

# Welcome Onesimus as a Brother in the Lord

Philemon 1:1-25

Key Verse: 1:16-17

**“...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”**

Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, and it is very personal. Yet it is included in the Bible, for it shows marvelously how Paul lived out the love of Christ practically. Paul had once been a legalistic and bigoted Pharisee. But after receiving Jesus' forgiving love, he was changed into a man who could love others, even Onesimus, a useless person--a runaway Gentile slave. When Paul shared Jesus' forgiving love with Onesimus in prison, Onesimus was transformed into a man of Christ's love who served Paul as a spiritual son. Jesus' forgiving love has power. It changed useless people into useful people, and also united Paul, Philemon, Onesimus, and the Lord's people in Colossae. These days, too, we need Jesus' forgiving love. There are many people who suffer from conflicts, hatred, a vengeful spirit, resentment, and bitterness. They lack peace, joy and freedom in their hearts. They feel they are living in a kind of hell. What we really need is not more money, but Jesus' forgiving love. When we have forgiving love in our hearts, we have peace, joy and freedom. We can restore relationships with one another and live in harmony. Let's learn Jesus' forgiving love through this passage.

**First, Philemon's good influence on the Lord's people (1-7).** Verses 1-3 are Paul's greetings. Verse 1a says, **“Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother.”** In most of his letters Paul identifies himself as an apostle of Christ Jesus. But here Paul calls himself **“a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”** He said in verse 13 that he was in chains for the gospel. People might have thought he was a prisoner of Rome. But he called himself **“a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”** He did not feel that Rome ruled his life; Christ was his Lord. He was in chains according to Christ's good purpose. Because he trusted Christ's love, he was free. Paul includes in his greeting **“Timothy our brother.”** Though Timothy was a much younger leader, Paul introduced him as a brother and co-author. Verses 1b-2 say, **“To Philemon our dear friend and fellow worker--also to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier--and to the church that meets in your home.”** Philemon had come to Jesus through Paul's witness. And Paul had served him in many ways (19b). It would be natural for Paul to look upon Philemon as one of his spiritual children. But he called him “dear friend” and “fellow worker.” Paul

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greeted Philemon's wife Apphia as a sister and their son Archippus, who was a leader at the church in Colossae (Col 4:17), as a "fellow soldier." Paul regarded each of them as a partner in the Lord. When we think about Philemon's family, it was beautiful. They opened their home to God's people to be used as a house church. Until the time of Roman Emperor Constantine in A.D. 313, there were no big church buildings. Churches were small gatherings in someone's home. We call them house churches. House churches spread quietly and steadily until the Roman Empire was evangelized. May God raise many house churches like Philemon's among us. Paul greeted them by saying, **"Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"** (3).

Verses 4-7 are Paul's thanksgiving and prayer. Paul began by saying in verses 4-5, **"I always thank my God as I remember you in my prayers, because I hear about your love for all his holy people and your faith in the Lord Jesus."** Philemon's love for God's people and faith in the Lord Jesus were being told even in a Roman prison, and Paul was thankful. Love for God's people as the expression of faith in Christ is a mark of a real Christian (Gal 5:6b). It is what Jesus wants people to see in his children (Jn 13:35). Though Paul was thankful, he was not satisfied. He prayed for Philemon to grow deeper. He prayed that Philemon's faith may become even more effective by deepening his understanding of every good thing we have in Christ. Philemon's love for the Lord's people was a source of joy and encouragement to Paul, and it refreshed the hearts of God's people (7).

Before meeting Jesus as his Savior, Philemon had been a man of standing in his society and a wealthy slave holder (16). Such people are usually arrogant and feel entitled to use others for their own benefit. They use their time and money selfishly. They give only bits of leftovers to others. They are stingy, like the rich fool in Luke 12 who died and went to hell. Perhaps Philemon had been like this. But when he met Jesus through Apostle Paul, he was changed. He opened his home and served the Lord's people generously. In the past, Philemon did not know how to use his money. But when he accepted God's sacrificial love he learned to be rich in good deeds and to be generous and willing to share. In this way he laid up treasure for himself as a firm foundation for the coming age so that he might take hold of the life that is truly life (1 Ti 6:18-19). There is a saying that "nobility obliges." It is the duty of the privileged and wealthy to share with those in need, as good stewards. This is rooted in a Christian value system. Almost everyone agrees that this sounds good, but it is difficult to practice. It is possible when we have in our hearts the sacrificial love of God, who gave his one and only Son to save

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sinners. When Philemon practiced God's love, his home was transformed from a cold abode of the selfish into a warm fellowship full of grace and life. His house became an oasis in the desert. May God raise many Philemons who know Jesus' love and give good influence to God's people.

**Second, Paul appeals to Philemon for Onesimus based on love (8-25).** After expressing his thanksgiving and prayer for Philemon, Paul came to his point. Verse 8 says, **“Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do...”** What did Paul mean by the words, **“you ought to do”**? It was in regard to Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, whom Paul was sending back to him. In those days, runaway slaves were hunted down, captured and returned for a reward. Upon return, many were crucified by their masters. Others received a branding on their foreheads that signified they were runaways, marking them for life. To make matters worse, Onesimus seems to have been a thief (18). Upon his return, he could have been very badly treated. Yet Paul wanted Philemon to forgive him. This is what “you ought to do” meant. As an apostle, and his shepherd, Paul could have ordered Philemon to forgive Onesimus. Yet he preferred to appeal on the basis of love, merely as an old man, and a prisoner of Christ Jesus (9).

Paul said of Onesimus **“who became my son while I was in chains.”** Here we can see Paul's gospel faith. Paul never despaired in any situation. Rather, Paul made a new history. Usually people in challenging situations think that they need to improve their circumstances first, in order to do something. Those in prison think, “I must get out first, then I can do something.” They are overwhelmed by the situation. Then they complain and blame God, parents, teachers and their environment. But Paul did not complain. Paul did not find someone to blame. Rather, Paul was thankful, joyful and ready to do something for Jesus, even in prison. So when Paul saw Onesimus, he found a way to serve Jesus. With gospel faith, Paul raised a disciple of Jesus even in prison.

We also see Paul's heart as a great shepherd for one useless person. So often, people think that good disciple candidates are excellent students, good-looking, and have many talents. But Jesus' disciples are not generally characterized by such qualities. Rather, they are often weak, lowly, despised and even useless. But Jesus called such people, served, healed, forgave and shepherded them, until they became useful people. For example, Matthew was a tax collector and a national traitor. Due to his guilt and shame and regret, he was like a bruised reed and a smoldering wick (Mt 12:20). But Jesus called him as his disciple and cared

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for him with great compassion until he became the writer of a beautiful gospel. Paul learned from Jesus how to raise disciples. Paul does not say how he met Onesimus. Perhaps Onesimus' story went something like this: As a hopeless slave, he longed for freedom and a new life. So one day he took some money from his master and ran away to Rome. But he was captured and put into prison, in the same cell as St. Paul. Paul saw him with Jesus' compassionate heart. He welcomed him as he was and listened to his miserable story. Then Paul shared the gospel, especially Jesus' forgiving love. When Onesimus heard the gospel, his heart was deeply moved. He sincerely repented with tears and accepted Jesus as his Savior. He became a new creation. He found new hope and a new life. He continued to study the Bible with Paul and practiced its teachings sincerely. In this way he could grow until he became useful to God, and to Paul. He became Paul's aide in serving gospel ministry in prison. Perhaps he began to teach the Bible to the palace guard and even Caesar's household. The name "Onesimus" means "useful." He had been useless due to his sins. However, Jesus' forgiving love changed him into a useful man. He was no longer a runaway slave, but a child of God. Paul loved him dearly and acknowledged him as God's servant, referring to him as **"my very heart,"** and **"faithful and dear brother"** (Col 4:9). Paul wanted Onesimus to stay with him, for he was valuable to Paul in gospel ministry (13). But Paul realized that Onesimus needed to return to his master and reconcile with him first. So Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon (12).

It is not easy to send a beloved one into a dangerous situation. What was Paul's attitude? Verse 14 says, **"But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do would not seem forced but would be voluntary."** Paul wanted any favor that Philemon granted to be voluntary, not forced. Doing good deeds should be voluntary. When God created mankind he did not make us like robots, but created us in his own image. God gave man free will so that we might love and obey God freely, and communicate heart to heart. God respects the free will he gave mankind. God does not force us to believe in him or to worship him or do good deeds. By the same token, he allows us to do evil when we are bent on it (Ro 1:24, 26, 28). He wants us to serve him freely, recognizing that it is the most blessed way of life. There is a famous saying, "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still." Not even God, our Almighty Creator, forces people against their will. How much less, then, should mere human beings try to do this. Healthy persuasion does not seek to dominate another person, but to help them see the truth and decide to live by it of their own volition. Paul takes this general tone throughout his letter to Philemon. God wants us to love him and serve him voluntarily. He wants us to do good voluntarily. He sacrificed his one and only

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Son Jesus for our sins. This moves our hearts to surrender to his love and to love and serve him willingly.

In verse 15 Paul explains why Onesimus was separated from Philemon for a little while: **“that you might have him back forever...”** To Paul’s eyes, Onesimus’ running away was not just the criminal act of a troubled man. Rather, Paul saw God at work behind the scenes. God works for the good of those who love him (Ro 8:28). Paul suggested that by God’s grace, now Philemon could form a new relationship with Onesimus, saying in verse 16, **“...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord.”** In the past Onesimus was a slave - rebellious, stubborn, useless. He was a source of frustration and anguish to Philemon. But now he was no longer a slave. He was a dear brother, part of God’s family. Paul helped Philemon see Onesimus with respect, as a man, and as a child of God. The words “dear brother” and “fellow man” mean that there was no hierarchy, regardless of human distinctions. They were equal before God. This concept was revolutionary. It was only possible in Christ. Anyone who is in Christ is very valuable, like a dear brother or sister. Paul really wanted Philemon to accept Onesimus from his heart. He said in verse 17, **“So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”** Not only did Paul want Philemon to accept Onesimus, but to honor and serve him as though he were Paul himself. Practically speaking, it is not easy to do this. Philemon had to overcome his natural pride as a slave owner. He also had to overcome his sense of injustice over what Onesimus had done. We can understand him. When one man recently returned to Chicago UBF after doing bad things to God’s people, it was hard to accept him. Some people were suspicious of him, others resentful. We had to overcome this in order to welcome the one God sent back to us. But when we did, God raised him as a missionary.

Thus far we have seen Paul’s humbleness and great shepherd's heart for one person. How could Paul be like this? It was because he himself experienced Jesus’ forgiving love, and it filled his mind and heart. Paul often shared this grace in his letters. He said in 1 Timothy 1:13-15: **“Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord Jesus was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners - of whom I am the worst.”** Jesus’ forgiving love transformed Paul from a violent persecutor into a man of grace and love. Jesus’

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forgiving love transformed Onesimus from a useless person into a useful person. According to tradition, Philemon forgave Onesimus and set him free. Onesimus went to Rome and preached the gospel to the slaves and the poor. Later, Onesimus became the pastor of the Ephesian church, which he served for 30 years, before he was martyred. Jesus' forgiving love can transform any kind of person. We find Jesus' forgiving love on the cross. In the midst of extreme pain and anguish, Jesus prayed, **"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing"** (Lk 23:34a). Jesus taught us to forgive others as he has forgiven us (Lk 11:4). Colossians 3:13 says, **"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you."**

Christian life involves receiving God's forgiving love and forgiving others. God forgives us and wants us to forgive others. An unforgiving heart poisons us emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually. But when we have a forgiving heart we can have true joy and peace and freedom. We can be healthy in heart, mind and body. A forgiving heart produces a "win-win" situation. Through forgiveness all of our love relationships become stronger. Also we can grow to be mature. Many years ago I served a promising Ph.D. student, who seemed to grow spiritually. But shortly after a beautiful blonde-haired girl joined our fellowship, they disappeared together. At that time, I felt betrayed. It was hard to forgive him. But as I studied John 13, Jesus' forgiving love touched my heart and challenged me to forgive him. And a few days later he contacted me. He apologized, I forgave him, and we restored our relationship. The peace of God came into my heart. Practicing forgiveness is not just for others' sake, but for our own spiritual well-being.

In verses 18-22 Paul gives Philemon further incentives to welcome Onesimus as a Christian brother. Paul promises to repay anything Onesimus owed (18). Paul guarantees his promise by writing in his own hand (19a). Paul reminds Philemon that he owed Paul his very self (19b). Paul said it would refresh his heart (20). And Paul expressed confidence that Philemon would do even more than Paul asked (21). Finally, Paul asked Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, anticipating fellowship in answer to their prayers (22). Here we see that although Paul respected Philemon's free will, he wrote to him very persuasively. In verses 23-24 Paul sent final greetings from Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke. Paul concluded: **"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit"** (25).

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The great reformer Martin Luther said that we are all like Onesimus to God. We are slaves of sin and runaways who abandoned God. Also, we are thieves who stole God's property. However, God welcomes us as we are, forgives all our sins through Jesus' death on the cross, and makes us his precious children. We are forgiven sinners. Therefore we should forgive others from our hearts. Let's receive and practice Jesus' forgiving love.