



**Adult Sunday School Lesson Summary for May 23, 2010
Released on Wednesday, May 19, 2010**

“Do the Right Thing”

Lesson Text: Philemon 1:8-18, 21

Background Scripture: Philemon 1:1-25

Devotional Reading: Colossians 4:2-9

Philemon 1:8-18, 21

8 Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,
9 Yet for love’s sake I rather beseech thee, being such a one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.
10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:
11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:
12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:
13 Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:
14 But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly.
15 For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;
16 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?
17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself.
18 If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee aught, put that on mine account;
.....
21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.

LESSON AIMS

Facts: to show that Paul was urgently concerned that Philemon would do what was right in how he treated his slave Onesimus.

Principle: to emphasize that the task of the church is to do what is right under any circumstances.

Application: to show that when we do what is right, we affirm the calling of the Christian community.

INTRODUCTION

Fellow Outsiders

Have you ever encountered someone who had a background that intersects with your own? Maybe you've moved away from your hometown only to meet someone years later from the same town! In our mobile society, such stories are repeated many times. We encounter people whom we do not know, only to find we have common friends and experiences. This creates an unusual camaraderie. Being in a new city can be scary and lonely. When we are far from home, it is comforting to find someone, anyone, who shares our past. It is as if we accidentally become fellow outsiders, displaced people with common memories.

Something a little like this happened with the apostle Paul. In the early A.D. 60s, he found himself in the biggest city of his world: imperial Rome. He had never been there before, although he seems to have made friends. He was confined under house arrest and had no freedom to explore the city (Acts 28:16, 30). He must have felt scared and lonely at times. Then he encountered a person from his past, but a person he probably did not know before. It was a person who reminded him of happier days, but a person with a terrible secret. This is the setting for this lesson, Paul's short letter to Philemon.

LESSON BACKGROUND

Time: A.D. 60

Place: from Rome

The letters of Paul are not arranged in our New Testament chronologically, but by order of length. The letter to the Romans is the longest and comes first. Philemon is the shortest and comes last. This order is somewhat misleading, for Philemon belongs chronologically with three of the other letters that we call the Prison Epistles. Two of these three are Ephesians and Colossians; these two and Philemon have overlapping recipients and themes. The fourth Prison Epistle, Philippians, was written about the same time but to a church in Macedonia; it addresses different people and issues.

Paul's missionary journeys resulted in extensive travels in Asia Minor. During this period "all they which dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). This means that Paul and his associates were busy preaching the gospel and planting churches throughout the area.

It is during this period that churches were started in Colosse, Laodicea, and Hierapolis, a cluster of cities about 100 miles east of Ephesus. We have no record that Paul ever visited these cities, but he had contact with some of the leaders of these churches. Combining Colossians 1:7; 4:9, 12; Philemon 1, 2, 23; and the lesson text, we realize that one of these was a wealthy man named Philemon. Apphia and Archippus, believed to be Philemon's wife and son, respectively, also were known personally to Paul (Philemon 2). When Paul wrote these letters, Archippus apparently was a grown man and a leader in the Colossian church (Colossians 4:17).

While in Rome, Paul was contacted by a fourth member of the Philemon household: a slave named Onesimus. Onesimus was not in Rome legally, though, for he had run away from his master, Philemon. Somehow Onesimus found Paul, his master's old friend, in that teeming megalopolis.

We do not know how old Onesimus was, maybe just a teenager. He was a resourceful young man, though, for he was able to hide his identity as a fugitive slave. Perhaps he tired of this life of running and sought out Paul to help him. Paul's letter is a personal appeal to Philemon to allow Onesimus to come home.

Many of Rome's residents were slaves. Scholars estimate that slaves made up one-third to one-half of the city's population. It would have been easy for Onesimus to blend into this environment, but his life was in danger if his status as a runaway slave was discovered. The institution of slavery was maintained by an atmosphere of fear among the slaves; they knew their punishment for running away could be severe.

THE BASIS FOR PAUL'S PLEA (Philemon 1:8,9)

1. Who was Philemon and why did Paul write a letter to him?

Paul wrote this short letter to a friend of his at Colosse named Philemon. We are able to locate him at this town because of two hints. First, Archippus is mentioned both here (v. 2) and in Colossians 4:17. Second, Onesimus, the chief subject of this letter, is said to be "one of you" (v. 9).

Though Paul had never visited Colosse, he must have met Philemon elsewhere (perhaps Ephesus), for he was one of Paul's converts (Philemon 1:10). At the time of this letter, Philemon was a prominent Christian at Colosse who had a church in his house (v. 2) and performed works of love for the saints (vs. 5, 7). Paul had a special favor to ask of him (which we will explore later) and first stated the basis for his plea. The "wherefore" in verse 8 looks back to Philemon's established reputation for good deeds (vs. 5-7). This gave Paul confidence to appeal to him once more.

2. On what basis did Paul choose to appeal to Philemon? (vs. 8,9)

Paul reminded Philemon that he could have been bold in Christ to enjoin him in the matter. This means that if Paul had wished, he had the right, as an apostle, to order him to do what he asked. This would have indeed been legitimate, for his apostolic boldness was in Christ, not in himself. It was Christ who gave authority.

Paul, however, chose not to invoke his apostolic authority. Instead, he wrote, "For love's sake I rather beseech thee." He appealed to something in Philemon higher than bowing to coercion - his love for Paul and respect for his ministry. Paul chose to beg, not command. Paul called attention to his condition. He was "Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ." The Greek word translated "aged" is close to one that means "ambassador," which some think is the better word here, especially since Paul and Philemon were probably close to the same age (Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, Eerdmans). Either description would call forth respect and sympathy, since Paul also was a "prisoner of Jesus Christ."

Paul was about to ask Philemon to make a sacrifice, but he spoke as one who personally knew what sacrifice was. His long, respectable career of representing Christ had brought him to prison. He chose to appeal to this rather than to his apostolic authority.

THE OCCASION FOR PAUL'S PLEA (Philemon 1:10-14)

3. Who was Onesimus? What was his relationship with Paul? (v. 10)

Paul begins his plea by naming the person at the center of his request: *Onesimus*. This name means "profitable one" or "useful one." We discover by reading on that Onesimus was Philemon's slave who had run away to Rome. But Paul's portrayal of Onesimus is far different from that of a slave. He called him "my son ... whom I have begotten in my bonds." Onesimus has undergone a radical change. He is now Paul's *son*, for Paul has *begotten* him spiritually during this period of Roman imprisonment (compare 1 Corinthians 4:15). Onesimus is now a fellow believer, one who has been born again in Christ.

4. How had Paul's attitude changed since he was a Pharisee?

Paul's attitude here shows how far he had come since being a self-righteous Pharisee. Onesimus was not only a Gentile but also a *slave*, one of the lowest in society. Paul practiced what he professed—that in Christ "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free" (Gal. 3:28). He believed fully in Christian equality.

5. How should faith in Christ have transformed the life of a slave? (v. 11)

The name "Onesimus" means "useful." It was common to give slaves names like this. Yet up to his conversion he had not lived up to it. Paul said that previously he had been unprofitable to Philemon. Now, however, he was profitable both to Philemon and to Paul. Onesimus had attached himself to the apostle and his ministry and proved himself useful. In so doing, he also had become useful to Philemon, whom Paul considered a partner.

Onesimus' example demonstrates the transformation Christ can work in a person's life. An unbelieving slave had little incentive for doing good work apart from escaping a master's whip. But as a believer, he had a new Master, Jesus Christ, whom he served from the heart (cf. Eph. 6:5-8). He now had the motivation to exalt Him and His gospel by doing good work (cf. 1 Tim. 6:1). If his earthly master was a Christian, he had an even greater incentive, since the two were brothers (v. 2).

Some might raise the question whether the Christian slave-owner should not have freed the one who was now his equal in Christ. This is a legitimate question, but not one Onesimus should have concerned himself about. As a believer, he had his own set of responsibilities before the Lord. If Philemon freed him, he should be thankful, but until that happened, he was to do his duties faithfully (cf. 1 Cor. 7:20-24).

6. How can we tell that Onesimus was valued by Paul? (vs. 12,13)

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. But it gave Paul deep distress in his *bowels* to do so. Sending him back was like sending part of himself. Thus, Paul requested that he be received in that spirit.

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, probably carrying this letter. The crux of Paul's appeal was this: "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me." Paul longed to keep Onesimus with him because he ministered to him in his difficult situation in Rome. Paul lovingly mentions that if Onesimus were in Rome he would only be doing what Philemon himself would do if he could. Certainly, Philemon must have been in tears as he read these affectionate words of his beloved friend and apostle.

7. If Paul wanted to retain Onesimus as a helper, why did he send him back to Philemon? What teaching opportunity did this present? (v. 14)

Paul refused to keep Onesimus because to have done so and then to have sought Philemon's approval may have forced Philemon to grudgingly approve of the situation. But Paul knows that if kindness or helpfulness is in any way forced, it becomes insincere. Philemon's goodness always proceeded willingly from a heart of compassion. We must constantly examine our own lives to insure that proper actions are produced by proper motives.

THE ASSUMPTIONS BEHIND PAUL'S PLEA (Philemon 1:15-18, 21)

8. How did Paul see God's sovereignty at work on this occasion? (v. 15)

Paul spoke of God's sovereignty in both the departure and the return of Onesimus. He had left deliberately, but God overruled his rebellion to accomplish His purpose. Paul believed strongly that God brought about good for His people through all kinds of circumstances (Rom. 8:28).

Now Onesimus returns to Philemon for the duration of this life, with the happy prospect of spending eternity in heaven with Philemon and all other believers. This does not mean that Onesimus never would have been saved if he had not run away. But God in His providence did turn his evil around for good.

9. What new relationship existed between Onesimus and Philemon? (v. 16)

God's sovereignty had opened the opportunity for a new relationship; Paul's love would further it by removing barriers. Paul spoke next of this new relationship: "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved" (Philemon 1:16). No longer was Philemon to receive Onesimus as a slave; he was now a brother. Christ had lifted the relationship to a higher plane, and love was the cement that bound them together.

First Paul emphasized that he personally considered Onesimus a beloved brother. But how much more was he a brother to Philemon, beloved both in the flesh and in the Lord? The former refers to human relationships, the latter to spiritual ones. Paul stopped short of telling Philemon to free Onesimus, but the new relationship of brotherhood made slavery among believers a glaring inconsistency. Christianity, lived out consistently, was the major force behind the gradual dying out of slavery in the Roman Empire.

10. What incentive did Paul provide for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus? (v. 17,18)

Paul had already asked Philemon to receive Onesimus back (v. 12), but now he put the request in terminology that could scarcely be ignored. He stated that if Philemon regarded him as an associate, a partner in spiritual matters, then he should receive Onesimus as he would Paul himself. There is, of course, no question as to how Philemon would receive Paul! This is also a perfect picture of how God receives sinners who trust Christ as Lord and Saviour. How is that? Just as He receives Christ.

Furthermore, Paul wants all of Onesimus' wrongs placed on his own account as if they were his (v. 18). In the same way, Christ takes all the believer's sins on Himself and pays for all completely by His shed blood (1 Pet 2:24): Christ is our substitute. He suffered our punishment. No wonder Luther could so aptly say, "We are all the Lord's Onesimi."

11. What confidence did Paul have in Philemon's response to his plea for Onesimus? (v. 21)

Paul believed that Philemon would cooperate fully with what he asked. Paul had avoided any direct command to that point; yet "obedience" implied that Philemon would interpret his appeal as binding. He also expressed confidence that Philemon would do "more than I say." What could this possibly have been? Paul had already implied that he wanted Onesimus forgiven, received in brotherly love, and returned to him for service. All that remained was legally setting him free.

This short letter thus gives insight into social conditions in the first-century Roman Empire. It also demonstrates the potential for social change that lies in Christ's gospel if it is faithfully proclaimed and practiced. All the social reformers of the centuries cannot claim the results that come from the love of Christ. Let us manifest it and through it do the right thing.

PRACTICAL POINTS

- 1.** The highest motivation for granting any request is love (Philemon 1:8,9).
- 2.** Leading a person to Christ often prompts a special bond between him and you (vs. 10,11).
- 3.** True love may request but should not demand or presume upon a fellow believer's kindness (vs. 12-14).
- 4.** True salvation changes a person both spiritually and practically (vs. 15,16).
- 5.** If we truly love God, we will love His people and the people they love (vs. 17,18).
- 6.** True love seeks to do more than simply what is requested (v. 21).

CONCLUSION

Elusive Equality

The history of the church tells us that at the beginning of the second century A.D. there was a prominent leader named Onesimus in the Ephesian church. We do not know if this is the same runaway slave who forms the subject of the letter to Philemon, but several things make this plausible. If Onesimus had been a teenager when Paul encountered him in Rome, he would have been in his 60s at that later time - not an unusual age for a position of leadership. Further, *Onesimus* was common as a slave name, so it is very possible that this leader was a freed slave. This might also help explain why this small, very personal letter to Philemon survived to be included in the New Testament. It tells the encouraging story of an apostle and a believer, and how their love for Jesus transcended the harsh reality of slavery in their world.

We like to think that all are equal in the church, but in certain ways this is not true. In most churches there are great income differences among families. There are those whose families have been associated with the church for many generations, making them very influential, in contrast with new believers, who have little influence. Some may have extensive educations and advanced degrees, while others can barely read and write. There are those with a deep, thorough knowledge of Scripture, and those who are novices. There are the very old and the very young. There are those who are sick and physically weak and those who are healthy and fit.

Yet in every way that matters eternally, we *are* equal. We are all saved in exactly the same way in Christ. We worship the same God. We share the gift of the same

Holy Spirit. We are equally, limitlessly loved by God our Father. We are all one in Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:28).

This equality under God can be difficult and elusive to maintain in a society that has created many ways of dividing and categorizing people. It is important, however, for church leaders to recognize barriers to full, open fellowship and seek to eliminate them. The church of Paul's day seemed to be content to have slaves and masters in the same congregation, but the church today has rightly rejected slavery, the so-called "peculiar institution." What, if any, is the "peculiar institution" in your church that strains Christian equality?

PRAYER

Lord God, we join our voices to You in prayer along with millions of other believers. We glorify Your name in every part of the earth. May our voices become one voice, as Your great love for us is translated into a great love for all our brothers and sisters in Christ. We pray this in Jesus' holy name. Amen.

THOUGHT TO REMEMBER

We are all one in Christ.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "**Temper Judgment with Mercy**" and will examine how we as Christians are called to be keepers and defenders of the truth. We must build our faith, and watch from falling into darkness. Study Jude 1:1-25.

LESSON SUMMARIZED BY

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