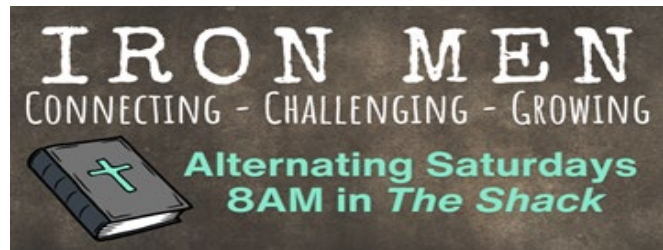


## Lesson 4

### Philemon 1:12-17

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**Introduction:** The Letter to Philemon is an appeal to forgiveness and reconciliation, to humility and love. In its entirety, it represents a master class in Christian encouragement and influence. Onesimus is a runaway slave, led to Christ by the Apostle Paul during his own imprisonment in Rome. Paul is sending Onesimus back to his master with a letter not only seeking clemency, but acceptance as a Christian brother. Our study picks up in the middle of the letter where Paul only now begins to get to the real point. As Paul enters into his appeal to Philemon asking him to reconcile with Onesimus and accept him as a brother in Christ, Paul begins to reveal more about his desires and intentions.

After his conversion, Paul originally wanted Onesimus to stay on with him at Rome, with Philemon's (his master) permission. But, Paul realized that, to keep Onesimus at Rome and merely send a letter either asking or commanding Philemon to approve, amounted to coercion - sort of like asking for forgiveness rather than permission. So, instead of just sending the letter asking for permission to keep Onesimus in Rome, Paul sends the letter to Philemon, and has Onesimus to carry it.

Moreover, as his slave-master, Philemon had certain rights over Onesimus, including rights to his labor and its monetary value. We don't know exactly what the arrangement was, or the circumstances regarding Onesimus's indentured obligations to Philemon, but we do know that Philemon was being deprived of the beneficial value of that labor so long as Onesimus was at large as a runaway slave.

For Paul to have kept Onesimus in Rome, a runaway slave that rightfully belonged to Philemon, and for Paul to have merely sent a letter to Philemon demanding Philemon's permission to keep him in Rome, and with no compensation for the loss of Onesimus's labor, past and future, Paul's actions, in reality, would have bordered on kidnapping and extortion.

### **READ: Philemon 1:7-18**

### **Philemon 1:12 (NOTES)**

- *"I have sent him back to you in person"* - Paul emphasizes that he could have kept Onesimus with him in Rome and just sent the letter, but Paul understands the implications of doing so, namely, coercion, kidnapping, and extortion. So, Paul does the right thing in sending Onesimus back to "face the music," but with a letter begging clemency, really, for both Paul and Onesimus.
- Christian conversion never cancels one's legal obligations (civil or criminal). Onesimus and Paul both have to "face the music" in a sense. They cannot keep depriving Philemon of his rights to justice, compensation for his losses, and the return of his slave. Decisions and actions have consequences, and becoming a Christian does not relieve one's obligations. Paul understands and sends Onesimus back. Justice required Paul to send him back to his master. Conscience obligated Onesimus to return. Love prompted Paul's letter.

- a. Karla Faye Tucker, who killed two people with a pickax during a drug-fueled robbery in Houston in 1983, after a supposed "jail-house conversion," she became a born-again Christian. On her new status as a Christian, she sought clemency from Governor George Bush in 1998 on the basis of her conversion - "I am a changed person. I am not the person who killed those people."
  - b. An international campaign for clemency even broke out among Christian groups and leaders, and even Pope John Paul II chimed in. Governor Bush rightly upheld the death sentence, and she was executed on February 3, 1998.
- *"that is, sending my very heart"* - Paul wants Philemon to understand that the only reason Paul kept Onesimus as long as he did, was because he loved Onesimus as a young brother in Christ, and Onesimus was valuable to Paul in his imprisonment.

### **Philemon 1:13 (NOTES)**

- *"whom I wanted to keep with me"* - Paul loved Onesimus as a brother in Christ (agape love), and it seems he was also fond of Onesimus. Paul had developed a friendly affection for him (phileo love).
- *"so that in your behalf he might be at my service in my imprisonment for the gospel"* - If Paul is able to send him back, Onesimus must be a free man now. If he had, in fact, been in jail with Paul, Onesimus obviously had been released, since Paul is now sending him back to Philemon with the hope that Philemon will send him back to Paul.

- *“at my service in my imprisonment”* - Onesimus’s freedom makes him even more valuable to Paul who is still in prison. Whether in a dungeon or under house arrest, the Roman government provided little if any physical support for its prisoners other than shelter. Onesimus probably has already been assisting Paul with his personal needs (food, clothing, blankets, hygiene, medical assistance, etc.).
- *“for the Gospel”* Onesimus may have already been helpful in assisting Paul in the ministry of the Gospel, too (perhaps teaching, witnessing, assisting with communications, couriering Paul’s letters, etc.). Onesimus clearly was and could continue to be useful to Paul if he remained (or returned a forgiven and truly free man).
- *“at my service in my imprisonment for the Gospel”* - Paul is playing every card he has, including reminding Philemon that Paul’s imprisonment is for the sake of the Gospel. Paul’s Gospel ministry (preaching, missionary work) landed him in prison in Jerusalem. Paul had allegedly caused a riot there, stemming from accusations of disrespecting Jewish law and bringing a Gentile into the temple. After his arrest in Jerusalem, Paul, as a Roman citizen, made an "appeal to Caesar," which meant he would be sent to Rome for trial. Hence his imprisonment in Rome at the time of his writing of this letter.
- *“in your behalf he might be at my service”* - In other words, by allowing Onesimus to remain at Paul’s side in Rome, Philemon becomes the hero - he is providing both Onesimus’s services and companionship to Paul in his imprisonment, and Philemon is bearing the burden of the cost resulting from his continuous loss of Onesimus’s labor.

## Philemon 1:14 (NOTES)

- *"I did not want to do anything without your consent"* - As discussed above, it would have been immoral and illegal for Paul to have kept a runaway slave as his own slave, so to speak, instead of returning the slave to his rightful master.
- *"so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion, but of your own free will."* - Paul is not only asking for Onesimus to be forgiven, but also to be set free so he can return to Paul, and that at Philemon's expense. This is a big ask, but not a not command. For Philemon to agree to all this, he would stand to gain the spiritual benefits of giving sacrificially to a friend in his imprisonment, and to support the ministry of the Gospel, as well.

**Discussion:** What are the spiritual benefits Philemon stands to gain by his willingness to forgive Onesimus's sins and crimes, accept him as a brother in Christ, a spiritual equal, and potentially set him free and send him back to Paul?

- a. His personal spiritual growth.
- b. The example his "goodness" is setting for those in his house church. *"Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."* Matt 5:16.
- c. Blessings of giving so freely to God. *"Give, and it will be given unto you. They will pour into your lap a good measure; pressed down, shaken together, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return."* Lk 6:38.

d. Discuss any others?

### Philemon 1:15 (NOTES)

- *"he was ... separated from you for a while ... "* - He ran away. Onesimus is a runaway slave belonging to Philemon.
- *"For perhaps it was for this reason that he was separated from you"* - Paul is attempting to encourage Philemon by essentially arguing that what Onesimus meant for evil (choosing to run away), God intended for good (his salvation, and Paul and Philemon's gain of another covert). Onesimus ran away from a lifetime of slavery under Philemon and straight into the arms of Jesus to become his slave forever.
- *"For perhaps it was for this reason that ... you would have him back forever"* - Yes, "have him back," not merely as a slave in this life, for whatever term the circumstances of his slavery entailed, but as a Christian brother for all eternity, as he explains in the next verse.

### Philemon 1:16 (NOTES)

- *"no longer as a slave, but more than a slave ... how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord."* - Still, a slave ("in the flesh"). Philemon got his runaway slave back, but he also gained a brother in the process as well ("in the Lord"). Like the adage, "We didn't lose a daughter; we gained a son-in-law."

- Moreover, Philemon got back a better slave, one who is devoted both to his earthly master and also to his heavenly Master. We don't know how long Onesimus had been AWOL, but Paul argues and believes that the trade was worth it.
- *"a beloved brother, especially to me"* – Onesimus had apparently served Paul by ministering to his personal needs as a prison inmate and faithfully serving alongside Paul in the ministry of the Gospel.

### **Philemon 1:17 (NOTES)**

- *"If then you regard me as a partner"* - Partner (Gr. - koinonos). The meaning is, "If you regard me as in fellowship together with you, as a comrade and friend and, spiritually, as an equal.
- *"accept him as you would me"* - In other words, no longer view or treat him merely as a slave, but view and treat Onesimus as he would Paul.

### **Discussion:**

- Should Philemon now treat Onesimus differently, as both a slave and now a brother, than he treated him when he was merely a slave and not a brother in Christ? If not, why not? If so, how?
- We are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. We are also commanded to love our enemies. Was Philemon to love his slave as himself, even before his conversion, and did Onesimus's conversion change anything in that regard?

- Are we to love our employees, our dentists and doctors, our tax preparers, and even our housekeepers, gardeners, and lawncare workers as ourselves? And if they become believers, or we learn that they are believers, how does that change the dynamics of our relationships?
- Certainly, Philemon treated Paul with deference and respect, love and affection, and greeted him with joy whenever the two were reunited. Paul asks the same for Onesimus. If Philemon had failed to so treat Onesimus in the past, before he ran away, was Philemon in error? In sin?
- What does all of this mean for us in our relationships? In what ways are we coming up short in how we treat people who hold different stations in life than we hold ourselves, especially stations we might consider to be beneath us? Are there different standards for how we as Christians treat and interact with other people depending on whether or not they, too, are believers and depending on what station in life they hold in comparison to us?

### **Final Comments?**

### **Small Groups**