

“Developing a better understanding of good things”

Philemon 1-18 NIV

“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker—² also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and to the church that meets in your home: ³ Grace and peace to you¹ from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ “I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. ⁷ Your love has given me great joy and encouragement, because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the Lord’s people.

⁸ Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, ⁹ yet I prefer to appeal to you on the basis of

love. It is as none other than Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—¹⁰ that I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he has become useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him—who is my very heart—back to you. ¹³ I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary. ¹⁵ Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.”

**Philemon is among the shortest Bible books.
Don’t let its brevity fool you.**

¹ a. Verse 3: The Greek is plural; also in verses 22 and 25; elsewhere in this letter “you” is singular.

b. Verse 10: Onesimus means *useful*.

Philemon helps with some our most difficult, contended issues.

I recently reread a commentary I first studied about forty years ago.

The author carefully probed Philemon’s textual and historical evidence.

Decades back his scholarship impressed me.

My recent reading made me think he could have more efficiently stated his good research.

His surplus words distracted and wearied me.

The Apostle Paul wasted no words in Philemon.

Philemon features two guys at odds.

Paul met the two on separate occasions.

Philemon likely lived comfortably in or near the ancient city Colossae.

The Colossian church worshiped in Philemon’s home.

The first churches built no worship edifices.

Christians rented halls or met in the homes of folks who could sit 25-30 persons for their assemblies, where they often shared meals.

Paul earlier spent at least two years preaching in Ephesus about 120 miles distant.

Paul and Philemon possibly met then and Paul brought Philemon to the Lord.



Villa in Pompeii- (Ref 54) Flickr

Did Philemon own a home of this style and grandeur?

Many Roman citizens owned slaves.

How many slaves Philemon owned, no one knows but he kept one named Onesimus.

“Onesimus” means useful; many slaves then wore that name.

In my younger days some of us joked in the presence of friends and relatives saying to another: “Make yourself useful and bring me a cup of coffee;” or “hand me that wrench.”

Did the origin of the name “Onesimus” come from similar circumstances?

By the way, I have never made an offhand comment like that to Norma.

At some point, Onesimus left Philemon and apparently took more than a wrench.

Where slave Onesimus wandered, only God knows, but he, too, came in contact with Paul.

Some scholars speculate that he could have been a fellow prisoner of Paul in Rome.

Paul, you recall, underwent terrific transformation.

Before he met Jesus, Paul banged on doors demanding folks inside to denounce Christ.

Once Christ changed him, Paul banged on hearts helping folks believe Jesus’ resurrection.

Someday try listing the people the New Testament records as Paul’s associates and he mentions by name.

Paul helped scores of people whose hearts Jesus changed

In First Corinthians, we get an idea of the backgrounds of folks Jesus transformed:

“Some of you were once like that. But you were cleansed; you were made holy; you were made right with God by calling on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”²

In short, Paul said to these people who quit those former life-styles:

“Some of you Corinthians used to do that stuff, but you gave it up when you gave your lives to Jesus, washed your sins away in baptism, and put on God’s Spirit.”

The last sin Paul mentioned in his 1 Corinthian 6:9, 10 notables was

“thievery,” “cheating,” or “swindling.”

Did he have folks like Onesimus in mind?

Onesimus evidently stole, but gave up thievery when he gave his life to Christ.

In his Philemon letter, Paul wrote of: “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.”

² 1 Corinthians 6:11 New Living Translation



Mamertine Prison, Rome

Paul wrote a touching letter.

Some folks question his approach.

They criticize the Christian Philemon for owning a slave in the first place:

“How could you do that?!”

The critics seem unaware of some basics.

This letter helps us identify these essentials.

A) First, Christians quit sinning.

- 1. Paul stopped hating.**
- 2. Onesimus quit stealing.**
- 3. If you are uncertain about what sin is, reread 1 Corinthians 6: 9, 10 and Galatians 5:19-22.**

Paul did not come up with these; Jesus defined wrongdoing in Matthew 15: 19.

The Lord expects us to stop doing these things because they endanger us, our loved ones, and society.

Preachers claiming: **“God loves you just the way you are”** do not tell the full story.

When parents discipline little children for playing in the street, they do it for good reason.

They try to prohibit the kids from unsafe practices because they love them.

God expects us to quit sin because it harms us and our loved ones.

God requires us to stop because sin adversely affects us and society.

B) Essential two; American Law does not necessarily equal Christian principles.

What Christ taught applies to churches and believers, not to governments.

The New Testament nowhere speaks to governments.

Some believers either forget or don't realize that the laws God gave in Exodus through Deuteronomy applied to the nation of Israel.

They stayed in effect only while Israel governed itself—about 1400 BC to 600 BC. **In Jesus’ time, Rome controlled Israel and most of the Mediterranean world.**

The New Testaments urges Christians to obey their governments: Jesus; **“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”³**

Paul: Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. ²

Consequently, whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted, and those who do so will bring judgment on themselves... ⁷ Give to everyone what you owe him: If you owe taxes, pay taxes; if revenue, then revenue; if respect, then respect; if honor, then honor.”⁴

³ Matthew 22:17

⁴ Romans 13:1, 2, 7 for **further reading:**

12 “Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. 13 Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, 14 or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. 15 For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people. 16 Live as free

The NT gives no precedent for influencing governments through protest or outside means.

Early Christians resisted only when governments tried to prevent them from preaching about Jesus and worshiping God. Otherwise they made no attempts to interfere with or protest government actions.

When the Roman governor Felix unduly held Paul in prison, Felix hoped Paul would give his bribe money.

Neither Paul nor local Christians protested. Paul tried to convince Felix to believe in Jesus.

Felix “sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus. ²⁵ As Paul talked about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”⁵

people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. 17 Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honor the emperor.”

⁵ Acts 24:24, 25 NIV

Paul did not ask local Christians to protest his mistreatment or anyone else’s.

The Lord teaches both slave and free Christians to treat one another as brothers and sisters remembering we all answer to God.

Jesus didn’t commission us to forth and create a perfect society.

We stop sinning and treat all others as we wish to be treated—as true brothers and sisters.⁶

Early believers followed this assignment. That’s why Paul asked Onesimus to return to Philemon.

Toward the same end, he wanted Philemon to accept his former slave as a brother in Christ: “Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—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. ¹⁷ So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you

would welcome me. ¹⁸ If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me.”

The New Testament urges love and forgiveness, not protest and bitterness.

The Lord wants us to tell the message of Jesus’ forgiveness on the cross and the power of his resurrection.

Nothing in our lives should detract from that message.

C) We share Jesus’ news with every person, not just those we like:

“I pray that you may be active in sharing your faith so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing we have in Christ.”

Consult few different versions and you will see a wide variety of translations of this verse (6).

Even the current NIV has changed from its original 1973 translation.

I confess to missing a huge clue in this verse.

The word “share” translates the Greek word “koinonia.”

“Koinonia” means to share something with someone.

⁶ For further reading, see Colossian 3: 22-25 regarding slaves; Colossians 4:1 regarding masters; Colossians 4: 9 re: Onesimus.

You often see “koinonia” translated as “communion” or “fellowship.”

Paul asked Philemon to share his faith, have fellowship or communion, with his slave.

God’s servants often reluctantly do this.

Jonah hated the people of Nineveh and didn’t want God to save them.

Only after the Lord had Jonah tossed into the Mediterranean during a typhoon did he get the message—God wants everyone saved.



The Lord sent a preacher named Ananias to talk to Saul of Tarsus about Jesus.

Ananias: “Lord, I’ve heard a lot about this guy; he’s a killer on the loose and he’s on his way here to murder innocent people.”

Jesus never meant his church to be divided in any way—not by language, culture, race, income level, or denomination.

He wants all to be saved. God **“is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”**⁷

“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matthew 28:18-20).

We who accept Christ know our unworthiness.

We also know God’s mercy and power.

Protest and bitterness aren’t needed.

God righteously judges all of us.

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⁷ 2 Peter 3:9 NIV