

**Philemon:**  
*“From Trash To Treasure”*  
Part 2 of 3

**Intro:**

We're continuing with our look at the book of Philemon from last week and so let's return to Philemon - which you will find right in front of the book of Hebrews. So if you find Hebrews, go left and you'll find it. We're going to be following up on last week's study on this short book, this short letter, divided into only 25 verses.

As we noted last week, this was perhaps one of the most personal letters that Paul wrote. Though we only made it to Verse 7 the last time we were together, there is a **tremendous** amount of richness here, and even though I had hoped that we'd be able to complete our study this evening - I think we'll probably have to conclude our study with a 3rd part next week.

Just to recap: Philemon is a book that holds **profound** application to us as believers but it also contains a very strong exhortation to those of us as Christians in leadership.

You'll remember that though a number of names were mentioned in this letter, there were 3 names that this letter was primarily concerned with: Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. We learned last week that Paul was writing this letter to Philemon from his imprisonment in Rome, likely from the damp, dark, putrescent dungeon known as the Mamertine Prison, before he was to be executed under the Roman Emperor Nero.

We also learned that Philemon was likely to be the Pastor of the church in Colossae where the believers there gathered for church in his home. And then we learned that Onesimus was a slave who belonged to Philemon but who had run away after stealing something and had fled to

Rome, likely in a bid to get lost in the crowd. And finally, we had seen that the apostle Paul was pleading for the sake of Onesimus and calling for Philemon to forgive Onesimus his wrongs.

We saw that at least part of what makes this letter so interesting is that Paul was not making his appeal to Philemon to forgive Onesimus by asserting his apostolic authority (as he *normally* did, as he certainly *could* have). He wasn't *commanding* that Philemon forgive Onesimus. Why? Because Paul was not making an appeal from his AUTHORITY; he was making his appeal from his HEART. This was, in every way after all, a heart issue.

Philemon had some understandable hostility towards Onesimus, seeing as how Onesimus had not only run away but had stolen something of value as well. This wasn't some petty offense. This wasn't just a family squabble. Recall that the punishment for being a runaway slave was death. This was a big deal. And it's also a big deal that this Inspired book, as short as it is, was included in the canon of Holy Scripture. It deals with, after all, forgiveness and reconciliation. And isn't that *literally* at the very heart of our own redemption?

And so to conclude our recap of last week's study of the contents of the letter, we saw that Paul was writing this letter to Philemon, sending a very heartfelt greeting to him and his family (or at least his household) in the first few verses, and then a few verses further we read Paul heaping praises upon Philemon's character, for being so loving and faithful, towards Christ and the saints and what a blessing it was for Paul to hear of it.

And so now we move into the part of Paul's letter to Philemon in which he begins to explain the purpose of his letter. So now that Paul has Philemon's attention, Paul begins to make his plea to Philemon for Onesimus beginning in Verse 8. We find the bulk of the plea of the apostle Paul \*basically\* from Verse 8 through Verse 21. But there is so much there within those 14 verses

that I think it might be wise that we at least attempt to break that up into a couple pieces and then conclude our look at the book of Philemon next week.

Let's read the bulk of that segment of the letter to Philemon together starting at Verse 8 and reading through Verse 14:

(Read Philemon 8-14).

**Verse 8, 9, 10:**

Now Verses **8**, **9**, and **10** are all part of 1 sentence and although I think we can rightly divide this sentence into these 3 separate verses as the translators have, they're all part of 1 thought and so we'll take a look at them thusly.

And by the way, you probably know this but I always think it bears repeating that the numerical divisions with a particular book, that is the Chapter and verse divisions, were placed there by the early translators and were done so for our reference, so that we can find sections of scripture more easily. In other words, these numerical divisions are not inspired.

But looking at the totality of Paul's sentence here, we see the beginning of his plea. Verse 8-10, we read "[8] *Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, [9] yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you - I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus - [10] appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.*". You see, he's setting Philemon up here by reminding him that although he DOES have the authority as an apostle of Christ to *compel* Philemon's cooperation in receiving Onesimus back, instead of ORDERING Philemon to do the right thing, Paul is appealing to him IN LOVE as a brother in Christ. *Do you see that?* Paul is seeking a response by Philemon

based on LOVE, and not obedience to his authority. Why? Because Paul didn't just want Philemon to do the right thing; Paul wanted Philemon to do the right thing FOR THE RIGHT REASON.

Knowing who God is and what we WERE in our filth and our sin, what the cost of the cross of Christ means, and what our discipleship in Christ demands, we ought to be asking ourselves, "How then should we live?". Forgiveness is no small thing. But it is NOT all about us. It is all about HIM.

Brothers and sisters, please get this: God has commanded us as Christians to forgive others JUST as God through Christ has forgiven us. And we will recall that God's Word goes even further, telling us that if we do NOT forgive others, then God will NOT forgive us. **That bears repeating:** Jesus Christ Himself tells us that if we do NOT forgive others, then God in heaven will not forgive us. Do you realize how many times God's word exhorts us as believers to forgive?

**Ephesians 4:32**, *"Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you"*.

**Mark 11:25**, *"And whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone, so that your Father also who is in heaven may forgive you your trespasses."*

**Matthew 6:14-15**, *"For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."*

**Matthew 18:21-22**, *"Then Peter came up and said to him, "Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven."*

**Colossians 3:13**, *“Bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive.”*

And on and on and on and on.

Forgiveness is a tough thing. I understand that very well. For example, I’m sure that it would take a long time for me to forgive a murderer for taking the life of someone I loved very much. I’m positive that it would require the Holy Spirit to begin a work of healing in my own heart.

But if we’re having a hard time forgiving someone, we need just look at the Cross. Get a taste of what YOU were forgiven of. Remember: In our sin, all of us stood before God convicted as transgressors of His Holy Law, as guilty and condemned criminals; not ***awaiting*** a sentence, but awaiting the ***execution of a sentence*** **ALREADY PASSED ON US.**

Do you repent of your sin and put your trust in Christ? Then Praise God - because YOU have been forgiven. Everyone to whom much was given, of him MUCH will be required (Luke 12:48). You have received MUCH forgiveness? Then practice forgiving MUCH.

Again, in Verses 8 & 9, Paul could very easily have said to Philemon, “I, the apostle Paul, by my authority, command you to forgive” and that certainly would have carried some weight. But he’s not saying that. He’s sort of arguing from the greater point to the lesser point. He’s saying “I am here in this stinking, rotting dungeon, shackled for my bondage to Christ. I am being faithful and I’m asking you to do the same.” God has forgiven you through Christ? Then go and do the same! Don’t just do the right thing. Do the right thing FOR THE RIGHT REASON.

**Verse 10:**

In Verse 10, the last of Paul's 3-part sentence, the opening salvo in his heartfelt appeal to Philemon, we read something very interesting: "...[ I ] *appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.*". While in Rome, by the sovereignty of God, Paul and Onesimus had somehow found each other. Through circumstances not described in scripture, these 2 met while in Rome. Now Paul is saying that he became Onesimus's father (spiritually speaking) while in his imprisonment. So that means that at least Onesimus's conversion happened under Paul while Paul was in chains.

I suppose it's possible that Onesimus had arrived in Rome and at some point was walking along when he had heard a familiar voice, preaching to the crowd "Hey, look at that - it's Paul". It's possible that Paul saw him at a distance, and remembering him from Philemon's house church in Colossae, called out to him. Maybe it's the case that Onesimus was grabbed up by the Roman authorities during some evangelistic work alongside Paul, and then connects with Paul that way. It could be that Onesimus was caught doing something and thrown into the same prison as Paul and later Paul brings Onesimus to a saving knowledge of Christ. It doesn't really matter HOW God brought the two together, what does matter is that through God's sovereignty, they WERE brought together, and Onesimus had been brought to Christ by Paul.

And therefore, Paul lovingly refers to Onesimus as his "child". It isn't that Paul had biological children of his own, it was that Paul had "children" in the faith. People who he led to Christ and mentored and disciplined. For example, we see similar tender language when Paul refers to both Titus and Timothy as his "children" in the faith.

What's also really remarkable is that the distance between the small town of Colossae and the city of Rome was about 1300 miles! I mean, can you imagine? 1300 miles - That would have taken many months to travel. And it wasn't a straight shot. This wasn't like driving (or walking as

the case was) from Vancouver to Los Angeles via I-5. I mean, if we were to use Paul's 3rd missionary trip's route from Ephesus (which was very close to Colossae), and go to Rome via that route, this would have been quite a journey. He would have traveled either along the western coast and up through the northern part of modern Turkey, across the northern Aegean Sea, into Macedonia, down into Greece, across the Adriatic Sea, across Italy to the west coast where he would eventually find Rome. Or, another route we might estimate, which if going by Paul's 4th missionary journey, Onesimus may have left Colossae (or Ephesus) by boat, traveling west across the Mediterranean Sea, perhaps stopping at Malta, and then going past Sicily, and up along the west coast of Italy to finally arrive in Rome. Traveling by boat wouldn't have been easy either. These were boats NOT traveling under power. They were entirely dependent on the wind, they likely had to avoid a number of storms, they may have had to avoid pirates - after all, there was a thriving slave trade throughout the Mediterranean in those days.

The point is that it was a very long, arduous, sometimes terrifying, perhaps even tortuous journey to reach Rome, where Onesimus could perhaps start a new life. Surely, no one would find him there. Surely, he wouldn't be recognized that far away, right? I'm being sarcastic of course.

I'm belaboring this point because it was the Sovereignty of God Himself that brought these two together and would ultimately lead Onesimus BACK to Philemon where a profound reconciliation would take place. It was the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit Himself that would be sure to include THIS book, the book of Philemon, into the canon of Holy scripture. It would be God's Sovereignty that would have us as Christians study this book and learn of its profound call to forgiveness. It would be God's Sovereignty that we are doing that together, this day, right now. What does that tell you? I think it says, we need to hear this. We needed to hear it today. And last week. And next week.

I will never forget the late wife of my Pastor one day saying to me, “The Word of the Lord never returns void”. That’s from Isaiah 55:11, “...so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” Why do I mention that? Is this call to forgive NOT from the Lord? Is this book NOT the inspired Word of God Himself? If not, then let us conclude our study and return to our lives, content with where we’re at in our walk with Christ. We can just be content to be as much of a reflection of Christ right now as we’ll ever be in this life.

But. But if this IS the inspired Word of God Himself, and we have heard it today, then it was because God sent out His word to us THIS DAY and it “*shall accomplish that which [He] purpose[s], and shall succeed in the thing for which [He] sent it*”.

### **Verse 11:**

Returning to Paul’s words here in Verse 11, we read “(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.)”. There’s something really fascinating about Paul’s play on words here when he says to Philemon that Onesimus was “formerly **useless**” but now is indeed “**useful**”. The reason that we see it as a play on words is that the Greek word Onesimus, the NAME “Onesimus” actually means “USEFUL” or “profitable”. It’s sort of like Paul is saying “USEFUL was USELESS but now USELESS is USEFUL”. The point being that through the grace of God, Onesimus had been radically transformed, indeed from death to life.

Another thing to take note of is this: **Paul is not excoriating Onesimus**. He’s actually pleading ON BEHALF of Onesimus. I can’t help but to see this image of a newly converted Onesimus, sitting in this awful, stinking, fetid dungeon, chained up next to Paul. And now he’s come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and in his newly regenerated heart, he begins to feel the full

onslaught of his shame for what he has done. Of the hurt he has likely caused Philemon and his family. The sorrow begins to really take hold and perhaps he even begins to weep. He wishes to apologize to Philemon, he wishes to exercise some form of repentance, he wants very much to correct his wrongs, and be reconciled, but he knows there is no hope of it. If he ever gets out of prison and if he is ever able to go back, if he even MAKES it back, he'll arrive at Philemon's doorstep and will likely be put into chains and sent away to his execution.

And there's Paul, lying in this God-awful place, this dungeon that the sewers of Rome connect to, the putrid aroma filling the air. And he looks and sees Onesimus sitting there, weeping, he sees the conviction of the Holy Spirit take hold, and sees him sitting there humbled by it all. And it's as though he puts his hand on Onesimus's shoulder and says, "Now you're MY son, you're MY responsibility now. If Philemon has an issue with you, then NOW he has an issue with me. I'm going to send you back with a letter and I want you to hand it to him. I know he'll do the right thing. YOU just need to trust in the Lord". Now look, that hypothetical conversation is NOT RECORDED IN SCRIPTURE - this is PURELY my own idea of what MIGHT have happened. Just my own imagination of what that hypothetical conversation might have looked like.

But the point is that NOW, Onesimus can truly answer to his name! And Paul doesn't speak to Onesimus **or about** Onesimus as his previous conduct would have warranted. I mean after all, Onesimus DID run away from Philemon and he DID steal from him. In fact you might say that here in this instance, Paul is acting as mediator between Onesimus and Philemon. Between one who has sinned and one who has been sinned against. We see later how Paul takes the shame of what Onesimus has done, and the debt he has incurred, upon HIMSELF. All for the purposes of reconciliation. Sound familiar?

God covers the sins of the penitent heart in the blood of Christ. Christ incurs our debt and becomes the very CURSE of sin that WE held. And because of that, there is now a pathway to reconciliation with our God. The righteousness of Christ is imputed to all those who would turn from their sin and place their full trust in Him. So how much more should we forgive others, their harms against us?

You say, "Well God I'm okay with this and I'm okay with that, but don't ask me to forgive so-and-so. That is something I won't do - they hurt me too bad". And God says, "Fair enough - then I will withhold my forgiveness of YOU as ransom against YOUR forgiveness of OTHERS". It's one of the promises of God we don't particularly like isn't it? God is promising that if you don't forgive others, then He won't forgive you." That's absolutely terrifying. If you're a believer anyway.

### **Verse 12:**

We now walk into the next verse, Verse 12 where Paul writes, "*I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart.*". Wow. There's a couple things we see immediately. One, is that Paul is sending him back to Philemon. Philemon has every right under Roman law to exact punishment against Onesimus; whether death or prison or otherwise. Philemon sees Onesimus show up, knocking on the door, he is well within his rights to have him arrested. Then he'll "have his closure". "I caught him!". "That'll teach him". The world system allows for Philemon to get his "justice". And Onesimus knows that! Can you imagine Paul telling him that HE is the one to deliver this letter? Really? I'd probably say something like, "I know you're an apostle but couldn't we send someone else and then wait to receive Philemon's response? I mean, shouldn't we see if he's going to forgive me first?".

We know that Onesimus did in fact, ultimately deliver this letter to Philemon so what might that indicate of our dear Onesimus's faith? Oh keep in mind, he's a baby Christian. I mean, he's not ready for the "difficult things" yet right? I mean, this is next-level-Christianity type stuff right? How many of us are 10 years in the Lord? 20 years? 30 years? How many of us are 40 years old in the Lord and STILL DRINKING BABY FORMULA? Have you ever seen a 40-year old, dressed up like a baby, drinking from a bottle? That's not cute. It's disturbing. So why are we okay with that in Christianity?

The second thing we see is that Paul says, "...*sending my very heart*". Ouch! Paul is laying it on thick. Look at the scene: There's a knock at the door. Onesimus is standing there with a letter in his hand. Onesimus - the runaway slave who stole from Philemon. Philemon probably is about ready to throttle Onesimus when he's handed this letter that BY THE WAY starts with "Paul...". To elevate the call to accountability, Paul even adds "...and Timothy". Ok, so now Paul has his attention. Then Philemon reads this letter and sees that Paul is pleading for the sake of Onesimus and appealing to Philemon to forgive him. All while the door is open with Onesimus standing there. Onesimus, no doubt having months and months and months of time to think about what will ultimately happen when he knocks on Philemon's door, STILL, in an exercise of **TRUST IN CHRIST**, walks up and knocks and hands this letter to Philemon. And Philemon must be grinding his teeth, he must be completely dumbfounded at the very least that he is receiving a personal letter from Paul himself, at the hand of Onesimus no less, the same guy who stole from him and ran away some time ago.

And now Philemon comes to the part of the letter where Paul writes "*I'm sending him back to you, **SENDING MY VERY HEART***". Paul continues his tender plea from the heart in the matter of reconciliation of Onesimus back to Philemon. It's quite a statement. "Sending my very heart".

There can be no misunderstanding at this point; Paul's heart on this matter is clear. By the conclusion of this letter, we will see why Paul's impassioned plea from the heart was so important, so necessary.

**Verse 13:**

What Paul says next is probably hard for Philemon to hear. In Verse 13 we read, *"...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..."*. It seems like Paul has put Onesimus on ministerially-equal footing with Philemon by saying *"...on your behalf he might minister to me..."*.

There is no "tenure" in Christianity. As I was saying before, there are lots of people who have been 30 years in the Lord that are still "baby Christians". Lots of so-called "mature" Christians still eating baby food. The fact that there is no tenure denotes that maturity comes from the process of sanctification; a process ordered by the Lord that we must choose to willingly cooperate in. Philemon no doubt was a great pastor, as we can note by all of the praise heaped upon him by Paul earlier in the letter. But there were glaring holes in his Pastoral role, some of which Onesimus apparently fulfilled in Rome when he was yet with Paul. To the point of Paul wishing for him to stay with him to minister to him on Philemon's behalf. Ouch.

It's as though Paul was impugning Philemon's character as a man who was unkind, perhaps even cruel, to his slave Onesimus and who had perhaps forgotten that *in Christ*, "...there is neither slave nor free... (Galatians 3:28)". Philemon had forgotten how to treat people, least of all, in his own home. What would that indicate about his Pastoral care perhaps? It might indicate that he needs some maturity, some growth in the area of how he should be treating people, particularly in his role as a Christian in leadership.

In any case, he must have found Onesimus to be perfectly fit for the role of ministry, especially when it came to ministering to Paul there in his chains because he seems to say as much. But the fact that Paul is sending a perfectly good minister, BACK to Philemon, demonstrated that Paul was willing to DENY himself a useful ministry and a great comfort in order that a **GREATER work of reconciliation could take place.**

**Verse 14:**

Continuing the sentence from Verse 13, here in Verse 14 Paul continues, “...*but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.*”. So Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon, he is denying himself the great comfort of having his newly converted child in the faith, his prison-borne disciple, and doing it all in the most tender way possible: By appealing to Philemon’s authority over Onesimus and not by invoking his apostolic authority over Philemon as he most assuredly could have done. He could have, but no - Paul wants Philemon’s voluntary cooperation.

We can see that the entire tone of this letter from Paul to Philemon is that he doesn’t just want Philemon to do the right thing. He wants him to do the right thing FOR THE REASON. Paul is showing deference. He is showing him respect. He is pleading with his heart. He is even denying himself and his authority in order to allow Philemon to exercise the discretion that can only be exercised of his own accord. Not under duress or threat. Not because Paul is an apostle. Not because now Timothy is involved in this whole matter. Not because Onesimus is standing in front of him, there on the landing in front of the door. No. It’s because, like our God, he desires that Philemon, like us, learn to be slow to anger, quick to forgive, and abundant in pardons.