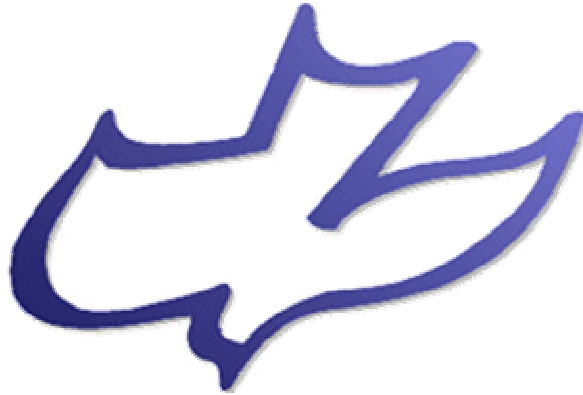


WORD OF LIFE STUDY GUIDES

By John Paul Miller



Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.

2 Timothy 2:15

WORD OF LIFE STUDY GUIDES



Pastor John Paul Miller

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The Epistle of the Apostle Paul to Philemon

By Pastor John Paul Miller

INTRODUCTION - Postcard on Forgiveness

Postcard on forgiveness is the best way to describe Philemon. It is the briefest of Paul's letters, contains only 334 words in the Greek text.

AUTHOR: This is the most personal of all letters Paul wrote (vv. 1, 9, 19). It is so short it is like a "postcard." It was hand carried to Philemon by Onesimus and Tychicus, who also delivered the letters we know as *Ephesians* and *Colossians* to their respective churches.

DATE AND PLACE: *Philemon* is one of the first prison epistles Paul wrote from Rome on his first imprisonment about A.D. 61 (vv. 1, 9, 10, 13, 23). These included *Ephesians*, *Philippians* and *Colossians*. Philemon 22 reflects Paul's hope to be released from captivity soon. *Philemon* is closely connected with other epistles, especially *Colossians*. Timothy is mentioned along with Paul in the opening of both epistles. Those who send greetings at the end of *Philemon* are said also to send greetings at the end of *Colossians* (cf. Archippus in Col. 4:17). *Philemon* was written to go with Onesimus on his return to his master. According to *Colossians* 4:7-9, Onesimus was to accompany Tychicus to Colossae (cf. Eph. 6:21-22).

PURPOSE: Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, prominent member of the church at Colossae, had stolen from his master and sought freedom by fleeing to Rome. Onesimus came in contact with Paul in Rome and was converted to Christ (v. 10). Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to tell him of the conversion, and to plead for the returning slave. R. B. Jones writes, "It is a private letter, but deals very definitely with the Christian teaching that would ultimately make human slavery impossible." "This letter is not an attack against slavery as such, but as suggestion as to how Christian masters and slaves could live their faith within that evil system. It is possible that Philemon did free Onesimus and send him back to Paul (v. 14)" (C. C. Ryrie). The primary goal of the letter is to seek Onesimus' reinstatement as a brother in the Lord, and in the household of Philemon from which he had fled.

THEME: One Christian brother makes his plea to another to forgive and restore another brother.

KEY VERSE: v. 18

STYLE: This postcard is a model of courtesy, discretion, tact and loving concern for a runaway slave to another brother in Christ who has legal authority to extract justice. It is a tactful, highly personal letter to a personal friend on a very delicate issue.

SLAVERY IN PAUL'S TIME: William Barclay has one of the best descriptions of slavery in Paul's day. He writes:

No one knew better than Paul how great a risk he was taking. A slave was not a person; he was a living tool. A master had absolute power over his slaves. "He can box their ears or condemn them to hard labor—making them, . . . work in chains upon his hands in the country, or in a sort of prison-factory. Or, he may punish them with blows of the rod, the lash or the know; he can brand them upon the forehead, if they are thieves or runaways, or, in the end, if they prove irreclaimable, he can crucify them." . . . Pliny says, "He can brand someone with a hot iron for stealing a couple of towels."

What made it worse was the slaves were deliberately held down. There were in the Roman Empire sixty million of them and the danger of revolt was constantly to be guarded against. A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated. And, if a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on the forehead, with the letter F—standing for *fugitivus, runaway*—and at the worst he would be crucified to death.

This letter is filled with practical applications of Christian love. It brings out the best in others (v. 4). It seeks the welfare of others (v. 10), and deals honestly with them (v. 12). It bears the burdens of others (v. 18), and believes in the best of them (v. 21).

The Advocacy Law of Rome: The Roman law stated that a slave might flee to an influential friend of the master and implore his intercession. Paul probably uses this appeal in v. 15, and to the changed life of Onesimus (vv. 11-14). Please accept Onesimus as a brother (vv. 16-17). Accept him as you would accept me. Paul gives his own personal pledge, "I will repay." You can "charge it" to my account (vv. 18-19). "You owe me. . ." one (v. 19).

How much we owe Jesus Christ! II Cor. 5:21 God imputed, charged to Christ our sin debt; credited to us His righteousness. God receives us in the merit of Christ. CHRIST SAID: "CHARGE IT TO MY ACCOUNT!"

We are all slaves to sin! Christ paid our sin debt. Col. 2:13-14

He has now adopted us as His sons (v. 16). Onesimus is "more than a slave. . . brother." Paul then makes his appeal, "Refresh my heart" (v. 20) - cause cheer, relieve

ONESIMUS THE BISHOP OF EPHESUS?

Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, wrote in a letter to the churches of Asia Minor, about 50 years later. Ignatius makes the same pun Paul does regarding the bishop of the church at Ephesus. It may well be that the Onesimus of Philemon, the unprofitable run away slave has become the great bishop of Ephesus.

SOME ABIDING PRINCIPLES:

1. Christ enables us to triumph over our circumstances through fellowship with Him. Paul was a prisoner, not of Rome, but of Jesus Christ! (v. 1, 9, 23). How many of us know what it is to experience limitations, persecutions, frustrations and to sit down and write of ourselves as the prisoners of Christ Jesus? It is the privilege of every believer, but possible only of those who are living in true fellowship with Jesus. Opposite of "poor me" syndrome.

2. Life in Christ changes every relationship.

Paul and Philemon: "Love seeketh not its own." cf. vv. 12-14, "I wanted to keep Onesimus."

Paul and Onesimus: "Love beareth all things." cf. vv. 18-19 "Charge it to me. I will take care of Onesimus' debts."

Onesimus and Philemon: "Love suffereth long, and is kind." cf. vv. 15-17 You have been hurt, but it is time to forgive.

3. Our relationship with others test our relationship to Christ. The burden rests on Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Could Philemon angrily refuse to receive Onesimus? Could Onesimus refuse to return to Philemon? Could Paul keep that which was not his own? My relationships to other men test my relationship with Christ.

4. Social evils can be changed by transformed lives. The Colossian church was composed of rich and poor, master and slave. The church lives through the power of a common love. ILL: Quechuas: drunken weekends. Accept Christ - profitable, hard working contribution to society.

5. Christ radically changes our lives. Martin Luther said, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi, we are all the Lord's profitable servants. How have we been made profitable to the Lord? Where are we unprofitable? The unprofitable becomes profitable. It is the perpetual picture of Christ dealing with men. cf. Isa. 53:6. We were all runaway slaves to sin.

Example of changed lives: Philemon: faith and love toward Christ and the saints.

Onesimus: man changed from unprofitable to profitable

Paul: living above his circumstances. "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus."

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<http://www.abideinchrist.com/messages/phileint.html>

Philemon 1:1-25 - "From Bondage to Brotherhood"

Does Christian brotherly love really work, even in situations of extraordinary tension and difficulty?

Paul had no doubt it worked and we see it so clearly in his personal postcard to his dearly beloved fellow laborer Philemon.

Background and Setting:

Paul's first imprisonment – 60 or 61 AD.

Same time as Colossians, Ephesians, and Philippians

It's the shortest and most personal epistle

Bruce Wilkinson & Kenneth Boa, in their book, "Talk Thru The Bible", have this to say about Philemon:

"In this very personal and persuasive letter, Paul skillfully handled a delicate matter with supreme tactfulness and genuine warmth. As in his other epistles, he was able to apply the highest principles to the most mundane affairs. Christian love and courtesy dominate Philemon (**The letter to Philemon develops the transition "from bondage to brotherhood" that is brought about by Christian love and forgiveness.**), and though it is not written with elegance and formality, its content is marked by loftiness and dignity. Unlike his other epistles, Paul wrote Philemon entirely in his own hand (v. 19), apparently to emphasize the urgency and personal nature of the request. Paul does not minimize the urgency and personal nature of the request. Paul does not minimize Onesimus' offense, but acting as his advocate and intercessor, he puts himself in Onesimus' place.

Philemon was not written to impart doctrine but to apply it in such a way that the life-changing effects of Christianity would have an impact on social conditions. The power of the gospel overcomes sociological barriers ("neither slave nor free," Gal. 3:28; cf. Col. 3:11), and Paul is a vivid illustration of this truth: this once self-righteous Pharisee now refers to a gentile slave as "my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten" (v. 10). Philemon is not a direct attack on the institution of slavery, but its Christian principles would ultimately lead to the renunciation of slavery.

I want to point out five marks of Christian love seen in Paul's letter to Philemon:

I. It's grateful for the best in others (vs. 1-7)

Philemon 1:1-7, "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer, And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the

Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints; That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother."

Questions/Lessons:

- Are you grateful for others?
- Do you pray for them? – Even when they are doing good?
- Are others grateful for you? – Your Love? – Your Faith?
- Do you bring them joy?
- Are they refreshed by you?

II. It seeks the welfare of others (vs. 8-11)

Philemon 1:8-11, "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds: Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me."

Paul intercedes for Onesimus'

1. On the basis of Philemons' reputation (vs. 8 – "Wherefore")
2. On the basis of Christian love (vs. 9)
3. The conversion of Onesimus (vs. 10)
4. The fact that Onesimus was now valuable to Paul; (vs. 11)

Lesson: How the gospel changes lives and makes them of value.

III. It deals honestly with others (vs. 12-16)

Philemon 1:12-16, "Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels: Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel: But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever; Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?"

Notice verse 15, "Perhaps" – as Christians God is in control of even the most difficult experiences of life!

God rules and overrule in all our affairs!

Examples – Jacob & Joseph

Romans 8:28, "*And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.*"

Also notice the problem Philemon faced in forgiving Onesimus but, Paul had a solution, it would be costly but he was willing to pay the price.

IV It bears the burdens of others (vs. 17-19)

Philemon 1:17-19, "*If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*"

In verse 17, Paul says , "*receive him as myself*"

This is an illustration of the believers identification with Christ.

Ephesians 1:6, we are "*... accepted in the beloved.*"

Paul was not suggesting that Philemon ignore the slaves crimes and forget the debt Onesimus owed.

Notice verse 18-19, "*If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account; I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*"

This is an illustration of the doctrine of imputation ("*...put that on mine account;*")

Romans 4:8, "*Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute sin.*"

How?

By the doctrine of propitiation ("*...I will repay it:*")

J. Sidlow Baxter – “See what a parallel we have with the Gospel way of salvation. As human beings you and I are God’s property; but as sinners we have robbed Him and are fugitives. Our guilt is great, and our penalty heavy. The Law condemns us. Conscience hunts us down. But if the Law condemns us, grace concedes us the right of appeal. As Onesimus found refuge with Paul, so we find refuge with *Jesus*, who, besides being the sinner’s Friend, is the co-equal Friend and Partner of the One whose property we are. In Jesus we find both a *precator* (intercessor) and a *genitor* (or begetting father), just as Onesimus found in Paul the one who not only interceded for him to Philemon but led him into the secret of a new life (verse 10). Moreover, just as Paul contracted Onesimus’s debt, saying to Philemon, “Put that to mine account,” so has our Lord Jesus graciously contracted upon Himself and *our* debt and demerit, wiping it out once for all. And now, just as Onesimus became reconciled in heart to Philemon and voluntarily returned to his owner, so have we become “reconciled to God” and of our own free-will have gratefully returned to Him, no longer rebels, or even servile slaves, but gladly to be “received” by Him “for ever (verse 15).”

V. It believes the best of others (vs. 20-25)

Philemon 1:20-25, “Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say. But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen”

In verse 21 we see Paul’s confidence in Philemon’s obedience.

In verse 22 we see Paul’s confidence in Philemon’s prayers .

Martin Luther said, “we are all Onesimus”

In verses 23-25 we have Paul’s closing remarks.

Notice the words “*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.*”

This ancient postcard to Philemon has a present day postmark, with our names on the forwarding address.

1. As human beings we are all God’s property.
2. But as sinners, we have robbed God and are fugitives, and slaves running from our true Master.
3. Our guilt is great and the penalty severe.
4. The law condemns us
5. But grace concedes us the right of appeal.
6. Through Jesus Christ, our intercessor, the sinners friend, we find refuge.
7. Jesus paid my debt – put that on my account – I will repay it!

8. And now I am accepted in Him, and adopted into God's family.

Free from the Law; oh, happy conditional!
Jesus hath bled, and *there* is remission!
Cursed by the Law, and bruised by the Fall,
Grace hath redeemed us---once for all!

What happened to Onesimus?

Ignatius, on his way to be executed from Antioch to Rome, wrote to Ephesus, to the bishop whose name was Onesimus.

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