

The Little Godly Books

Philemon 2&3 John Jude

PHILEMON

Introduction

Americans have been concerned with their rights from the founding of our nation:

1. The right to practice religion however they wished was one of the primary reasons the first settlers came to America from England.
2. The right of representation and self-determination was one of the primary reasons the Revolutionary War was fought.
3. The right for all persons to be free was one of the reasons the Civil War was fought.

We enjoy our rights. We demand them. Brave men and women fight and even die for them.

You have one right that you might not always consider. You have the right... **to remain wronged!**

When would you exercise your right to remain wronged? Jesus might ask you to do it in order to put Christianity into *practice* and into *perspective*.

Philemon had been wronged. A slave in his household, a man named Onesimus, had run away. To compound the wrong, Onesimus had stolen from Philemon.

Because of our own history with slavery, we find it difficult to identify with the issues raised in this letter. To us, what Onesimus did in fleeing slavery was right, and Philemon was in the wrong for not freeing his slaves. Set-aside your thoughts about the evils of slavery for a moment. Under Roman law, what Onesimus had done was not just wrong; it was criminally wrong. Philemon had the right to punish Onesimus, even to kill him.

The apostle Paul got involved. His solution to the situation boggles your mind: He sent the slave back, to make things right with his master, and he asked Philemon to exercise his right to remain wronged by receiving Onesimus without punishment.

You see, they were all believers and it gave them a rare opportunity to put biblical principles of love, forgiveness, and mercy into practice. It also gave the Holy Spirit a rare opportunity to put Jesus into perspective.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 When You Are Wronged, Jesus Might Ask You To Wave Your Rights, and #2 When You Were 'Wrong,' Jesus Asked His Father To Make You Right.

#1 When You Are Wronged,
Jesus Might Ask You To Wave Your Rights
(v1-16)

Slavery was common in the Roman Empire. As much as one-half of the total population were slaves. Slaves performed all kinds of work, not just manual labor. Slaves were both domestic and educated, laborers and professionals. They had no rights under Roman law. A master had the power of both corporal and capital punishment over his slaves. Runaway slaves, if captured and returned, would at least be mutilated if not murdered.

It bothers us that Paul did not simply condemn slavery. What was he thinking?

He may have been thinking that social evils are soonest changed by transforming the lives of people. The Bible doesn't condone slavery, and everywhere its principles are applied slavery will disappear. Still it must be admitted that the Bible never concentrates on the **restructuring** or **reforming** of society. It concentrates on the **regeneration** of souls. Society is changed as a result of individuals being saved.

This letter provides an example of how extensive those changes can be.

Philemon 1:1 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy *our* brother, To Philemon our beloved *friend* and fellow laborer,
Philemon 1:2 to the beloved Apphia, Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:
Philemon 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul was in Rome, literally a **prisoner**, under house arrest. He did not consider himself a prisoner of Rome; he was a **prisoner of Christ Jesus**. He was serving the Lord, and his assignment was to be a **prisoner** *in* Rome, not *of* Rome.

When you feel imprisoned by problems; or chained to your circumstances; you have been given them as your assignment, in order to practice the Christian life before others so they can get a good perspective on how Jesus transforms lives.

Timothy was not a prisoner, but chose to remain with Paul in Rome. Paul was discipling him. Timothy was getting a pretty good picture of what was in store for those who served Jesus.

Philemon was more than a friend to Paul. We read later in the letter that Paul was the person God used to lead Philemon to faith in Jesus.

Scholars have reason to believe that **Apphia** was Philemon's wife, and **Archippus** their son. Evidently he was the pastor of the Church in Colossae where they lived; his name appears at the end of Paul's letter to the Colossians as one of its key leaders.

The **church** met in their **house**. Paul was writing to **all** these people because **all of them** were involved with Onesimus. Philemon was his master; Apphia, as woman of the house, had the daily oversight of the slaves; Archippus, as a minister, would be responsible for directing the reaction of the Church members who themselves would certainly have any number of possible reactions to the return of a runaway slave.

Philemon 1:4 I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers,
Philemon 1:5 hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints,

Paul kept tabs on his converts and Churches – both *practically* and *prayerfully*. Nothing encouraged him more than a good report of their spiritual progress. I suppose nothing discouraged him more than their spiritual regress.

Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the Church were making spiritual progress. Paul heard of their **love** and their **faith[fulness] toward the Lord**. Their practice of love and faith was about to be tested by the return of Onesimus. It's one thing to love those who are lovely; but what about those who have wronged you?

Philemon 1:6 that the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.

The sharing of your faith is *not* a reference to evangelism. It means the fellowship they shared together as a body of believers. **Effective** means *put into action*. **Acknowledgment** means *to discern*. **Every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus** is a reminder to always take the spiritual high ground.

This is an encouragement for them to discern God's best spiritual response to the return of Onesimus and then put their response into action as a fellowship.

Philemon 1:7 For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother.

Philemon and his family had an open house to receive believers and to refresh them. The **refreshment** was certainly physical, in terms of their hospitality in offering food, drink, and shelter. But it was primarily spiritual, because they refreshed the **hearts** of **saints**. Sometimes people think they have the gift of hospitality because they invite others over, or open their homes for certain things. The real issue is whether or not people leave spiritually refreshed after they are with you.

Philemon 1:8 Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting,

Philemon 1:9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal *to you* - being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ -

Paul had the spiritual authority to tell Philemon what to do. Authority exists in the Church, and it ought to be recognized and obeyed. It's always better if you acknowledge it for yourself, rather than getting commanded. Truth is, when you are given grace to acknowledge it for yourself, but don't, it is to your own shame.

The letter is a bit mysterious thus far. We're ten verses into it; Paul was hinting at something; but he didn't mention Onesimus until now:

Philemon 1:10 I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains,

Whoa! *My son Onesimus?* How did this runaway slave get saved? The story behind this letter is one of the most remarkable in all of Scripture. For the first time in the letter you begin to see the amazing hand of God in providence. It appears that Paul enjoyed some freedom while under house arrest. Commentators believe he was able to go out into the city and publicly proclaim the Gospel. On one such occasion among those who responded was Onesimus. Whether immediately or after some short period of time, Onesimus told Paul his story. He was a runaway slave trying to hide in the hustle-and-bustle of Rome.

Onesimus was in a dire dilemma. Not only had he run away; Onesimus had robbed his master's household before he fled. As a Christian he sensed he had wronged his master by running away but to return could mean death.

Paul inquired as to who his master was. "Philemon," answered Onesimus. Whether Paul smiled or laughed out loud is not recorded in the inspired text but I'm sure he had some such reaction. Paul not only knew Philemon, he knew him well. Paul had led Philemon to faith in Jesus Christ. Paul recognized the hand of God in these converging circumstances.

Philemon 1:11 who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.

Onesimus means *profitable* or *useful*. It was a common name given to slaves, in the hopes they would live up to it. Paul told Philemon that *Profitable* was unprofitable but is now profitable. The indication

is that Onesimus had been a lousy slave – only giving eye-service, always causing problems. He undoubtedly took advantage of his Christian master's kindness. He was unprofitable as a slave, then even moreso in robbing Philemon to finance his escape. Now he was returning. As a believer he would prove to be a profitable, hard-working, dedicated slave.

The New Testament addresses the evils of slavery by empowering masters to treat their slaves with consideration and fairness; and slaves to work faithfully for their masters. Master and slave are to function under a higher title and duty – as brothers in the Lord. In the long run it's a much better solution than simply legislating an end to slavery.

Philemon 1:12 I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart,

Philemon 1:13 whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel.

Philemon 1:14 But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.

A genuine, radical transformation had occurred in Onesimus. It would put Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the Church in their house to the test. Given God's providence, would they exercise their right to remain wronged by receiving Onesimus without punishment?

Philemon 1:15 For perhaps he departed for a while for this *purpose*, that you might receive him forever,

Philemon 1:16 no longer as a slave but more than a slave - a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon, Apphia, Archippus, and the Church certainly prayed for the salvation of the slaves. Their prayers and preaching had no effect on Onesimus. He robbed them and ran. But now here he was – a *beloved brother*.

It was up to Philemon... Would he have a bigger perspective than the offense done to him? Circumstances are never just earthly; they are eternal. You need to look beyond the earthy to the eternal. Paul takes us high above the *extenuating circumstances* to *eternal considerations*.

The right thing to do was to forgive the wrong and receive Onesimus. Sometime in **your** life, the right thing to do will be to remain wronged. You'll need to get *beyond* and *behind* the earthly circumstances to see the eternal considerations to know when you should exercise the right to remain wronged. Just know that Jesus will ask you to do it.

They were to put Christianity into practice. But there was something more: The situation with Philemon, Onesimus and Paul puts Christ into perspective.

#2 When You Were 'Wrong,'
Jesus Asked His Father To Make You Right
(v17-25)

Martin Luther is quoted as saying, "We are all God's Onesimus." You and I are the property of God, by right of His creation of us. But we are born in rebellion against God. We start out in life as runaways, having robbed God by taking the life He has given us and spending it all on ourselves. We're slaves – though we deceive ourselves into thinking we are free. We're slaves to sin. The Law of God condemns us to death.

We are spiritual Onesimuses. At some point we encounter Jesus. He asks His Father to make us right.

Philemon 1:17 If then you count me as a partner, receive him as *you would me*.
Philemon 1:18 But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.

Philemon 1:19 I, Paul, am writing with my own hand. I will repay - not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.

Philemon 1:20 Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord.

Onesimus owed a debt he could not pay; Paul was willing to pay a debt he did not owe. In the same way, only with much greater significance, you and I owed God a debt we could not pay – the debt of sin. Jesus was willing to pay the debt of sin He did not owe! On the Cross, He took your sins, He paid your debt. He said from the Cross, **It is finished!** One of the possible translations of **It is finished!** is *paid in full*.

Paul told Philemon to **put that on my account**. The Greek word could be translated *impute*. He is illustrating the Bible doctrine of imputation. When you repent and believe in Jesus, God declares you right (righteous) with Him. Your sin is imputed, or charged, to Jesus Christ's account and His righteousness is imputed, or credited, to yours.

Once the debt was imputed to his account, Paul said **receive him as you would me**. Once your sin is imputed to Jesus and His righteousness to you, God the Father receives you just the same way He receives Jesus.

Philemon 1:21 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

What could Philemon do that would be **more** than Paul asked? There might be a hint that he should set Onesimus free.

For his part, Onesimus was returned to the household debt-free and with a new power to love and serve his master. When you are saved, you are returned to God's household of faith; and you find within a power to love and serve your Master.

Paul ended with some information about who was with him, and how God was using him.

Philemon 1:22 But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you.

Philemon 1:23 Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

Philemon 1:24 as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers.

Philemon 1:25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen.

Paul was focused on ministry – and ministry is people putting Christianity into practice because you have a perspective on Jesus.

What do you think? Do you think that the folks in Colossae followed Paul's counsel? Tradition has it that they did. Onesimus went on to become a bishop in the early Church.

Applying the Word...

If you are a Christian, you have the right to remain wronged. You don't always need to exercise your right to be wronged. Each situation will require prayer and discernment. But especially in our nation, with our background, you need to remind yourself that somewhere, some time, Jesus will ask you to put Christianity into practice and Him in perspective by bearing the wrongs done to you.

If you are not a believer... You are Onesimus before he encountered Paul. You owe God a debt you cannot pay. Jesus is ready to transfer His righteousness into your account; but you must repent and believe on Him.