activation**

Be sensitive this week to anyone who is being bullied, discriminated against, or otherwise hurt. Think of ways to stand up to help this person.

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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### **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

### Philemon 1:8–18

#### Introduction:

Today's text features Philemon, prominent in the early Christian church, and Onesimus, his runaway slave. In fact, scholars believe that Philemon was probably a wealthy member of the Colossian church and was a Greek landowner who had been converted under Paul's ministry. The Colossian church even met in Philemon's home (Life Application Study Bible, 2448–2449). To someone who has been oppressed, it may be hard to believe that a fellow believer can be both a Christian and a slave owner. However, Paul, who was under house arrest (see Acts 28:30, 31), wrote a letter to Philemon, telling him the truth in love—appealing to him to receive Onesimus back into the fold, but treat him as a fellow brother in Christ, instead of as a runaway slave.

This letter can cause some concern among African Americans and other oppressed people, who may not understand why the apostle Paul did not ask Philemon to free Onesimus. He did not appeal to Philemon to treat Onesimus as he would want to be treated (as a free man). Since Philemon would not want to be Onesimus's slave, why would he want to make Onesimus his slave? While not making a direct appeal to abolish the master-slave relationship, Paul wrote to convince Philemon to not only forgive Onesimus for running away and perhaps stealing money to finance his trip, but to accept Onesimus, whom Paul led to Christ while he was in Rome, as a fellow brother in the faith.

**Philemon 1:8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,**

History shows that slavery was very common in the Roman Empire and even some Christians owned slaves. Such was the case with Philemon, who owned Onesimus. Apparently, Onesimus had run away to Rome, where he met Paul, and Paul led Onesimus to Christ. He then persuaded Onesimus to return to his master and appealed to Philemon to reconcile with his runaway slave (v. 10).

Even though the apostle Paul did not condemn the institution of slavery in his letter, he does point out to Philemon that Philemon and Onesimus's relationship must change. Philemon can no longer behave as a slave owner relating to a slave; Philemon needs to see and relate to Onesimus as a fellow brother in Christ. Because this change is important and necessary, Paul admits that his boldness in writing such a letter is based in Christ. The word "bold" in the Greek is *parrhesia* (par-rhay-SEE-ah), and it means "frankness, bluntness, outspokenness."

**9 Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.**

Paul appealed to Philemon on the basis of the Greek *agape* (ag-AH-pay), meaning "unconditional love," that fellow believers share with one another. "Beseech" in the Greek is *parakaleo* (par-ak-al-EH-o) and means "to call near (i.e., invite, invoke, entreat)." Paul implored and entreated Philemon to do the right thing. He also reminded Philemon that he (Paul) was not a novice in the Lord; he was an elder, an apostle, and was also a "prisoner of Jesus Christ." In other words, Paul was sold out for Christ. At that time, he was under house arrest because of his faithfulness to his Lord and Saviour. Paul could have used his authority, therefore, to compel Philemon to comply with his wishes, but instead Paul chose to reflect on Philemon's faith and love.

## **10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:**

Paul saw Onesimus as his spiritual son because he had led Onesimus to the Lord, while Paul himself was a prisoner—in bonds. The Greek word for “bonds” is *desmios* (DES-mee-os), and it means “held captive, a prisoner.” Appealing to Philemon on his spiritual son’s behalf, the apostle begged Philemon to deal kindly with his runaway slave. Paul based his appeal on Philemon’s Christian commitment.

When we are committed to Christ and His agenda, this should cause us to want to obey Christ and His commands. We should not do it grudgingly, but out of heartfelt obedience. Paul wanted Onesimus to comply out of heartfelt obedience—out of his love for the Lord and also his love for his fellow man. Therefore, not only did Paul ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus, but to accept Onesimus as a brother. In other words, Paul wanted Philemon to treat Onesimus as he (Philemon) would want to be treated. He wanted Philemon to show heartfelt kindness toward Onesimus.

## **11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:**

Onesimus’s name means “useful” or “profitable” (KJV). Paul explained that although Onesimus had not been useful (he had been “unprofitable”) to Philemon when he ran away, now Onesimus would be useful (profitable) to both Philemon and Paul himself in the ministry. The word “unprofitable” in the Greek is *achrestos* (AKH-race-tos) and means “inefficient, detrimental.” The word “profitable” in the Greek is *euchrestos* (YOO-khrays-tos), meaning “easily used, useful.” The newly re-formed relationship between Philemon and Onesimus was a testimony of how a new life in Christ can foster forgiveness and be a witness to a lost and dying world. Both Philemon and Onesimus, therefore, could be useful in that witness or ministry.

## **12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:**

The apostle Paul told Philemon that he was sending Onesimus back to him. Bible scholars reason that in the early days of Christianity, Christians did not have the political power to change this system. Therefore, Paul did not condemn or condone it, but worked instead to transform individual relationships like the one between Philemon and Onesimus. In this manner, social structures could undergo change by changing the people within those structures. Even in our own society, we find that we cannot legislate a change of heart. Only God can and does change hearts. Thus, Paul sent Onesimus back to his master and asked Philemon to receive him without retribution. Paul made a heartfelt plea that Philemon and Onesimus would reconcile. Remember that the body of Christ must be united if the world is to know us by our love for each other.

## **13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:**

Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him in Rome. He would have proved helpful, but instead the apostle sent Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. Since Paul was under house arrest and his movements were restricted, he could have used Onesimus to minister to him “in the bonds of the gospel”—in other words, help him do ministry. However, Paul felt that it was more profitable in their Christian unity that Onesimus go back to Philemon.

## **14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.**

Paul, therefore, did not want to do anything without Philemon’s consent, and he did not want Philemon to feel forced to do what Paul asked of him—“that thy benefit should not be as it were of

necessity" (v. 14). The Greek word for "benefit" is agathos (ag-ath-OS), which means "good, well." Obeying because one feels compelled is different from heartfelt obedience. If Philemon felt compelled to accept Onesimus back into the fold without punishment and as his fellow brother in Christ, there still could be a breach in the unity. There could be resentment on Philemon's part. Therefore, Paul wanted Philemon to be in total agreement with his recommendations. He wanted Philemon to be a willing participant in Christian unity.

**15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; 16 Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?**

Paul asserted that perhaps Onesimus left Philemon for a season, so that he could come back and be received as his fellow brother in Christ forever. Thus, Onesimus's status as a Christian made a gigantic difference in Onesimus and Philemon's relationship. They were no longer slave owner and master, but brothers in the Lord. To Paul, God had worked a bad situation to the good of His kingdom. Another soul had been won to Christ.

Paul asserted that Onesimus was more than a servant now that he had accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. Now, instead of Onesimus being just a servant—a slave—Philemon and Onesimus were both members of the family of God. They were both joint-heirs. They were both equals before Jesus Christ. This idea was stressed in Paul's letter to the Galatians, in which he wrote, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond (slave) nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). In other words, Philemon and Onesimus were now one in the Lord.

**17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. 18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;**

Paul then told Philemon that if he considered him (Paul) to be his partner in the Lord, then when Onesimus returned, Philemon should give him the same welcome that he would give Paul. The word "partner" in the Greek is koinonos (koy-no-NOS) and means "a sharer, associate, companion, fellow partaker." Paul was so adamant about sealing the reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus that he showed his love for Onesimus by assuring Philemon that he (Paul) would pay any debt that Onesimus owed him. Paul also showed that he was heavily invested in Onesimus, this new believer, who had gone through much both as a slave and a runaway slave. Paul affirmed Onesimus as one of the Children of God. Since he was both Philemon's and Onesimus's spiritual father, the apostle Paul hoped that Philemon would remember this and respond by forgiving Onesimus for his transgressions against Philemon. Paul's personal letter to Philemon shows believers that indeed, the presence of almighty God can and does change relationships and can bring about reconciliation. Paul wanted both Onesimus and Philemon to do the right thing.



# Daily Bible Readings

## **Monday**

Ephesians 6:1-9

## **Tuesday**

Philemon 1:1-7

## **Wednesday**

Philemon 1:8-11

## **Thursday**

Philemon 1:12-14

## **Friday**

Philemon 1:15-17

## **Saturday**

Galatians 5:13-18

## **Sunday**

Philemon 1:18-25