

# **The Teachings of Philemon**

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# **The Teachings of Philemon**

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# Introduction

One of the ways I've been studying the Word of God is by making a list of everything that each book of the Bible teaches. This has resulted in more than a thousand pages of material. Although it's interesting and I've learned a lot from writing it, that's a lot of bullet points to read through!

This isn't intended to summarize each book of the Bible because that's what my "Chapter Summary of the Bible" is for. It's also not intended to offer in-depth commentary because that's what my regular commentary is for. This book is simply a collection of points that I found interesting.

I hope there's some material here that you find edifying.

Jon Cooper

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# Philemon 1

**Philemon 1:1:** "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellowlabourer,"

- The letter to Philemon was written by both Paul and Timothy.
- Paul referred to Timothy as his brother. It's Biblical to refer to other Christians as brothers and sisters, for we're all part of the family of God.
- When Paul wrote this letter he was a prisoner.
- Paul wrote this letter to Philemon.
- Paul called Philemon "dearly beloved". He didn't think it was inappropriate to be affectionate in his letters.
- Paul called Philemon a "fellowlabourer".
- In Paul's introduction he referred to himself as a prisoner, not an apostle. He was emphasizing the fact that he lacked freedom (just like the slave Onesimus).
- In Paul's introduction he referred to "Jesus Christ", or Jesus the Messiah.
- The reason Paul was in prison was because of his faithfulness to Jesus Christ.
- Paul's faithfulness to Jesus Christ cost him a great deal, and didn't benefit him in a worldly or material sense.

**Philemon 1:2:** "And to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus our fellowsoldier, and to the church in thy house:"

- Apphia is a female name. She may have been Philemon's wife, but since she's not mentioned elsewhere in the Bible there's no way to know for sure.
- Paul didn't think it was inappropriate to call fellow believers "beloved", regardless of their gender. Affection wasn't viewed as inappropriate.
- Archippus is mentioned both in this book and in Colossians 4:17. In Colossians Paul referred to the ministry that Archippus had been given from the Lord, and commanded him to fulfill it.
- Paul calls Archippus a "fellow soldier".
- Paul didn't think that military metaphors were unbiblical, pagan, or inappropriate.
- There was a church which was meeting in Philemon's house.
- In the apostolic era, churches met in people's homes. They didn't meet in church buildings.
- There's no mention of church buildings anywhere in the New Testament, nor are there any commands to build such things or meet in them.
- The pattern we find in the Bible is churches meeting in small groups in people's homes.
- There's nothing wrong or inappropriate with churches meeting in homes instead of in dedicated church buildings.
- No book of the New Testament ever implied that when a church met in a home it was a sign of poverty. No apostle ever taught that churches should strive to have their own building.



- Paul began his letter by greeting people and encouraging them.

**Philemon 1:3:** "Grace to you, and peace, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

- Paul prayed that Philemon would have both grace and peace. He didn't pray that Philemon would suffer and have pain.
- Grace and peace comes from God the Father and God the Son.
- Paul called Jesus the Messiah (the "Christ").
- Paul called Jesus "Lord". We must submit to His commands and obey them.
- Jesus is our Lord and has complete authority over us. Those who deny that are denying what the Bible clearly teaches.

**Philemon 1:4:** "I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers,"

- Paul regularly prayed for Philemon.
- It's Biblical to pray for others, and to make regular mention of them in our prayers.
- Even though Paul was in prison, he still cared about the health and wellbeing of others and he still tried to reach out to them with encouragement and support.
- Paul prayed for others while he was suffering in prison.

**Philemon 1:5:** "Hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all saints;"

- Philemon had love for Jesus.
- Philemon had love for all of the saints. (Later in his letter Paul would identify Onesimus as one of the saints.)
- Philemon had faith in Jesus.
- Paul put value on having love toward the saints.
- Paul put value on having both love and faith toward Jesus.
- Paul had heard other people testify of Philemon's love and faith.
- It's good to testify of the love and faith of others.

**Philemon 1:6:** "That the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus."

- Paul wanted Philemon to effectively communicate the faith that he had in Jesus.
- Every good thing which was in Philemon was because of Jesus Christ, who transformed him, saved him, and gave him those good things.
- Our faith can't be effectively communicated if we don't acknowledge and understand that any good thing which is within us is the result of Jesus.
- We *must* give Jesus all of the credit and praise for every good thing in our life. They're all His doing, not ours.
- Jesus is the one who transformed us and put good things in us (just as Jesus transformed Onesimus, who Paul will

bring up later in his letter).

**Philemon 1:7:** "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother."

- Paul took great joy in the love that Philemon had for Jesus and for all of the saints (which Paul would later ask him to apply to Onesimus).
- In ancient times the "bowels" were seen as the seat of emotions (whereas today the culture refers to the heart).
- Philemon refreshed the saints, encouraged them, and strengthened them. (Later in this letter Paul will ask Philemon to do the same thing by freeing Onesimus.)
- Paul referred to Philemon as his brother in Christ.
- Paul took the time to greet and encourage Philemon, and make sure that Philemon knew Paul was praying for him, before getting to the point that Paul wanted to address.

**Philemon 1:8:** "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient,"

- Paul chose to take a very gentle approach to asking Philemon to set Onesimus free. He could have condemned Philemon, railed against him, and used his apostolic authority to force the matter, but instead Paul entreated him as a brother.
- It would have been convenient for Paul to use his apostolic authority to demand that Philemon do whatever he wanted, but instead he chose to take a more gentle and loving approach. In doing so Paul set an

example of how to handle confrontations in the church.

- Paul wanted Philemon to know that he had deliberately chosen to take a gentle approach over this issue.

**Philemon 1:9:** "Yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ."

- The reason Paul chose to be gentle with Philemon was out of love, not fear.
- Paul referred to himself as "the aged".
- Not only was Paul old, but he was also a prisoner.
- The reason Paul was a prisoner was because of his relationship with Jesus.
- Paul twice emphasized the fact that he was a prisoner before ever mentioning Onesimus – who was Philemon's slave and also lacked freedom.

**Philemon 1:10:** "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds:"

- Paul met Onesimus while he was in prison (although it seems that Onesimus himself wasn't in prison).
- When Paul met Onesimus he didn't turn him over to the Roman authorities, as the law of the time required. Instead he wrote this letter to Philemon.
- Paul refers to Onesimus as someone he had "begotten in my bonds". It seems Paul played a role in the salvation of Onesimus even though Paul was in prison at the time.
- Paul referred to Onesimus as his son, indicating that Paul

had a very close relationship with him and cared about him a great deal.

- Paul didn't think it was inappropriate to refer to people who he had "begotten" in Christ as his children.
- While Paul was suffering in prison for the sake of the gospel, he took the time to write a letter on behalf of Onesimus – someone who *wasn't* in prison.

**Philemon 1:11:** "Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me:"

- When Onesimus was the slave of Philemon he hadn't been a profitable slave. Instead he had caused Philemon harm.
- Onesimus was a changed man now that he had been saved, and he was useful to both Philemon and Paul.
- Paul was benefiting from his relationship with Onesimus.
- Onesimus was able to help Paul, who was in prison for the sake of the gospel.

**Philemon 1:12:** "Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels:"

- Paul didn't turn Onesimus over to the Roman authorities. Instead Paul sent him back to Philemon with this letter.
- Paul made it clear to Philemon that the apostle loved Onesimus like a son, and he wanted Philemon to receive Onesimus the way Philemon would receive a son of Paul.
- Paul sent Onesimus back, but with the clear expectation that Philemon would set him free and return him to Paul.

- Paul didn't condemn Philemon or Onesimus in this letter, but instead took a loving and gentle approach to asking Philemon to do the right thing.

**Philemon 1:13:** "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the gospel:"

- Paul wanted to keep Onesimus with him so that he could serve the apostle while he was in prison.
- Paul once again mentioned the fact that the reason he was a prisoner was for the sake of the gospel, and Onesimus was helping him. The implication is that if Philemon didn't do as Paul asked then he would be depriving the apostle of help that he urgently needed while he was suffering in prison as an old man.
- Paul was very gentle, but he made it difficult for Philemon to tell him no.
- Paul said that he considered the service Onesimus was providing to him to have been done on behalf of Philemon. In other words, Paul was giving Philemon the credit for what Onesimus was doing for him.
- When we can't attend to someone's needs, but instead send someone else and make it possible for them to do the work, it's counted on our behalf.

**Philemon 1:14:** "But without thy mind would I do nothing; that thy benefit should not be as it were of necessity, but willingly."

- Paul could have used his apostolic authority to keep Onesimus, but instead he sent him back to Philemon and

asked Philemon to free him. Paul did this even though losing Onesimus would negatively impact his ability to spread the gospel.

- It would have been far more convenient for Paul to simply take what he wanted, since he had the authority to do so, but instead he inconvenienced himself while he was in prison in order to show love and respect toward Philemon (who was not in prison).
- Paul wanted Philemon to return Onesimus willingly, not because Paul kept him and didn't give Philemon a choice.
- God wants us to give willingly, not because we're forced to and we don't have a choice.
- Paul didn't take the pragmatic approach that "it's for the sake of the gospel, that justifies whatever I need to do".
- Paul showed respect and love to others even when it cost him a great deal to do so.

**Philemon 1:15:** "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever;"

- Onesimus had fled from Philemon.
- Paul told Philemon that perhaps the reason Onesimus left was so he could meet Paul, become saved, and then return as a beloved brother in Christ instead of an unprofitable servant.
- There may be times when we go through trials in our life that ultimately lead to greater blessings, and a better situation than if the trial had never happened.
- There's an everlasting component to the relationships that Christians have with one another.

**Philemon 1:16:** "Not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord?"

- Paul wanted Philemon to look at Onesimus as a beloved brother, and not a runaway slave.
- Paul told Philemon that he viewed Onesimus as a beloved brother in Christ.
- Paul didn't think it was inappropriate to refer to other Christians as "beloved".
- Paul told Philemon that he should have an even greater love for Onesimus than the apostle did.

**Philemon 1:17:** "If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself."

- Paul told Philemon to treat Onesimus the way that he would treat the apostle himself.
- Paul, the apostle who wrote much of the New Testament and who God used to do miraculous things, and who planted churches all throughout the world, asked Philemon to consider him to be a fellow partner in the gospel. Paul was showing incredible humility here, since the acts of Philemon were very small compared to the acts and suffering of Paul.
- Paul took great pains to make sure that Onesimus was well received.

**Philemon 1:18:** "If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account;"



- Paul said that if Onesimus had done anything wrong or owed him any money, Philemon should charge those things to Paul (just like our sins are put on the account of Christ, who suffered on our behalf).
- Paul was willing to take on the wrongdoing and debt of Onesimus, a runaway slave.
- Paul didn't deny that Onesimus had wronged Philemon. Instead he told Philemon that he was willing to pay that debt (just as Christ paid our debts).
- Paul was willing to take on the debts of others while he was a prisoner. He was willing to suffer on behalf of others at the very time he was already suffering greatly for the sake of the gospel.

**Philemon 1:19:** "I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it: albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides."

- Paul personally wrote a letter to Philemon promising to pay any debt that Onesimus owed. Paul made that promise while he was in prison.
- Paul wrote this letter with his own hand, to make sure Philemon understood he was making a binding promise and would keep his word.
- Paul said that he would repay the debts of Onesimus in spite of the enormous debt that Philemon owed to Paul (thus reminding him of what Jesus said: "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors").
- Paul's promise to repay Philemon for any wrong that Onesimus had done made it impossible for Philemon to punish Onesimus.

**Philemon 1:20:** "Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord: refresh my bowels in the Lord."

- Paul once again referred to Philemon as his brother in Christ.
- Paul told Philemon that if he granted Paul's request it would bring him great joy while he suffered in prison.
- Paul made it clear to Philemon that by doing this he would greatly help the apostle Paul through a very difficult and trying time.
- When we see others walking faithfully in the Lord and doing what's right, it should bring us joy.

**Philemon 1:21:** "Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say."

- Paul was confident that Philemon would be obedient to the Lord and do what was right.
- Paul told Philemon that he was confident Philemon would go above and beyond what the apostle asked. Paul fully expected Philemon to return Onesimus to him.
- Paul was loving and gentle, but he was also very clear about what he wanted. He wrote this letter in a way that made it very difficult for Philemon to refuse.
- This letter is an example of what it means for a church to be characterized by love, even in conflicts.

**Philemon 1:22:** "But withal prepare me also a lodging: for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you."

- Paul was in prison, but he expected to be released and have the opportunity to visit Philemon.
- Paul was reminding Philemon that one day he intended to visit Philemon and see him and his church again. One day the person who wrote this letter would be there in person to see him.
- Paul expected Philemon to be praying both for his release from prison, and that he would have the opportunity to visit.
- Paul valued visiting churches in person.
- Paul believed that God answered prayers, including prayers of deliverance.
- Paul expected Philemon to want to see him, and to have a place ready for him if he came to visit Philemon's household.

**Philemon 1:23:** "There salute thee Epaphras, my fellowprisoner in Christ Jesus;"

- At the time this letter was written, Epaphras was also in prison for the sake of Jesus. Epaphras is also mentioned in Colossians 1:7 and 4:12 as a faithful servant of Christ who labored fervently for the church.
- Epaphras, a prisoner who was suffering on behalf of Jesus, sent his greetings to Philemon.

**Philemon 1:24:** "Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellowlabourers."

- Marcus sent his greetings to Philemon. Colossians 4:10 identifies him as the son of Barnabas' sister.

- Aristarchus sent his greetings to Philemon. Colossians 4:10 calls him a fellow prisoner, and Acts 19:29 refers to him as a man of Macedonia and one of Paul's travel companions.
- Demas sent his greetings to Philemon. In 2 Timothy 4:10 we find out that Demas forsook Paul right before the apostle was martyred, for Demas loved this present world.
- Lucas sent his greetings to Philemon. He isn't mentioned elsewhere in the Bible.
- At this time Demas was considered to be a fellow laborer, but eventually Demas revealed his true nature when he forsook Paul.
- Paul saw value in including the greetings from others in his letters. Paul wanted Philemon to know that these other people were thinking about him.
- Paul wasn't alone when he was in prison. He had the support of Epaphras, Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, and Lucas.

**Philemon 1:25:** "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen."

- Grace comes from the Lord Jesus.
- Paul asked that the grace of Jesus would be with the spirit of Philemon.
- People have spirits.
- The spirit which is within us can receive grace from the Lord Jesus and benefit from it.
- Paul ends the letter with "Amen" (let it be).