

Reflection
7 September 2025

PHILEMON

[SLIDE 29] Overview

Paul's short letter to Philemon gives us a remarkable picture of the life and loving relationships that characterized the first-generation Christian churches. **[SLIDE 30]** Paul's theme is the practical outworking of Christ's life in a loving church community [repeat slowly], with two sub-themes:

1. The deep mutual participation in God that Christians share as the outcome of their rebirth to faith in Jesus
2. How to persuade someone you love to do something difficult and demanding, yet deeply pleasing to God, with grace and love

Background

Paul wrote to his dear friend Philemon, who lived in Colossae, a small city located in today's south-western Turkey, sometime in the mid-50s AD. Paul was a prisoner at the time, probably in Ephesus.

Philemon was a relatively wealthy man. By the way, how do we know that Philemon was wealthy? [Possible answers: 1. He owned slaves. 2. He hosted the church in his home. 3. He had a house big enough to have a guest room kept for Paul.]

Philemon had become a Christian, a believer in Jesus, through Paul's preaching of the gospel, presumably in Ephesus. We can infer from the letter that Philemon, his wife Apphia and son Archippus had worked closely with Paul in the proclamation of the gospel in Ephesus, and had then returned home to Colossae, where they shared the gospel with others and helped raise up a new church that met in their home. Paul probably intended that his letter to Philemon should be read aloud to the church gathering.

The letter focusses on Philemon's runaway slave, Onesimus, who seems to have stolen quite a bit of money from Philemon to finance his escape, as Paul's remarks in verse 18 imply. But Onesimus had met Paul, had become a believer in Jesus, and was a great

practical help to Paul during his imprisonment. Paul's purpose in writing to Philemon was to persuade him to take Onesimus back, but not reluctantly or grudgingly. **[SLIDE 31]** Rather Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus in a way that reflects their shared life in God: as a beloved brother in Christ.

In the opening lines of his letter, we see how much Paul appreciated Philemon's genuine faith in Jesus and his love for God's people that flowed from that faith. Philemon's love for others gave Paul great joy and encouragement, because he 'refreshed the hearts' of the believers. I really understand what Paul was writing about. So many of you have refreshed my heart over the years, including during my illness last year. That has meant a great deal to me!

[SLIDE 32] Mutual participation

Paul's prayer for Philemon, recorded in verse 6, is rich and precious. Here is a paraphrase that brings out its meaning very well:

[SLIDE 33] *I am praying that the mutual participation that characterizes the Christian faith you hold may have its full effect in your realization of every good thing that God wants to accomplish in us to lead us into the fulness of Christian fellowship, that is, of Christ.*

The key word here is translated into English as 'mutual participation', in the original Greek, *koinonia*. **[SLIDE 34]** *Koinonia* is the word that Paul used throughout his letters to describe the loving relationships, the fellowship, the mutual participation, the deep interchange that flows between Christian believers because of their shared life in Christ. That mutual participation in God's life is the essence of what it means to be the Church. I will explore the implications of *koinonia*, that loving shared participation in Christ's life, in a few minutes.

[SLIDE 35] Gracious persuasion

Have you ever needed to persuade someone you love to do something difficult but essential, perhaps even something pleasing to God? It's not easy. It can be risky. What if your loved one rejects your plea and refuses to do what is right and life-giving in the situation? Paul took that risk with his friend Philemon over Onesimus. Let's take a look at what Paul writes about Onesimus, whose Greek name means 'useful'.

In verses 10-13, in a witty play on words, Paul describes Onesimus as formerly useless to Philemon but now useful to both of them. Paul refers to Onesimus as 'my son' ... 'my

very heart'. He expresses the hope that Philemon will allow Onesimus to continue to help him during his imprisonment.

Paul appeals to Philemon in language that feels uncomfortable to us today. In verse 8, he acknowledges the existence of a spiritual authority over Philemon that he refuses to exercise, appealing rather 'on the basis of love' in verse 9. He assumes that Philemon will 'obey' and 'do even more than I ask' in verse 21. In verse 19, Paul writes that Philemon owes him 'his very self', his very life, but says he won't mention it! Does this seem odd to you? On the surface, to modern readers, Paul seems ... well ... conniving and manipulative.

To understand the tone in which Paul is writing, it helps to know that the whole of Graeco-Roman society, from the emperor to the poorest manual labourer, was tightly structured around patronage. Everybody was someone else's client. Everybody owed their patron obedience, service, favours, whatever the patron asked or desired. In return, the patron provided economic opportunities and advancement, as a duty to his clients. This was the social system that Paul and Philemon lived in and instinctively understood. And Paul's approach to this exploitative patron-client relationship was to **subvert** it. Paul could have appealed to Philemon on the basis of formal duty. That would have been manipulative but very normal in his society. But Paul refused to assert his right as Philemon's spiritual patron or father. Instead, he appealed to Philemon on the basis of the love of Christ, the far stronger bond of their mutual participation in God, the *koinonia* that Philemon and Paul shared. That loving connection was then and is today the essential characteristic of every Christian church community.

Now let's see what Paul was really asking Philemon to do. Paul calls Onesimus 'my son', an astounding thing for a first-century Graeco-Roman person to write about a thieving runaway slave. The Romans were very sensitive about runaway slaves. [SLIDE 36] Here is a photo of one of about 45 ancient slave collars that archaeologists have discovered. It dates from the 4th to 6th centuries AD and was dug up in Italy. On the metal tag is inscribed, in Latin, [SLIDE 37] "I have run away; hold me. When you return me to my master Zoninus, you will receive a gold coin."

A slave was property, literally 'a thing' – *res* in Latin. [SLIDE 38] Slaves were viewed legally and culturally as sub-humans. Paul's goal in writing to Philemon is not to obtain Onesimus' freedom from slavery. It is much more radical than that. Paul wants to change Onesimus's status from a subhuman into a human being. The way he plans to do that is ingenious: He treats Onesimus as his own **son** and calls on Philemon to receive him as a **brother**. [SLIDE 39]

The most crucial relationship in that society, by far, was between freeborn fathers and their legitimate sons and between full freeborn brothers. Those were sacred relationships for Greeks and Romans. The fact that they have not been sacred in western society for hundreds of years makes it difficult for us today to understand what Paul is doing in *Philemon*. Everything a freeborn Roman man did was for his sons' fame and glory. Men represented the family publicly. They transmitted their clan names, their property and their professions to their sons. The relationship between a father and his sons was everything. Greek and Roman religion, ethical values and social organization were all summed up in two words: **sonship** and **brotherhood**, relationships deliberately defined in explicit contrast to slaves.

A slave was legally defined as *filius neminis*, literally a son of no one. No Greek or Roman man would dream of claiming a slave as his son. No slave could make a claim on any man as his father; and it would be inconceivable for a free Roman to designate a slave as his son. Yet that is exactly what Paul has done with Onesimus – naming him his beloved son!

Paul's request to Philemon was profoundly radical and subversive of Graeco-Roman culture. [SLIDE 40] It was outrageous in that society to expect Philemon to view his thieving, runaway slave Onesimus as his brother, his sacred equal. Yet that is exactly what Paul asks of Philemon in verse 16. It would not be easy for Philemon or for Onesimus. Philemon would have to lay aside his pride and his right to punish Onesimus – runaway slaves were often tortured or crucified. Onesimus would have to lay aside his fear of punishment. Onesimus would have to seek forgiveness and Philemon would have to grant it. Paul was seeking to reconcile the estranged Philemon and Onesimus – an extraordinarily difficult undertaking, only made possible by Christ's grace at work in their lives. Such a reconciliation is a costly and powerfully transformative expression of the mutual sharing in God's life – *koinonia* – in the Church.

Conclusion

[SLIDE 41] Only God can make a runaway slave into a beloved son and brother. Paul is turning Onesimus, Philemon, himself and the whole church over to God's grace, trusting God to do the impossible in hearts and lives by applying their shared participation in God's life, *koinonia*, to their relationship. That's what it means to be 'Church'. We too can trust him to do the impossible in our relationships today!