

Secrets to Tearing Down Division From One of Paul's Most Overlooked Letters

Tucked between Titus and Hebrews, you'll find Paul's shortest and most personal letter. It's so tiny and obscure, many people overlook it and never bother to read it. Yet, it contains one of the greatest accounts of God's grace and Christian love. It is addressed to Philemon, a convert of Paul's who pastored a church in Colossae which met in his house (Philem. 1-2). It is the companion to Colossians, written at the same time and delivered together.

The tone of the letter is very cordial and courteous, earning it the nickname "The Polite Epistle." Paul was so concerned about the content that he personally took time to pen it in his own handwriting (Philem. 19). The theme deals with reconciliation, forgiveness and how Christian brotherhood removes all social and class distinctions. Truly, in Christ, there is no black or white, male or female, Jew or Gentile, rich or poor, slave or free—we are all one in Him.

Paul probably met Philemon in nearby Ephesus where he taught for two years at the School of Tyrannus (Acts 19:8-10). Philemon was a wealthy and generous man whose home was a haven for weary saints (Philem. 5-7). Although he was a benevolent believer, he also owned slaves including one named Onesimus who escaped, thus the reason for Paul's letter.

Slavery is an evil practice in any age among any race. While biblical truth stands in opposition to slavery, it also recognizes it was a sad reality in ancient culture. Slaves were considered and treated as property and had few legal rights. Runaway slaves were severely punished. In some cases, they were beaten, seared with a hot branding iron as

fugitives, crucified, or killed by other cruel methods.

Sin is a form of spiritual slavery. Jesus said, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34) We've all been slaves to sin to some degree or another. The good news is "Sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). Before salvation, we were like puppets on strings manipulated by Satan, sin and the flesh. Now, though not sinless, we are no longer controlled by sin because Christ cut the strings: "Therefore if the Son sets you free, you shall be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Onesimus apparently stole from his master and fled to find Paul in Rome. There, in prison, Paul led him to Christ (Philem. 10). Over the next few weeks or months, he became an asset to Paul's ministry who called him "a faithful and beloved brother" (Col. 4:9b). Soon, the dreaded day came when Paul legally had to send him back home. You see, in order to be totally right with God, we must at least attempt to be right with other people (Matt. 5:23-24).

So, Paul's letter to Philemon is a tender appeal to reinstate his runaway slave. Here we see ourselves since we've all run away from our benevolent Master. "All of us like sheep have gone astray; each of us has turned to his own way .." (Isa. 53:6).

Notice five requests Paul made to Philemon that mirror Christ's intercession for us (Heb. 7:25):

1. **Accept Onesimus back.** "I appeal to you on behalf of my son Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment, who in the past was unprofitable to you, but now he is profitable to you and to me" (Philemon 10-12). Onesimus means "useful or profitable," so Paul used a word play to say that even though he hadn't lived up to his name, he was now a changed man. How many times have we run away from God, but Jesus persuaded the

Father to accept us back with open arms?

2. **Treat Onesimus as a brother.** “Perhaps this was why he departed for a while, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother” (Philem. 15-16a). When we return to God, He doesn’t treat us as second-class servants. Instead, He treats us as His sons and heirs and restores our seat at His table.
3. **Treat Onesimus just like me.** “If then you consider me a partner, receive him as you would me” (Philem. 17). Paul told him to roll out the red carpet and welcome Onesimus just as he would the admired apostle. In Christ. And we are just as accepted in the presence of God as Jesus, the firstborn Son.
4. **Put Onesimus’ debt on my account.** “If he wronged you or owes anything, charge this to my account ... I will repay” (). Dying on the cross, Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” He used the Greek word *tetelestai*, an accounting term that means “paid in full.” “He paid a debt He did not owe/ I owed a debt I could not pay/ I needed someone to wash my sins away./ And now I sing a brand-new song—‘Amazing Grace’—/ Christ Jesus paid the debt that I could never pay.”
5. **Prepare a place for me.** “But, in addition, prepare also lodging for me, for I hope that through your prayers I shall be graciously restored to you” (Philem. 22). Sounds similar to Jesus’ promise, “I am going to prepare a place for you” (John 14:2). Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.

Onesimus made the long trip back to Philemon’s house with knots in his stomach. I imagine when their eyes met, he bowed his head, fell on his knees and said, “Before you say anything or do anything, Paul said, ‘Read this first,’” and handed him a scroll we call the Epistle of Philemon. The merciful master and the pardoned slave embraced as brothers in Christ. According to legend, Onesimus was later granted his freedom

and became the bishop of Berea. {eoa}

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