

**Philemon – Pt. 3**  
**“Accepted in the Family”**  
**Philemon 1:17 - 25**

**Big Idea – Because of Jesus Christ believers are accepted into God’s family.**

Here's the backstory: Paul was a prisoner in Rome, his friend Philemon was in Colossae, and the human link between them was a runaway slave named Onesimus. The details aren’t clear, but it appears that Onesimus robbed his master and then fled to Rome, hoping to be swallowed up in the crowded city. But, in the providence of God, he met Paul and was converted! The primary theme of this letter is “be someone who forgives”

Philemon 1:17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me.

18 If he has done anything wrong to you or if he owes you anything, charge that to me.

19 I, PAUL, WRITE THIS WITH MY OWN HAND: I WILL REPAY IT. AND I WON'T MENTION THAT YOU OWE ME YOUR VERY SOUL!

20 Yes, my brother, please do me this favor for the Lord’s sake. Give me this encouragement in Christ.

21 I am confident as I write this letter that you will do what I ask and even more!

22 One more thing—please prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping that God will answer your prayers and let me return to you soon.

23 Epaphras, a prisoner with me for Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you.

24 And also Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, workers together with me, send greetings.

25 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

### **1. Paul’s partnership with Philemon**

The word translated "partner" is koinonia, which means "to have in common." It is translated "communication" in Philemon 6, which means "fellowship." Paul volunteered to become a "business partner" with Philemon and help him solve the problem with Onesimus.

He made two suggestions: "Receive him as myself," and "Put that [whatever he stole from you] on my account."

As Philemon's new "partner," Paul could not leave Rome and go to Colossae, but he could send Onesimus as his personal representative. "The way you treat Onesimus is the way you treat me," said the apostle. "He is to me as my own heart" (Phile. 12).

## **2. God accepts us He accepts His Son Jesus Christ.**

God's people are so identified with Jesus Christ that God receives them as He receives His Son! We are "accepted in the Beloved" (Eph. 1:6) and clothed in His righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21). We certainly cannot approach God with any merit of our own, but God must receive us when we come to Him "in Jesus Christ." The word receive in Philemon 17 means "to receive into one's family circle." Imagine a slave entering his master's family! But imagine a guilty sinner entering God's family!

## **3. Paul offered to pay Onesimus's debt**

Paul did not suggest that Philemon ignore the slave's crimes and forget about the debt Onesimus owed. Rather, Paul offered to pay the debt himself. "Put it on my account—I will repay it!" The language in Philemon 19 sounds like a legal promissory note of that time. This was Paul's assurance to his friend that the debt would be paid.

Paul wrote most of his letters using a scribe, aka an amanuensis, because he quite possibly had an eye disease. We say this because in Galatians 6:11 he says "you see how large a letter I have written with my own hand" and in Galatians 4:13 – 15 he talks about how the believers at Galatia knew about his "infirmity in his body" and says he knew they would have plucked out their own eyes and given them to him if they could!

## **4. Jesus Christ wants to pay our debt – "the doctrine of imputation"**

It takes more than love to solve the problem; love must pay a price. God does not save us by His love, for though He loves the whole world, the whole world is not saved. God saves sinners by His grace (Eph. 2:8-9), and grace is love that pays a price. God in His holiness could not ignore the debt that we owe, for God must be faithful to His own Law. So He paid the debt for us!

Theologians call this "the doctrine of imputation." (To impute means "to put it on account") When Jesus Christ died on the cross, my sins were put on His account; and He was treated the way I should have been treated.

When I trusted Him as my Savior, His righteousness was put on my account; and now God accepts me in Jesus Christ. Jesus said to the Father, "He no longer owes You a debt because I paid it fully on the cross. Receive him as You would receive Me. Let him come into the family circle!"

a difference between being accepted in Christ and acceptable to Christ. Anyone who trusts Jesus Christ for salvation is accepted in Him (Rom. 4:1-4).

Believers must strive with God's help to be acceptable to the Lord in his daily life (Rom. 12:2; 14:18; 2 Cor. 5:9; Heb. 12:28,niv). The Father wants to look at those who are in His Son and say of them as He said of Jesus, "I am well pleased!"

Philemon 19 suggests that it was Paul who led Philemon to faith in Christ. Paul used this special relationship to encourage his friend to receive Onesimus. Philemon and Onesimus were not only spiritual brothers in the Lord, but they had the same "spiritual father"—Paul! (see Phile. 10 and 1 Cor. 4:15)

## **5. Did Paul hint in vs. 21 that Philemon should free Onesimus?**

Was Paul hinting in Philemon 21 that Philemon should do even more and free Onesimus? For that matter, why did he not come right out and condemn slavery?

This letter certainly would have been the ideal place to do it. Paul did not "condemn" slavery in this letter or in any of his letters, though he often had a word of admonition for slaves and their masters (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10). In fact, he encouraged Christian slaves to obtain their freedom if they could (1 Cor. 7:21-24).

During the American Civil War, both sides used the same Bible to "prove" their cases for or against slavery. One of the popular arguments was, "If slavery is so wrong, why did Jesus and the Apostles say nothing against it? Paul gave instructions to regulate slavery, but he did not condemn it."

One of the best explanations was given by Alexander Maclaren in his commentary on Colossians in *The Expositor's Bible* (Eerdmans, 1940; vol. VI, p. 301):

1. the message of Christianity is primarily to individuals, and only secondarily to society. It leaves the persons whom it has influenced to influence society. 2. it acts on spiritual and moral sentiment, and only afterwards and consequently on deeds or institutions. Third, it hates violence, and trusts wholly to enlightened conscience. So it meddles directly with no political or social arrangements, but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these, and leaves them to soak into the general mind.

Had the early Christians begun an open crusade against slavery, they would have been crushed by the opposition, and the message of the Gospel would have become confused with a social and political program.

Think of how difficult it was for people to overcome slavery in England and America, and those two nations had general education and the Christian religion to help prepare the way.

Think also of the struggles in the modern Civil Rights movement even within the church. If the battle for freedom was difficult for us to win in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, what would the struggle have been like back in the first century?

Christians are the salt of the earth and the light of the world (Matt. 5:13-16), and their spiritual influence must be felt in society to the glory of God.

God used Joseph in Egypt, Esther and Nehemiah in Persia, and Daniel in Babylon; and throughout church history, there have been believers in political offices who have faithfully served the Lord.

But Christians in the Roman Empire could not work through local democratic political structures as we can today, so they really had no political power to bring about change. The change had to come from within, even though it took centuries for slavery to end.

## **6. Paul's closing to his letter**

Paul closed the letter with his usual personal requests and greetings. He fully expected to be released and to visit Philemon and Apphia in Colossae ("you" in Phile. 22 is plural). Even this fact would encourage Philemon to follow Paul's instructions, for he certainly would not want to be ashamed when he met the apostle face-to-face.

As we have seen, Epaphras was probably the pastor of the church; and he had gone to Rome to assist Paul. Whether he was a "voluntary prisoner" for Paul's sake, or whether he had actually been arrested by the Romans is unknown. He's to be commended for his dedication to Christ and to Paul.

John Mark was with Paul (Col. 4:10), the young man who failed Paul on his first missionary journey (Acts 12:12, 25; 15:36-41). Paul had forgiven Mark and was grateful for his faithful ministry (see 2 Tim. 4:11).

Aristarchus was from Thessalonica and accompanied Paul to Jerusalem and then to Rome (Acts 19:29; 27:2).

Demas is mentioned three times in Paul's letters: "Demas... my fellow worker" (Phile. 24), "Demas" (Col. 4:14), "Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10).

John Mark failed but was restored. Demas seemed to be doing well but then he fell. It's how you finish, not how you start that counts!

Luke, of course, was the beloved physician (Col. 4:14) who accompanied Paul, ministered to him, and eventually wrote the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Paul's benediction was his "official signature" for his letters (2 Thes. 3:17-18), and it magnified the grace of God.

the grace of Jesus Christ made our salvation possible (Eph. 2:1-10).

It was Jesus Christ who said, "Charge that to My account! Receive them as You would receive Me!"

Application: Whom do I need to forgive?

Whom do I need to tell about Jesus' saving grace?