

Philemon • The Application of Christianity

Introduction

The ultimate goal of *Walk with the Word* is to apply God's Word to our every day life, to prove that we "hear" God speaking through His Word by being obedient to such a degree that it actually changes our behavior. In Paul's letter to Philemon we have a wonderful glimpse of just such an application. Paul makes no doctrinal statements, quotes no Scripture, nor does anything "apostolic"; he reveals a heart and mind in every day application of the Gospel to which he was called to preach. Here we see early Christians that didn't just "talk" but knew how to "walk".

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, ²and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, ⁵because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; ⁶and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake. ⁷For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

⁸Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, ⁹yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

[Read v.1-3]

Q: How does this letter, compared to Paul's other letters, start out differently?

A: Paul calls himself "a prisoner of Christ Jesus", forgoing the usual mention of being an apostle or elaborating on his calling and office in Christ. From the outset this is a very personal letter that shows Paul's Christianity on a very personal level, interacting with another fellow Believer.

Q: What is special about Philemon?

A: As a host of a church in his own home, he is probably both a spiritual leader and a more prominent member of his community, someone looked up to both spiritually and publicly, probably wealthy in both the heavenly and earthly sense.

[Read v.4-7]

Q: According to v.5, what is Philemon's chief characteristic praised by Paul?

A: "...your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints".

Q: What is this an Old Testament application of?

A: Philemon was obedient to **BOTH** of the tablets of the Law from which everything else proceeded. The first side were commandments to love and serve God, the second side to love and serve man. Philemon's love and faith were spiritually mature, obedient to the whole intent of Scripture both in regards to his personal relationship with Christ and his personal relationships with others.

Q: What is the result of a life whose love and faith are so balanced?

A: "...the hearts of the saints have been refreshed..." (v.7) Philemon is not just a recipient of a right personal relationship with Christ, but a conduit of same to everyone else around him.

Application: Have you ever been a "refreshment" to another, or someone to you? Do you ever consider this as a personal measurement of the quality of your own walk?

[Read v.8-10]

Q: Paul specifically refers to Onesimus as "begotten". What does this mean?

A: It's another way of saying that Onesimus has been born again; he is not exactly the same person when he originally ran away from Philemon. He has undergone a profound change.

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¹¹who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

[Read v.11]

Q: What does “Onesimus” literally mean when translated in English?

A: “Useful”, as in profitable or an advantage.

Q: What are the before and after terms Paul uses in v.11 that play on the meaning of Onesimus’ name?

A: “Useless” as in “not serviceable”, and “useful” as in “serviceable”.

Q: What is the picture painted by this word play?

A: Onesimus in his original state was “profitable” in name only and in reality was not serviceable to Philemon; now that he has been “begotten” (v.10)—that is, born again—Onesimus is now serviceable and profitable. As a new creation, Onesimus is finally and actually fulfilling his name through his calling in Christ. It’s a wonderful illustration of Christ knowing and calling us even before we were born.

Q: Why might it be significant that Paul stipulates that Onesimus “now is useful BOTH to you and me”?

A: A defining characteristic of a new life truly and completely changed by Christ is that it not only fulfills **new** roles and responsibilities, but makes amends for the past.

¹²I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, ¹³whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

[Read v.12-14]

Q: What is Paul acknowledging that still remains to be addressed by Onesimus?

A: Reconciling wrongs in his past.

Q: Why is that important? Is it just about some kind of personal debt or payback?

A: Christians are forgiven of their past sinful life by Christ, but they may need to prove the effect of Christ’s change in their life by taking responsibility to make any amends as a result of those sins. It’s a testimony of Christ both personally and to others.

¹⁵For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever, ¹⁶no 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.

[Read v.15-16]

Q: So was Paul’s encouragement for Onesimus to make amends simply about paying something back? What is the larger potential reward?

A: Onesimus—now a new creation in Christ—returns as a new creation in terms of his relationship with Philemon. Not just simply a slave with an earthly debt to repay, he returns as a brother in Christ with heavenly blessings to bestow. He’s now a true fulfillment of his name “Useful”, “both in the flesh and in the Lord”, both physically and spiritually.

¹⁷If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me. ¹⁸But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). ²⁰Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

[Read v.17-20]

Q: Does Onesimus owe Philemon something? Has he wronged Philemon?

A: Yes. Slavery was quite different in that time from its practice in the New World. Very often the designation “slave” was given to someone who sold themselves in order to repay a debt they legitimately owed. There were a variety of ways to ultimately pay off the debt and regain freedom. Onesimus therefore could be reneging on payment, depriving Philemon of further income, and it is implied that in his flight he may have stolen goods or money from his master to finance the escape. This was **NOT** an escape effected by a slave under inhumane and intolerable circumstances, but more like a debtor both failing to live up to his bargain and stealing even more.

Q: Does anything come to mind in Paul’s provision in v.18, “But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account”?

A: It certainly sounds like the work of Christ on the cross on all our behalf. It’s the application of Christ’s grace to Paul, passed along to others.

Q: How does Paul’s mention of Philemon’s personal debt to Paul remind us of another of Christ’s teachings?

For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.
– Matthew 6:14-15

It’s the practical application of Christ’s teaching in every day life.

Q: How does Paul tie this request in with the beginning of the letter on a personal level with Philemon?

A: “...refresh my heart in Christ”. (v.20) It’s both the acknowledgment that Philemon, a spiritual leader who has already demonstrated the quality of His faith and love because “*the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother*” (v.7) as someone Paul knows will seek higher spiritual benefits even at the expense of worldly repayment. Philemon’s reconciliation with Onesimus will pay back greatly in spiritual dividends for everyone concerned. Paul is confident Philemon sees “the big picture”.

²¹Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

[Read v.21]

Q: Why does Paul make mention of PHILEMON’S obedience? Isn’t this an issue of ONESIMUS’ obedience?

A: Philemon is responsible for his spiritual role in the reconciliation process just as much as Onesimus is responsible to make restitution.

Application: *Just because we’re “right” doesn’t exempt our behavior and attitude from submission to Christ in the process.*



Final Application

- *How is this interaction a practical application of Christ's intended working of the church?*
- *How are we prepared to receive back one that has severely and materially harmed us, but returns changed as a born again Believer?*
- *Does this teaching apply to anyone that does **any** wrong to us **regardless** of their spiritual condition?*