

Divide-The-Truth Sunday School Preview Notes
Philemon 1-25
Explore the Bible Sunday School Lesson for October 19, 2003

Introduction: The book of Philemon is the second of Paul's three prison epistles that we begin today to study. It is a treasure among treasures in that it is a personal letter sent from Paul to a beloved friend and brother in Christ, Philemon. It is the shortest of Paul's writings. It could be considered in our day nothing more than a short thank you letter. Although this epistle does not teach any lofty doctrinal issues, it is none the less an important epistle in that it teaches the power of forgiveness. The theme of forgiveness runs throughout the scriptures. From Genesis to Revelation forgiveness is taught, spoken of, and demonstrated. Our Lord, on the cross of Calvary, demonstrated the ultimate act of forgiveness for all to mankind.

The occasion for Paul writing this epistle was due to a slave named Onesimus running away from his master, Philemon, in Colosse.

Philemon had been saved under the ministry of Paul, most likely in Ephesus, for Paul at the time of his prison epistles had not yet been to Colosse. In reading from this text, it is apparent that Philemon had become a prominent member of the church there and was most likely a man of wealth. Onesimus, as we have already stated, ran away from his master and more than likely also stole money from him for his journey to Rome. Rome would have been the most perfect place for hiding for it was a great distance from Ephesus, it was a very large city geographically and in population, and at the time of Paul's writing, it was possibly two-thirds populated with slaves. Onesimus would have blended well in and simply would have been lost in the masses. Rome built its empire off of the free labor of slavery. Because of Rome's dependence on slavery and because the number of slaves was so great, a slave owner had complete freedom to do as he pleased with his slaves. Slaves could be bought and sold like property, treated with the utmost kindness, or beaten to death without anyone questioning the actions of the slave owner.

Despite Onesimus attempt to remain unnoticed in Rome, somehow he came in contact with the Apostle Paul. Being that Paul was in prison and unable to move about freely, it seems likely that the only place Onesimus could have come in contact with Paul would have been in prison. If he had stolen once from his master, as most commentators feel that he did, stealing again would not be out of character. How they came in contact is of little importance when we see the outcome. Onesimus could not have come in contact with one more concerned about the soul of man. In every path that Paul walked, men and women, Jew and Gentile, free and slaved, would hear the same message: Jesus is the Son of God sent for the sins of man!

Paul wrote this letter to Philemon to urge him to forgive Onesimus rather than punish him or put him to death.

1 Beginning in verse one and continuing to verse seven Paul will cautiously approach the matter between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul will open his letter with his name. Later on in the epistle he will state "*I, Paul, have written it with mine own hand.*" This was truly a personal letter from Paul. The very name of "*Paul*" to the churches he wrote to elicited one of two responses: either one of awe and respect or one of contempt. In this particular situation, Philemon would have been excited that his brother and spiritual father in the Lord was writing a letter to him. Paul then will remind him of his situation, "*a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*" This is the only epistle where Paul refers to himself as a prisoner. In Philippians, he calls himself a servant. In Colossians, the third prison epistle that we will study, he calls himself an apostle. Anytime a word or phrase is used only once or used multiple times in the same book or passage of scripture it is usually there to communicate something very important. In Philippians, Paul's theme is unity in the church. Therefore, he offers the best examples possible to communicate it: Jesus and himself. What could bring about more unity in a church than looking at oneself, as Jesus and Paul did, as a servant? In Colossians, Paul will have to combat a great doctrinal error. Therefore, he will call upon his title of "*apostle.*"

Class Interaction:

1. So why do you think he used a very different title for himself here?

Here, we are not dealing with doctrinal error or any problem in the church, but rather a personal issue between two brothers in Christ. I imagine that Paul, when he will ask Philemon to forgive Onesimus, knows what the initial response will be. "I cannot forgive him. You don't know the damage he has done! You don't know what he cost me!" And Paul will respond, as he is rattling his chains, "O, yes I do!" Paul will not use his authority as an apostle because he understands that you cannot make someone else forgive. They have to do it from their own heart for it to be true forgiveness. I cannot better illustrate this than an illustration from my own children. There are many times that I have to discipline my son for not treating his younger sister nicely. He may push her down, and I in turn tell him, "Tell her you are sorry." Does he do it? Yes. But does he do it and mean it? Not likely. He is only doing what daddy tells him because I have authority over him. The same situation was with Paul, only here he was dealing with adults.

Paul will also describe Philemon as a "*beloved friend*" and "*fellow laborer.*" The word "*beloved*" is the Greek word "*agapetos.*" It comes from the Greek word "*agape,*" which speaks of the love of our God in providing for us His Son as payment for our sin. It speaks of an unlimited and unmerited love that makes no stipulations or has no exceptions.

"*Fellow laborer*" speaks of a companion in the work or a colleague in the work of the ministry.

Class Interaction:

1. Have your class look up the following verses of scripture: Romans 16:9, 16:21, II Corinthians 8:23, Philippians 2:25.
2. How are these men described?
3. We know who Timothy, Titus, and Epaphroditus were, but who was Urbanus?

No one knows, but Paul called him a fellow laborer. A nobody became a somebody by laboring with Paul in the ministry. I consider myself a nobody. I will never have my name recorded in the scriptures. I most likely will never have it recorded in a "Who's Who," but I do distinguish myself as a "*fellow laborer*" in the Gospel as I serve with my pastor and the people of our church. What a wonderful privilege and responsibility to know that I can consider myself a "*fellow laborer*" in the Lord's work.

2-3 "*Apphia*" was no doubt Philemon's wife and probably a convert of Paul. "*Archippus*" was Philemon's son. Here Paul refers to "*Archippus*" as a fellow soldier. In Colossians 4:17 Paul will instruct him to "*take heed to the ministry which thou hast received in the Lord, that thou fulfill it.*" Because of both references, it is believed that he had been in some form of leadership in the church at Colosse.

Though this letter is a very personal letter to Philemon, it is very clear that Paul intends for this letter to be read in the church because he addresses the church, "*and to the church in thy house.*" Philemon's house served as the meeting place for the believers in Colosse. It was not until the third century that churches had separate buildings for worship.

I cannot help but think how this must have stung the heart of Philemon to have this read in the presence of the church and in the presence of his runaway slave who was being returned to him. However, Paul will not only ask him to forgive, but he will also, in the presence of the church, ask him to receive him back into his home.

Class Interaction:

1. How would this kind of forgiveness be possible when we have been hurt beyond measure or betrayed beyond repair? How can we forgive like Paul is asking Philemon to forgive?

The answer is found in verse three in four words, "*the Lord Jesus Christ.*" The word "*Lord*" literally means owner as it is translated in Luke 19:33. It carries the idea of authority, which arises out of ownership. Paul is reminding Philemon, and us, that Jesus owns us and therefore, has the right to ask us to forgive and expects it of us. Just as Onesimus was owned by Philemon, and therefore had no rights, we are owned by the "*Lord Jesus Christ,*" and therefore have no rights.

4. What a prayer live this man had! He says he had prayed for him "*always.*" Before there was a

situation that needed prayer, Paul was already at work on his knees. How contrary this is to our prayer life. Typically it takes a disaster to bring us to our knees.

5 Paul's prayer of thanksgiving continues here because Paul had heard good things about Philemon, "*hearing of thy love and faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints.*" Paul has not told Philemon yet that one of the saints for whom Paul is thankful of his demonstration of love is his own slave. Here again, the word "love" is the word "agape." Paul is saying I have heard of your unlimited and sacrificial love toward the saints, many of whom were most likely unmerited in receiving it.

Point: That's what agape love is. It's unlimited. It's sacrificial. It's unmerited.

Paul will call on Philemon to forgive Onesimus because of his relationship with the Lord (v.3) and because of his relationship with church (v.4). I cannot think of anything more powerful than forgiveness. Nor can I think of anything more harmful than a lack of forgiveness. Paul said, "I've heard about your forgiveness."

Too many times the world hears just the opposite. Too many times the world hears about church squabbles and bickering and fighting. When was the last time you heard about church members forgiving one another of things that happened in the past?

Point: Forgiveness is powerful because others hear about it.

6 The word "*communication*" in the KJV is better understood "*fellowship.*" The word fellowship means much more than how we understand it and practice it in the church of our day. It literally means a mutual sharing. We see this in the early church as recorded in Acts 2. Believers belong to each other in a mutual partnership that is produced by their "faith." When Paul states that "thy faith may become effectual" he is speaking of power. The word "*effectual*" is the Greek word "*energes.*" Our English word "energy" comes from this word, but a literal understanding of the word is "powerful."

Paul, as we have just said, expected this letter to be read in the church. He was very concerned about the "*fellowship*" of the saints as he frequently mentioned it in his epistles. Paul understood that what goes on in a local body of believers is heard abroad. Therefore, it is important that we choose to do what is right in regards to the whole body of Christ rather than ourselves. It is not difficult to figure out that if Philemon and Onesimus did not reconcile, it could affect the whole church. Personal issues often are the catalysts to disruptions in the church. A brother offends a brother or a sister offends a sister outside the walls of the church building but they bring it with them and in turn develop sides. Before long there is bickering and backbiting in the church over an issue that never really started in the church.

Paul understood that talking about forgiveness and actually forgiving are two different things. Thus he goes on to say, "*through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake.*" The word "*knowledge*" speaks of personal knowledge acquired through experience. You can hear message after message about forgiveness. You may even teach a message about forgiveness. But until you practice what you preach/teach you cannot experience the depth of forgiveness.

This side of heaven we cannot fully understand God's forgiveness granted at Calvary to all whom receive it. It is beyond what our minds and hearts can comprehend. However, when we choose to forgive others we are never more like our Lord and Master.

If you want to experience forgiveness, then you must be willing to practice forgiveness. Otherwise, you miss out on the most fundamental aspect of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

7 Forgiveness is powerful because it leads to "*joy*" and "*comfort.*" Paul speaks of Philemon's love for all the saints as bringing them "refreshment." The word "*refreshed*" or "*encouraged*" is a military term that speaks of an army resting from the march. I was once in the military and remember marching on the landing strip of the base. It was Texas, it was July, and it was very hot. I cannot tell you the relief when we were allowed to break. We immediately sought the shade of a nearby hanger. That kind of feeling is what Paul is stating the saints were experiencing: relief and comfort.

We have all experienced times in our lives when we knew we should forgive but chose not to. You may be in that very season of life right now. How do you feel when you come in contact with that person? Or maybe the same feelings are aroused when you do nothing more than think about the situation. Are these feelings of anger, dread, hurt, bitterness, or other feelings like them? Have you ever been sick because of these types of feelings? Paul said that the *“bowel of the saints are refreshed.”* *“Bowels”* speak of the heart or gut. It is the location that the Bible often talks about being the location of our emotions. We use this understanding when we speak of *“getting something off of our chest.”*

Forgiveness not only releases the person who has wronged you. Forgiveness releases you. To not forgive does us more harm than the one we refuse to forgive.

Philemon was not a pastor, does not appear to be a deacon, and most likely was not a teacher. He was a member of the church who Paul says brought refreshment to the saints.

Point: Forgiveness is powerful because others feel the affects of it.

8-9 Beginning in verse eight and continuing to verse nineteen Paul begins to make his appeal. Beginning in this verse, Paul gets to the heart of the matter with Philemon. There is no doubt in my mind that Philemon had a good idea where this letter was headed, especially with Onesimus and Tychicus standing before him. He probably knew Paul was going to give him some instructions or make a request but he did not know just what the apostle wanted yet.

In verse eight Paul is telling Philemon that he could use his authority as an apostle and demand that Philemon forgive his runaway slave. But Paul understood that this would not be true forgiveness. So in verse nine Paul appeals to three things in hopes Philemon will forgive and restore Onesimus: 1) love- *“for loves sake”*, 2) Paul’s age, and 3) Paul’s current situation – *“a prisoner of Jesus Christ.”*

Paul, at the time of writing this letter, was about sixty years old. Though that does not sound very old in our culture, it was in his. In addition, he had been so mistreated that his body probably looked older than most. Paul’s current situation in Rome was also a ground of appeal. This is the second time he mentioned that he was a *“prisoner.”* Paul probably was hoping that Philemon would think to himself, *“I cannot bring about Paul’s freedom but I can my own slave.”*

10-11 Whether Philemon was thinking this or not and whether he had figured out what was about to occur, Paul now makes his request. Over one third of the way through the letter and finally Paul says the name, Onesimus. Paul will describe Onesimus in several ways beginning in verse ten and continuing to verse fourteen that are meant to demonstrate his changed heart.

First, Paul will call Onesimus *“my son.”* The description of him as being his *“son”* and the statement *“begotten in my bonds”* is a reference to Onesimus’ spiritual birth.

Second, Paul will use a play on words in verse eleven to describe the change that had occurred in Onesimus’ life. The name Onesimus was a very common name for slaves in New Testament times. It meant useful or profitable. Most likely a slave may have been given this name after he had served his master for a long enough time that the master recognized his usefulness and profitability. In other words Paul was saying, *“There was a time when useful was useless, but now he who was useless is now useful.”* In other words, *“You are not getting the same man back.”* Onesimus had proven to Paul, who was probably a pretty good discerner of men’s hearts, that he had changed. Onesimus had become a living example of Paul’s words in Colossians 3:22-24, *“And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily as to the Lord, and not unto men; knowing that of the Lord ye shall receive the reward of the inheritance; for ye serve the Lord Christ.”*

Point: Salvation always brings about changes in our lives. Otherwise, how can others know what has happened in the heart?

12 Paul thus sends him back to Philemon. This must have been the most difficult thing for Onesimus to follow Paul on. As we have already noted, Roman law allowed slave owners unlimited authority over their slaves. A slave owner could torture without mercy or kill without any one questioning his actions. Stealing was most often punished by crucifixion. As you recall, Onesimus most likely stole from his master in order to travel to Rome. I can well imagine that after Onesimus' conversion, Paul probably disciplined him for a period of time and then one day told him, "Onesimus, you must return to your master." Onesimus' reply probably would have been, "But I can't. You know the laws. He will at the very least torture me but more than likely put me to death." To which Paul would reply, "Onesimus, you are going to have to trust me on this one." Paul had found Onesimus, so useful that his feelings had grown very deep for him, "*mine own bowels.*" The bowels or gut were considered locations of emotions in New Testament times.

Class Interaction:

1. What application can we make of this?

Paul reveals to us that there had been a change in Onesimus, as there should be when Christ comes into our lives. However, salvation does not reverse the ravages of sin. Acceptance of Christ may or may not undo wrong decisions. Onesimus' decision to run away was not reversed by his coming to Christ. Nor are many decisions of our past. Onesimus had to face the consequences of his actions, consequences that could have resulted in his death. We too must face the consequences of our actions. I doubt that any of us will have to face the possibility of death as Onesimus did.

Point: Salvation is free, but the moral obligations that come with it often prove to be very expensive.

13-14 Paul had found this runaway slave so useful that he would have preferred to keep him for himself so that he might be "*ministered*" to. However, there was a problem. Onesimus, by law, was the property of Philemon. In fact, had Paul kept him without the permission of Philemon, Paul could have been imprisoned for harboring a runaway slave. Thus Paul was bound by the laws of man to make every effort in returning him. But Paul did suggest that Philemon might allow Onesimus to minister on behalf of Philemon to himself.

Class Interaction:

1. What application can we make of this?

Paul could have made many good arguments for not returning Onesimus. He had already told Philemon in verse eleven that he had been profitable to him. He could have played the mental mind game of thinking he is better off with me than his master. He could have argued that the dangers Onesimus would face in traveling back to Philemon were too great. There were many. He could have possibly found a legal loophole and somehow argued he is my slave now. He could have argued that he needs to grow more in the Lord before I send him back. He could have argued he wouldn't come back without even trying to convince Onesimus to do so. Or he could have simply ignored the subject. After all, Rome was a very long way from Colosse so who will find out?

Every one of these arguments is what is more accurately called rationalization. We can be so good at it that wrong becomes right and no one questions it. Paul knew the law and he also wrote, "*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers...*" (Romans 13:1). He had a duty to send Onesimus back, a duty under the laws of man and also under the laws of God. Whether he liked it or not, he had to do what was right.

Paul's dilemma is no different than ours. There are times when we know that doing what is right will cost us more than doing what is wrong. However, the cost is insignificant when compared to integrity. I would rather be poor and others know that I am honest than rich and others know that I am dishonest.

Point: Getting right with God always involves getting right with men.

15-16 Paul could never be accused of preaching easy believeism. Onesimus had to return and Philemon

had to forgive. Both men were being asked to do something that was uncommon, unacceptable, and just not easy.

In verse fifteen Paul presents the providence of God to Philemon. "Could it be that he ran from you so that he might run into me so that I might reveal Christ to him?" Paul also points out the outcome when he says he "*departed for a season*" but you have "*him forever.*"

The word "*receive*" means to take back from a distance. Onesimus running away had created more than a physical distance between himself and his master. It had created a spiritual and an emotional one also. Paul is telling the one wronged, Philemon, to take back in the one who wronged so that the distance (spiritual and emotional) is done away with.

Why would Paul ask this of Philemon? Because Onesimus was now "*not a servant,*" but "*a brother.*"

Point: Forgiveness is so powerful because it has the power to bring together people that are separated emotionally and spiritually.

17-18 Paul leaves no stone unturned that might give Philemon an excuse for not receiving Onesimus back. First, Paul calls on their partnership in the ministry. The word "*partner*" here again is the word "*koinonia*" which speaks of a mutual partnership in the ministry. Thus Paul is asking, "How would you receive me if I were to come to Colosse? Then please treat Onesimus the same."

Verse eighteen is the only hint we have that Onesimus actually stole money or possessions from Philemon. However, here Paul says that he will become a debtor for Onesimus if that is what it takes.

Point: Forgiveness is powerful because it brings about restitution.

Paul's willingness to pay a debt that was not his is a wonderful picture of Christ's work on Calvary for you and me. Philemon, like God, had been wronged. Onesimus, like the sinner, stood in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. Only by Paul's actions, like our Lord's, was/is forgiveness and restitution possible. Christ was willing to put our sin on His account and His righteousness on ours.

Paul's words in verses twelve through eighteen could just as easily be understood as words from our Lord, "Father, _____ (put your name in the blank) owes you a great debt but I am willing to put his debt on my account and my account balance (righteousness) on his. Receive him as you would me."

II Corinthians 5:21 *For he hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

19 Paul has already made it clear that he would pay any debt of Onesimus. In the previous verse the words "*put that on mine account*" are a commercial phraseology. Here he continues by making it a point that this letter was written by the hand of Paul. It was not uncommon for Paul to dictate his letter to a secretary. What Paul was doing was underscoring the importance of this letter and actually making it into a contract or IOU. Paul knew how difficult it was for human nature to forgive when there was an unpaid debt, especially money.

I am reminded of a man I went to seminary with. Ronnie was saved and called to the ministry shortly thereafter. In the process of getting his house in order to move to Memphis, TN the Lord began to convict him of all the stealing from his employer over many years of employment. He knew it would be impossible to determine the exact amount of money he owed but felt it was at least several thousands of dollars. He did not have the money but felt that he needed to seek forgiveness and restitution for the debt. To make a long story short, he met with the president of the company and told him of his salvation and call to ministry and of the many years of stealing. On the spot the president of the company forgave him of his actions and forgave him of the debt. He also paid for Ronnie's schooling at seminary. The president of the company was a saved man. He understood debt. He understood that he once had a debt that could not be paid and someone stood in and said, "I will pay that debt." His name is Jesus.

Paul also reminds Philemon of the great debt he once owed. A debt that was paid by the same Lord of Onesimus. A debt that was paid on account of Paul's preaching of the Gospel, "*albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides.*"

20-21 Paul laid it all on the line. He put all he had into his plea, but ultimately the actions taken were left for Philemon. Forgiveness cannot be forced!

Paul not only tells Philemon and us that forgiveness should come because we realize the great debt that God has paid in Christ Jesus, but he goes on to say there are some personal benefits as well.

In verses thirteen and fourteen, Paul hinted at the possibility of Onesimus staying with Paul if Philemon would consent. This he tells Philemon would be a great physical ministry to the aged apostle. But in verse twenty, Paul is not thinking of a physical benefit but of a spiritual benefit. This was the direction Paul always pointed to. This is the same line of thought when Paul wrote to the Philippians, "*Not because I desire a gift; but I desire fruit that may abound to your account*" (4:17).

So how was Philemon to benefit spiritually? By bringing "joy" and "refreshing." The word "refresh" is the same word that was used in verse seven. It is a military term that speaks of an army resting from a march. Everywhere Paul went conflict occurred because of the preaching of the gospel. He was currently in a Roman prison cell because of conflict between him and the Jews. Many of the letters he wrote in the New Testament were written to churches experiencing conflict, but this letter was written to an individual to prevent conflict between two believers that could ultimately lead to conflict in the church of Colosse.

In verse seven Paul spoke of Philemon's refreshing the saints by his past conduct. Now would be the ultimate test of his faith. Seeing that the church was small and currently meeting in Philemon's house the matter between Philemon and Onesimus was probably no secret. Now that Onesimus had returned, there was probably great tension in the household and the church. The actions of Philemon would make the situation more or less tense. The actions of Philemon could do great harm or bring about great unity into the church. Paul the "*aged apostle, the prisoner of Jesus Christ,*" and the one who had paid such a great price for his obedience was asking Philemon to refresh him and at the same time refresh the church.

Paul closes with confidence in Philemon's actions. What more that Paul spoke of is uncertain. Possibly Paul hoped that Philemon would send Onesimus back to Rome. Possibly Philemon would not only grant forgiveness but also freedom. Whatever the outcome Paul spoke with confidence in Philemon because he had confidence in the Lord.

To God be the Glory!

Divide-The-Truth Sunday School Preview Notes are offered by Bro. David Brown through Shelbyville Mills Baptist Church, Shelbyville, TN and are available by request through e-mail only at Divide-The-Truth@juno.com. The purpose of these notes is not to replace your materials but to add to your current materials so that you might "rightly divide the Word of Truth" (II Timothy 2:15). A full doctrinal statement and references are available upon request.