



## philemon 8-16

<sup>8</sup>Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, <sup>9</sup>yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus—<sup>10</sup>I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. <sup>11</sup>(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) <sup>12</sup>I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. <sup>13</sup>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, <sup>14</sup>but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. <sup>15</sup>For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, <sup>16</sup>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.

## commentary

**8-9** Paul possibly has the authority and respect of Philemon to be able to command him to receive Onesimus back and reconcile with him, but he would rather model that the more loving approach is to persuade him. In fact, love always persuades, rather than coerces. Because of Philemon's previous pattern of showing love, Paul does not come at him nagging or demanding reconciliation. When somebody orders another to do something, the orders are often resented, but it is another thing for a friend to come in love, making an appeal.

Paul is currently nearing the end of his life in Prison in Rome (possibly 60 years old at this time), and he uses this fact possibly as part of his persuasion and appeal to Philemon. As such, it seems Paul is not opposed to using pity to his advantage!

**10** Here, Paul breaks the news that Onesimus has become his "child" in the faith, even while he was in prison. What a shock it must have been to Philemon to see Onesimus show up on his doorstep with this letter, then to read that he had come in contact with Paul, and experienced a radical life-change.

**11** The Gospel is powerful to change somebody, even those who seem most "useless" to us. The name "Onesimus" was frequently given to slaves, because it literally means "useful." Paul uses his name as a play on words to say that while Onesimus was formerly useless for stealing from Philemon, then running away, he became useful because of his new faith in Christ. God had changed Onesimus, and now he can live up to his name.

The proof of Onesimus' usefulness is apparent. He helped support Paul in his missionary work and aided him while he was in prison in Rome. Colossians 4:9

says that he accompanied Tychicus in delivering Paul's letter to the Colossian church, as well as delivering this letter to Philemon. Because of his changed life, Onesimus was willing to go back and reconcile with Philemon, whom he had wronged.

Going back and making restitution for former wrongs is one of the more difficult things to do once becoming a Christian. It is, however, one of the most freeing, liberating, and healing processes, though. Even in recovery programs, often there will be a step where one needs to go back and make restitution for the damage they did as a result of their addiction. Christians ought to continue to live repentant lives and seek restitution for wrongs done.

**12** Paul does not kick Onesimus in the pants and tell him to make things right, he actually gets involved with him through the process. He walks with him, even being willing to help pay for whatever was stolen (v. 18). Paul releases Onesimus, who was very useful to him, in order that reconciliation could take place. The Greek word for "heart" is *kardia*, which is actually the internal organ(s). He is saying that there is a deep affectionate place in his heart for Onesimus, and it hurts Paul to send him back to Philemon. It wasn't just Onesimus who had to make a sacrifice for this relationship to be repaired, but Paul, himself, made a huge sacrifice in acting as an advocate and being willing to release him back to Philemon.

**13-14** Paul recognizes that not only was Onesimus a former slave of Philemon's, and legally belongs to him, but he desires for Philemon to make the decision, himself, to release the former slave to Paul's service as a co-missionary. He could have held on to Onesimus' service for awhile longer, but noticed not only the urgency to send Onesimus back, but also to have integrity in giving back to Philemon what was rightly his.

**15-16** Now, Paul draws attention to the possibility that this is all according to God's sovereign plan. Onesimus' fleeing as a thief, may have been a blessing in disguise, because now he is a brother in Christ. He was certainly somewhat useful as a slave, but now, as a partner in the Lord's work, and as a brother, he all the more useful to Philemon, Paul, and to Jesus. Not only that, but his relationship with Onesimus is now eternal, rather than just for the duration of this time on Earth.

## for reflection

**Sunday** - Reflect on Philemon 8-16 and today's sermon. Take some time to analyze your relationships. Is there anybody you need to be reconciled to? Is there anybody toward whom you have bitterness and resentment? How would God have you lovingly confess to them and reconcile the relationship?

**Monday** - Reflect on Philemon 8-10. Consider how you typically attempt to persuade another person. Do you lovingly make an appeal, or do you resort to more direct methods of coercion or making orders? In your relationships right now, what is the most loving way to make a request? What is appropriate?<sup>1</sup>

**Tuesday** - Reflect on Philemon 11. One of the things we are driven toward once we experience new life in Christ, is a desire to go and reconcile relationships we broke, and confess and ask forgiveness from those we wronged, repaying debts and seeking to restore what we may have broken. Are there any of these tasks of reconciliation you may need to go back and repair? Any people you wronged, who you need to ask forgiveness and seek to restore?

**Wednesday** - Reflect on Philemon 12. Is there a sacrifice you may need to make in order to see others make restitution or to reconcile? How can you show your affection for your friends and sacrifice your own time, efforts, and resources by helping them through their healing process?

**Thursday** - Reflect on Philemon 13-14. Consider your past life apart from Christ in contrast with your life in Christ. How are things different? List some of the former and present characteristics of who you were/are and what your life was/is and take some time to thank God for how he has changed you. What may be some further transformation needing to take place in your life?

**Friday** - Reflect on Philemon 15-16. Who (or what type of people) do you have the tendency to look down upon and see as hopeless? How can you begin to pray for them and see them as potential followers of Jesus? Or, maybe there is someone you formerly had conflict with, but now they have decided to follow Jesus. How might you see them differently and celebrate the fact they are now a brother/sister and not necessarily a burden?

**Saturday** - Reflect on 2 Corinthians 5:16-21. Who has God sovereignly placed in your life that needs to either be reconciled to another person and/or to God? How might you be used by Him to make a plea for reconciliation as God used Paul to reconcile Philemon and Onesimus? What kind of action will you take this week?

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<sup>1</sup> Notice that Paul seems to think that using a bit of pity for his old age is somewhat appropriate in his situation.

## for discussion

**Ice Breaker:** What your favorite example of an outdated piece of technology that has been much improved upon?

### Read the entire letter to Philemon.

1. **In verses 8-9**, what are some of the methods Paul uses to make his appeal to Philemon? What methods does he avoid, and why?
2. **Verse 10** is Paul's appeal. What do you think Philemon was thinking when he read this sentence?
3. **Concerning verse 11**, we discussed on Sunday the concept of pote' (formerly) and denuni (but now). What is the most significant aspect of your personality or desires (pote') that has changed as a result of becoming a Christian (denuni)?
4. **Look at verses 12-14**. What were some sacrifices Paul had to make in helping Onesimus seek restitution?
5. Why was it so important for Paul to seek Philemon's consent?
6. Do you have any stories of restitution with others you had to go make, once you became a Christian?

### Read verses 15-16.

7. Has there been a time in your life when God surprised you with his involvement in events of your life to bring about a better outcome?
8. Why is Onesimus now "more than a slave?"
9. Think of a person (or a type of person) who you might see as hopeless. How might you pray for that person?
10. Take some time in your prayers as a group to ask God to move you all to a ministry of reconciliation.

## for memory

### 2 Corinthians 5:17

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.*



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