

Blessed be the glorious name of our Savior Jesus Christ. Welcome as we study the Bible, the Word of God, which is the lamp to our feet and the light to our path (Psalm 119:105).

The book of Philemon is a letter written by the Apostle Paul while he was in prison, addressed to a believer named Philemon. (A letter, or “epistle,” is simply a written message.) Paul wrote this letter under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and it was included in the New Testament canon because of its profound spiritual lessons and instructions for Christians. It is also one of the shortest books in the New Testament.

Who was Philemon?

Philemon was a man who came to know Jesus Christ through the preaching of Paul and his companions in the city of Ephesus. He believed in the gospel, became a faithful servant of Christ, and eventually served as a leader of the church that met in his own house in Colossae (Philemon 1:2). Philemon was a man of means and owned slaves, as was common in that culture.

One of his slaves, named Onesimus, stole some of Philemon’s property and ran away to Rome. Along the way, he encountered Paul, who was preaching the gospel. The message of Christ deeply touched Onesimus, leading him to genuine repentance. He became a true believer,

transformed by the power of God (2 Corinthians 5:17), and even desired to serve alongside Paul in the ministry, even during Paul's imprisonment.

However, Paul, being led by the Holy Spirit and guided by wisdom, decided not to keep Onesimus with him. Instead, he sent Onesimus back to his master, Philemon, with a letter of commendation—this very epistle—testifying to his genuine conversion and transformed life. Paul interceded on his behalf, urging Philemon to receive Onesimus not as a mere slave but as a beloved brother in Christ.

This was crucial because, under Roman law, runaway slaves could be punished by death. Paul therefore sent Onesimus back with this letter, appealing to Philemon's love and Christian character.

Paul's Key Appeals in the Letter

1. **Receive Onesimus back because he has truly repented and been transformed.**

Philemon 1:9-12:

“I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you.”

2. No longer treat Onesimus as a slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ.

Philemon 1:16:

“...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”

3. If Onesimus owes you anything, Paul himself will repay it.

Philemon 1:17-19:

“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will pay it back.”

Paul closes the letter expressing confidence that Philemon will do even more than requested (Philemon 1:21).

Lessons for Us Today

1. How to treat those who serve us

The gospel changes how we relate to others, including those under our authority. If you employ someone—a house helper, a security guard, or office staff—remember that if they come to faith in Christ, they become your brother or sister in the Lord. Treat them with dignity, fairness, and love (Colossians 4:1). Their wages should be fair and their humanity respected, so they feel valued and not like mere tools for labor.

2. How to serve when under authority

On the other hand, if you are an employee or in a position of serving someone, Scripture commands respect and sincerity of heart:

Colossians 3:22:

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to curry their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.”

Being in Christ does not eliminate respect for authority; rather, it deepens our sense of responsibility to serve faithfully.

3. The ministry of reconciliation

Paul models for us the work of every servant of God—to be peacemakers and reconcilers (Matthew 5:9; 2 Corinthians 5:18). Onesimus, though genuinely converted, had wronged his master. Before fully engaging in ministry, it was right for him to reconcile with Philemon. Likewise, today’s church must help believers make amends with those they have wronged. True repentance includes restitution where possible (Luke 19:8–9).

4. Restoring relationships before ministry

Some believers want to serve in the church but have unresolved conflicts—abandoned families, unpaid debts, or broken trust. Before granting ministry positions, church leaders should ensure that such issues are addressed, as Paul did for Onesimus, to protect the witness of the gospel (1 Timothy 3:7).

Conclusion

The book of Philemon teaches us about forgiveness, reconciliation, and the transforming power of the gospel. Just as Paul interceded for Onesimus, Christ intercedes for us before the Father (Hebrews 7:25). May we learn to love, forgive, and see each other not by worldly status but as one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.” (Matthew 5:9)

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