

THROUGH THE BIBLE

PHILEMON 1

A British newspaper ran a contest with the winner receiving a substantial cash prize. The money went to the best answer to the question: "*What is the shortest way to London?*" Here was the winning answer: "*The shortest way to London is with good company!*"

Long trips are more fun when you travel with friends. **And the same is true on our journey through life.**

As I look back on my life what matters most to me are not my accomplishments, but the friendships I've made in the pursuit of those accomplishments. You can measure a person's wealth by counting their friends.

Yet lasting friendships require commitment and hard work. Once, actress Susan Saint James gave the following description, "*Friendship is like putting on pantyhose. You get one foot in and then the other, and wiggle around and tug until you get it right, then pretty soon you say 'I love these pantyhose - they fit!'*"

Rest assured, I have zero experience squeezing into a pair of pantyhose, *but I've had fun watching my wife!* I've seen that it requires flexibility and adjustment, *some give and take.* And it's only after quite a bit of effort that they fit. **The same is true with a friendship.**

This is what Paul teaches us in this letter to his pal named Philemon. He illustrates the value of friends, and his willingness to work at those friendships.

Verse 1, **Philemon 1** "**Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother...**" There are Christians who have a ministry of writing letters *to prisoners*. Well, the book of Philemon is a letter **from a prisoner** named Paul.

Paul was in Rome. He was incarcerated for His faith, and was waiting to stand trial before Caesar Nero. Paul wrote three other *letters* during his *lock up*: **Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians**. Along with **Philemon** they're called "**The Prison Epistles.**" Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon were delivered by Paul's friend Tychicus.

Paul writes **Philemon 1** "**to Philemon our beloved friend and fellow laborer...**" Notice, Paul's friendship with Philemon was forged as a **Philemon 1** "**fellow laborer**" for the Lord.

Consider them *“old army buddies.”* They had fought many a spiritual battle together in the Lord’s Army.

They say soldiers - *men who share a foxhole, who fight shoulder to shoulder* - forge deep and durable friendships. The rigors of combat tend to draw men together. They learn to communicate, and stay united, and trust each other. Soldiers have each other’s back.

This is why the best way to make friends is to get involved in the spiritual battle. When you share the *joys and jolts* of laboring for the Lord with another person a special bond begins to form - real friendship develops!

This letter is also addressed [Philemon 2](#) *“to the beloved Apphia...”* Probably Philemon's wife. And [Philemon 2](#) *“Archippus our fellow soldier...”* He seems to be Philemon's son.

And apparently, the son had followed in *his father’s footsteps...* he too was a [Philemon 2](#) *“fellow soldier”* in the faith.

[Philemon 2](#) *“And to the church in your house...”* Philemon may’ve been a wealthy man - with a large, spacious home. Apparently, he had opened his doors and offered his house as a meeting place for the church at Colossi. Philemon and his family were hospitable to the saints.

Realize the Church met in the homes of its members for the first 275 years of its existence. And this was Christianity’s most successful period of growth and expansion. Acts 2:46 describes the habits of the first church in Jerusalem, [Acts 2:46](#) *“So continuing daily with one accord in the Temple, and breaking bread from house to house...”* They met in the Temple, for a large corporate gathering, yet they also gathered from house to house, in more intimate and personal settings.

Remember nowhere in the NT does the word [Philemon 2](#) *“church”* refer to a building. We the people are the church. Once, a man complained to his pastor, *“Kids are wearing their hats in the sanctuary.”* The pastor corrected him, *“No, the sanctuary is wearing a hat.”*

It’s *believers not bricks* that make a church. In Matthew 18:20 Jesus said, [Matthew 18:20](#) *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.”* We enjoy our air-conditioned, freshly-painted facility, but a church building is a *convenience* not a *requirement*. The first church met from home to home.

And don't miss the hospitality this required. Philemon’s family mixed home with church... *A Sunday School class might’ve met in Archippus’ bedroom, Apphia cleaned*

house constantly (her kitchen was used for pot-lucks), Philemon mowed grass every Saturday. Yet they gladly lived their life around church.

Our church also started in a home. The duplex I rented was our initial gathering ground, and it put a definite burden on a newlywed bride named Kathy. People were always coming and going... *Bible Studies, meetings, hanging out...* Kathy shared her house with a church. And this required a definite hospitality.

Usually, when we think of spiritual gifts we think of healing, or prophecy, or miracles. But 1 Peter 4:9 adds to the list, ^{1 Peter 4:9} **“hospitality,”** ^{1 Peter 4:9} **“Be hospitable to one another without grumbling. ^{4:10} As each one has received a gift, minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.”** When the church meets we need members with the supernatural knack of making people welcome, and including them into the group.

God didn't design humans to be alone. Isolation isn't healthy. God wired us for community. He desires us all to plug into a church and find meaningful friendship with other believers. And it's the gift of hospitality that greases the skids to make fellowship happen easier.

In verse 3 Paul greets *Philemon and family*, ^{Philemon 3} **“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴ I thank my God, making mention of you always in my prayers...”** Notice, the Apostle Paul prayed for his friends. In almost every letter he wrote to let his friends know he was praying for them...

Hey, **the most important favor** you do for a friend is to pray for them, and **the next most important favor** you can do is to let them know you're praying for them. What a comfort is to have someone who cares enough for you, to intercede with God on your behalf.

Verse 5, ^{Philemon 5} **“hearing of your love and faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints...”** Paul was a good friend to Philemon, but Philemon was quite a friend himself. It's one thing to display ^{Philemon 5} **“love and faith”** toward God - it's quite another matter to display ^{Philemon 5} **“love and faith”** toward other people.

Yet this is the mark of real friendship - a friend loves you enough to risk trusting you. They'll go out on a limb for you... We all know it's hard to trust fallible human beings. Friendship creates a vulnerability. Love people enough and inevitably you'll get disappointed, but the benefits of a real friendship are worth taking that risk.

Philemon and Paul had learned to trust each other in the midst of the battles they'd fought together. They knew from firsthand experience they could count on each other for cover when the attacks ramped up.

As a kid my favorite TV show was *The Lone Ranger*. The masked cowboy had an Indian sidekick named Tonto, who called him, "[Kemosabe](#)." Years later I learned what the term meant, "[faithful friend](#)." Over the years through their many scapes the Lone Ranger and Tonto learned to depend on each other. This is what we need, a friend to depend on, [a Kemosabe in Christ](#).

Verse 6, [Philemon 6](#) "[That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus](#)." Paul prays that people will notice Philemon's godly life, so that his sharing of the Gospel will be more effective. [Paul realizes when it comes to evangelizing others a life-full of good works is far more impressive than a mouthful of good words](#).

Often, before people will listen to us, we first need to earn the right to be heard - *be a friend, show your love*; then they'll be more inclined to listen to your message.

[Philemon 7](#) "[For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother](#)." Apparently, Philemon was a winsome witness - a refreshing person to be around. Spend time with Philemon and you would leave encouraged.

There are actually two types of people in the world... First, are those people who are enthusiastic about life. They love living. They're optimistic, and encourage you to have the same attitude. They look on the bright side. They're full of faith and hope. And every time you're around these folks your spiritual battery is recharged.

But there are people who are just the opposite. They're spiritual leeches. Like parasites they feed off other people. They drain you rather than recharge you.

These folks are pessimistic, complaining, negative. Invariably, they focus only on themselves. *And frankly, you hate to be around them...* So here's the question: [What kind of person are you - a light or a leech?](#)

Here's a poem, "[What good did it do to be grouchy today? Did your surliness drive any trouble away? Did you cover more ground than you usually do - because of the grouch you carried with you? If not, what's the use of a grouch or a frown - if it won't smooth a path - or a grim trouble down? If it doesn't assist you, it isn't worthwhile. Your work may be hard, but just do it and smile!](#)" It's been said, "A long face will do a

lot to shorten a list of friends.” I have no doubt Philemon *had* many friends, because he was a good friend to *have*!

Hey, you’ll make more friends in two months by being interested in other people, than you will in twenty years trying to get other people to be interested in you!

Once a man made scores of friends by changing just one word in his vocabulary. For years every time he heard someone make a comment he responded, “*aw, baloney.*” One day, he replaced “*baloney*” with “*amazing.*” Now whenever someone comments, he responds, “*amazing*” - and he has lots more friends.

Did you know there’s a vitamin you can take that produces friends? B-1. There’s an old saying, “*I went out to find a friend, but could not find one there. I went out to be a friend, and friends were everywhere!*”

Now in verse 8 Paul gets to the reason behind his letter, [Philemon 8](#) “*Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, ⁹ yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you - being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ - ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten while in my chains...*” Apparently, a divine appointment took place in Paul’s Roman prison cell...

Has God ever booked you a divine appointment?

You just happened to bump into a person you weren’t expecting to see. It seemed accidental at the time, but later you realized God had orchestrated the meeting. The rabbis say, “*Coincidence is not a kosher word.*” There is no happenstance with God. Such an appointment occurred between Paul and Onesimus.

Realize, Onesimus had been Philemon's slave. And whenever we think of slavery we recoil in horror.

Four-hundred years of Hebrew bondage in Egypt, under the rule of a wicked pharaoh, is one example of the cruelty of slavery... Defenseless Africans packed onto ships by European traders, taken to the new world, and sold to white landowners. Plantation slavery was shockingly evil... Even today, slavery still exists. Human trafficking exploits young people held against their will by vicious men who use them as sex-slaves. This is a modern day slavery that needs to be ended...

Chattel slavery where one person takes ownership or control of another person is a horrendous evil.

Yet in some ancient cultures slavery took the form of something far more benevolent. In Hebrew society, under the Law of Moses, slavery served as an

alternative to debtor's prison. Fall behind financially and you could work off your obligation. Rather than file bankruptcy, working in the house of your creditor, was a way you could climb out of an insurmountable hole. It was a means of showing someone mercy, not cruelty.

Philemon was not a vile, exploitive slave trader. Paul commends him for his love, and kindness, and faith. He was a Christian businessman, helping a neighbor pay off some debt, and regain his financial freedom.

But Onesimus had failed to appreciate Philemon's care and concern. He begrudged his servitude, and copped an attitude from day one. Onesimus probably stole from his boss. Worked as little as he could. Was a constant rebel-rouser. Finally, Onesimus flew the coup.

He tried to get as far as possible from all that was familiar, so Onesimus boarded a boat and sailed 900 miles from the country town of Colossi to the big city of Rome. There he figured he can get lost in the crowd.

Yet a strange chain of events occurred while in Rome. Imagine one night, a haughty Onesimus strolls into a local Hooters to celebrate his newfound freedom. He downs one too many beers, and makes a pass at a waitress who's boyfriend sees him. Onesimus ends up in a brawl. He gets arrested and tossed in the slammer.

The next day, Onesimus is shaking off a hangover, when he opens his eyes - and irony of all ironies, he's in the same jail cell as Philemon's buddy, Paul. What he thought he was running from, he had run right into.

This story reminds me of three college students in Key West, FL. After purchasing some pot, they found a secluded cluster of trees next to a building, and thought no one would see them smoking their stash.

What they didn't realize is they were sitting under the air-conditioning intakes of the local police station. Inside the police noticed heavy marijuana fumes coming through the air ducts. *The kids were busted.*

They tried to hide from the authorities in their life, instead they ran smack into them. This was Onesimus.

You can imagine what happened next. God used His servant Paul to convict the runaway's rebellious heart. Through Paul, Onesimus saw his need for Jesus, and opened his heart to the Gospel. As Paul puts it in verse 10, *Philemon 10 "Onesimus... I have begotten while in my chains."*

Now Paul has a new spiritual son in the faith. Onesimus was born again by God's Spirit. That's why Paul now writes to his buddy Philemon and asks a fellow believer to take back Onesimus - *as a brother*.

But what about Philemon? The story has a happy twist for Onesimus, but he was wrong to run. He had a debt to pay. Onesimus had an obligation to Philemon. In fact, his AWOL had now made the situation worse.

Under Roman Law a run-away slave was a wanted man. His master listed his name and description with the authorities. If caught, he'd often face death. There is actually the record of a man, who after retrieving his slave, threw him into a pool of man-eating fish.

Paul though loved Onesimus. The thought of harm coming to him would be tough for Paul to swallow. So he takes up this scroll and quill and goes to bat for Onesimus. Paul appeals to Philemon to take him back.

But notice how Paul makes his appeal. He doesn't use his authority - *instead his appeal is based on love*. Notice again in verse 8, *Philemon 8 "though I might be very bold in Christ to command you... 9 yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you..."* Paul is **asking not commanding**.

Once, Dwight Eisenhower explained the two types of leadership. He put a string on the table and pushed one end. He failed to move it where he wanted. But then he pulled the string and controlled it precisely. And people are like strings... Folks don't like to be pushed. They respond best to the pull of love. Thus, Paul doesn't *push* Philemon, he *pulls* on his heartstrings.

Paul could've ordered Philemon. Notice, he calls himself, *Philemon 9 "Paul, the aged"* - he was 30 years an apostle. Paul was a spiritual heavyweight, yet his style wasn't pushy. He wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus **not because he had to, but because he wanted to**.

Be careful when you push a friend, and start making demands. You never get far pressuring people around.

When you begin to push and force people, and figure they owe you (*the ole "you scratch my back and I'll scratch your back routine"*) that's not the Jesus' style!

A true friend relies - not on browbeating, or on guilt trips, or on pressure tactics, or on pay backs - but on love. Learn to love with no strings attached. The best way to preserve a friendship is to avoid forcing a friend.

Paul continues his appeal in verse 11. He says to Philemon of Onesimus, [Philemon 11](#) “who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.” Here’s a word play... The name [Philemon 10](#) “*Onesimus*” means “profitable.”

Paul is saying that Philemon’s slave has not been very *Onesimus*. He’s been more a *headache* than a *helper*, but now Jesus has made him a *real Onesimus*. Jesus takes unprofitable people and makes them spiritually profitable, and productive, and fruitful...

Verse 12, [Philemon 12](#) “I am sending him back. You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart, ¹³ whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel. ¹⁴ But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.”

Paul loved Onesimus. Philemon’s slave was now Paul’s friend. Paul would’ve liked Onesimus to stay in Rome and assist him in ministry, but it was right to send him back. He had an obligation to Philemon, and a big part of repentance is fulfilling our responsibilities.

If Onesimus were to stay and help Paul, it would need to be Philemon’s choice. Once, Onesimus returns to Colossi, and makes things right with his master, then *Philemon* can decide what’s next for Paul’s new friend.

And I think it’s interesting to note Paul’s concern that any help he receive for the Gospel’s sake be voluntary, or as he puts it, [Philemon 14](#) “*not by compulsion.*” And this should be true of everything we *do for God* or *give to God*.

2 Corinthians 9:7 reads, [2 Corinthians 9:7](#) “So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.” God wants us to *serve Him* and *give to Him* from our hearts - not because *we’ve got to*, but *we get to!* He loves a cheerful giver.

When we *do for God* or *give to God* with a grudge, He considers it a tainted sacrifice. We learn from the OT that God was insulted when his people offered less than their best. He expects the pick of the litter - the first of the flock. The best gifts are prompted by love.

Paul continues, verse 15, [Philemon 15](#) “For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave - a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Paul insists Philemon should see the hand of God in this turn of events, and view Onesimus in a new light, *no longer a slave, but a* ^{Philemon 16} *“beloved brother” in the Lord.*

Only the Gospel can so radically change one man’s perspective of another man - *from bother to brother, from unprofitable to profitable, from indebted to free.*

And this became the NT Church’s strategy to rid the world of slavery - **they preached the Gospel!...**

It’s provocative that the first Church made no attempt to abolish slavery as a social institution. The first Christians didn’t adopt a political agenda and become social activists campaigning for governmental change.

Certainly, most examples of Roman slavery were horrendous, and needed to come to an end. Such slavery was cruel, immoral, and anti-Christian, but you never saw the Church out picketing the slave markets.

In fact, 1 Corinthians 7 instructed believing slaves, that unless they were set free to remain loyal slaves.

In modern times, we’ve made the mistake of thinking that every social evil can be cured through forced action or legislation. We assume societal changes occur when old laws are stricken and replaced with new laws. But realize what happened in America after the Civil War. Following four years of a bloody conflict where 620,000 of our sons died in battle nothing changed in race relations. It may’ve gotten worse.

Believe it or not, after the War reparations were paid, *but not to former slaves as you would assume, but to former slave owners for their loss of labor! How could such an injustice be allowed?* It was horrendous. Yet it proves the difficulty of changing human hearts. Even after a deadly war, racism and bigotry still prevailed.

And what about today, after abolishing legalized slavery and advancing civil rights - *how are we doing with racial prejudice? Not great.* Humans still oppress humans. People who are supposedly free still get exploited, controlled, and manipulated by folks who are smarter or more powerful. **No set of laws can alter the human heart!** This is what the early Christians realized.

Social problems like slavery, abortion, and poverty are symptoms of deeper spiritual issues. If sin is only dealt with on **a legal level** the problem won’t be truly solved. It has to be dealt with **spiritually** - in hearts and minds. *Hate has to be replaced with love... Greed has to go and generosity grow... Selfishness has to be substituted with compassion... Truth has to triumph!*

And this doesn't happen through *political means* or *social unrest*, but through *spiritual awakening* - **by the Gospel**. As Paul said to the Corinthians, [2 Corinthians 3:17](#) "[where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.](#)" Only Jesus can bring about true freedom - from both sin and slavery.

Of course, the first Church didn't participate in a democracy like ours, where we have an obligation to vote and speak out on righteous causes, *yet realize Paul didn't even try to abolish slavery in the Church*. Rather than alter the relationship between this master and his slave, Paul encourages both men to love each other as brothers. **Love was the ultimate answer.**

Paul relied on love. His appeal here to Philemon is based on love, not legislation. Legislative power is like a wet noodle up against the awesome power of love.

But there's an even deeper lesson in this wonderful story. There's a *symbolic, spiritual message* in Paul's plea to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus. For just as Paul interceded for Onesimus, Jesus intercedes for us!

In a sense, we're all runaway slaves, unprofitable to God. In Martin Luther's commentary on the book of Philemon he wrote, "[All of us are Onesimuses!](#)"

We departed for awhile, but only to be received back forever!... And no longer just as slaves, *but more!*... as brothers of our Lord! We're now joint-heirs with Jesus.

Certainly, we're slaves or servants of Christ, but Galatians 4 tells us we're more than just *slaves to God*, we're *sons*. Our place is not only at the Master's feet, but around His table. We're His kids, and He wants us to *enjoy His presence*, and *gobble up His provisions*.

I love how Paul intercedes on behalf of Onesimus. In verse 17 the apostle tells Philemon, [Philemon 17](#) "[If then you count me as a partner, receive him](#) (the Greek word means "[receive him into your family circle.](#)") [as you would me.](#)" Paul insists Philemon should treat Onesimus as family. His slave should get the same treatment as his pal.

Then verse 18, [Philemon 18](#) "[But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.](#)" Paul will pay for any damages Onesimus caused. What he cost Philemon in debt or lost revenue, Paul will reimburse. Paul loved him enough to put his money where his mouth was.

And what Paul did for Onesimus depicts what Jesus has done for those who trust in Him. For **man has two problems... First**, we've failed to earn God's approval. And **second**, we lack what it takes to pay our debt of sin. On **the asset side** of life's ledger we don't have enough. On **the liability side** we owe far too much.

But Christ, *the Accountant of Grace*, has the answer! In verse 17 He tinkers with **our assets** - Philemon 17 *“receive him as you would me.”* Just as Paul went to bat for Onesimus, the Father in heaven has promised to accept us just as He receives His own Son, Jesus.

He adds the righteousness, stature, and holiness of Christ to our account. Now when I approach God I'm assured of His acceptance because He treats me as He treats Jesus. I'm now heartily received into the family circle. I can come boldly to the throne of grace!

And in verse 18 Jesus works on **our liabilities** - Philemon 18 *“if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account.”* Just as Paul agreed to cover Onesimus' debt, Jesus covered our spiritual damages. On a Roman cross God placed our sin on Jesus' shoulders. He took our payments, and cleared our debt! The Lord's last words spoken were, John 19:30 *“It is finished.”* In the original language, *“Te Telestai.”* The phrase was an accounting term commonly seen in the ledgers of Jerusalem businesses. The words meant, *“paid in full.”*

When Jesus died on Calvary's cross all that needed to be done was done for us to be saved! The story of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon paints a beautiful portrait of the salvation Jesus has offered you and me!

Verse 19, Philemon 19 *“I, Paul, am writing with my own hand.* Paul's signature at the bottom of this letter may've doubled as a promissory note. The transaction is now in writing. His promise to Philemon is legally binding.

Which is the reason Jesus came **under the Law**. Atonement for our sin was carried out legally - by the book! Sin had to be blotted out and righteousness imputed according to the biblical legalities. In essence, God has also put His signature on our salvation.

Then Paul adds, Philemon 19 *“I will repay - not to mention to you that you owe me even your own self besides.”* Here Paul proves he's still human, and concedes that at times human beings are motivated by less than love.

Paul contradicts his insistence on love and instead throws his weight around. Just in case love doesn't prompt Philemon to do the right thing - he reminds his friend he carries some clout. *“Remember Philemon, ole buddy, you'd be going to hell if it wasn't for me.”*

Apparently, Philemon owed his salvation to the ministry and preaching of the Apostle Paul. Paul is reminding his former convert, *that he owes him one!*

We probably ought to excuse Paul for this one example of heavy-handedness. All-in-all Paul handles what was a delicate situation with tender loving care. It's been said, "A friend is someone who can step on your toes without messing up your shoe shine." That characterized the friendship Paul showed Philemon.

Verse 20, *Philemon 20* "Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. ²¹ Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." 1 Corinthians 13:7 tells us, *1 Corinthians 13:7* "(Love) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things, love never fails." Paul expected Philemon to do what was right.

We all need someone who believes in us, and has high expectations for us. It inspires us to do our best. It's been said, "A friend is someone who thinks you are a good egg even though you're slightly cracked."

Verse 22, *Philemon 22* "But, meanwhile, also prepare a guest room for me, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be granted to you." Paul is planning a visit to Colossi and invites himself to stay at Philemon's house. Apphia can add another house guest to her busy duties.

Verse 23, *Philemon 23* "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you, ²⁴ as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow laborers. ²⁵ The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." And with these few personal greetings Paul closes his letter to Philemon.

But let me challenge us with some closing thoughts. Here's a question, "What kind of a friend are you?" Are you a "faithful friend" - **a Kemosabe in Christ?** Or does real friendship sound like too much hard work?

I hope we all realize that when God called us to be **His** kids, *though we may not have known it at the time*, He was also calling us to be **brothers and sisters!**

And **I have no doubt that in light of eternity a brother is certainly worth the bother!** Let's work at our friendships, and make our church the best it can be!