

Text: Philemon

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

My dear beloved flock, the text for our meditation this morning is the Epistle lesson of Saint Paul to Philemon.

Boys and Girls, I pray that you are doing well. Have you ever loved someone a lot? I am sure that you love your moms and dads a lot. Out of that love, we do the things that they tell us to do, whether that be to take out the trash, do the dishes, clean our rooms, or many more. In our text for today, we see Saint Paul tell Philemon to do something, what does Saint Paul tell him to do? And what does that have to do with us today? Ponder those question as you hear the rest of the sermon. You may go back to your seats and those who love you.

It is not often that we get a chance to read a whole book of the Bible in one sitting! Yet today, we are blessed to read one of the most personal letters of Saint Paul. It is the only place where Paul begins a letter by addressing the individual on a friend-to-friend basis rather than stating his credentials as an “apostle.”

Background

Saint Paul writes to his friend, Philemon, on behalf of Onesimus. Onesimus had been a slave of Philemon. But he had robbed Philemon and run away to Rome with the money. There, he meets Paul, who was in prison at the time. It was there that Onesimus heard the Good News of Jesus Christ from Paul and became a Christian. Since Paul felt that Onesimus should go back

home, he sends him with this letter addressed to Philemon. Paul appeals to Philemon, “for love’s sake” to forgive Onesimus and welcome him back. This is important because Onesimus faces wrath on his arrival. Estimates suggest that there were 60 million slaves in the Roman Empire, men and women who were treated like pieces of merchandise to buy and sell. A familiar proverb was “So many slaves, just so many enemies!” The average slave sold for 500 denarii (one denarius was a day’s wage for a common laborer), while the educated and skilled slaves were priced as high as 50,000 denarii. A master could free a slave, or a slave could buy his freedom if he could raise the money (Acts 22:28).

If a slave ran away, the master would register the name and description with the officials, and the slave would be on the “wanted” list. Any free citizen who found a runaway slave could assume custody and even intercede with the owner. The slave was not automatically returned to the owner, nor was he automatically sentenced to death. While it is true that some masters were cruel (one man threw his slave into a pool of man-eating fish!), many of them were reasonable and humane. After all, a slave was an expensive and useful piece of personal property, and it would cost the owner to lose him.¹

Paul asked Philemon to forgive Onesimus, to welcome him as Paul’s very heart. He says that he desires to keep Onesimus but sent him back. If that’s not enough, Paul asks Philemon to **charge** (*elloga*, an accounting term) Onesimus’ financial obligation to Paul.

¹ Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). [*The Bible exposition commentary*](#) (Vol. 2, pp. 270–271). Victor Books.

Christ's Taking of Debt

This generous act compares in a small way with Christ's substitutionary work on the cross. There, Christ suffers, bleeds, and dies. Why? Because of your debt to God. As Onesimus was in debt to Philemon, so sinners are in debt; they must pay for their sins against God. As Paul was not involved in any way with Onesimus' guilt, so Christ was sinless, separate from sinners (Heb. 4:15; 7:25). And as Paul assumed Onesimus' debt, so Christ took on Himself the sins of the world (Isa. 53:6; John 1:29; Heb. 7:27; 9:26, 28).² His precious blood covers our debt in full. Before God, He sees not our debt, but sees the payment made in full by Christ on our behalf.

That is how Philemon can refresh Paul's spirit and welcome back Onesimus into his home, because of Jesus Christ! Onesimus is not just Philemon's slave, he is his fellow brother in Christ. Because Christ has taken Philemon's debt, Onesimus' debt, and our debt, we can live together in love, refreshing each other's spirits. We can show each other, not the wrath, not the anger, or the punishment that we justly deserve. Rather, we show each other the love of God and refresh each other's spirit. How? By forgiving each other when they harm us, by loving each other and welcoming each other as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, by caring for each other.

Because Christ had changed Onesimus' life, Paul tells Philemon to "receive him as you would receive me." Forgive

² Deibler, E. C. (1985). [Philemon](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, p. 774). Victor Books.

him, yes. But welcome him back into the house too. Treat him with honor and respect. Treat him like you would treat me. Much more important though, “forgive him” and “receive him” because God has forgiven him of the greatest “debt” of all- sin. Welcome Onesimus back!

You may not have an “Onesimus” just like the one that ran away from Philemon, but there are Onesimuses in your live too. As Luther writes, We are all (Christ’s) Onesimi if **we** will believe it What will you do? How will you treat them? Will you, with God’s grace, strive to use Paul’s example?

“For love’s sake” forgive him. Notice and enjoy the joy it brings. Forgive him because Christ gave everything in order to forgive you. See how God’s great love for you in Jesus Christ makes everything different, how it makes all the difference.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard and keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.