

Kirkwall Presbyterian Church

'It's your move, Philemon'

Philemon

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By Keith Marcy

Before we read this short letter, I want to introduce the characters.

1. The letter is from **Paul**, a servant of the Lord, instructed by Jesus to take the Gospel message to the Gentiles. Paul's past life is not pretty. Although he was extremely well-educated in Jewish history and Jewish law, he did not believe Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah. He made it his mission to arrest, imprison and torture anyone – both men and women, who expressed belief in the Gospel – that is, that Jesus died and rose again to forgive their sins. Some of them died under Paul's cruelty. But the ascended Lord suddenly apprehended Paul, spoke to him and gave him a repentant heart. Now, ironically, Paul is under house arrest in Rome for proclaiming the Gospel he once tried to destroy! He continues his ministry by writing letters to encourage members of churches to keep on living for Jesus.
2. The second main character is **Philemon**. He had become a believer in the Lord Jesus through the ministry of Paul, whether directly or indirectly. He owned slaves, indicating that he was a wealthy man; he probably owned land and may have raised black sheep. The area was known for its black yarn. Philemon hosted the church – the assembly of believers of that area – in his home.
3. The third main character is **Onesimus**, a slave owned by Philemon. Being a believer, Philemon should have treated his slaves more humanely than other owners did. However, they were still slaves. Onesimus appears to have been a single man, likely young (18-20 years), and restless for freedom. So, he stole some goods from Philemon – perhaps some street clothes, and some gold Roman coins, and ran away. And he did not stop until he reached Rome, about 1,200 miles to the west. Who is in Rome? Paul, Timothy, Luke, Tychicus, Aristarchus, Mark, Justus, Epaphras – most from the area of Laodicea and Colossae. Some of these are in prison, the others are providing for them. Onesimus has met many of them. We do not

know why a runaway slave would want to see people from home. The Holy Spirit obviously prompted him to seek them out and Paul led him to faith in the Lord Jesus. So, Paul called him *'his son,'* – not a biological son, but a spiritual son – like Timothy – one he led to be born again becoming a child of the King.

Onesimus became a helper to this group of whom Paul is a leader. But there is a problem: Onesimus has confessed he ran away from Philemon, his owner. Paul would like to keep him as a helper, but that would be dishonest. Onesimus realizes that if he goes back, he may be whipped, beaten or even killed – all acceptable under Roman Law. But together Paul and Onesimus will do the right thing. Onesimus will go back accompanied by Tychicus. Tychicus will come with two letters – one to the church at Colossae, and one to Philemon and the church at Laodicea. And Philemon will have to make a decision. Here is the short pleading letter.

Read Philemon.

And that is it. Are you like me? You quickly flip the page hoping to find a postscript or an end note telling what happened to Onesimus? There is none. We must glean from verses 4-7.

Philemon has a track record of wearing his faith in the Lord Jesus for all to see. As Christ has loved him, he loves and encourages other believers. Paul prays for him in verse 6 that his walk would be such that it demonstrates his talk when he tells others about his Savior, the Lord Jesus. Paul's prayer is, *'that you may be active in sharing your faith...'* The Greek here means *'that your deeds would speak as loudly as your words.'* We could say, *'that the way you conduct your life would speak **louder** than your words.'* The sentence goes on. There will be a reward to this Philemon – *'so that you will have a full understanding of every good thing in Christ.'* The chapter closes on a personal note from Paul, *"Your love has given me great joy and encouragement; because you, brother, have refreshed the hearts of the saints."* (verse 7)

That is Philemon's track record. Perhaps we can safely assume that he accepted Onesimus' apology, and treated him as a fellow believer, welcoming him as he would welcome Paul. (verse 17)

How is this story tied into last week's study where we looked at the topic of *'taming the tongue?'*

1. If we have been injured emotionally by someone who lost control of their tongue and they come to us with a sincere apology, we have an obligation to accept it. But do not say flippantly, *"Oh well, it was nothing. No worries."* That would be a lie. Rather, say, *"I was really hurt by your words, but I accept your apology. Thank you for it."*
2. If you have apologized for some hurtful things you have said, accept the fact that it will take time for the offended person to really forgive you. You must earn their forgiveness as you move forward. This is true no matter who it is – your child, your spouse, a co-worker or a store clerk.
3. Recognize that there are some wrongs people commit that do require an apology, but it may take a lifetime to rebuild a trust relationship with that person again. If you have been an offender in, for example, conning someone into a sexual encounter, an apology is necessary, but you must recognize that healing for the offended one may take years. The non-verbal part of your apology will be to voluntarily stay away from them.